**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 19**

**Episodes 2138-2286**

**Episode 2138**

GREYSON

I was thrown into a void of penetrating white light as the voices of the three witches drifted around me before dying away to silence.

“What’s going on?”

My words echoed into the void until they faded to nothing. Growing frantic, I looked around and tried to get my bearings, but there was only the light and a strange weightless feeling that had me disoriented and unsure of which way was up or down.

Chloe’s voice rose up out of nowhere. “You have two days.”

I twisted around, looking for her and the other two witches, but as far as I could see I was completely alone in this strange void of too bright light.

“Make the right choices,” all three witches said in unison, their voices barely above a whisper.

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I opened my eyes and looked around. *Where am I?* I was in bed and fully clothed, and I’d never seen this room before in my life. I sat up and blinked at my surroundings, trying to jog my memory. There was an old flat-screen TV and a simple wooden desk, a small bathroom to my left, and a no smoking sign on the door.

*A motel room? Did I have one too many last night?*

As much as I tried, I couldn’t piece together where I was, or how I’d gotten here. I paused and rubbed my eyes as I recalled the strange dreams I’d had last night. They’d been kind of sexy—but also kind of nightmarish. I vaguely remembered something about a girl I’d been in love with, and there’d been some kind of danger threatening to come between us… And even weirder, I’d been living in a pack house with my brother Xavier. I chuckled. Like that would ever happen. Maybe it was time to cut down on the whiskey.

I swung my feet to the floor and was starting to get up when I spotted an antique pocket watch on the side table. Where the hell had that come from?I picked it up and turned it over in my hands before popping it open and checking the time. I shot a glance at the digital clock on the nightstand to double check the time and then looked back at the pocket watch. It was broken, the hands stuck at midnight.

I got up and stretched. My joints and muscles felt tight and a little achy, no doubt thanks to the crappy motel bed. Definitely not the most comfortable place to wake up after what must have been a long night. I took a peek outside. It was a beautiful early summer day. The sun was shining, and a nice warm breeze drifted through the window, which was open just a crack.

As I shrugged out of my shirt, a piece of paper fluttered out of my breast pocket. I picked it up and read it.

*Tonight at 10pm. 2444 Daley Road.*

I knew the address—it was an underground fight club. I’d taken down a lot of challengers in places like that, but I wasn’t in that scene anymore, and it had been a hell of a long time since my last fight. I shook my head and crumpled the paper in my fist, preparing to toss it, but then I paused, reconsidering. Maybe beating the crap out of some unlucky asshole would do me good. I’d left that part of my life behind, but I guessed one fight for old time’s sake wouldn’t hurt. I had plenty of time to make up my mind, either way.

After a quick shower, I left the motel room to find something to eat. My bike was parked right out front. I fired it up and sped out of the parking lot, leaving a spray of gravel in my wake. I rode for a little while before I saw a truck stop diner. I was about to turn in when I spotted a sign across the street, advertising a Mrs. Smith’s Café. Curious, I bypassed the diner and pulled into the café instead. There was something eerily familiar about the place, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on what it was.

I parked out front, close to where a woman was busy setting up a clapboard sign advertising the day’s lunch specials. She smiled at me as I climbed off my bike, and then she went inside. An odd feeling circled in my stomach. Something about her reminded me of my mother—a mother I couldn’t possibly remember, since she’d been murdered by my father when I was just a baby.

I entered the café and locked eyes with the woman again before she walked behind the counter and disappeared into the back. I took a seat at a table and checked out the menu. There were a lot of different things to choose from, and almost everything looked good.

“Hi there,” said the cashier. “Welcome to Mrs. Smith’s Café. What do you have a taste for?”

“I don’t really know,” I said, looking up at her.

“Well, why don’t you try the house special?” she asked, coming close.

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“A white chocolate mocha with a muffin,” she said flirtatiously.

If she fluttered her eyelashes at me any harder, I was afraid she might blow me away.

I sat back in my seat and checked her out. She was cute, but right now all I could think about was food. “Is it a big muffin?”

“Oh, it’s big,” she said with a half-smile. “And the mocha’s a nice size, too.”

“Then sure, the house special sounds great.”

“Coming right up!” she sang.

I closed the menu and slapped it down on the table, just as my phone vibrated in my pocket. I answered it even though I didn’t recognize the number that flashed up on the screen.

“Hey, it’s Chloe. I’m just calling to make sure you’re going to the fight tonight. My sisters and I bet quite a lot of cash on you… and it would be really good for us if you waited until the third round to take the guy out.”

I scoffed. “I can’t guarantee anything. You know how these things go. Besides, I’m not even sure if I’m going to fight at all.”

“What? What the hell do you mean? Didn’t you just hear me? We have a lot of money riding on you!”

“Not sure how that’s my problem.” Conversations like this were one of the many reasons why I’d chilled out on the underground fight club life. There was always someone in your ear about a bet they’d placed, asking you to put your neck out and go the extra mile so that they could capitalize. Meanwhile I was the one in the ring, putting my body on the line.

“Don’t be an asshole, Greyson. Besides, you shouldn’t run away from what you’re good at.”

Without another word, I ended the call. *I* decided what was best for me. I yawned. I hoped that mocha had enough caffeine to help me get over this hangover, or whatever it was that had me feeling like death warmed over. I took a look around the café. It was wall-to-wall humans, talking and laughing and eating off each other’s plates. Oblivious. None of them had the foggiest idea who I was, what I was capable of, or the things I’d done. That was probably for the best. Their world was dark enough already.

I pulled out the pocket watch again and examined it closely, looking for an inscription or something that would give me some sort of hint about where the hell I’d gotten it. Seeing as I wasn’t a hundred years old, it wasn’t exactly my style of jewelry, so it was a little strange that I had it in the first place. Finally, I found what I was looking for. On the inside, I could just make out an inscription that said something about fate. I looked closer, but the lettering was quite faded, and that was all that I could make out. Maybe I’d won it in a bet.Maybe it was worth something. Too bad it didn’t work.

The door flew open, and a young blonde woman came barreling in. She slid into a nearby corner booth and flipped open her laptop, making as much noise as humanly possible. *Annoying.* I returned my attention to the watch just as the cashier called out, “Special!”

I got up and nearly tripped over the young woman’s bag, which she’d dropped on the floor. I glared at her as I reached for the cup on the counter. As soon as I touched the cup, I felt a soft touch on my hand, and a jolt shot through me. Startled, I turned to look into the face of the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen in my life. She looked up at me, her hazel eyes widening.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I-I think that’s mine.”

I forced myself to look away from her so I could read the name scrawled on the side of the cup.

*Caliana*.

**Episode 2139**

“My mistake.” The man’s deep voice washed over me like a tide of baritone deliciousness, and all I could do was stare into the silvery color of his eyes. Now that I’d staked a claim on my white chocolate mocha, I was unable to find my voice. I wasn’t sure of the last time I’d seen anyone as attractive as him. He was tall, broad, smoking hot, and staring right back at me.

*Me.*

*OMG. I have a hot guy in my grasp.* I looked down at where my hand rested on his. *And the first thing I could think to say to him was that he was stealing my order?*

It was true, the order *was* mine, but I would’ve gladly given it up for him—given the chance, I wouldn’t stop there, either. He smiled as he withdrew his hand and returned to his table. My cheeks warmed as I watched him go, and I knew I was blushing like crazy.

*Could he tell that I’m a virgin?*

“Remember my order, too!” Lola called out, interrupting my thoughts.

“I got it, I got it!” I picked up Lola’s order and rushed over to join her, sneaking a glance at the guy across the room on my way.

*Oh my gosh, he’s still staring right at me.*

I crashed into Lola, nearly spilling my drink down her shirt.

“Dude, what’s wrong with you?”

“Sorry, Lola!”

Still distracted, I handed Lola her order as I followed her to our booth. I could still feel the man’s eyes on me, and my heart was hammering in my chest—a perfect accompaniment to the butterflies fluttering around like crazy in the pit of my stomach. What the hell *was* wrong with me?

Lola followed my gaze as she sipped her drink. “Whoa, who’s that guy? He’s majorly hot and, wait, he’s looking over here. I’m in range to make full eye contact, but I don’t think he’s looking at me… Wait, he’s looking at *you*.”

Completely flustered and afraid to look his way again, I said, “Don’t be ridiculous, Lola, he’s probably looking out the window or something.”

My mind was racing a mile a minute. Mostly, I was beating myself up, wishing that I’d said something, anything, besides “that’s mine.” If I’d played the whole thing better, he might have asked me out on a date, and then we’d eventually get engaged, get married, have kids… But who was I kidding? My game was pretty much zero—as proven by the way I’d completely botched our chance meeting only seconds ago.

“Cali, he’s still looking. You should go over and introduce yourself,” Lola pressed. “Flirt a little.” She leaned in close. “Who knows, maybe he’s the gorgeous man you’ve been saving your virginity for.” Lola wiggled her perfectly manicured eyebrows at me.

I glared at her and gave her a playful smack on the arm. “Don’t be crazy. There’s no way I’m going to go pick up some rando guy—he could be a serial killer for all we know. Besides, I’m seeing Alex tonight at the party.”

Lola rolled her eyes and groaned dramatically. “*Alex?* *Really?* Let me get this straight—you’re choosing a day-old grilled cheese over filet mignon?”

“Stop it! Alex isn’t day-old grilled cheese! He’s really nice.”

She rolled her eyes again. “Sorry, you’re right, he’s not a day-old grilled cheese—he’s a *month-old* grilled cheese. And I don’t want to hear about how *nice* he is. Nice is boring! You don’t give it up to *nice*, you give it up to someone like *that*.” Lola started to point at the guy, and I snatched her hand down, embarrassed and hoping to hell that he hadn’t seen her.

“Stop it, don’t point!” I looked at him out of the corner of my eye. It didn’t look like he’d noticed, thank god.

“Fine, but it’s your twentieth birthday, and as a present, I will not allow you to lose your virginity to Alex. I have a better prospect in mind. There’s this guy I know. He’s coming to town tonight, and I invited him to the party.”

“What? I can’t believe you! What about Alex?”

Lola grinned. “Who?” She laughed. “It’ll be fun! We’ll have a few drinks—”

“Lola. You know I don’t like to drink.”

“It’s an acquired taste, Cali, so we’ll work on that. But like I was saying, the guy I invited—he’s super hot, at least in his pictures.”

“What?” I asked, alarmed. “Who even is this guy? Don’t tell me you’ve never actually met him?”

“Chill!” Lola said. “I promise he’s legit—and anyway, don’t worry about the details. I’ve seen *Catfish* enough times to know what to look out for. I’ve taken care of everything. Just try and let loose tonight. Have some fun, go with the flow.”

UGH.

There was no use arguing with Lola. Once she had her mind set on something, there was no changing it. I took a sip of my mocha and used it as a chance to steal another glance at the handsome stranger. At least he wasn’t staring at me anymore—though I wouldn’t have minded seeing those eyes again. They were unlike anything I’d ever seen.

My phone dinged, and I quickly picked it up. It was a text from my dad. *Hey sweetie. Mom’s napping, call later!*

“Hey, is everything okay?” Lola asked, shooting me a concerned look. “How’s your mom doing?”

“Everything’s okay for now, I think.” I slid the phone back into my purse and tried to keep my mind in a positive place. Mom wasn’t in the hospital anymore. She was home with Dad, where she belonged. Things were looking up.

Lola reached across the table and squeezed my hand. “Well, at least tonight you’ll be able to take your mind off things for a bit.”

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True to Lola’s promise, the party was shaping up to be a fun time. There were people of all ages mingling and dancing to the blaring house music, drinks were flowing, and more people were pouring in by the second. It was pretty much a full-on rave.

*What the hell kind of party did Lola bring me to?*

“Caliana! Hey!”

I turned to see Alex making his way over to us, and he pulled me into a quick hug. Then he started to lean in closer. OMG was he trying to kiss me?! Quickly, I offered him my cheek instead that his lips connected with. Why would he do that?

Alex draped an arm around my shoulders. “So glad to see you, Cali. Now that you and Lola have arrived, the party can really start,” he said with a wink. “Tony and I are about to go get in on a game of beer pong. You and Lola should join—it’ll be me and you against Lola and Tony.”

“Never,” Lola grumbled. “Sorry, Alex—I need to borrow her for a second. I… uh… have to show her something.”

Lola grabbed my arm and dragged me away.

“Let me get this straight,” she said when we were out of earshot. “The guy who is so desperately trying to get in your pants comes over to greet you, and you let him kiss your cheek? Such passion, such heat!” She thrust a beer into my hand as she laughed. “Drink up and let loose with anyone but him.”

Trying to keep an open mind, I lifted the beer to my lips and took a huge gulp. Ugh. Still just as gross as I remembered.My immediate urge was to pour it out, but I decided to hold onto it so that people would stop giving me drinks. I even took a few pretend sips while my eyes combed over the party.

I spotted Alex and Tony starting up their game of beer pong, and more and more people were gathering into a huge mass of bodies to dance as the music seemed to grow louder and louder. I decided to make my rounds, and I ran into a few friends from class. We were giggling about a drunk guy puking in a corner when Lola bounded over and grabbed me.

“Cali, he’s here!”

“What? Who’s here?”

“The guy I’m hooking you up with, remember?”

“Oh,” I responded. I’d kind of been hoping she hadn’t been serious. She didn’t even know what he looked like past a photo… but if he was here, did he look like it? Was he really hot? “Um, does he have a name?” I hadn’t even laid eyes on the guy and I was already nervous.

“Of course he has a name—Xavier Evers. Now turn on that Cali charm I know is in there somewhere and get you two acquainted.”

Wait. Like right NOW?!

No no no no. I wasn’t in any position to meet this guy right now!

As Lola dragged me through the jumble of dancing bodies, I spotted the guy from the café. He was looking stoic and confident, standing a little apart from everyone else. I almost tripped and fell flat on my face. What was he doing here?We locked eyes, and without a moment’s hesitation, he started walking toward me. My heart fluttered to life in my chest.

Lola jerked my arm to get my attention. “Look!” She pointed at an extremely hot guy who was looking right at me, a scowl on his perfect face. “That’s him. Xavier.”

I swallowed roughly. Lola hadn’t been kidding. Xavier’s looks alone were enough to send tremors of heat racing through me. But what was she thinking? I was awkward! I had absolutely no experience with guys. Talking to them, kissing them, let alone guys of this kind of looks caliber.

As if he knew exactly what I thought of him, Xavier’s smile widened as he sauntered over, ignoring everyone in his path.

“Hi,” he said, stopping right in front of me. “You must be…”

“Caliana?” the guy from the café interrupted.

I froze and looked back and forth between them, feeling like I was about to pass out at their feet at any moment. I didn’t think I’d ever seen two more attractive men in my life, and to think that they were both interested in me? It was almost too much to take.

Suddenly, Xavier’s expression darkened as he turned to look at the other man. “Greyson? What the *fuck* are you doing here?”

**Episode 2140**

GREYSON

My jaw tightened as I took in the sight of Xavier standing right in front of me, wearing that patented smug look of his. I hadn’t expected to run into my younger brother of all people—especially not here, not now. I remembered the dream I’d had this morning about living with him in his pack house, and I shuddered in disgust. I’d rather poke my eyes out with silver spikes than live under the same roof as Xavier, and I was sure that Xavier felt the same.

I was certain he thought I was nothing but a no-good traitor.

Caliana was clearly astonished as she looked back and forth between us. “You two know each other?”

I couldn’t help but stare at her; the crease of her brow as her cute face scrunched up in confusion, the delicate curve of her neck, the soft pink of her lips… It was so easy to shut out everything but her.

Xavier snorted, not hiding his disgust. “We’re brothers.”

“Hold on, *you’re* Greyson Evers?” the blonde girl said, her mouth open in shock.

I nodded, not really liking the way she’d said that. This was all becoming a little much, andI was still getting over the unpleasant surprise of seeing Xavier. I couldn’t focus on him. I would never give him the satisfaction of rattling me, not when he thought he knew me. Deciding to ignore both this girl and Xavier, I returned my full attention to Caliana.

“I’m Greyson.” I took her hand and gave it a gentle shake, recalling how soft and warm it had felt at the café. I was laser focused on her, and I couldn’t ignore the surge of attraction that flowed over me, just like it had the first time I’d laid eyes on her. I was committed to not letting her get away this time. “I’m sorry I didn’t introduce myself earlier.”

“You *know* her?” Xavier asked.

I looked at my brother, not sure how to answer. It was odd. I felt like I’d known Caliana forever, even though I’d only just met her that morning. It was a similar feeling to the one I’d had when I’d seen Mrs. Smith’s diner—that there was something familiar about it that I couldn’t quite grasp.

Caliana opened her mouth to say something to Xavier, but before she could, I answered him. “Yes, I know her.”

Did *he*?

“Um, it’s nice to meet both of you,” Caliana said.

“If you knew anything about him, you wouldn’t be saying that,” Xavier said, his focus on me.

I stopped myself from rolling my eyes at him and refocused my attention on Caliana. As far as I was concerned, Xavier was a non-factor. I could tell that she was a bit overwhelmed, and I was about to pull her aside when some guy with two red Solo cups in each hand came up to us.

“Caliana, come on, we’re about to play another round, you in?”

*Who’s this clown and why is he even talking to her?* It was obvious that she was way out of his league. The guy kept gesturing for her to follow him, but Caliana didn’t move, and she looked uncomfortable.

“Who are you?” Xavier asked.

I recognized the look on my brother’s face, and I hoped for the clown’s sake that whatever answer he decided to give didn’t rub Xavier the wrong way. That much about Xavier would never change. That was the difference between us: he thought he knew me, and I actually *did* know him.

“I’m Alex. Who are you?”

I took Caliana gently by the arm. “Hey, why don’t you and me go get some fresh air?”

“Y-Yeah, sure,” she said.

I could tell that she was relieved as I steered her out into the back yard. I was beyond happy for the fresh air and a break from the blaring music. I couldn’t help but notice the look of annoyance that had passed across Xavier’s face as I stole Caliana away, and I was more than pleased to be getting under his skin. Xavier hadn’t been the only one staring daggers at me—a lot of guys had been checking her out. But I’d reached her first.

Now, I just had to make sure that I got to keep her.

As soon as I’d laid eyes on Caliana that morning, I’d felt something that I’d never felt before. Fuck the fighting, the solitude, the moving from place to place and the entire Rogue lifestyle. Screw my brother and everything and everyone else. The inexplicable feeling I got when I looked at Caliana? *That* was something worth pursuing.

I looked down and realized that I was still holding onto her arm. I didn’t want to let go. A beat of silence passed between us as I calculated my next move.

I saw a blush gathering on Caliana’s cheeks as she stammered, “So, uh, that was some mocha this morning, right?”

I laughed. “Do I make you nervous, Caliana?”

I didn’t want her to be nervous, but I couldn’t deny that I took it as a good sign. It meant that she was feeling the same way that I did, and I wanted to explore that with her tonight, if she’d let me.

She laughed, and there was an obvious nervous pitch to her voice. “Why would you say that?” She ran a hand through her hair, and I followed the movement, wishing that I was the one running my fingers through her hair instead.

I shrugged. “Not sure. I tend to have that effect on people.”

I couldn’t help but notice that she hadn’t pulled her arm away—and I took that as an invitation to step a little closer. I could feel the warmth radiating off her skin, could sense the beat of her heart, and I could feel my own heart racing just like hers.

She was doing something to me. I couldn’t explain this pull to her I felt. I’d been with other women before, of course, but I’d never had such a strong reaction to someone before. Not like this. This was something I’d never felt before. Ever.

“Are you having a good time tonight?”

“Yeah,” she said shakily. “It’s my birthday, and my friends came, and you know this really isn’t totally my scene or anything, but I didn’t want to be mean. I know they’re just doing it to be nice and all…”

As she rambled on, I allowed myself something I shouldn’t have. I should’ve been listening to her, but instead I imagined stepping forward to kiss her. I would wrap my arms around her waist and pull her close so that I could feel her heart beating right against mine. I would take the kiss slow and tease her a little before snaking my tongue between her lips…

“Shoot!” Caliana yelped as she somehow tripped over herself—which was a little confusing, since she’d just been standing still. I reached forward and caught her by the waist, and she fell against me. “Oh god, sorry!” She looked down at her feet. “My friend Lola—she made me put on these heels, and I totally suck at wearing them.” She laughed nervously and looked up at me.

“Oh? I didn’t notice.”

I hadn’t. The heels only made her legs look long. Sexy.

Her closeness had stirred up the wolf inside me, and I wanted to kiss her now more than ever. I wanted her, I needed her, I hungered for her to be mine, and only mine. The wolf in my mind growled, *she’s ours.* The assertion thew me off. *Ours?* Was my wolf trying to claim this girl? I’d never felt anything like this before, not even with Maren.

I looked down as something cold and wet spread across my chest. She’d spilled her beer down my shirt.

“Oh my god!” she squealed, once she’d realized what she’d done. A mix of shock and embarrassment flooded across her beautiful face. “I’m so sorry, Greyson! I… I didn’t realize how much was in here—and I should’ve known it was pretty full since I barely drank any!”

She started swiping her hands up and down my chest, trying her best to dry me off.

I didn’t know how much good it was doing, but there was no way I was going to stop her. Every time she touched me, shocks of electricity ripped through my body. Soon, she didn’t seem to be trying to wipe the beer off at all. Her expression changed from embarrassment to something else as she reacted to feeling my abs through my shirt. Soon she was doing less wiping and more, I’d argue, caressing. It was taking everything in my power to keep from making my fantasy of kissing her a reality. I took her hands in mine, stopping her before I lost the little bit of control I was holding onto.

“It’s okay, love.” I took her beer and put it aside. “It’ll come out.”

Her hands felt so small and soft in mine, and the overwhelming need to protect her washed over me. A comfortable silence fell between us, and we gazed into each other’s eyes. It felt like there was no one else in the entire world but the two of us.

“I’m sorry for being so awkward, and this might sound weird, but…” She hesitated. “I feel like I know you?”

“No, I don’t think that’s weird.” I lifted her chin. “In fact, I feel the same way about you.”

*Ours.*

Then I leaned in and kissed her.

**Episode 2141**

I’m sorry WHAT?!

Was the super hot guy I’d just met today *kissing* me? ME?

For the longest time, I’d had trouble even getting a date with anyone but Alex, who I didn’t even *want* to date, let alone a guy like *this*. I felt MAJORLY out of my depth. Up to this point, I’d only kissed Alex, and that hadn’t been the best experience. It certainly hadn’t taught me much about the art of making out. It’d mostly taught me that Alex was cute, but I didn’t have chemistry with him.

But this kiss? It didn’t feel like that one. *At all.*

I wasn’t sure what to do with my lips at first. I’d settled for a safe space of keeping them puckered up to his. I didn’t want to turn Greyson off by accidentally, like, licking his face or something, but I didn’t want to bore him, either. I was *certain* he’d definitely had practice kissing before me. Even when we’d been standing talking, girls were glaring at me for even breathing in his direction.

Before I had time to overthink more, he pulled me tight against him. A surge of liquid heat consumed my entire body as he deepened the kiss. Suddenly, all my anxiety and uncertainty melted away and I was kissing him back, and he certainly wasn’t complaining. I didn’t care what I was doing with my mouth as long as his was still on mine.

Something about the way we moved together and the way our bodies were responding to being pressed against each other felt comfortable and right. It reminded me of what I’d told him just before he kissed me—that I felt like I knew him. I’d definitely meant it, too. But how the hell was that possible? Was this just some intense déjà vu, or something else?

I shut off every other thought in my head and concentrated on the present. I latched onto Greyson as his warm tongue parted my lips. A moan escaped my lips before I could stop it. Had I just made that sound?! My quick spike of embarrassment was erased when Greyson dropped his hands to my lower back and pulled me even tighter against him.

I pushed away slightly so that I could flatten my hands against his chest, wanting to feel his amazing abs again. I realized that I might have missed the opportunity to touch him like this if I hadn’t accidentally doused him in my beer, as that seemed to have set off the chain reaction that had led us to this moment. Maybe beer had some use after all.I’d never felt abs like his before—granted, I’d never felt ANY guy’s abs before, but it didn’t take a lot of experience to know that Greyson’s were something special.

I let my hands wander up to the taut curve of his pecs, and again, I wasn’t disappointed. He was built like he’d been chiseled out of stone.

Feeling daring, I slid my tongue against his and was pleased when we found a languid, sensual rhythm that made me weak in the knees. I had nothing to compare the experience to, exactly, but between the warm insistence of his mouth and the sensation of his strong hands sliding all over my body, this was the best kiss that I’d ever had in my entire life. I didn’t want it to end, and I could tell from the way he was raising the intensity as each second passed that he didn’t want it to end, either.

I still couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d met him before, and in some bizarre way, it felt like we’d shared a kiss like this before and that it had been just as amazing then. I wanted more.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and, at the risk of seeming too eager, shoved my tongue deeper into his mouth. This time Greyson moaned, and he lifted me up just a little so that my feet were no longer touching the ground. I felt safe and protected in his embrace, and another feeling I’d never felt before blossomed in the pit of my stomach.

*Is that desire?* I thought. *Is this what it feels like to want someone?*

Suddenly, I heard my name being called as though it wasn’t the first time.

“Cali!” It was Lola. “Cali, why are you ignoring me? CALIANA HART!”

Flustered, I pulled out of Greyson’s hold. I immediately missed the warmth of his arms. I looked up at him to see a dark look in his eyes, and the strange feeling in the pit of my stomach intensified.

“Um, excuse me,” I said reluctantly, my voice a hoarse rasp.

Still dazed by the kiss, I made my way over to Lola, and she yanked me back inside, where the party as still raging.

“I’m sorry, did I just see you KISSING GREYSON EVERS?” She crossed her arms over her chest and started tapping her foot on the floor like she was a disappointed teacher waiting for an explanation for bad behavior. “WHAT THE HELL, CALI?!”

“Um, yes—wasn’t that why you were calling my name like a maniac?” I rolled my eyes. Hadn’t she told me to lighten up? “It just sort of happened. What’s the big deal?”

“I wanted you to meet XAVIER, not GREYSON!” Lola was fuming, and I didn’t get it, nor did I appreciate her tone. It was almost like she was scolding me—which was classic Lola. She tended to act like she was my mother if I did anything she didn’t entirely agree with, and while I was used to it and understood that she was looking out for me, it was definitely a buzzkill after the high of that epic kiss. Just thinking about it made me want to go back for more.

Wanting to change the subject, I said, “Isn’t it weird that they’re brothers—”

“You know how there’s always a *good* brother and a *bad* brother?” Lola yelled, cutting me off.

“Uh, yeah, I guess?” I didn’t actually know that there was such a thing outside of TV shows and movies, but I decided to humor her.

“Well, *Greyson* is the bad brother. You were making out with the *bad one*! Don’t you get it? Stay away from him!”

“Okay, you’re really overreacting. It was just one kiss.” *The most amazing kiss ever!* “And besides, how do you even know all this? You just met Greyson for, like, five seconds.”

Lola shrugged. “I’ve heard things. Bad things. Trust me—Xavier is the better option.”

Lola grabbed my arm and started to pull me away, but I held my ground. “Wait, how do you know that Xavier is the better option? You’ve never even met him before tonight.”

Had Lola lied to me about Xavier?I hoped that wasn’t the case—we’d always been honest with each other.

“It’s just a feeling,” Lola explained before dragging me away from Greyson, who’d just come back inside.

As Lola yanked me away, I cast a longing look back at Greyson, and found him staring right back at me with those eyes of his. A swarm of butterflies took flight in my stomach, but a few seconds later, I lost sight of him in the crush of partygoers. Straight ahead of us, I saw Xavier talking to a guy who looked similar to him, but then his gaze shifted to me as if he’d sensed my presence. More butterflies.

*What is it about these Evers brothers?* Both men had the most intense way of looking at me, almost like I was being served up as a meal.

The guy with Xavier turned and shouted over the loud music as we joined them. His looks were striking—what was with all the hot guys tonight? “Hey, I’m Colton, Xavier’s better-looking half.”

“Nice to meet you?” I was stunned. “How many Evers brothers are here tonight?”

Xavier looked in Greyson’s direction. “Greyson’s just a half-brother.”

“What?” I could barely hear over the music. It seemed like it had gotten even louder in the few minutes that I’d been back inside. I was starting to get a headache.

“He said Greyson’s just a half-brother!” Colton shouted.

“Oh!” I nodded, just barely catching what he’d said.

“Hey, let’s go into one of the rooms so we can talk!” Lola shouted.

“That’s a great idea!” Colton yelled.

Xavier took my hand, and I gasped as a spate of goosebumps spread all over my body. It was the same feeling I’d had when I touched Greyson’s hand at the café, and I didn’t object as he led me away, Lola and Colton following close behind. Xavier opened a door to a side room, and Lola stopped in the doorway.

“What, aren’t you coming in?”

Lola grinned and waved goodbye.

“Lola?”

“You two talk,” Lola said as she slowly started shutting the door.

“You two know about the birds and the bees, right?” Colton added, just before the door clicked shut.

WHAT WAS SHE DOING?!

Was Lola serious? Was she, like, offering me up to Xavier to *hook up*? She’d just shut me in the room with a guy she didn’t even know! And more importantly, a guy *I* didn’t even know! I turned to look at Xavier, who’d made himself comfortable on the couch.

Xavier was watching me with a look that gave me a delicious chill, despite myself. There was something about him… He was so different from his brother, but I still felt a connection, somehow. Plus, he was sinfully attractive—tall and broad like his brother, but with piercing blue eyes instead of grey and dark brown hair where Greyson’s was blond. I just couldn’t take my eyes off him.

Xavier leaned back in his chair. “Why don’t we get this over with?”

**Episode 2142**

XAVIER

I watched the girl’s—Caliana’s—eyes go wide. I knew I was being a dick right now, but it felt good and I couldn’t stop myself. I relaxed into a full man spread and waited.

Caliana stepped back and put her hands on her hips, flipping a strand of her hair out of her eyes. “Get *what* over with?”

She looked cute, standing there all indignant. In an instant, I shot up from the couch and advanced on her until I had her boxed in against the wall. Up close, she was more beautiful than cute, and she smelled like a mixture of beer, a delicious floral scent, and… *Greyson*. A human nose probably wouldn’t have caught it, but I did—it was just the slightest hint of my traitorous brother’s scent, but it was there at her lips.

*Did he kiss her?* Anger coursed through me. *He’s kissed those beautiful, luscious, pink lips?*

“It’s obvious, Caliana, that my twin brother and your friend went through quite a lot of trouble so that the two of us could spend some… quality time together. We shouldn’t disappoint them, should we?”

Her eyes went wide again, and I was suddenly filled with the burning desire to kiss her. I hadn’t had that feeling in a long time, and it was strange to feel it so strongly now—and for this human girl I’d just met.

She swallowed audibly. “I think we should probably get to know each other first, don’t you?”

I smiled. “I don’t know. I’ve got some pretty dark secrets—I’m not sure you could handle getting to know me.”

*And, if you knew what I was, you’d run.*

“You don’t know me well enough to know what I can handle,” Caliana said, defiant again.

I leaned in close. Did she want to play that game? She had no idea how much better I could play it than her.

“Well,” I said slowly, “that’s why we should do this…”

I leaned in close, teasing her, but she wasn’t moving away. Her lips were so close. I lingered there, waiting and watching with no small amount of amusement as she swallowed hard and pressed back against the wall. I was making her nervous, but not enough to scare her. I didn’t think she was the type to scare easily, which I liked, but I had to admit that I liked making her nervous. I was surprised when I felt her warm hand on my chest, jolting me to attention and throwing me off my game for a split second.

“So, are you?”

I was only half listening, distracted by the warmth of her closeness and the feel of her small hand pressing against me. “Am I what?”

“Are you going to kiss me?”

I was surprised. “Do you want me to?”

“Do you want to?”

I smiled and backed off, liking this little game more than I’d thought I would. “I haven’t decided yet.”

I was making my way back to the couch when she spoke again.

“So I guess you’re all talk.”

I whirled around and moved toward her, surprised by her charm, her wit, her ability to pique my interest. It had been so long since I’d been challenged like this, since someone had really surprised me.

“Did I hear you right?” I asked, turning on her.

“Yep.”

“You think I’m all talk?”

She shrugged, and I couldn’t let that stand. I crossed back over to her, pinning her hands over her head, wanting to hold her attention as I leaned in closer than before. She met my gaze head-on. I studied her, unable to tell if she was trying to play tough.

Maybe I didn’t care.

There was something—a spark—inside me that I hadn’t known existed anymore. My wolf. I hadn’t heard my wolf in a long fucking time.

I hadn’t been able to shift for… Who knew how fucking long it had been, now? My wolf had abandoned me right after my mate had been killed, and before tonight, I hadn’t felt even a hint of it. Until now.

Until *her.*

It was faint, but it was there—my wolf was speaking to me, telling me that it wanted her. That he wanted Caliana. That *I* wanted Caliana. How had this human girl managed to stir something like this in me? I tried my best to deal with a surge of emotions that I’d thought had left me along with my wolf.

We stared at each other for a long, hot moment, neither of us blinking, only tearing our eyes away at the sound of a loud pounding on the door. “Hey, how’s it going in there? Do I need to show you where everything goes?”

“Fucking Colton,” I grumbled.

Caliana easily slipped from my hold, and just like that, the moment was broken.

“Maybe we should go out and rejoin the party,” Caliana suggested. She was a little flushed but looked otherwise unshaken, like nothing had happened at all.

For a moment, I wondered if I’d imagined everything, if my wolf had actually stirred to life inside me again.

*No, there’s no mistaking it. Your wolf is there.*

I opened the door, and Caliana stepped out.

Lola grabbed her. “We’re going to get you another drink.”

I was about to follow when Colton slapped me on the back. “So?”

I turned to Colton, trying to keep my composure. “What the hell, Colton? What is this?”

“You haven’t fucked anyone in lord knows how long, so I was just trying to help you out.” Colton slapped me on the back again and gave me a serious look. “That’s what brothers are for—to pick you up when you’re down, and to get you fucked senseless by a hot babe. You’re welcome by the way.”

My brother was a massive idiot.

“Colton, I don’t need your help having sex with anyone,” I growled. “Did you organize this with Lola?”

I’d known Lola as Aaliyah, even Lia, but now she was going by a new nickname. It suited her, but scheming with Colton? I didn’t know Lola well enough to know if she was capable of serving up her friend to me on platter, but I definitely wouldn’t put it past Colton.

“Something like that. You want to grab some Jell-O shots?”

I sucked my teeth. “Jell-O shots? Are you serious? What, are we back in high school?”

I started toward the keg, and Colton gestured toward Greyson.

“How does it feel to have the psycho here?”

“I hate it. I wish that murderous bastard was dead.” I pumped some beer into a Solo cup and took a long drink. *Ugh, what is this cheap shit?* The beer at parties was almost always awful.

“Why *is* he here? Last I’d heard he was still somewhere in Oregon or near Seattle,” Colton said. “This kind of party doesn’t even seem like his scene.”

“Maybe I should tell him to leave.”

Without even trying, my eyes gravitated away from Greyson and landed on Caliana, just as some gross-looking guy approached her and Lola. The guy was getting way too close to Caliana for my comfort, and I felt a sudden need to protect her. Despite the taste, I drained the rest of my beer and went to join them.

“Can I get you two a drink?” I asked Caliana and Lola, wedging myself between them and the creep who couldn’t take a hint.

The guy slapped a firm hand on my shoulder. “I already brought her a drink, so now she has to talk to me. And she should be grateful that a nice guy like me is talking to her. There are a lot of weirdos here.” Then he winked at Caliana.

“Ugh, Tony, you’ve had too much to drink, as usual,” Lola said. She looked beyond disgusted.

*Tony, huh?* I let my eyes drift down to Tony’s hand, where it still rested on my shoulder. I plucked it off me, giving it a hard squeeze for fun and holding it tightly so that he struggled to pull away.

“She doesn’t owe you shit, Tony,” I growled.

I was livid, and not exactly sure why I was getting so worked up. I looked at Caliana as my wolf stirred to life inside me once again.

*Mine*, it growled faintly.

Tony finally managed to rip his hand away, and he shook it up and down, obviously in pain. “You’re an asshole, man!”

“It’s fine, Xavier, leave it alone. Tony, just—go,” Caliana said, trying to defuse the situation.

“No, this asshole wants to be a dick, huh? Try to break my hand? Huh?” Tony demanded.

“Are you asking me a question, or…”

“Fuck you, man!” Tony slurred, getting in my face.

“No, fuck you. Go home and sober up. These women aren’t interested in you—I don’t think anyone is at this party, if I had to take a guess. So it looks like it’s going to be you and the hand again tonight—if it still works, that is.”

“*Fuck off!*” Tony yelled as he shoved me. I barely moved.

“Is that all you’ve got?” I asked.

*This isn’t a fight you want to get into, pal.*

I actually couldn’t believe that this human was trying to start a fight with me. It was time to end this. I wanted to tear his throat out, but I’d need my wolf to do that, and besides, there were too many witnesses. I balled up my fist and threw a punch that I knew would have put Tony down for the count—if Greyson hadn’t caught it before it made contact.

“You don’t want to do that, Xavier,” Greyson said, gripping my fists as it hovered inches away from Tony’s shocked face.

I grabbed Greyson’s wrist with my other hand and yanked him toward me.

“You’ve crossed the line.” I gave him a hard push, and he knocked into Tony and sent him crashing to the ground. Greyson, however, was steady on his feet as I squared up in front of him. “Should we settle this right now?”

**Episode 2143**

I was horrified. Tony was a huge jerk, and I was glad that Xavier had stepped in, but I was in no mood to see a full-on fistfight like something out of those old Westerns my father liked to watch. And on my birthday! Xavier and Greyson were almost nose to nose, and it definitely seemed like the two brothers were about to fight.

How the hell had this happened?!

Alex jumped in and picked Tony up off the floor as Colton pulled his brothers apart.

“Come on you guys, break it up! Not in front of the children!” Colton joked, wedging himself between them and holding them both at arm’s length.

Lola leaned in. “Pretty hot, huh?”

I gave Lola a dumbfounded stare. “How is almost seeing a bloody fistfight hot?”

“Okay, okay, not the fistfight part. But you have to admit, it was pretty hot the way Xavier stepped in to protect you from Tony.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I guess it was kind of cool.”

I was glad that Greyson had stepped in, too, though. Tony probably wouldn’t have had a snowball’s chance in hell against Xavier, and I wasn’t interested in seeing him get his ass handed to him, even if he was an asshole.

Lola grinned. “See? You should thank me.”

“What?”

“I make an excellent matchmaker, right? He’s so obviously into you.”

I turned my attention to the Evers brothers and watched them as they talked—or rather, argued—between themselves. They definitely shared a family resemblance, and all three of them were unbelievably smoking hot. I suddenly caught Greyson’s eye and looked away, flustered.

*How can a simple look from him do that to me?*

Lola pulled me away. “I saw that. I told you to stay away from that one.”

“Lola, have I ever met them before?” I still couldn’t shake the feeling of recognition that had been floating at the back of my mind all night.

“What? No. They’re not from around here. I’m positive.”

“It’s so strange, I just feel like I’ve met them—all of them. Maybe I’ve seen them on campus before, or… I don’t know. It’s so weird.”

“I don’t know either, Cali, but this is my jam!” Lola squealed as the next song came on. She was jumping with excitement as she dragged me into the crowd. “Come on, let’s dance!”

I couldn’t say no, and Lola wouldn’t have listened—or heard me over the music—if I did. Besides, Lola and I always had so much fun dancing together.

I lost myself in the music, letting myself forget about the weird feeling of familiarity that I had around the Evers brothers as I moved to the music.

“Oh, I forgot to wish you a happy birthday!” Lola yelled. “I’m sorry that things got so out of control!”

She pulled me into a hug. As we pulled apart, I gasped. Greyson was heading straight for me. He moved through the crowd like a great white shark, his eyes fixed right on me. I could feel my cheeks burning already, and my heart was pumping like crazy in my chest—and not because of the dancing.

Lola was dancing like a wild woman as Greyson took my hand and pulled me away. I could see Lola objecting, but her voice was drowned out by the music, and Greyson ignored her as he led me through the crowd to a quieter area.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” he began. “Things with my brothers are a little… complicated.”

“You don’t have to explain,” I assured him. I knew better than most how complicated family could be, and we’d only just met—he didn’t owe me an explanation.

“Good, because it would be too difficult to explain,” he said with a weary smile.

I smiled back at him as my eyes trailed down to his lips. I remembered how good it had felt to kiss him, to touch him, to be close to him. Even now, I felt like I was in a dream. We were surrounded by all these beautiful women, but this gorgeous man only had eyes for me. I couldn’t believe my luck.

“I have to get going,” Greyson said suddenly. “I have some things to attend to.”

Wait, he was *leaving*?

Instantly, I felt a heavy sadness. I’d barely spoken to him, but I felt so connected to him already, it was uncanny. I didn’t want him to leave, but we definitely didn’t know each other well enough for me to tell him that—even if I did feel like I knew him somehow.

He took my hand in his and planted a gentle kiss across my knuckles, letting his lips linger for a few titillating seconds.

“I’ll see you again, love,” he said. Then he smiled and walked away.

I watched him go, feeling light-headed. He hadn’t asked about seeing me again, he’d *told* me he would. He was so confident, and I liked it. Then I realized that I had no way of contacting him! I was about to chase after him when someone put a hand on my shoulder and spun me around. I inhaled sharply—*Xavier.*

He smiled. “Going somewhere without saying goodbye?” He moved in close. “Don’t ever do that, Caliana. Don’t ever leave me.” He paused. “Not without saying goodbye.”

I scoffed. “Are you really trying to tell me what to do?”

“Yes,” he said. “Because you like it.” He reached out and swept a lock of my hair behind my ear, and I nearly melted at his touch, despite myself.

I wasn’t sure what to say to him. Unlike Greyson, the things that Xavier said sounded almost like commands. I had a sudden flash of being alone with him, his tempting lips so achingly close to mine… I was starting to feel even more light-headed, and the room was spinning just a little. I was beginning to think that if I stayed here a minute longer, I wouldn’t be responsible for my actions. I’d never felt this… *turned on*? It scared me a little.

Behind us, Colton was belting out a karaoke tune. His singing voice left much to be desired.

Xavier groaned. “My brother is an idiot.”

“I’m… probably going to get going.” I searched my brain, fumbling for an excuse. “I… Uh… I have to get up early tomorrow to look for a new job.”

Xavier frowned. “That’s too bad.” He lifted my chin, and his touch sent lightning bolts through me. “I’ll see you around.” He stared deep into my eyes before turning around to face Colton. “Stop it, man!”

I stood there, watching him with my mouth open in shock.

*Why does it feel like I know for a fact that we’ll see each other again?*

Lola came up to me, clearly tipsy. She was breathing hard from all the dancing, and I could tell that she was as ready to leave as I was. “Where’ve you been? Let’s go check out the new place that just opened up around the corner—I need some fried food to soak up all this alcohol.”

“Sounds like a good idea.”

I took one final glance back at Xavier as I followed Lola out of the party and into the warm fresh air, which felt so good on my skin. It was nice to be away from the noise of the party, and after everything that had happened, I was excited to get out of there so that I could clear my head.

“Oh no,” I burst out. “I forgot to say goodbye to Alex!”

I hadn’t seen him since he’d dragged Tony away from the fight between Greyson and Xavier.

“Girl, that’s only worth doing if it’s goodbye for good!” Lola said with a loud cackle.

I rolled my eyes. Lola had never liked Alex—I’d always known that—but I had a soft spot for him. But it was just that, a soft spot. I’d never felt anything with Alex like what I’d felt tonight with Greyson and Xavier. Maybe it was a good thing that I’d met them, since now I knew how it was supposed to feel when you were actually attracted to someone.

But I’d been attracted to TWO BROTHERS? My libido needed to chill. She’d been too starved, it seemed, up until this point.

I sighed, reflecting on the night and wondering how—and when—I would see Greyson again. We hadn’t exchanged information, but he hadn’t seemed too worried about that getting in the way of us reconnecting.

Suddenly, a chill raced down my spine as we made our way down the street. It felt like we were being watched. I turned and looked over my shoulder. There was no one there.

“Do you feel that?” I asked Lola.

“Yeah,” she said, her eyes wide. “Let’s move a little quicker.”

We linked arms and picked up the pace, but the feeling didn’t go away.

“Is someone there?” I called out into the darkness. No answer.

“If someone’s fucking around, you’d better stop. I have Mace!” Lola shouted as she stuck her hand in her purse. I didn’t know if she really had Mace, but I hoped that she did. I was starting to get really scared.

We increased our speed until we were almost running. Just as we rounded a corner, a huge beast jumped out in front of us. It was easily as big as a grizzly bear, though it looked like a wolf. Its eyes were glowing, and its sharp teeth gleamed in the moonlight as it bared its teeth at us.

I screamed.

**Episode 2144**

I scrambled backward and smacked right into Lola, nearly sending us both tumbling to the ground.

The creature stepped forward and snarled, looking like it was about to take a bite out of us at any moment. I screamed and clutched at Lola’s shirt but was otherwise frozen to the spot in fear. I’d never seen anything like this creature in my whole life, and I’d never been this scared, either. Without another moment of hesitation, the creature howled and lunged at me. At the same moment, another beast sprang out of nowhere and jumped on top of it, knocking it sideways before it could get to me. This creature looked like the first, but it was much larger and had thick grey fur.

“WHAT THE HELL IS THAT THING?” I shrieked as the two creatures started fighting a few feet away from us. The grey creature seemed to be the better fighter, which was lucky for us as it was keeping the other one from coming back at us. I was frightened to my core, but I still couldn’t make my legs move, even though every inch of my brain was screaming at me to run, to save myself.

“We should go,” Lola said, pulling my arm. She sounded so calm and collected. Why wasn’t she freaking out like I was?

The grey beast growled as it tore into the other one’s leg, causing it to howl in pain before it managed to yank itself free from the huge grey beast’s strong jaws. With a pained snarl, it shot off into the woods without looking back.

The grey beast started to chase after it, but then it stopped. I watched in shock as the creature, partially visible through the trees, transformed into a man. A naked man. He had his back to us, but then he turned back and looked at me, his grey eyes shining in the darkness.

What the fuck.

WHAT THE FUCK?!

“*Greyson?*” I breathed, barely able to catch my breath, I was so shocked.

He opened his mouth as if to say something, but then there was shouting behind us. As Xavier and Colton came running toward us, Greyson turned away, transformed back into the huge grey beast, and disappeared into the woods. I watched it all with my head spinning and my breath coming in short gasps. My heart was nearly pounding through my chest. I didn’t know what to think.

I turned to Lola. “What—what the hell was that? Did I—did you see…?”

Had I been drugged? If so, I wasn’t sure how; I’d barely had a sip of alcohol all night, so it seemed like a slim possibility that I’d been roofied or something.

Lola was just standing there looking at me with an unreadable expression on her face.

I grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. “Tell me you saw that! Tell me I’m not hallucinating! Tell me you saw those wolf-bears!”

Xavier finally reached us. “Are you okay?”

I stared at him, unable to form a single word to describe how I felt at that moment, let alone a full sentence. I was way too overwhelmed to speak, and I was still waiting for Lola to answer.

Lola glanced at Xavier like she was asking permission for something, and I couldn’t help but notice the knowing look that passed between them. Or was I imagining it? Like I’d imagined two huge wolf-bears fighting right in front of me? No, that had been real. I’d seen it, and there was no mistaking what had happened.

“Oh, it must have been a bear? Or a wolf?” Lola said slowly.

“What? I know what I saw! It was him. Greyson. Only he wasn’t him. He was a wolf—a wolf-bear!”

Xavier sighed. “There’s no such thing, Caliana.”

“Oh? There isn’t? Then what would *you* call your brother?”

Xavier paused to think. “I’d call him an asshole,” he said as a slow smile spread across his face.

“Oh *burn*! Up top!” Colton said, holding up his hand for a high five, which Xavier gave him with that same satisfied smile on his face.

“Stop it! This is no laughing matter.” Then it hit me. Was Xavier like that too? Was he a wolf-bear-slash-human like Greyson?

“Anyway, Caliana, nothing to worry about. It couldn’t have been my brother. He left a while ago, remember? Maybe you had a little too much to drink?” Xavier said.

“I didn’t drink at all,” I snapped. “Or barely, anyway. Definitely not enough to hallucinate a couple of—”

Lola grabbed my arm, cutting me off. “We should go.”

“What? But what if that—that *thing* is still out there? Are we going to just ignore what just happened? A wolf battle broke out right there!” I said, pointing at the road.

I still couldn’t believe what I’d seen, and Lola’s strange calmness wasn’t making it any better.

“Cali, it’s no big deal,” Lola said. “We’re in Minnesota—you see a wolf or two sometimes.”

“A wolf or two? *REALLY?!*”

I was so confused. Why was I the only one freaking out? I’d lived in Minnesota my entire life, and I’d never seen a wolf out on the street like that. I was starting to question myself. Had I really seen Greyson? It was dark, and I certainly had Greyson on my mind. Maybe I’d imagined the whole thing. Maybe I’d wanted to see him so badly that my mind had conjured up his image.

“You two aren’t going to let a couple of wolves or whatever you thought you saw ruin a good time, are you? Stay, party!” Colton said. “The night’s young, and there’s so much more karaoke to do!”

“No, we’re going home,” Lola said, starting to lead me away.

“I’m coming with you,” Xavier said.

“Going to get nasty?” Colton asked, chiming in.

I was silent as we walked back to our apartment, still trying to make sense of what I’d seen while attempting to understand why I was the only one who seemed shaken up by the whole thing. Lola, Xavier, and Colton were chattering away like nothing out of the ordinary had happened—like it was just a regular day. Meanwhile I kept looking over my shoulder, worried that another beast was going to pop out of nowhere and rip us all to shreds.

Once we were back at our apartment, I watched the others laughing and talking like it was just a normal hang session after a party. I couldn’t believe it.

Colton opened the fridge. “Hey, where’d you get this juice?”

“What juice?” Lola asked. “Cali did the grocery shopping.”

“You mean to tell me you don’t know what’s in your own refrigerator?”

“Maybe I don’t. What’s it to you?” Lola barked.

Xavier came up to me as Colton and Lola started arguing. “Hey, do you want some water?” When I didn’t respond he asked, “Are you okay?”

“Do I look like I’m okay?” I snapped. “I just don’t get how everyone can act like a wolf attack—because that’s what it was—is nothing. Like it’s just another day.”

Xavier shrugged and sat down beside me. I shifted away a little—he was sitting way too close, but I also didn’t want him to sit too far away, either.

Before long, Colton and Lola came to join us.

“By the way, Lola,” Colton said, “how come you never kissed me?”

Lola grimaced. “Kiss *you*? Ugh! Why would I want to?”

“Well, there are plenty who would—and do.” He wiggled his eyebrows.

Lola rolled her eyes. “Name one.”

I got up and excused myself as Colton and Lola kept arguing. I wasn’t in the mood to hear it, and I needed to think clearly. I headed to my bedroom and flopped facedown on my bed with the lights off. I couldn’t believe them, being all nonchalant.

*I know what I saw. It was a bear… wolf. Wolf-bear.*

I’d seen plenty of pictures of wolves, but I’d never seen one as big as either of those two. I got up and started pacing, playing the frightening image over and over again in my head. Was I losing my mind? How could a *wolf* turn into *Greyson*?

I’d seen *Twilight*, but animals like that—*creatures*—weren’t real. This was real, *I* was real—this room, my hands, everything around me. Werewolves weren’t real. Maybe I’d drunk more than I thought?

I turned at the sound of my door opening. Xavier stood in the doorway, a hulking silhouette. He stepped inside and closed the door behind him. Instinctively, I backed away until I butted up against my bed. Xavier stepped up close to me, his eyes twinkling in the slivers of moonlight filtering through my window. I felt the sudden urge to grab him, to kiss him, but I knew that would be foolish. For all I knew, he was just as dangerous as the things I’d seen fighting on the street.

Xavier took my hand and gently pulled me down to sit beside him on the bed. A moment of silence passed between us, and I wondered what he wanted to say.

Finally, he took a deep breath, looked me in the eye, and said, “Do you want to know the truth?”

**Episode 2145**

XAVIER

*What am I doing right now? Am I really going to tell this girl who—what—I am? What Colton is? What Greyson is?*

I didn’t know why I felt like I should tell her everything. Maybe it was my need to protect her, my need to let her know that she could believe what she’d seen. I wanted her to know that she wasn’t crazy. I knew there was a chance that it might all be too much for her—I rarely ever bothered to tell humans the truth. It was a lot for them to handle. But something about Caliana told me that she was tougher than she seemed, and that not only would she not be afraid, but she’d also be accepting. It was something I’d felt the moment I’d laid eyes on her.

A connection that went deep—deeper than I’d ever expected.

Caliana looked up at me. “Are you saying that you lied to me before?”

I shrugged. “I did what I thought was right at the time.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? From my perspective, you’re admitting that you lied.”

“Listen, I suggest that you let me tell you, and then decide what I should or shouldn’t have told you before,” I said bluntly.

Caliana stood up suddenly and looked down at me. “You know, you’re really annoying. If you have something to say, just say it.”

I smiled. “I like it when you get all riled up like this.” I patted the space beside me. “Sit.”

Defiant, Caliana stood up even straighter, her hands on her hips.

“*Sit*,” I said, adding a little edge to my tone this time.

Finally, Caliana did as I asked and sat down beside me, but I could tell that she was still ready to put me in my place if she felt that I wasn’t being straight with her.

“You don’t like to be told what to do, do you?” I asked.

Caliana gave me a startled look. “I’m just waiting for you to tell me whatever it is you came in here to say,” she said slowly.

It was clear that she was still shaken from seeing the wolves before, and I hated to see her that way—so afraid and unsure of herself.

As much as I wanted to come clean, to give credence to what she’d seen earlier tonight, I hesitated. Was I really going to tell a stranger one of my deepest, darkest secrets? I felt such a pull toward her that I was worried that if I started talking, I might tell her too much. Scare her away. That was the last thing I wanted.

I leaned in close. “Are you sure you want to know? If you’re smart, you’ll tell me to leave.”

“And if I did, would you?”

“If you ask nicely, I might consider it.”

She looked right into my eyes, and then got up. “Okay, you can leave.”

I laughed and stood up just as quickly, moving close to her. She flinched away ever so slightly, though she was trying her best not to show the effect I was having on her.

I leaned in and put my lips close to her ear. “I said to ask nicely,” I whispered. “That wasn’t very nice.”

She pushed my head back and started to say something, but then to my surprise, she pulled me in for a kiss instead.

It only took a few seconds for me to want to devour her.

I breathed her in, wrapping my arms around her waist to pull her close as I deepened the kiss. What I was starting to feel for Caliana was unlike anything I’d ever felt in the past—even with my past mate. I felt my wolf howling to life inside me. *Caliana is mine.* It felt good to feel my wolf stirring again.

*Is he back for good? Is it because of her?* I didn’t know, but I wanted more.

I walked her backward to the bed and gently pinned her down, covering her body with mine without letting our lips lose contact for even a second.

Without hesitating, she wrapped her legs around my waist. I was right in that sweet spot against her, and gently, I slid my tongue into her mouth. Then, almost like she was feeling a little shy about it, her tongue darted to meet mine.

I wanted more, needed more. I’d fantasized about this moment from the moment I’d first seen her, though I hadn’t imagined that it would be this good. I didn’t want to stop at all. I wanted her, and my wolf wanted her, and my wolf and I always got what we wanted.

I moved to tunnel my hand under her shirt, but she squirmed away. Stopping, I leaned up and away from her, my breath coming in quick gasps as I tried to gather my composure. “Is there a problem?”

“I-I don’t have a problem, but it’s not quite midnight yet, or is it? Because if it’s not, it’s still my birthday, and I just… It’s so strange having a birthday like this, unlike any other birthday I’ve ever had, and with everything that’s happened—wolf-bears and that party and that loud music and… I just don’t know. I don’t want to put a lot of pressure on myself.”

I looked at her, confused. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I’m a virgin!” she blurted out.

“Huh,” I said, pulling away, surprised.

If the admission was meant to deter me, it did quite the opposite. Knowing she was a virgin made her even more attractive. It made me feel stir crazy—how could that be true? How could this woman be untouched by anyone else? That meant that if—*when*—we had sex, she would belong to me and me alone.

I most definitely wanted Caliana all to myself.

“Well, if you wanted,” I said slowly, “we could take care of that problem right now.”

I was only half kidding. If she asked me to, I’d fuck her right here and now. I’d make it so good for her, she would see stars. My attraction to her was reaching a fever pitch. I couldn’t stop thinking about all the things I’d do to her if she let me.

For starters, I would get her all warmed up and ready for me. I’d lick the sweet warmth between her legs until she was panting my name. I couldn’t wait to dip my tongue inside her over and over again before suckling her clit in my mouth, slowly, until she came. Then I’d tell her that was only the beginning.

I would put both of her long, smooth legs on my shoulders and enter her nice and slow. I would be so damn gentle and make sure she was ready for all of me. I would make sure I hit all the right spots so that she’d never forget her first time, or the man who’d made her first time feel so fucking good. Then, if she wanted, and if she was up for it, I’d turn her around while using my fingers on her clit, circling it with my fingertips and pumping in and out of her at just the right rhythm until she came again…

It was taking everything I had to keep from grabbing her right now and doing every single thing that crossed my mind.

“I really appreciate the offer, Xavier, but I just met you.”

Even in the dim lighting, I could tell she was blushing. I could smell how turned on she was. It was killing me.

“Of course,” I said.

I was smiling, but a fire was raging inside me, and my wolf was agitated and hungry for more of her—but I knew that I had to play this as a slow burn. I was more than willing to wait as long as she needed. I could already tell that she was worth every single agonizing minute.

Caliana got up and straightened her clothes. “What is it that you wanted to tell me?”

I took a deep breath, working hard to shift my brain back to “let’s not scare her off with my secret” mode. My heart was pounding, and my palms were even sweating, just a little. I couldn’t believe that I was about to tell her this.

“First,” I said, “I need to know that you’re not going to freak out.”

“Unless you’re about to tell me that you’re a serial killer, I think I’ll be okay.”

“I’m not,” I said with a sigh. “But what I am is still dangerous.”

Caliana laughed a little like she thought I was joking, but that laughter died in her throat when she saw the look on my face. “Wait, you’re serious?”

She looked scared, and I saw her gaze dart toward the door, like she was contemplating how many steps it would take for her to get away from me if push came to shove.

*You should be scared.*

“Xavier… What are you?”

I looked her right in the eyes. “I’m a werewolf.”

**Episode 2146**

GREYSON

I was running through the woods at top speed, angry as hell. I kept my nose in the air as I went, trying to pick up the Rogue’s scent. It wafted by, and I pivoted, changing direction so that I could get right on its trail. The Rogue werewolf I was after had intended to attack Caliana, and that Rogue was going to pay the ultimate price.

I usually didn’t get involved when Rogues went after humans, but Caliana wasn’t just any human. She was someone who’d taken hold of me in a way that I could hardly comprehend. My one regret was that she’d seen me before I’d had a chance to explain who I was, what I was.

I assumed I’d scared her—maybe even more than the Rogue had. I’d thought I was far enough away when I shifted, but I’d seen the look in her eyes, and she’d been frightened. Maybe she hadn’t seen enough for it to matter. I could only hope.

In the meantime, I was going to find that Rogue and make him pay for what he’d done. Luckily, I knew what it was like to be a Rogue, which meant I knew exactly how to hunt like one. I sniffed the air again. His scent was getting stronger, and all my senses were on fire as closed in. I was getting close. I’d wounded the Rogue, though how badly, I wasn’t sure. I’d tried to rip his leg clean off, but unfortunately, he’d gotten away before I’d been able to do the type of damage that would have put him out of commission.

BAM! The Rogue flew out of the darkness and tackled me to the ground. He snarled and snapped his teeth, trying to get at my throat. He was strong, but I twisted away from him and tore out of his hold. Without waiting for him to get the upper hand again, I sped around behind him and clamped down on his leg. I shook my head back and forth and dug my teeth in as hard as I could. The Rogue’s blood shot into my mouth, and I knew then that I’d hurt him.

The Rogue howled in pain as I threw him against a tree. I was just about to pounce on him and go in for the kill when I heard shouting in the distance. Distracted, I tuned to see where it was coming from. Taking advantage, the Rogue scratched dirt into my face. I yowled in pain, my eyes burning as the voices grew closer. I squinted against the pain in my eyes, just able to make out the flashlight beams sweeping the area.

The Rogue was still crumpled against the tree, licking the wound in his leg.

*Don’t go near her again*, I mind linked to the Rogue.

*She’s mine!* the Rogue replied.

“What the hell is that?” someone shouted as a flashlight beam swept toward us.

A moment later, the Rogue took off into the darkness. I hesitated. I knew that I couldn’t be seen by humans, not now. I didn’t know exactly what I was up against, and I still couldn’t see all that well because of the dirt in my eyes, and I didn’t want to be caught off-guard. I would have to hunt the Rogue down another day.

After taking one last look around to plot my course, I took off into the night.

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Many hours later, I woke up outside Caliana’s apartment. I hadn’t meant to fall asleep, but it had been a long day, and an even longer night. I’d followed her scent easily and had decided to stay hidden in the woods outside her place to keep watch, just in case the Rogue decided to come back. As a Rogue myself, I knew how unpredictable they could be—but this Rogue was different. Volatile. Rabid, almost.

I’d seen the look in his eyes. He wanted blood, and he’d been dead set on Caliana. Why? I didn’t know. All I knew for sure was that if he came back, I wouldn’t let him get away again.

I wasn’t sure why the human girl was already so important to me, but she was. Ever since I’d seen her at that café, she was all I’d been able to think about. I couldn’t help but feel like I needed to see her again. Needed to kiss her again, touch her again, and hold her in my arms. I’d told her that we would see each other again, and I planned to keep that promise. I remembered what had passed between us—the heat, the passion, the way our lips had moved together, how right she’d felt in my arms…

I snapped out of the memory and regained my focus. I retreated back further into the trees, making sure that I was hidden. It was definitely a risk to be hanging around here shifted, but if something were to happen to Caliana, I knew I would regret it. I had to protect her, especially now that I knew that the Rogue had her in his sights.

There was another feeling, too, bubbling in the back of my mind. It was an uncomfortable feeling, one that I just couldn’t shake. It almost felt like I was running out of time to be with her, like if I didn’t do something—and fast—everything would be lost. I had no idea where the feeling was coming from, but it was there, and I knew that it meant something. But what? I wasn’t sure.

It was starting to dawn on me that Caliana wasn’t just any girl. The way she affected me meant only one thing: she was my mate. It was a crazy thought, but there was no other explanation for the emotions she’d stirred up inside me.

Suddenly, her window opened and she appeared, taking in the morning air. I pulled back into the shadows, making sure to stay hidden. She looked just as beautiful as I remembered, and I wished that I was up there with her and not out here, longing for her touch.

Just then, the front door of the apartment building opened and Xavier stepped out into the early morning light. I growled.

*What’s my asshole brother doing here?*

Then a horrible thought hit me like a ton of bricks.

*Did he spend the night?*

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Had Xavier slept with the woman I was certain was my mate? My blood started to boil as Xavier walked toward me. I stepped forward and growled just loud enough to catch his attention. Xavier slowed.

“Greyson?” He walked slowly toward the tree line, his expression cautious as his eyes searched for me.

I shifted back to human and stepped toward him. “What were you doing with her?”

Xavier sniffed. “None of your business.”

“Answer me.”

Xavier stepped closer, not backing down. “I don’t have to answer to you, or anyone.”

“Did you sleep with her?” I couldn’t stop the question from coming out. I was afraid to hear the answer. I didn’t know what I would do if he said yes. I braced myself.

Xavier smiled. “We didn’t sleep, brother. You can count on that.”

It took everything I had to fight the urge to punch the smirk right off Xavier’s face. It was just like Xavier to goad me and try to get me to react. I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction, but I needed to know what had happened last night.

“We did have a long conversation about werewolves.”

“She knows?” I asked, alarmed. How could he have been so foolish to tell her? Humans weren’t supposed to know about our world. About us. *You’ve already broken that by showing yourself to her*, I reminded myself.

Xavier nodded. “I had no choice but to lay it all out for her after you shifted right in front of her. What were you thinking? I knew you were stupid, but that was careless, even for you.”

Xavier came closer, but I could tell that he wasn’t on the offensive, and I relaxed just a little—though I would never fully let my guard down around him.

I turned away from him, overcome with worry. I wasn’t as concerned about Caliana finding out what I was as much as worried about how she was coping with it all. I knew that humans sometimes had a hard time accepting that the world wasn’t as simple as they thought it was.

“Is she okay?” I asked.

Xavier looked into the distance, as if considering the question. “She took it better than most humans would. But then again, she’s special. I knew that the moment I first saw her.”

“You stay away from her!” I said. My hands were balled up into tense fists, and there was nothing I wanted more than to bury one of them right in the center of his smug face.

Xavier stepped back and chuckled. “Even if that were possible, I couldn’t.”

“Well, you’d better try, baby brother.”

I was on high alert again, ready to fight if Xavier made one false move. We stepped toward each other until we were nearly chest to chest. I looked into his eyes, and he looked right back at me, both of us unflinching.

Then, in complete unison, we both said it. “She’s my mate.”

**Episode 2147**

After everything that had gone down over the last few hours, I felt like I’d been in a living nightmare—only it wasn’t entirely scary. After all, I *had* enjoyed kissing Greyson and Xavier, but that had been before I’d found out they were both werewolves. It was more than a little unnerving to realize that I hadn’t had a clue about who they really were.

OMG! How many other people I’ve met have been werewolves without me even knowing it?!

I still couldn’t believe everything that had happened last night, and it was getting harder and harder to wrap my head around it as each moment passed. I hadn’t slept a wink all night, so I wasn’t dreaming—or hallucinating, or anything in between. My arm was bruised from pinching myself over and over, just to make sure. My mind wouldn’t stop racing as question after question stacked up in my head.

Werewolves? Real life, howl at the moon and chase people through the woods, werewolves? I’d seen so many movies about them but had never even considered the possibility that they might be real—or that I would one day come face-to-face with them, and that they would be extremely attractive, at that.

I was pacing back and forth, trying to get it all straight in my head while Lola watched from the couch.

“So, about Xavier—don’t you think he’s, like, majorly sexy?” Lola asked, narrowing her eyes. Her question threw me off, and I felt myself blush before I could even think about trying not to. “I knew it!” she shouted.

“Excuse me?” I said, snapping at her. “You knew what?!”

“I knew that you would lose it to Xavier. *I knew it!*” Lola clapped her hands like she’d just solved a mystery.

“What? Lola, do you remember what he told me he is?” I asked. “He said he’s a *werewolf*.”

Lola remained perfectly chill about it. Just like last night. “Lola, do you think that for my first time, I’m going to do it with a… *werewolf*?”

Lola sighed and rolled her eyes. “I’m sure he was just joking. You’re blowing this whole werewolf thing way out of proportion, you know.” She crossed her arms and looked away.

“What? Are you serious? You set me up with a guy who fully believes he’s a werewolf! Let’s just start there. The fact that you’re downplaying it all is really getting on my nerves, just so you know.”

Lola shrugged. “Better a werewolf than a vampire,” she muttered. “And trust me, they’re way better in bed, too.”

I stopped pacing and stared at Lola in disbelief. “Wait a minute… you *knew*? You knew that he was a werewolf? And you didn’t tell me?”

Lola paused, looking nervous. “Something like that.”

“So you’re telling me that you *knowingly* set me up on a date with a *werewolf*? Do you realize how crazy that sounds?” Then it hit me. “Wait a second. How are you so relaxed about the idea that werewolves even exist?!”

Lola whistled awkwardly and got up from the couch. “Cali, promise me that you won’t freak out on me like you did that time in fifth grade when I told you that I’d kissed that sixth grader under the bleachers.”

“Come on, the only reason I freaked out was because that sixth grader was the biggest bully in school! He used to flush my lunch down the toilet—and yours, too, if I remember correctly. Just tell me!”

“Okay, well… The reason I didn’t freak out last night, and the reason I seem so unconcerned about all of this is because, well… I am one.”

“You’re one of what?” I wasn’t sure whether to laugh or smack her for playing with my emotions at a time like this. “This isn’t a joke, Lola. I’m serious. Stop fooling around.”

“I guess you’re half right, since I’m only part werewolf. I’m actually what they call a hybrid. Human plus werewolf equals…”

I stared at her, waiting for her to say that she was joking. She didn’t.

“Lola, stop playing around. I’m warning you. This is really serious. I’m kind of having a rough time dealing with the fact that I made out with not one, but TWO werewolves last night, and you’re not helping. At ALL.”

“Cali, I’m not joking. I’m telling the truth. I’m a werewolf.”

I thought back to the night before, and how Lola had tried to convince me that what I’d seen was a wolf, or a bear. She’d treated me like I was overreacting, like it was just a run-of-the-mill Minnesota wildlife sighting.

“So last night when I saw what I saw—why didn’t you just come clean then?” I demanded. “Why’d you try to make me think I was crazy? That I was seeing things?”

“Because of how you’re acting right now,” Lola said, exasperated. Then she flopped back down onto the couch.

I didn’t know what to say. Could she really blame me for freaking out? In my opinion, I was taking it all pretty well. At least I hadn’t run away screaming—and I was sure other people might have. This was a lot to take in. My whole world had just changed in an instant. I was starting to get a little angry. None of this was my fault, and Lola was acting like she hadn’t just dropped a major bomb on me.

“This whole time we’ve been friends, all the stuff we’ve been through and all the secrets we’ve shared, and you never bothered to tell me?”

Lola paused, wincing a little. “I thought about it, believe me. I wanted to tell you so many times, but I could never find the right time. I was so worried that you’d think differently of me, or that you wouldn’t be able to handle it. But that’s how I know Xavier and Colton,” she explained. “Colton and I were talking, and we decided that you and Xavier might hit it off. Xavier’s having a little bit of a shifting problem right now, and Colton thought that if he met you, you might be able to help fix that for him.”

I was surprised to hear that. “You two thought that I could somehow fix Xavier’s shifting problem? How?”

“It’s complicated, but we were doing it for a good cause,” Lola said with a shrug.

I wasn’t sure that I wanted to “fix” his problem after seeing that humongous creature last night. But, if I saw Xavier again… I thought back to the kiss we’d shared last night, on my BED of all places. My skin flushed with heat as I remembered how it had felt to have Xavier on top of me. *Wait, why am I indulging this?* I was starting to get flustered.

“Is Colton your mysterious online boyfriend?” I asked. “I thought you and Colton hooked up last night.”

Lola laughed. “*Colton?* Oh my god, disgusting. Gross, no. He’s definitely not my type. I’m not actually sure whose type he *would* be. Besides, he didn’t stay long. He left after he drank all of our juice.”

“And Greyson? He’s really their brother?”

Lola nodded. “Yeah, he’s their brother, but he’s kind of the black sheep of the family. Speaking of, I meant what I said last night. Greyson is bad news.”

I was a bit confused—Greyson hadn’t seemed all that bad to me. In fact, he’d seemed like quite the opposite. I thought back to our kiss, and another wave of heat coursed through me before my new reality came back to slap me in the face.

“This is all a lot,” I said. “I need some air.”

I’d never been one to run or jog when I had problems, but I needed to get out of there, maybe take a walk or something while I tried to make sense of all this.

I went into my bedroom and changed into a pair of sweats and my running shoes.

“I’ll be back,” I said to Lola on my way out.

“Don’t take too long, I’m starving!” she said.

I went out into the crisp morning air, which instantly made me feel a lot better. I started walking, going over everything in my head. Despite the shock of learning that werewolves were real, and that my BFF was, in fact, a werewolf, there was something that was troubling me even more. Greyson and Xavier. Even now, knowing everything that I knew, I couldn’t get them out of my head.

Just yesterday, I’d been living in a normal world—just a regular girl who had no idea what types of creatures were lurking in the shadows. And today… Today, I was being pulled toward two werewolf brothers. And it was a pull I was worried I couldn’t control.

I hadn’t gotten far from the apartment when someone yanked me into the trees and put a heavy hand over my mouth, muffling my shocked scream. I struggled against their hold, kicking and pulling until I broke free. I tumbled to the ground and tried to crawl away, but they grabbed me and pulled me back. I rolled over onto my back and looked up to see a crazed man staring down at me. His face was dirty, his hair was a tangled mess, and he had a gun pointed right at me.

He spat on the ground and leveled the gun at my face. “I told him you’d be mine.”

**Episode 2148**

XAVIER

I wasn’t sure if I’d heard my asshole brother correctly. Was this some sort of sick joke?

“What the fuck do you mean, Caliana’s your mate?” I growled, stepping closer.

Greyson growled back. “Because she is. Who the hell are you to say she’s yours too?”

If this jackass wanted to talk, we could. We were going to talk about the damage that I’d do to his stupid fucking face. Caliana had come to the party last night to meet *me*—she had agreed to meet *me*, not Greyson—and now everything had gotten twisted. Why should I need to defend my claim to her when she was *my* mate?

She was mine, and I hadn’t been so sure about anything in a really long time.

What the hell was happening to me?

I had no idea how I could be so certain about my feelings for her so quickly, but the kiss we’d shared yesterday had hit me with so much clarity that it felt like I could finally see the truth. *She* was my truth. Her skin, her warmth, her taste, the way she’d held onto me and moaned into my mouth. She made my wolf rejoice, and my body vibrate with the need to have and worship and fucking possess.

I had to have her.

My wolf had been buried for so long, and he was certain that Caliana was it for us.

I’d never thought I would feel that way again. Not after what had happened to my last mate—not after all the rage and tragedy and horrible feelings. But this thing I felt for Caliana was brand new, beautiful like she was, an emotion that ate me up like a wildfire, seemingly coming out of nowhere.

When Colton had tricked me into going to that party last night, he’d aimed to get me to meet her, thinking that if I hooked up with someone, I’d snap out of my grief over the loss and destruction of my old mate. Colton wanted me to reclaim my wolf, and he’d tried to pull off this kind of bullshit before, but I’d never been interested.

But then I’d seen Caliana.

This was more than sex, though. More than desire. It was this overwhelming urge to be with her, to tease her and see her blush, to talk to her and watch her smile.

She was mine. End of story.

And if Greyson wanted to keep his head on his shoulders, he needed to back the fuck off.

“You better put some clothes on and get the hell out of here,” I snapped, shoving him back.

Greyson clenched his fists. “I’m not going anywhere until I see her.”

I snorted, raising an eyebrow. “I get why you’re jealous, man. After all, I was the one who spent the night with Caliana, and you were the one locked outside like a forgotten puppy.”

Greyson snarled, grabbing me by the collar. I gripped the back of his neck to push him away. I’d dreamed about killing my notorious older brother for years now—for everything he’d done to me and the Redwood pack. He was a dangerous man, a bad man, and the idea of Caliana being in danger because he randomly decided to fucking claim her made me hate him even more.

Greyson was a Rogue who burned down everything in his path, and I wasn’t about to let him drag Caliana into his chaos. She was destined to be with me. To be safe and happy in my arms while Greyson stayed the hell away from her.

Growling, I slammed him against the wall. “You’d better stay the fuck away from Caliana. You know you don’t deserve her, and if you try any funny shit, I’m going destroy you. Hear me, brother?”

Greyson growled and flipped us, shoving me up the wall himself. He was a strong motherfucker—I had to give him that. “I don’t want hurt you, Xavier, but I will if I’m forced to.”

I punched him in the stomach, hard. He let go, staggering backward.

“Just get the fuck out of here, Greyson, while you still can,” I said.

Greyson shook his head. “I *can’t* go anywhere. I can’t leave my mate. I’d die without her.”

I glowered, the rage I felt so overwhelming I wished I could shift right now and tear him apart. “She’s not your mate! How dare you think that you’d even *deserve* someone like her after all you’ve done? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Greyson’s chest was heaving. His voice was icy. “At least I didn’t kill my old mate. At least Caliana wouldn’t be anyone’s replacement.”

I was so enraged I charged at him, fists raised. He ducked, as if he’d expected it.

“You’re a piece of shit!” I snarled.

Greyson scoffed, as if amused. “You know what? If fighting is the only way you feel we can resolve this, then let’s get it over with.”

I wanted to shift and bite his head off, but I wasn’t sure if I could. My wolf had claimed Caliana, but I had no idea if that meant he was ready to jump out and challenge Greyson’s after so much time on ice.

Greyson was a lot of bad things, but he was also a formidable fighter. One of the best. He stepped back, his grey eyes steely on me while he made a move to shift. My heart was pounding as I wondered what the fuck do I do next, but then…

Greyson paused.

“You can’t, can you?” he asked slowly. He was the naked one, but the way he stared at me made me feel exposed. “You can’t shift.”

I looked away, scoffing. There was no way Greyson could tell something was wrong with me. This problem of mine wouldn’t matter soon enough, though—I was dead certain that the way to get my wolf back fully was through Caliana. She had woken him up, and I needed to cling to that feeling if it was the last thing I did.

As for Greyson, I could kick his ass—as long as we both stayed human.

“Of course I can shift,” I snapped, lying. “I just have more than one working brain cell, and I know that we’d trash this place and draw attention. Have you ever seen two huge wolves going at each other in broad daylight?”

“Really,” Greyson deadpanned, arms crossing over his chest. This asshole’s sarcasm drove me up the wall.

“Really,” I said, huffing. “Besides, I want the pleasure of seeing your human face when you draw your last breath.”

Greyson seemed unimpressed, the bastard.

“However you want it, little brother,” he said with a shrug.

I was fuming. “Stop calling me that!” I snarled, and charged at him. The asshole ducked again before punching me in the gut, but I was ready for him—the second he left his face uncovered, I gave him a good one in the mouth, feeling skin break before he staggered back.

“That’s what you get,” I spat, and he laughed at me.

*Laughed*.

I was going kill him. The way he deserved it for being a traitor to the Redwood pack and killing our own.

We slammed into each other, both of us pros in hand-to-hand combat. He shoved me to the ground, punching my jaw repeatedly.

“This all you can do?” he mocked.

Growling, I flipped us over and banged his head down hard enough that he groaned. “Fuck. You.” I landed another punch on his face, but then suddenly—

“Hey! What’s up?”

Colton sauntered over, the doofus, distracting me long enough for Greyson to twist my arm. The pain was instant—he’d dislocated my shoulder—but it was still pretty mild.

Colton frowned. “Why wasn’t I wasn’t invited to the family reunion?”

I shoved my elbow into Greyson’s stomach and threw him off, telling Colton, “Fuck off.”

Colton, the obnoxious shithead, laughed and told Greyson, “It’s always nice to see how you bring out the best in Xavier. Some things never change.”

I huffed. “He’s fucking crazy, man.”

Colton squinted. “Does this have anything to do with that girl, Caliana?”

Greyson glared at Colton. “This isn’t your business, kid. Back off.”

Colton scoffed, stepping closer to me. Peering at Greyson, he said, “That’s where you’re wrong. You’re a traitor, and if you have an issue with Xavier, then you have an issue with me too. We’re real brothers in that way.”

I rolled my eyes, sighing deeply. Colton meant well, but he could be so annoying. Greyson and I had literally stopped fighting just to deal with his bullshit.

“I appreciate your loyalty, Colton,” I told my twin, “but I can handle this myself.”

“Are you really trying to tell me right now that I don’t get to beat the shit out of him?” Colton snapped, poking Greyson on the chest.

Greyson shoved Colton’s hand away.

“You probably should know that Greyson’s claimed Caliana—the girl *you* set me up with—as his mate,” I told Colton. “When I know she’s mine.”

“Wrong!” Greyson snarled, charging at me.

Colton got in the middle. “Have you both lost your minds? How the fuck can this one girl have *two* mates, you assholes?”

“Guys!” Lola shouted. I looked over Colton’s shoulder and saw her running toward us. Her eyes wide with fear, she said, “Cali’s missing!”

**Episode 2149**

I was staring at the business end of a silver revolver, chills running down my spine. The scary man was scaring me shitless, and I had no fucking idea what to do. Was this how I died?

*I can’t just die! My parents would be devastated!* I screamed inside my head, scrambling backward only to trip over my purse, its contents spilling on the ground.

“Shit!” I hissed, trying to grab my phone, but the man adjusted his aim to my face.

“Leave it,” he declared. “We’re going.”

He dragged me to my feet, pulling me further into the woods. I contemplated struggling or shouting for help, but there was nobody around. The gun was terrifying, and I bit my tongue, my heart racing in terror.

*How could this be happening?*

Yesterday, I was living a normal life, just trying to get by, like everybody else. And then last night, my world had been turned upside down. Not just because I’d met two of the most alluring men EVER, but because I’d learned that they were werewolves—WEREWOLVES?—and that Lola, my freaking best friend, was a werewolf too.

Werewolves were, like, A THING.

And now, after all that, I was about to perish at the hands of some crazed, gun-toting maniac.

I suddenly had a flash of inspiration—I had watched a documentary about serial killers, actually, and some behavioral specialist had said that a victim could increase their odds of escape by pretending not to be afraid and just playing along. Serial killers apparently *loved* it when their prey was afraid, so if you didn’t show that emotion, it ruined things for them.

*This is so fucked up*, I thought, my eyes growing hot with unshed tears. *I feel like throwing up…*

I swallowed the fear and stared at the man. He looked like a normal guy, which just made things a hundred times more terrifying. Taking a deep breath, I said, “So, um, before you murder me, I think you should know my name.”

The bloodthirsty monster shot me a sideways look, still dragging me deeper into the forest.

“I’m Caliana,” I said. “My friends call me Cali. You can me Cali, too, actually—I feel it would be appropriate.”

The guy shot me another look but remained silent. He was super rude, but what the fuck did I expect? He wanted to mutilate me!

“I’m a college student looking for a job, by the way,” I added. “Do you have any leads? I’m not very good at murdering, but I could definitely clean up a crime scene.”

This time, the man raised an eyebrow. Was I getting to him?

*HOW IS THIS REAL LIFE?*

“I’m only asking because my mom is sick,” I explained hurriedly. “She needs me. Who is going to take care of her if…”

My stomach lurched so fiercely that I stopped talking. The nausea returned. This man was going to kill me, and the only thing I could cross my fingers for was a quick, painless murder.

*Don’t cry, Cali!* I told myself. *He wants you to cry, he wants—*

“Do you even have any idea who I am?” he asked, pausing his brisk walk.

I swallowed roughly. “I don’t know you. I’ve never seen you before.”

The man smiled. It was ominous. “That’s not true—we met last night.”

I studied his face—his normal, nearly handsome face—but when I met his gaze, there was something familiar to it. His eyes held something dark and sinister, something that made me realize…

I gasped. “You’re that wolf-bear from last night!”

The man shook me up, making my bones rattle. “I’m a *werewolf*. Don’t ever make that mistake again.”

“I-I’m sorry,” I stammered. “I meant no offense!”

He glared at me, spitting to the side. “Keep your fucking mouth shut.”

He kept dragging me along, and I knew I needed to find a different angle here. This monster was going to drag me to his lair. My head was filled with the image of a bed made up of human bones, a wolf as large as a bear lounging on it, his jaws bloody after feasting on a person’s flesh.

I would be that person soon.

*No way! I’m NOT going to die!*

“NO!” I shouted, digging my heels into the ground to stop him from dragging me. “You have no power over me! Let me go, or you’re gonna wish you were never born!”

The man was stunned enough to stop and face me. He actually laughed. “What?”

I glared, furious now. How fucking dared he do this to me? I was too young and cool to die! Okay, maybe not cool, exactly. But I was great, and I was loved, and my mom needed me!

“You ran off last night because you were scared,” I snapped. “You were terrified.”

The man was now bewildered. This was working!

“You were scared, because my boyfriend is a bigger, badder wolf-bear than you,” I declared. The word “boyfriend” felt small to describe Greyson, though. Whatever I felt for him already felt deeper—to an alarming degree that I couldn’t explain right now.

Right now, I just had to make sure this evil dick was the one who was afraid, not me. “And my other boyfriend is also a big bad wolf-bear, actually,” I exclaimed, talking about Xavier. “And my best friend is, too! They’re all going to come save me or, like, avenge my death!”

The serial killer looked weirded out. I had no idea evil could look so confused. “Wait, how many boyfriends do you have?”

I paused. Technically, neither Xavier nor Greyson were my boyfriends, but I wouldn’t mind if they were…

*Oh my god, what am I talking about?* I thought. *I can’t have two boyfriends! Two wolf-bear boyfriends. What would my parents think? OMG, and what about Alex?*

Well, I had completely forgotten about Alex.

“Listen here, girl,” the man said impatiently. “Did you know that the werewolf who chased me last night is a Rogue?”

I blinked. I was a little intrigued now, not going to lie. “Ooh, what’s that supposed to mean? Like, a sexy pirate?”

The man blinked at me like I was an idiot. I’d have been offended if this hadn’t been the least of his offenses. “He’s a Rogue. He’s a werewolf without principal, out on his own, killing indiscriminately… Just like myself,” he finished proudly.

I scowled. This madman had to be to be lying. Greyson was gorgeous and gentle and a pure soul. Okay, maybe I didn’t know him at all, but I could just tell. Sure, he had a menacing edge to him, but it was more like a *sexy* edge. Not a killer edge, of course not!

“You’re lying,” I declared. I’d had enough of this self-proclaimed Rogue. “He’s nothing like you!” I shoved him away, and he let go, looking amused.

“I’m afraid he is, princess. He’s the worst man you’ll ever meet. A cold-blooded killer, bad to the bone. I’m a fucking delight in comparison to him,” he said in a low, hissing voice.

I refused to believe him.

Werewolf or not, I knew that when Greyson kissed me, he made me feel soft and cherished and cared for. His passion had been fiery, but his hands on me had felt considerate, as if to make sure he wouldn’t hurt me, as if he knew I was new to all these overwhelming emotions he made me feel.

“What the hell do you want from me?” I demanded. “Why did you even bring me here?”

I stepped backward, running into a tree trunk. I looked around frantically—I needed a weapon. Would a sharp stick work? No, fuck, that was for vampires!

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m just having fun here!” The werewolf laughed. The evil jackass pointed at me with the silver revolver again, and I suddenly remembered. Silver! That could hurt werewolves, right?

I reached for my earrings frantically, but then I stopped. This was *useless*. They were too cheap. Not even silver plated. *Ugh!* I looked up, flailing a little like a mouse in a trap, and noticed that there was a low-hanging branch above me. The werewolf was standing straight under it.

“You know what I’m gonna do to you?” he asked, licking his teeth. “I’m gonna snap your neck. Then I’m gonna…”

I tuned his villain’s monologue out, panting as I glanced up at the branch again. My fake boyfriends and best friend were nowhere to be seen, and I was doomed. I needed to do something, anything, to escape.

Or at least distract him.

“… let’s see what your big bad Rogue boyfriend will do then, if he—”

“Look! He’s here!” I screamed, pointing behind the werewolf.

He paled in an instant, glancing over his shoulder.

Jumping up, I grabbed the branch and pulled it down, using it like a sling-shot to strike him on the shoulder.

The werewolf flinched, turning to me with a puzzled look on his face. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Screaming bloody murder, I broke into a run.

**Episode 2150**

GREYSON

“What are you talking about?” I asked Lola, fighting to keep myself composed. “Where is Caliana?”

But, of course, my dear little brother was already on fire. He walked up to Lola and asked, “Yeah, what are you talking about?”

Lola looked between us, her voice breaking. “Cali went out this morning, and she hasn’t come back! She hasn’t even answered my texts, which *never* happens!”

My stomach dropped.

“Maybe she went for some donuts,” Colton offered helpfully. *Jackass*. “They’re always the best in the morning.”

I glared at him. I knew he was supposed to be the class clown or whatever, but this was not the right time. Miraculously, Xavier agreed with me.

“Not now, Colton,” he snapped.

“I got worried and used Find My Friends, and—”

“Wait, you *stalk* Caliana?” Colton asked, intrigued.

Lola glared at him. “You don’t understand what it’s like to be a woman. There’s danger everywhere!”

My pulse started racing. Caliana—in danger? No, I’d find her and make sure to fucking eliminate any and all danger. Ever. I’d let her put me on a leash and take me everywhere with her like a lap dog if it meant keeping her safe.

“What did you find on the app?” I asked Lola impatiently.

With trembling hands, she held up Caliana’s phone. “I found this in the woods.”

“Shit,” Xavier said under his breath.

This was bad news. This was really bad fucking news, but I needed to keep my cool and get to the bottom of everything, STAT. “How did this happen, Lola?”

“I—I just thought Cali was blowing off some steam after Xavier and I told her about werewolves and stuff, but she wouldn’t just disappear!” Lola flailed. “That’s not like her!”

I took a deep, deep breath before I started breaking heads. Anxiety was rolling through every inch of me as I turned to Xavier. “How much did you tell her?”

The truth was that Xavier was the last person I’d have wanted Caliana to talk to when it came to werewolves. I wished that I’d been the one to explain things to her, to make sure she felt okay about it, to reassure her that she wouldn’t get hurt being around us.

Even though that was apparently a lie.

I’d purposefully stayed outside her apartment last night to protect her from the brand new supernatural world that had banged on her door, only to have her slip through my fingers. The thought of anything happening to her was mind-numbing.

“I had to tell her, Greyson,” Xavier snapped. “She saw a wolf. I couldn’t make her feel like she was fucking nuts.”

I swallowed audibly. “The Rogue from last night, he—”

“I thought you took care of him,” Xavier said coldly.

“He got away,” I said, equally as iced. I wasn’t about to explain myself to Xavier.

He scoffed, shaking his head. “While you stand there being useless, I’m getting back to the apartment. I’m going pick up her scent and find her.”

“Don’t bother,” I said. “I’ll shift and track her down myself.”

“Save it,” Xavier huffed. “She’s my mate and none of your business.”

This asshole really wanted me to break his head in half, didn’t he?

“What should I do?” Colton asked casually.

“You just shut up,” I snapped at Colton, then turned to Xavier. “If you hadn’t shown up and started arguing with me, then I probably would’ve seen where Caliana went and none of this would’ve happened.”

Xavier gasped. “*Me?* You’re the one getting in fights with random Rogues in front of her! Do you have any idea how scared she was?”

I felt so guilty at his words that I felt like cowering. “I did it to protect her,” I said. “I’m not going to sit here and waste time talking to you! I’m going find Caliana and—”

“HEY!” Lola said, clapping her hands.

“*What?*” Xavier and I snapped at the same time, heads swiveling toward her.

Lola looked between us. “Cali needs all the help she can get. Instead of arguing, why don’t you work together?”

I’d do anything to get Caliana back. I would kill anyone to save her. I would run through broken glass and fucking chew it afterward, go after an army, drink poison, you name it. I’d do *anything*—

Apart from indulging my deluded younger brother.

This little brat thought Caliana was his mate, and the mere idea of Xavier thinking he had the right to touch her, to kiss her, made me feel like a rumbling volcano. I wasn’t one for shouting and breaking shit like Xavier—I could be a gentleman all up in here, *thanks*—but the idea of sharing her had me simmering with rage.

Right now, though, if I were to listen to the logical side of things, I had to admit that working with as many people as possible was the smartest thing to do in order to find Caliana. I couldn’t risk her safety, no matter how much I resented Xavier.

Of course, though, he had different ideas.

“What?” He laughed. “Why would I work with a traitor?” He gestured to Colton. “You can help.”

“Adventure time!” Colton whooped, but I blocked their way.

“You’re not looking for her without me,” I said between gritted teeth.

Colton rolled his eyes. “We don’t need you, Greyson. We never did.”

I had no regrets for the life I’d led, and I made no apologies for the lives I’d taken. Every single one of those scumbags had deserved to be killed. But these idiotic kids had no idea about the truth. They thought they knew everything about me when they were aware of nothing but lies and rumors.

Xavier made a move to leave, but Lola grabbed him by the arm. “Seriously? What is wrong with you?” She pointed between us. “You both like Cali, so stop acting like babies and help find her! I’ll go put her phone and some other stuff away—you’d better get your heads out of your asses right now!”

She headed back to the apartment, and I turned to my brothers.

“She’s right,” I said. “We can kick the shit out of each other later. Right now, the important thing is to find her.”

Xavier peered at me. “Fine. But let me make something clear—I don’t trust you. I’m doing this for my mate.”

I clenched my jaw and promised myself that I’d beat Xavier up later, just for calling Caliana his *mate* when she was mine.

All in due time.

“Look at you guys,” Lola said wryly after returning, eyeing all three of us with a wrinkled nose. “One big happy family. Now let’s shift and get Cali.”

“Wait!” Colton said.

What the hell was it now?

“You shouldn’t risk shifting,” Colton told Lola seriously. “Jay said that it’s dangerous, that you can get stuck. I’ll never hear the end of it if you get stuck or some shit.”

Colton looked genuinely worried, which was pretty weird for someone as generally clueless as he was. Imagine that.

“Don’t think for a minute I’m going to sit this one out!” Lola said hotly. “Cali is my best friend. I’ve known her practically all my life, and the three of you have known her for like five seconds!”

I was struck by her words. I had threatened to kill my brother, and I had definitely thought about beating him up—all because of a woman I’d only met yesterday. It was fucking ridiculous—absurd, even—but I couldn’t ignore the feeling. It was like destiny.

Yeah. As cheesy as maybe I once would’ve thought that sounded, it was true. Caliana was my destiny.

I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Besides,” Lola went on sharply, “I can show you dumbasses where I found the phone.”

Colton shrugged, suddenly not giving a shit. “Whatever. It’s your life.” He turned to Xavier. “You can come with me.”

Colton shifted, and without sparing me a look, Xavier got on our brother’s back. Just as I’d expected—Xavier couldn’t shift. What the hell had happened there? Not that I was worried or anything. Okay, maybe I wanted to kill him, but I was also a *little* worried about him. I was the oldest, and this werewolf blood bullshit was hard to ignore.

I needed to focus on Caliana right now, though. *Focus*.

Lola and I shifted at the same time, and I got in the front.

*I’m the largest, so I’ll lead. Follow me*, I mind linked them all.

Xavier was glaring at me, but at least he’d shut up. He couldn’t exactly object, not when he’d been reduced to riding on another werewolf.

We headed off in the direction that Lola indicated, and I picked up Caliana’s scent immediately. It was rich and crisp and incredible—it almost made me feel drunk, woozy.

But then, another scent muddled it.

The Rogue from last night.

I should have killed the bastard. None of this would be happening if I’d gotten rid of him yesterday.

*This way!* I said, and we all raced forward.

Through my frantic worry and need to protect her, my wolf howling on the inside to keep her safe or die, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d done this before. “This” meaning working with a brother who wanted to kill me, all for a woman we both loved. *Weird*.

I knew I loved her, though.

As fast and unbelievable as it sounded, that kiss had changed everything. I might as well have been Prince fucking Charming for her, falling in love at first sight, falling at her feet, all that and more.

*Don’t worry, love*, I mind linked to the void, even though I knew she wouldn’t be able to hear. *I’m coming for you.*

I charged forward, running toward her scent, when—

Her voice was in my head.

*Um, excuse me? Who is this?*

**Episode 2151**

Had I really just heard someone’s voice in my head? And had that voice sounded like Greyson? Sure, I was extremely into him, but wasn’t that a bit much?

*Is this real life, or am I losing my mind?* I wondered, dashing through the forest.

I was probably losing my mind. I was being chased by a wolf-bear serial killer while being so attracted to Greyson that I was literally fantasizing about him talking to me.

*Stop thinking about the hot guy, Cali!* I scolded myself*. You have to get away from this maniac!*

Greyson wasn’t going to just randomly appear and save me—of course not. I had to save myself, because feminism, and right now, the only way to do that was to outrun the so-called Rogue. Though I wasn’t sure if that was such a good plan. I could hear the monster, running after me and—

Laughing? Was he *laughing* at me? Did he think my life was a joke?

“Keep it up, Little Red,” he called after me. “The harder you run, the more fun it is for me. I love a good hunt. And who knows? Once I catch you—and I will—you might be one of the lucky ones who survives.”

I shuddered at the thought of him catching me, my teeth gritting together. I wasn’t even sure what he meant. What kind of murderer relished his victim’s survival? How could I even survive if he sank those sharp teeth into my skin?

This guy was off the deep end, and if I could’ve afforded it, I’d have turned around and screamed at him to eat shit and die. I was already gasping for air, though; running had never been my forte. Lola always tried to encourage me to lead a more fit life, but how could I resist sitting on the couch and eating tacos? Yes, jogging was good for you, but at what cost?

I suddenly realized that the fact that I never jogged could actually cost my life.

*Oh no! Oh no no no NO!*

My thoughts were cut off when I heard traffic ahead. God, was I finally approaching a highway? Maybe I could flag down someone for help—or would the wolf eat them too? Of course, hitchhiking had its risks, but the odds had to be better than a literal supernatural being chasing me to drink my blood or whatever it was that wolves did. Like, what were the chances that I was trying to escape a murderer only to get picked up by another?

*Slim to none!* I thought. *You can do this, Cali!*

Emboldened by my inner pep talk, I was trying to pick up my pace when Xavier’s voice filled my head.

*Don’t you dare die, or I’ll kill you.*

What the hell? Was I imagining Xavier now too? What was wrong with me?

Choking, I tripped over something and crashed to the ground. The stench was horrendous, and I screamed. “OH MY GOD! A DEAD BODY!”

Panting and shaking, I took a better look at it, then, and I realized that it was just a dead deer. There was an arrow sticking out of it, and I wanted to cry now. Poor Bambi—losing his mother at such a young age!

*Like my mother is going lose me at my young age!* I thought frantically, looking around.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are!” the Rogue called, taking his sweet-ass time.

This son of a bitch was *toying* with me. He was literally playing with his food—the evil sadist was out to get me, and I couldn’t outrun him much longer.

I was out of breath, I was furious, I was terrified, but I could no longer hear sounds of traffic, and I had no idea where the fuck to run toward. I had no choice but to stand and fight—somehow. I needed a weapon. My eyes fell on the poor deer, and I realized that the arrow was the only thing that could maybe help me. I pulled it out, shaking.

*Ugh, this is so gross! I’m so sorry, Bambi’s mom!*

Trying not to gag, I stared at the tip. It looked like it was silver, but there was too much blood on it to know for sure. I wasn’t about to wipe the blood off on my clothes to figure that out. Perhaps I could hide under the carcass?

*Ew, no! There’s no way I can lift it, plus I don’t want to!*

“You’re lucky I love playing with my food!” The wolf’s voice and laughter echoed through the woods. He had to be close. My heart pounding, I looked around. There was a thicket of bushes—could I hide in there, or would he sniff me out exactly like a wolf could?

I had no choice, so I clutched the arrow and burrowed into the bush, fighting to control my breathing. I needed to watch, to listen. I looked at the deer—if I hadn’t been so obsessed with my strange attraction to Xavier, to the point of imagining him talking to me, I might not have tripped over it. But then again, I might not have found the arrow otherwise.

*Can this thing save me, though?* I wondered, shaking from adrenaline and fear and fury.

“You think you can outrun me?” the Rogue called, getting even closer. “You think you can hide?”

Trembling, I peeked through the branches as he paused at the dead deer. He sniffed the air, and a sinister smile formed on his lips. “I can smell you, human girl.”

I grimaced. I imagined that I smelled less than ideal right now after racing through the woods, but could my scent be so bad that he could pick it up from so many feet away? What the hell?

He slowly turned around, his eyes lazily moving from the trees to the ground and then…

To the thicket.

Could he—could he see me?

He moved toward me slowly. I gripped the arrow, holding my breath, not making a single sound. His eyes narrowed on the bush, but then, there was another sound in the distance, and he looked up.

He moved past the thicket and away from me.

*DID I JUST OUTFOX A SERIAL KILLER?!*

I was so beyond excited and relieved that I felt like jumping up and down. I refrained from doing that, though—I didn’t know if the werewolf was still around. I inhaled through my nose very, very quietly and strained my ears to listen.

Nothing.

Like, nothing at all. No birds, no animals, not even any wind.

*This… is not normal.*

It wasn’t. I could finally hear the highway again, though. It couldn’t be that far away. How long should I stay crouched in here? How far away could he have gone? Would he come back if he heard me move? But how would he know that the sound had been me instead of a squirrel or something?

I counted to a hundred and decided to come out—it seemed like a reasonable amount of time, and this fucking bush was making me itchy. Carefully, I started to crawl out, still feeling great about myself for escaping. The moment I got to my feet, though, I heard the snap of a twig.

I whirled around, gasping, only to see that I wasn’t, in fact, alone.

And the sound had *not* been made by a squirrel.

The Rogue leaned against a tree, smirking at me mockingly. How the hell had he tricked me so easily? Jumping backward, I hid the arrow behind my back, my breath coming out in pants.

“Poor little girl,” the werewolf tsked. “Did you really think you could escape?”

His mockery made me see red. I had never been more frightened in my life, and my fear only made my growing anger even worse.

“What the hell are you getting from all this?” I asked, trembling. “Why won’t you just leave me alone?”

He laughed. “Don’t you see, sweetheart? This is all a game to me.” He raised an eyebrow. “And now, it’s over.”

All of a sudden, there was an awful sound of crunching and snapping and breaking as he shifted into a huge wolf-bear right before my eyes, his clothes in pieces on the ground, fur growing out of his skin. His size made me scream in horror.

*Run, Cali! RUN BEFORE HE EATS YOU!* My brain was screaming at me, but my body wasn’t cooperating. I was frozen like an animal, an instinctual response that I fought to push through, because playing dead till the danger passed wasn’t gonna work here.

*Run, CALI!*

Or fight.

Could *I fight?*

The Rogue snarled and lunged at me, and my scream was piercing. I stabbed him with the arrow as hard as I could, my whole body shuddering at the impact.

I was fighting for my life. I had to do it. There was no one else here to do it for me.

The beast howled in agony as the arrow pierced his chest.

**Episode 2152**

XAVIER

*Don’t you dare die, or I’ll kill you.*

I wondered if Caliana had heard my mind link. Greyson would say that it was too aggressive and pretty messed up, especially considering the fact that she was probably running for her life right now. But what the fuck did he know?

I was losing my mind over here.

She was my mate—I knew she was, even if she wasn’t responding to my mind link. That didn’t mean anything. She probably didn’t know what to do with it. She was human, and all this was so new to her. Or perhaps she’d just been too far away for me to make a connection.

Perhaps I was a fool for trying.

For being so desperate for a girl that I’d only known for a few hours.

But my wolf couldn’t be lying—he was stirring deep inside me, hiding only to reappear at the thought of her. My wolf said that this was our mate, despite all the bullshit that Greyson thought about her. Meeting Caliana made me feel more settled down and at ease than I’d been in months. The connection between us, that instant spark, had awakened a part of me that I’d thought had been too traumatized to re-emerge.

I’d felt so lost without my wolf.

Colton had done everything he could to help get it back, but despite all the dates that he’d set up, despite all the girls he’d thrown my way, I hadn’t felt anything—not until Caliana. I wanted to keep her just as much as I wanted to keep my wolf. And I knew that I needed her for that to happen, for that buried part of myself to become whole.

This girl was making me feel like a complete person again.

Of course, I wasn’t going to tell Colton about all those emotions that were running around inside of me. I wasn’t going to tell him about my wolf returning yet. I loved my brother, but he was a cocky dick, and I wouldn’t hear the end of it if he knew that his idea of randomly setting me up with people—which I had rejected over and over again—had been a success. Maybe I’d tell him more after I was certain that Caliana felt the same about me, after we found her and I could be certain that she was safe and sound.

I hated that I was riding on Colton’s back, looking weak, relying on my twin for something that should’ve been natural, while we chased down the Rogue’s scent. It didn’t help that Colton could be a real douche at times. One moment he’d be out there doing all he could to get my wolf back, and the next he’d be giving me shit over losing it in the first place.

It didn’t help that I resented that Greyson was able to shift. I resented Greyson, full stop. He’d said that he was the biggest wolf and got in the front, and I wanted to tear his head off. If I were able to shift, *I’d* be the biggest. Showy fucker.

He paused, raising his nose to sniff the air.

*We’re close*, he said.

For a moment I was surprised. I hadn’t expected to hear his mind link in my head. Was that because Cali had reignited my wolf in me? Now all he needed to do was let me shift again.

I glared. *No shit. I can smell too, you know*. I kicked Colton’s side. *Why are we stopping?*

*Stop kicking me!* Colton grumbled*. I’m not a fucking horse!*

“Jesus Christ, you can be a real pain, you know that?” I muttered, jumping off my brother’s back.

I looked at the ground and saw footprints and cracked leaves, cracked sticks. Two people had gone this way, and I was sure that one of them was Caliana. Her scent was prominent, intoxicating.

My wolf snarled on the inside, ready to attack, to protect his mate.

*Help me do this*, I told my wolf. *We can attack this Rogue and save Caliana, but only if we do it together.*

My wolf growled, but my thoughts were interrupted by Greyson.

*What the hell are you doing?* he demanded, his grey eyes boring into mine.

*Fixing what you fucked up last night*, I snapped. *She’s close, and I can get to her by foot.*

*You better be careful*, Greyson said. *If the guy’s shifted, it won’t be a fair fight against you.*

I was seething with rage. I didn’t want his pity.

*Nobody asked for your opinion!* He was lucky we were trying to be quiet, otherwise I would’ve been yelling at him.

*Both of you, stop fighting!* Lola’s wolf huffed.

With one last glare, I started moving forward, ignoring my brother. After all, Greyson had only ever looked out for himself, and I wasn’t about to be fooled. I hadn’t come here to play his mind games—I was here to save my mate.

Taking a deep breath, I concentrated on her scent.

Caliana.

I started running toward it, just as I heard her voice echoing in my head.

*Oh my god! HELP!*

I dashed toward her scent and almost yelled with joy. She’d mind linked with me. She had to be my mate. I was about to respond when I realized that her screams weren’t actually in my head.

“Caliana!” I shouted, and everybody raced toward her shouts.

We reached a small clearing, and I looked around wildly, panting, calling her name.

“Caliana, I’m here! Caliana! I—”

A loud crack came from over my head. I looked up—

And Caliana came tumbling down from a tree and into my arms. She squealed, grabbing onto me, panting and flushed. Her eyes wide, she stared at me, her mouth parted. Her whole body was still shaking with adrenaline.

“You caught me,” she breathed.

I smirked. She was so fucking cute when she was shocked.

“Would you rather I hadn’t?” I teased, and switched my hold on her from bridal style to a front piggyback. I pretended to drop her, and she made a squeaky sound, clinging onto me tighter, arms around my neck.

“Xavier, stop it!”

She was panting, grinning at the same time as she buried her face in my neck. I pressed my lips to her temple, squeezing her against me, her chest flush with mine, every curve glued on me. I kept one hand on her ass, the other on her thigh. The feel of her, the weight and pressure of her against me was driving me nuts.

“You’re okay,” I said, soothing, nuzzling her cheek. “I’m here. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

She sniffled a little, her breath hot against my ear. She buried her nose in my hair, as if my scent was doing something to her too. My wolf stirred, demanding, eager to protect her, to claim her. I wanted to keep holding her like this, kiss her again, recapture the passion and power I’d felt last night.

*And the idea that she hasn’t had sex with anyone else…*

She was going to be mine, only.

I turned around, still holding her. Greyson had finished shifting back, and I could tell his expression was murderous.

“Look what fell into my arms. Must be a sign,” I said, gingerly putting Caliana down.

Greyson’s eyes flashed angrily—it was probably killing him to know that I was the one who’d saved her, not him. He stepped forward, his gaze fixed on her now.

“Are you okay?” he asked. His voice was low, soft, as if he were speaking to a wounded animal.

Caliana sniffed and turned to him. “I mean, I’m…” Her eyes widened once they dropped from his face down to his body.

She choked, looking away instantly.

Right that instant, Colton and Lola shifted back too.

“Ouch!” Lola groaned.

“Told you not to shift,” Colton told her haughtily.

“Ugh, fuck off,” Lola told him before running up to her friend. “Are you okay? Where did the Rogue go? I was so worried!”

Lola fussed over Caliana like a mother hen. Caliana just stood there, her eyes still wide as she looked around. “Okay, but why is everybody naked?”

Colton laughed. “Is that a complaint? Cause I mean, check this out!” Waggling his eyebrows, he struck a pose, flexing his biceps.

“Stop being a jerk!” I hissed, shoving him hard. He laughed.

“Are you okay, though?” Greyson asked Caliana again. I hated the way he was looking at her. Like she was precious. His.

No matter what he said, she wasn’t his mate. There was no way in hell that could possibly be true. It was crazy to even think about.

*No*.

“I’m fine. I mean… as fine as possible, given the circumstances,” Caliana said.

“I’m sorry you had to find out like this,” Greyson added in that same calm tone that pissed me the fuck off.

“You mean about all of you guys being werewolves?” Caliana asked nervously, looking among us. Her cheeks were a delicious pink. So fucking cute.

“Speaking of werewolves,” I said, looking around, “the Rogue could still be out here, waiting to attack again. You shouldn’t stay out here.”

“We should take you somewhere safe,” Greyson said, as if it was his fucking idea and I hadn’t been the one to point it out.

“Wait!” Caliana exclaimed before anyone could move, as if suddenly realizing something. She looked between Greyson and me. “Why the hell can I hear both of you in my head?”

**Episode 2153**

I stared at the two brothers with wide eyes, trying to take in what the hell was going on. And also how hot they both were. *How* was it humanly possible for these two men to be so hot?

*They’re* not *human, Cali!* I reminded myself. *That’s the point here.*

“Wait!” Lola erupted. “You can hear both of them? In your *head*?”

Both boys frowned. I blinked in alarm. I’d just had a near-death experience, and all this excitement was not doing great things for my blood pressure. “I mean, I think I heard them—I’m not losing my freaking mind, am I? I need—”

“You need to talk to your best friend is what you need!” Lola exclaimed and grabbed me, pulling me away from them. I was freaking out all over again here.

“Lola, calm down and slow down. What else could there possibly be still to reveal to me beyond the whole… oh, you know, *you’re all a bunch of werewolves.*”

Lola’s urgency only intensified. “Are you *sure* you weren’t just imagining that you heard them in your head?”

“No. My imagination, as wild as it can be, isn’t that inventive,” I said sheepishly. “I could have sworn I heard their voices in my head as clearly as if I were talking to them.” I scowled. “Only I wasn’t talking to them in person, because I was being chased by something called a Rogue.”

Lola took a deep breath. Ignoring the Rogue part as if I’d just told her I’d gone out to buy cookies, she said, “You and Greyson—you probably imagined that part, right? You two don’t have a real connection.”

“What do you mean by ‘connection’?” I asked. I thought about my kiss with Greyson—how intense and sexy and amazing it had been… It still made me tingle when I thought about it.

“I mean that werewolves can’t do that with just anyone, obviously!” Lola huffed. “They have to have a special connection, you know?”

“To do what?” I asked.

“To mind link! What do you think I’m talking about? Besides with other werewolves, mind linking happens only with your mate. Do you get that?” Lola peered at me.

I was getting all flustered here—all this talk about *mates*, and there I was still a virgin. How mortifying.

“Anyway.” Lola barreled through. “I think your mate is Xavier. Not Greyson. Forget Greyson.”

“What does being someone’s mate even mean for a werewolf, though?” I asked. I remembered learning in my seventh grade science class that wolves mated for life. Glancing over at Greyson and Xavier, I swallowed roughly.

*How is it possible that two amazingly hot guys would want to spend their lives with me? While BARELY knowing me? This is nuts!*

“Cali, are you even listening?” Lola said. “You should stay away from Greyson.”

Lola kept saying that, but I couldn’t deny my sudden and intense attraction to him. Or Xavier. I’d met them just hours ago, and I felt so torn about my emotions.

“Hey, girls!” Colton barked suddenly, making me snap out of my emotional reverie. “If you two aren’t going to start making out, can we go?”

Lola glared at him. “Can you stop being gross for like two seconds?”

Colton smirked, and I tried not to look at anywhere other than his face. Could these brothers put some freaking clothes on? This was not helping the heat in my cheeks, and… other areas.

“Shut up,” Xavier grumbled, shoving Colton out of the way as he walked toward me. “Let’s walk back home together, Caliana.”

He gave me a smile that made my knees weak, and I nodded.

All the while, Greyson stared at me from a few feet away, still naked.

*Oh my god, stop it with the nakedness! PLEASE!*

It was hard to tear my eyes away from him, though. I was pretty embarrassed, so I could only look at his bare chest that reminded me of a Greek statue. My heart was pounding. When our eyes met again, it was like he was in my head. It was as if he could speak to me with a single look.

*Maybe I* did *just imagine hearing his voice*, I thought.

I was so disoriented that I had no idea what to believe.

“Before we head off, though,” Colton said casually, “is anyone besides me wondering where the fuck the Rogue went, and how the hell Caliana ended up in a tree?”

“I was trying to get away from him, thinking that wolf-bears can’t climb trees,” I stammered.

Colton laughed. “Seriously?”

I pressed my lips together, thrusting my chin out. “Well, I defended myself. And I survived, as you can see. I stabbed the… werewolf… with an arrow. And after that, the tree seemed like a safe place.”

Greyson walked up to me, his gaze fierce. “Where did you stab him?”

I swallowed, looking up at him. “In the chest, I think?”

Greyson smiled softly, and I felt my brain melt while my eyes probably went heart-shaped. “I mean, where did it happen?” he asked. “If you wounded him, I can finish him off.”

The heart-eyes remained, even with Greyson talking about killing someone. It felt comforting, somehow, instead of terrifying like it probably should have. I opened my mouth to speak, but it was difficult with all the overtime my pulse was doing at Greyson’s proximity.

In the end, I just pointed in the direction of the dead deer.

“Sick!” Colton whooped. “I’m in the mood for some Rogue blood.”

He jogged away to check. Lola squinted between me, Greyson, and Xavier, while the two brothers looked at me—Xavier, all serious and intense, and Greyson, equally intense, though there was a smile on his mouth.

“You did really well,” he told me. “I’m proud of you, love.”

I felt my insides turn instantly to jelly at that. *Love*. Whoa, this was way too intense way too fast. But I didn’t hate it.

“There’s some blood, but no Rogue,” Colton said right then, returning.

“Xavier, walk home with Cali like you said. The rest of us should shift and go after it,” Lola said seriously, and Greyson and Colton agreed.

Xavier just stood there, nodding. He crossed his arms over his chest as Greyson took another step closer to me.

“Remember what I told you,” he said softly. “I will see you again. Stay safe, love.”

He leaned in, brushing his lips over my heated cheek.

My whole face felt like it was on fire. I fought hard to look anywhere except his naked body, and I was failing *miserably*.

*At least try to keep your eyes above his chest, Caliana! My god!* I thought.

With one last crooked smile, Greyson shifted and dashed off into the woods after Lola’s and Colton’s wolves. His wolf was a massive, majestic grey one, and looking at him made me feel woozy.

“I’m taking you home,” Xavier said, putting an arm around me.

I turned to him, my heart continuing its mad race. My heart had no shame, apparently, pounding for both of them equally. I loved how Xavier held me—I wasn’t used to having anyone protect me like this, and I liked it. As he led me away from the clearing and back toward the main road, I realized something.

Why hadn’t Xavier shifted?

“You’re a wolf too, right?” I asked Xavier, curious. “Why didn’t you turn into one too, like the others?”

Xavier abruptly pulled his hand away from me. I felt this coldness settling over him, and I flinched as he said sharply, “Someone had to take you home.”

Well that was evasive. He had to be hiding some sort of secret. He’d already told me about werewolves, though, so what could he be holding back?

*This is so weird!* I thought.

As we walked back together, I started to question my recent life choices. I had just escaped from a killer werewolf, and now I was being escorted home by a virtual stranger—who’d confessed to me just a few hours ago that he was also a werewolf. One who wouldn’t shift, apparently.

At the same time, Lola was saying that I was this guy’s mate. What even was a “mate,” for werewolves? I glanced over at Xavier—he was frowning, but he was still really hot. To a disturbing degree. At least he had that going for him, because he clearly wasn’t great in the communication department. But I was ready to make another attempt.

“So,” I said, clearing my throat. “Is this werewolf thing an open secret? Does everyone know about this except me?”

Xavier’s icy expression softened. “No. We don’t like witnesses. Things tend to get messy.”

I paused. “Messy? You mean murder-y?”

Xavier chuckled. His face was even more beautiful now. “Yeah.”

“I noticed that pattern,” I said wryly. “The Rogue was super eager to kill me for no reason. And now you and Greyson both want to kill the Rogue. Is that a thing with werewolves? Like, are you all running around and killing anyone who figures out what you—”

I froze in my tracks as a terrifying thought hit me.

“What’s wrong?” Xavier asked, looking confused.

Wide-eyed, I took a step away from this gorgeous stranger. “Since I’m a human and I know about werewolves… Does that mean that you have to kill me?”

**Episode 2154**

XAVIER

This girl couldn’t be for real. I’d been practically all over her for the past few hours, I had actually told her the truth about werewolves myself, and now she thought I was going to hurt her?

I could ask her how she could possibly ever think that, but, well, it’s not like I could blame her for thinking that of a bunch of werewolves, could I?

The fear in her eyes amused the freaky predator in me, though, as if to prove my own point. My wolf was enjoying this. I, myself, wanted her to look at me like she wanted me, like she needed me, and I didn’t like the idea of her fearing me…

Though the idea of messing with her a little was too tempting to resist.

“Actually…” I said, taking a step toward her. She instantly took another back, effectively trapping herself against a tree trunk. “I could, in theory, have killed you yesterday. You shouldn’t be so trusting, hanging out with werewolves. Especially not all alone.”

I raised my hands and rested them on either side of her head, looking at her up and down, and her intimidated expression changed to something else. She narrowed her eyes at me.

“Lola wouldn’t put me in danger if she didn’t trust you, though,” she said. “And I was alone with a werewolf last night, too.”

I smirked. “So you’re making all kinds of bad decisions then?” Looking down at her mouth, I murmured, “I can think of a few others you can make with me…”

Her cheeks turned a lovely shade of pink. She swallowed audibly, biting her lip, and my whole body reacted to her. She was so gorgeous, her scent so lush and delicious that I wanted a taste.

“How do I *really* know you’re a werewolf, though?”

Her question was so bold that I was stunned for a brief moment—long enough that she slid under my arm and sauntered away. She was certainly spirited.

I loved it.

I wasn’t about to explain to her about my wolf, though. It was too soon.

When I caught up with her, she said, “Lola says you have a shifting problem.”

Fucking Colton. He must’ve told Lola, and of course Lola hadn’t been able to keep it a secret. My brother was such a tool—it was a miracle he’d survived so long without someone cracking his head open.

“That’s none of Lola’s business,” I said, scowling.

Caliana glanced at me, keeping her pace steady. “But if it’s, like, a problem, isn’t there a pill you can take?”

I hated talking about my shifting issue as if it were a problem that something like Viagra could solve. *Jesus fuck.* I made a mental note to kick Colton’s ass when I got the chance. He needed it.

“It’s too complicated to explain. Nothing a pill can do. But I’m pretty sure I’ll be able to shift soon,” I said confidently.

Caliana looked intrigued. “How come?”

I came to a stop in front of her, interrupting her walk. She looked up at me, her eyes widening, her pupils blown wide as I touched her chin gently, lifting it. I lowered my mouth closer to her full, pretty lips.

“Because of you,” I whispered. My voice broke. I wanted to kiss her so badly, I was dying for it.

She swallowed thickly, not looking away, not pulling away. She wasn’t afraid. She moved closer, like she wanted me, like this was right.

Somewhere deep inside, my wolf howled in triumph.

“What could I have done? I’m just a human girl,” she murmured, her tone awed.

I felt the sudden urge to explain everything to her—how I’d lost my mate, and my wolf. But I was scared that the story would overwhelm her, make her fear return. Colton had always joked about me being troubled, fucked up, broody, but that wasn’t something that I was proud of. That wasn’t something I wanted to advertise to the woman I wanted.

Right now, all I needed to focus on was the fact that my wolf was returning.

And I knew it was because of this pretty, fiery girl before me.

How could I tell her that, though?

How could she possibly understand?

Swallowing, I dropped my hand and took a step back. Shaking my head, I said, “We should get you home.”

Caliana’s tone was cautious. “But you haven’t explained. Hardly anyone has. What do I have to do with your shifting?”

I smiled a little at her insistence and reached to take her hand. Her skin was soft and hot, and she instantly squeezed my hand. I loved how she accepted me like this—how she seemed to enjoy the connection.

This felt so fucking right that my whole body was vibrating with contentment.

“That’s enough questions for now,” I told her. “You know enough about me already.”

She snorted, still holding my hand as we kept walking. She kept up with my pace, always staying close to me, and the contentment turned into something fiercer as our silence grew. The feeling was strange and unfamiliar, and I was—

I was *happy*.

Not like I was going to break out in smiles or sing in the fucking rain, but being with her just felt so… perfect. Like it was meant to be. The emotion was so intense that it threw me off. I’d never felt like this before—not even with my former mate.

Even the silence between me and Caliana felt peaceful, and when we got to her apartment, I was disappointed. I liked walking with her. Touching her. Literally not talking, but just staring at each other. It was the best time I’d had in a while.

I stopped at her front door, and she paused in front of me.

She cleared her throat, fighting for what to say. She looked damn cute when she was at a loss for words. She shuffled her feet as she glanced up at me shyly. “Would you like to come in?”

I smiled. I’d been smiling a lot the past few hours, actually, so hey—maybe I *would* be breaking into smiles more after meeting her, after all.

“I think *you’d* like me to come in,” I said.

She arched an eyebrow. “And you *don’t* want that?”

I shrugged. “We’re talking about you now.”

She scoffed even while looking flustered. “Don’t get too cocky, mister. Nothing is going to happen. I was just being nice.”

I titled my head to the side. “You can believe what you want, but we both know you’d like me to stay.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she said stubbornly.

I laughed. “So what? You don’t wanna see me again?”

She fiddled with the hem of her shirt. “Do you want to see *me* again?”

“I thought that was obvious.”

She pressed her lips together, a smile forming. “Okay, then.”

“Okay, *what*?” I asked, taking a step closer. She smelled so fucking good that my wolf stirred again.

“*Okay*,I want you to stay,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Are you happy now?”

I grinned. “Very.”

“And Lola said Colton was the annoying one,” she said playfully.

I laughed at her teasing. The way we got along so easily was amazing. Especially when I got along with literally nobody—not even Colton. I loved the dude, would die for him, but I barely tolerated him most of the time.

I barely tolerated anyone, apart from Caliana.

She opened the door, and we both went inside. When I glanced at her bedroom door, I had a flash of the kiss we’d shared. In this house. This was the place where my mate had been living all this time, and I’d had no idea until now.

“Would you like some tea?” Caliana asked. She looked at me with those big brown eyes, and my heart was pounding.

“I prefer coffee, but either is okay.”

She led me to the kitchen and started busying herself. “I actually don’t have any coffee right now—I’ve only got green tea. I hope you like it.”

She kept talking quickly, fumbling with the tea and the cup, then accidentally spilled the water when I moved closer to her. I leaned against the counter, watching her as she wiped down the spill, huffing.

“I can be so clumsy, I—”

I reached out and tucked her hair behind her ear. Her breath caught, and she didn’t finish her sentence. Her gasp set me on fire. I leaned in closer, and she turned to face me, our gazes locking. Her pupils were blown wide, the tension rolling off her so hot that I could barely think. I traced my fingers along the side of her cheek, lingering. She shivered, her lips parting, her eyelashes fluttering. My wolf stirred, howling for her, the need so intense I could fucking taste it.

She wanted me.

She wanted this thing between us. She could feel it too, and I couldn’t wait any longer.

One hand reaching to her waist, the other for her neck, I pulled her in for a kiss.

**Episode 2155**

Time stopped as I felt Xavier’s lips press urgently against mine. Was this the connection Lola had talked about? Because I could feel it—I could feel the electricity, the closeness, the need pulsating through him and between us, like a live, heaving thing that made me shudder and tremble against him.

I couldn’t imagine ever being closer to another person than this.

It scared me, deep down—not because he was a werewolf, though that was worth consideration, but because I didn’t understand how I could feel something so intense for this man that I’d only just met. I couldn’t explain the way my skin rippled, the way my heart pounded when his tongue brushed against mine, when he groaned and gripped my waist, when he made me feel like he couldn’t get enough of me.

He pinned me against the countertop, his hand on my thigh to hook it over his hip, his lower body brushing up against me in a way that made my toes curl. The heat and friction between us made me light-headed, the urge to pull him closer so intense that I’d never felt anything like it before. It was startling, shocking, and the most amazing thing was that he could feel it too.

“You’re so fucking hot,” he rasped in my ear before kissing down my neck, and I whimpered. When he pulled back to meet my eyes, he was panting, his eyes hooded, his lips red. I loved the way he looked at me—I could barely believe it was happening, and then…

He reached for the hem of his shirt and got ready to pull it off.

My brain short-circuited.

The image of a shirtless—and very naked—Greyson flooded my head, and a weird sense of guilt hit me like a wall of bricks.

“Let’s, uh, let’s slow down?” I told Xavier in a squeak.

Before he could speak, the door to the apartment opened, and I heard Lola call, “Cali!”

I instantly slid away from Xavier, my pulse racing. When Greyson, Colton, and Lola came in, I was still straightening out my hair. Lola gave me a look and smirked, and I furiously blushed.

I didn’t dare look at Greyson.

“Tea, anyone?” I said in a high-pitched voice.

Greyson—at whom I was still not looking—said, “The Rogue is MIA, but a creep like that will be back. We’ll deal with him then, Caliana.”

I couldn’t resist meeting his gaze—not after he said my name like that. But when I did, I found that he was staring between me and Xavier, as if he could tell that I’d just been making out with his brother. What was it with these two that drove me absolutely crazy?

It seemed like they could peer into my mind.

Read my thoughts.

Talk to me without actually speaking.

Kiss me witless.

“Caliana?” Greyson said my name, his voice even and husky, and I almost jumped out of my skin.

“Yes?” I croaked.

“I don’t want you to worry,” he said seriously. “I promise you, we’ll get rid of the Rogue. I’ll keep you safe.”

A warmth spread through my stomach, and I was both freaked out and overwhelmed by the feeling. How could I be so into this? Into both of them? How could I like them so much, and at the same freaking time?

*This is so scandalous!* I thought wildly. *I’m a virgin, for god’s sake, and I want to jump not one, but two men’s bones. Ack! Stop thinking about it, stop thinking about it…*

“That sounds about right,” Colton said, looking between his brothers. “I assume that you two will be able to handle a lone wolf on your own, right? Because I don’t have all day.”

Xavier scoffed. “I can take care of the Rogue, Colton. I’m ready any time, any place.”

This was wild. I forced my horny thoughts to at least *try* to focus on the immediate dangers at hand. I couldn’t believe this conversation—they were talking about fighting a werewolf in the same tone that Lola and I talked about doing laundry. Though with much more tension—Xavier and Greyson were eyeing each other like they were ready to start ripping into each other at any moment.

I really, really wished that Greyson would put some clothes on.

*It’s so hard to keep staring at his face!* I thought. *And his collarbones—how are his collarbones so well-shaped? And his neck? God almighty, that’s one attractive neck!*

I supposed it was a good a time as any to remind myself that I had just been making out with this man’s equally gorgeous brother, who currently looked like a pissed off runway model.

*For shame, Caliana!* I scolded myself.

“I get that waiting around is how you and Xavier do things,” Greyson drawled at Colton in a way that was too sexy for me to process, “but that’s not me. And when it comes to Caliana, it’s better to be proactive, take matters into our own hands.”

So Greyson saying my name was cool beans. I could’ve listened to him whispering my name all night long. Preferably in my ear. While muttering other sweet nothings. I was ready to bet that he’d be very sweet about it.

*Again… have you no shame, Caliana?*

Xavier, meanwhile, glared at his brother. “Fine, then. I’ll finish this off.”

Xavier then decided that he hadn’t shocked me with his hotness in a while, so he took my hand and squeezed, staring deeply into my eyes. And intensely, of course, because that was his eternal vibe. “Don’t go anywhere until I’m back, Caliana.”

He headed toward the door, and Lola nudged me. “Go,” she hissed. “Follow him!”

I felt like I was rooted to the floor, though, because Greyson was staring at me. What was I supposed to do? We were communicating with our eyes right now, and that was super important to me, okay? *Jeez!*

“I’ll be back,” Greyson murmured, and I melted.

Then he led Lola and Colton after Xavier.

Once the front door was closed, I realized that I’d been holding my freaking breath all this time. I was light-headed because of it. Or because of Greyson in general, let’s be honest here. I poured myself a glass of water and gulped it down.

*Talk about being thirsty*, I thought.

I laughed to myself, pretty proud of my word play as I glanced out the window. Xavier and Colton hustled past and headed into the woods. I couldn’t see Lola or Greyson, so I assumed they’d already taken off… to kill a Rogue that had tried to kill me.

After I’d made out with a werewolf.

In my kitchen.

*HOW is this real life?* I wondered, starting to pace up and down.

Seriously, was I going to wake up and realize that this was a dream? Because that was the only possible explanation.

I touched my lips—just seconds ago, I’d been kissing Xavier. And last night, I had kissed his brother. A lot. And I’d liked both kisses so much—no, I had *loved* them, with an intensity that was unprecedented.

Whatever I felt about Alex looked like a lukewarm pancake in comparison.

Was this, like, passion? Lust? *Desire?*

*Oh my god, AM I GROWING UP?* I thought wildly.

Then I realized that I was twenty years old, which was a pretty good age for that kind of awakening. Of the emotional and physical type. My body felt all frazzled at the thought of those two guys, and I didn’t know what to do with it.

Especially the part about them being *two* *different* *people*.

Not even people, werewolves!

They were going to come back, and what was I supposed to do then? Just look at Greyson and Xavier and secretly wonder when the hell they were going to kiss me again, because it all felt super amazing and I wanted more of it? *Please?*

I suddenly decided that the best course of action for the moment was to go brush my teeth.

*Priorities! But also, FOR SHAME.*

Anyway, with a bounce to my step, I headed to the bathroom. Staring at my reflection, I focused on dental hygiene, and then I realized that I should probably shower as well after rolling around on the forest floor. While I washed my hair, I wondered why I wasn’t feeling exhausted. I’d been up most of the night, then I’d been attacked, kidnapped, and nearly killed by a werewolf, and yet I didn’t feel tired at all. If anything, I felt invigorated.

I felt… hungry.

And not for food.

*FOR SHA—Okay, you know what? I’m not ashamed*, I thought stubbornly*. If they want to kiss me, I’ll kiss them back! This is happening!*

Ten minutes later, after finishing up with the shower and putting on a fresh change of clothes, I returned to the kitchen to make that cup of tea.

In the silence, though, I heard the door open.

*Oh, no…*

Could it be the Rogue?

*Shit!*

Shaking, I grabbed the closest thing—a deadly spatula—hid behind the door, and raised it as I heard someone approach.

*It’s now or never, Cali!*

“This is what you get, you—”

My breath caught just as Greyson grabbed my wrist before the spatula could land on his head. He was still freaking naked, so I was just stupefied.

“Hope I didn’t scare you,” he said gently.

I blinked and let out a weird sort of giggle. Oh my god, I was ridiculous.

He was *also* ridiculous. Ridiculously sexy. My brain was set on fire just looking at him.

“Nice to see you too, Caliana,” he murmured, still holding my hand after lowering it down.

“What…” I cleared my throat. “What are you doing here?”

Greyson pulled me closer to him, his voice a warm whisper. “I had to come back to you, love.”

**Episode 2156**

Greyson was back! And he was STILL NAKED.

His words echoed in my mind. *He had to come back to me?* I spluttered as he took the spatula away from me and placed it on the counter.

“I couldn’t leave without making sure you were okay,” he said. “You went through so much today.”

His voice was soothing, and I felt a lump of emotion get stuck in my throat. He reached out to touch my face, but then he hesitated.

“Is this okay?” he whispered.

I nodded, speechless—*breathless*. Tracing his fingertips over my cheek, he said, “I feel so drawn to you, Caliana. It’s like a piece of myself that I didn’t know I was missing showed up and slapped me in the face.”

I blinked at him. “I *slapped you* in the face?”

Greyson laughed. It was so gorgeous it sent a shiver down my spine. “I just mean that when I met you, everything fell into place. I can’t explain it.”

I knew exactly what he meant.

“Being around you feels right,” he said. “Like you’re the sunshine after a storm.”

What in the romance novel was happening to me right now? Was love at first sight real, then? Was this how it happened on *The* *Bachelorette*? But that wasn’t real, and this—

This felt *real*.

I built up my courage to ask, “It’s… It’s because we’re… mates, right?”

Something flashed through Greyson’s silver eyes. He looked at me like he wanted to kiss me, to touch me, like he’d been thinking about me as obsessively as I’d been thinking about him. He looked at me like he wanted me. Desperately.

What was this feeling? Like he was part of me, and I was part of him?

“Greyson, I…” Without thinking, I reached out and touched his *very naked* chest. It felt so good—firm and muscular—that I flinched like I’d been burned.

*What are you doing, Cali, you hormonal little gremlin?* I scolded myself. *You have LITERALLY NO IDEA WHAT YOU’RE DOING!*

This guy must’ve slept with, like, an army of women. Women who could carry themselves better than me. Women who knew what they were doing, how to handle a man like him.

*But he’s in my kitchen*, I thought, a small, pleased smile playing across my lips. *I’m the one he’s staring at…*

The way he stared made me feel tingly all over.

“What did you want to say?” His tone was hushed, and my knees were wobbly.

“Just…” I swallowed. “Be careful out there. The Rogue seems super scary.”

“Don’t worry, love. It’s nothing I haven’t handled before.”

His confidence made me feel a certain type of way. He was so strong, so powerful, so—

“I’d never let anything happen to you,” he whispered.

I had no idea who kissed whom first.

I was one hundred percent sure that I didn’t want it to stop, though. It was hard and fast, and I’d never—not once in my whole damn life—kissed a man like this. I was melting in his arms, craving more. When he grabbed me and picked me up, it was as if I weighed nothing.

“Where’s your room?” he asked, panting.

I pointed wildly, directing him to the right room.

*Oh my god, am I really doing this?* I thought, squealing on the inside.

Apparently I *was*. Because the moment he placed me on the bed, I pulled him down for another burning kiss. His pace was a little slower now, but so intense that I was quivering underneath him. I wrapped my arms and legs around him, panting and shaking and losing my mind as he kissed down my neck, licking and sucking. Our bodies fit together, his naked and mine full clothed, and I could feel—

I could feel. His. Penis.

That was *most certainly* a hard, large-and-in-charge penis right *there*.

*OH MY GOD? Oh my god, what the fuck do I… do?*

My nervousness crashed and burned the moment his mouth found mine again, though. There was something about him that made me feel comfortable and cozy… But also like I wanted to tear off all my clothes and let him do whatever the hell he wanted to me.

The realization was so startling that I broke the kiss and blurted out, “Um, just so you know because it might be relevant, I’m a virgin!”

He paused, panting. His body was rigid over mine, massive and powerful. He stroked my cheek, softly saying, “That’s all right, love. Do you want to stop?”

I opened my mouth. Closed it.

“Caliana…” The way he said my name was so sweet that I kind of wanted to explode but also cry. “We can take it slow. You just say the word and—”

“Yes!”

He raised an eyebrow. “Yes?”

“I mean, no—”

He instantly sat up, but I gripped his shoulders—I wasn’t gonna let him go. He was real, and he was here, and he made me feel like I could break into a dance routine, even though I was very bad at dancing.

*I’m doing this!* I thought wildly. *This is it! IT’S HAPPENING!*

“I want to,” I said quickly. “I want you.”

“I want you too…” His gaze was scorching, making my chest feel tight. “I’ve never wanted anyone like this. I’ve never felt this way about anyone. Only you, Caliana.”

*What in the fanfiction fantasy is fucking happening to me right now?* I wondered.

“Maybe you could…” I cleared my throat. “Show me stuff? Like how I could, um, touch you?”

His eyes turned stormy. “If that’s what you want.”

I nodded. “Y-Yes.”

“Then let’s take it slow.”

We lay down on the bed, on our sides, and he took my hand. He kissed my palm, his eyes always on my face as he placed my hand on his chest, then down to his abs, then even lower. His skin was smooth and hard, his body tremendous—more powerful than I could have ever imagined.

When he wrapped my hand around him and completed that first stroke, he gasped against my mouth. Not to brag, but I got the hang of it pretty quickly, and soon he was shaking. I couldn’t believe that I could have such an effect on a man who seemed so invincible.

The power trip made me feel woozy.

“I want to touch you too,” he breathed against my neck. “Can I?”

My newfound confidence wavered. I’d never been naked in front of anyone before—except that one time Lola and I had accidentally seen each other, but that didn’t count.

*What if Greyson’s totally turned off by stretch marks?* I wondered, cringing. *No guy has ever seen them…*

His voice was quiet. “It’s okay if you don’t want to move forward. We can—”

“No.” I swallowed roughly. “It’s not that…”

He stroked my side gingerly, nuzzling my temple. “What is it then?”

“Stretch marks,” I blurted out.

He met my eyes, chuckling. I flinched, but he pulled me back to him. He took my hand and placed it on his torso, on a piece of skin that was rougher than the rest. “You feel that scar?”

I nodded.

“Do you see it as something bad?” he asked, sliding my fingertips over the old wound.

I flushed all over. “Of course not.”

He raised a cheeky eyebrow. “Then why would I find stretch marks bad?”

Pressing my lips together to hide a smile, I said, “You’re such a smartass.”

“I think you like it.”

I loved it, actually. He made me feel so good that I felt much bolder than my everyday self. I sat up and took off my shirt. I hadn’t put on a bra after the shower. His eyes moved from my face to my collarbones, then down my bare chest.

He licked his lips before looking up at me. “You’re beautiful.”

Greyson laid me down on the mattress a moment later. He traced his lips over my mouth, my neck, and then lower. His husky voice broke through in my head, making me shudder.

*Is this okay?* he mind linked. His hands hovered over my chest, his mouth too.

“Yes,” I breathed, wildfire spreading all over me.

*What about this?* he asked a moment later, lowering his mouth to my navel, planting kisses around it. I nodded, and he went on, kissing over my hipbones, then, over my stretchmarks. When he looked up at me, he seemed so drunk with desire that the idea of him not loving every part of me seemed ridiculous now.

*I love the way you feel, the way you smell*, he said, his fingers hooked on my underwear. *Can I take these off?*

I nodded, gripping the sheets tightly as he spread my legs. He looked right in between, but for some wild reason, I felt no shame about it. Not with him. Not when he used his mouth on me, traced his fingers over where I’d gotten so wet for him. Not when he asked if he could touch me on the inside, asked if it felt good, if I wanted more.

All I could say was, “*Yes.*”

“Oh my god!” My hips arched upward, toward Greyson’s mouth. My body spasmed while pleasure crashed over me like a wave, over and over and *over*. I’d never felt anything like it, never thought that fireworks could really be a thing, that orgasms could be such a big deal, because they were a massive, huge deal, they were—

*OH.*

*MY.*

*FUCKING…*

“Oh my *god*,” I choked out again, dazed.

And then I heard his deep chuckle.

“You can just call me Greyson, love,” he teased, kissing up my body.

Still panting, I grinned. Somehow I’d known he’d say that.

“Do you want—”

“*Yes*.” I was on the pill, and there was no way I was stopping now.

He kissed me again, deep and hard and perfect, brushing himself between my legs. He used just the tip to tease me, right there, right where I needed him, making me squirm and crave.

When I whimpered, “*Please*,” he moved just an inch inside. Then more, and more, the pressure of him so thick and charged that I gasped, my body clenching. This was nothing like his fingers. The feeling of fullness was foreign, extreme enough that it bordered on too much.

“Does it hurt?” he asked quietly.

I bit my lip. “A little.”

“I’ll make it better,” he whispered, reaching down to touch at the apex of my thighs. Staring into my eyes, he rubbed circles right there, right where I wanted it. Sparks of pleasure started to emanate from the place where we were joined. They spread all over, leaving me quivering, melting as I opened up to him, shivering under his gaze.

His thrusts were steady but deep, so good now that I couldn’t wait for more. He kept going, rotating his hips, touching me, kissing me, burning me from the inside out. The feeling pushed me higher and higher, heat and skin and Greyson making me feel like I was about to erupt under him, because of him…

Until I did.

Greyson shuddered inside me, with me, and I held him tight like I never wanted to let go.

When I kissed him again, hard and scorching, I *knew* I never wanted to let him go.

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I stared at him afterward. I was sore, but only a little. Mostly, I was completely fucking dazzled.

Greyson smirked. “That good, huh?”

*I’LL SAY!*

I was about to respond, when—

*Caliana!*

That was Xavier’s voice in my head. Gasping, I grabbed my sweatshirt from the floor to cover myself and ran to the window.

“What’s wrong?” Greyson asked, alarmed.

I looked out into the trees but didn’t see anyone.

*Stay inside! We found the Rogue’s scent.*

I tried to reply, but I couldn’t. And then my head was empty.

“Caliana—”

I whirled around to face Greyson. “Your brother needs you.”

**Episode 2157**

GREYSON

I was confused. And a little annoyed, not going to lie. I’d just shared an amazing, beautiful moment with this incredible woman, with my mate, and I’d never been happier.

But now she suddenly wanted to talk about my *brother*?

“What are you talking about, love?” I asked, fighting to understand.

Caliana swallowed roughly, and I liked the rosy color of her cheeks. I’d liked it much better earlier, though, while we were in bed and she was writhing under my mouth, under my body. Arching up to me as I sank inside and claimed her, greedy and needy for me, all mine. I’d been her first and only, and she was so responsive and hot and fucking perfect for me that I felt mad with want just looking at her.

I stared at her lips, thinking that I could go again, right now. I’d make it so good for her, just like before; I’d do anything she wanted as long as she—

“I heard Xavier’s voice in my head,” Caliana said, interrupting my thoughts.

It was like someone had thrown a bucket of ice cold water all over me.

The idea that Xavier had been in her head while we’d been in bed had my wolf growling in indignation. I was tempted to ask her about it, but the thought sickened me.

My wolf paced on the inside, like an animal in a cage, as Caliana said, “Xavier said they found the Rogue’s scent.”

Her words reminded me that I needed to focus on the bigger picture here.

We needed to eliminate the threat, for Caliana’s sake, and I had to be part of it, to make sure that everything went smoothly. Selfishly, though, I wanted to stay here with her, just to make sure she was safe. I wanted to ignore the real world.

Because in the real world, Xavier was able to mind link with her.

How the fuck could he do that when he couldn’t even shift?

The urge to grab Caliana and kiss her was sudden and sharp—and a little dark too, like a wild thing I barely had a grasp on. I’d never felt so territorial, never thought that I could feel that way about anyone. I didn’t want to be a dick, though. I didn’t want to make her feel uncomfortable, ever.

“If Xavier said that, I’d better go,” I told her.

The thought of leaving her right now felt like a stab in the heart. I used to ridicule those dramatic lovelorn werewolves who spouted on about fate and destiny. Not anymore, apparently, because here I was, the worst of them all.

“I’ll be back, okay?” I said, lowering my head to brush my lips over hers one last time. Her breath was so sweet that it took all my willpower to break the kiss. “See you later.”

I was about to leave the room when Caliana said, “Wait!” She grabbed a pair of pants and started getting dressed quickly. “I’m coming with you!”

I shook my head. “Caliana, it’s too dangerous—please stay here.”

She scowled. She was so fucking hot that I wanted to march up to her and pin her up against the wall, but this was not the right time, so I just walked out.

I’d barely gotten out of the house when the door opened behind me and—

“I said, I’m coming with you!” she called.

I turned around to see her look at me, fire in her eyes. She was pulling on her jacket with one hand, wielding a knife in the other.

Waving the paring knife in my face, she said, “I’m not going to wait at home like a helpless maiden. I’m responsible for what’s happened.”

I sighed, shaking my head. “No, you’re not. The Rogue is just a sick, power-hungry werewolf. And he’s already tried to kill you. I refuse to allow him another chance.”

She frowned. “But—”

“*Please* stay here. Stay safe. For my sake. Okay?”

The words made her pause, then look up at me with huge eyes that tugged at my chest.

“I’ll be back, I promise,” I said, leaning down to quickly kiss her on the cheek before breaking into a run. I shifted after reaching the woods and looked over my shoulder—Caliana was still standing there, looking worried. I missed her already.

*Don’t worry, love*, I mind linked. *Everything’s going to be okay.*

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As I ran through the forest, following Xavier’s scent, I fought to stop thinking about Caliana—I couldn’t allow my thoughts to get clouded here. The Rogue had to be dealt with, and then I’d be able to immerse myself in her. Feel her again, touch her again, talk with her and see her smile.

All in due time.

*What’s the status?* I asked Xavier.

*We’ve got it under control*, he replied.

Of course he’d attempt to brush me off. I wasn’t about to turn the Rogue over to my brother, though. When he’d gone after Caliana, he’d made it personal—for both of us, obviously.

Why could we both mind link with her?

It was pretty alarming, and I remembered a story from my childhood—something about a young werewolf woman who’d been mated with two werewolves. *Due destini*, a curse. But that had just been a story… Right? It had to be a story, because the thought of Caliana dealing with a curse was unimaginable.

Besides, Caliana couldn’t be with Xavier. Shouldn’t. He was too much of a loose cannon, and that could only mean danger.

He wasn’t her mate.

He hadn’t gotten the memo about that, though, because when my brothers came into view and our eyes met, his lips curled into a snarl.

*What the fuck did you do, Greyson?* he mind linked.

*None of your business*, I replied coldly.

Xavier growled. *I can smell it on you, you fuck! Did you sleep with her? She’s mine!*

I couldn’t believe this deluded douchebag. He wanted to go at it right now while the Rogue was out there.

*Both of you, shut up!* Colton hissed via mind link, and then a branch cracked a few feet away.

The Rogue emerged from the trees.

He was partially shifted, his eyes wild. Of course he’d come back for more—monsters like him always did. He was holding something shiny in his hand.

*What the fuck is he holding?* I asked the twins, but it was too late.

The Rogue dove toward Xavier with a roar. Xavier managed to dodge—barely—as Colton’s wolf came snarling in, boxing out the Rogue. But as they struggled, I realized that the thing in the Rogue’s hand was a gun.

*Hey!* I mind linked, growling. *He’s got a silver gun, be careful!*

I wanted to rip this guy limb from limb, feel his blood on my tongue for what he’d done to Caliana, but there was something wrong here. Why didn’t he just shift? Why did he insist on being this crazed half man/half wolf thing?

*Something’s wrong with this guy!* Colton said. *Like, even more wrong than usual!*

The Rogue’s gaze shifted from Colton and Xavier to me. He growled and charged straight at me, barreling through. I was ready, claws bared, but then he—

He charged straight past me? What the fuck?

I looked over my shoulder and saw he was running for…

*Caliana!* I mind linked.

Why the hell had she come here? She was looking terrified, still holding her paring knife. I jumped in front of her as the Rogue sprang. He tore at my side, but I didn’t give a fuck as long as she was safe. I attacked, digging my teeth into his shoulder and making him wail with pain.

“Xavier!” Caliana screamed, just as I fell to the ground.

The wound on my side had started to burn, the blood loss suddenly overwhelming enough to force me to shift back to human. Fuck. The knife hadn’t been silver, but whatever it was laced with was potent enough to slow me down.

“He’s got a gun!” Caliana screamed.

“And the bullets are made of silver, just for your little friends!” he told her. He raised the hand with the gun and turned toward my brothers. Colton, still shifted, and Xavier, still human.

They both froze.

“Which one of you boys wants to die first?” He laughed before turning the gun on Caliana. “Maybe you?”

The terror I felt was unlike anything else. I could never let her get hurt.

No.

I leapt up, my side still throbbing as I growled, “Shoot me.”

He shook his head. “No, the girl first.”

I stepped in front of her. “Over my dead fucking body.”

He sneered. “That can be arranged.”

A roar echoed through the woods, and all of a sudden, I saw Xavier run toward the Rogue, who aimed the gun at him.

“NO!” Caliana screamed.

This…

*Couldn’t be happening?*

From one second to the next, everything slowed down around me.

Three different women’s voices rang through my head, as if in a symphony.

*If Xavier dies*, they said, *Cali can be yours. Only yours. This is the fate you want most, and if your brother dies, her choice between the two of you is made. You can finally be happy with your mate, forever.*

I had no clue what was happening, but the idea of Caliana being only mine was intoxicating. It made me feel dizzy, made my brain turn fuzzy, until a sudden clarity was forced on me. It wasn’t Caliana that I saw, though.

It was Xavier and Colton.

As kids.

My gut told me that I was Xavier and Colton’s older brother. That that was supposed to mean something. That I had to protect them. That the bond of a werewolf family could never be broken.

But what about the bond I felt toward my mate?

My mate, my woman, the only person who could make me happy?

After all the horrors I’d been through, didn’t I fucking deserve to be happy?

*… Even if it means my brother’s death?*

If Xavier could shift, he could tear this bastard apart. But he couldn’t.

“Xavier, why the fuck won’t you move?” I yelled.

Xavier was panting, eyes wide, looking between Caliana and me.

Xavier stared at me, and as he did, he no longer looked like a man.

He looked like a kid.

He looked like my little brother.

“Say goodbye!” The Rogue laughed and pulled the trigger.

The sound rang through my ears, and I didn’t think.

I lunged into the line of fire, taking the full impact of the silver bullet, the metal slicing through my flesh.

My body collapsed in excruciating pain.

**Episode 2158**

GREYSON

I was falling.

The pain from the silver bullets ripping through my chest was still razor sharp, but even that started to fade as I fell, farther and farther and farther. Around me, the forest disappeared, giving way to an inky blackness so complete it pressed in on my eyes. The pain moved further away, becoming almost distant. Was this what it felt like to die? Was I dying?

Had the Rogue shot me? I thought he had, but suddenly nothing seemed quite real.

Had I saved Xavier?

The air around me was whisper soft, and I closed my eyes against the rush of cool wind.

Then I landed on the ground with so much force it knocked the wind out of me. I sucked in a tortured breath, but it felt like my lungs had spasmed shut. I opened my eyes and looked wildly around. The loss of blood was messing with me. I’d shifted back, but all my thoughts were starting to get fuzzy. Was I healing? Was I not?

My brain screamed for oxygen, and I put a coaxing hand on my chest, but when I pulled my hand away, it was wet and sticky. Was that blood? Was it *my* blood?

Voices swirled around me like hurricane winds. One moment I could have sworn I heard Xavier speaking. Or was that Colton’s laughing growl? No, the voices were higher—women’s voices. More than one. Was it Lola? Was it Caliana?

*Caliana.*

I listened hard, trying to catch a word or a phrase, trying to figure out what the hell was going on. And as I listened, the voices became a little louder, but I couldn’t catch any words.

I squeezed my eyes tight, and when I opened them, everything around me was blurry. The colors of the world ran together like a melting watercolor. I reached out and felt the ground around me. It felt damp and grainy.

Suddenly, I caught the roar of crashing surf, and just at that moment, the sharp, salty smell of the ocean washed over me.

It was sand beneath me. I was on a beach. But… *what beach*? Haystack Rock? Thor’s Well?

There was only one way to know for sure, so I sat up slowly, gingerly, my body throbbing with pain.

I had been right—I was at a beach—but it wasn’t a beach I recognized. I scanned at the rocks at the edge of the water and the waves as they crashed and frothed against each other, churning the deep blue water. And I was certain I’d never seen this beach before.

There was just a hint of daylight as I looked up at the sky, and—straight overhead—the moon was half-hidden behind an oddly orange-tinted cloud. In the distance I saw a fork of heat lightning, and I felt myself flinch. The shiny flash reminded me of the Rogue’s silver gun firing. The pain was back in my chest, but it was an only an echo, and it faded as quickly as it came.

A ticking sound grew louder and louder. The sound of it started pulsing inside my body until it matched the beat of my own heart. The pocket watch. It sat heavy on my chest, and I fumbled for it and snapped it open. The second hand was moving—*counter*clockwise.

I stared at it, trying to make sense, but it made no sense. The watch was broken—the hands didn’t move. But there was no denying that it was moving now. The voices swirled up around me, louder this time. They were right behind me, and I turned.

Behind me, the three witches stood around a fire.

Chloe smiled at me. “Welcome back, Greyson. Did you miss us?”

My heart beat fast as I looked around. “Where’s my brother? What happened to him? Is he alive? And Caliana? Where’s Caliana? What have you done with them?”

As sudden as the heat lightning, I got a flash of memory—arguing with Xavier, his voice harsh and angry. Then another, with Caliana. Kissing her, the feel of her beneath me in her bed.

Had that been real? I didn’t know anymore.

I closed my eyes and thought hard, trying to get the facts straight. I remembered meeting Caliana at the café in Minnesota. But… that couldn’t be right, could it? I could have sworn I’d met her for the first time at Xavier’s house. I’d heard that Xavier had found his Luna, but I hadn’t expected someone like Cali. I’d come to the house because of Silas. For business. I hadn’t planned to fall in love with her. I hadn’t planned to meet my mate.

But… did that *really* happen?

My head started to ache.

“Which of the memories is real?” I demanded, looking up at the witches. “Were *any* of them real?”

The watch suddenly stopped ticking, and the silence it left behind thundered in my ears.

“Which do you think were real?” Lauren asked calmly.

I could feel my anger rising.

“If I knew, I wouldn’t have asked,” I growled, getting to my feet. I moved swiftly toward them. “What the fuck did you do to me?”

Chloe held up a hand, and it felt like I walked into an unseen wall. I couldn’t get one step closer to the witches.

“We did exactly what you wanted, Greyson,” Chloe said coolly.

Posie frowned at me. “Do you remember what you wanted?”

“All I *want* is to know what’s happening to me,” I snarled.

Chloe sighed, sounding exasperated. “Think back, Greyson. Why did you summon us?”

The card—the card they’d given me all those months ago flashed into my memory.

I touched my chest. “The curse,” I rasped. “I wanted to free Cali from the curse.”

Posie smiled at her sisters. “I think he’s finally starting to get it.”

“I’m really not,” I growled.

“Maybe we should explain,” Lauren suggested. “After all, he’s only a werewolf.”

I glowered at the women, but they looked unbothered.

“What you just experienced was real,” Chloe explained, “in that you *did* experience it, but it was like a game. Like—oh, girls, what are those things called?—virtual reality goggles?”

“Oh! I love those!” Posie said. “So realistic!”

Lauren shook her head. “They make me nauseous.”

“A *game*?” I asked, frowning. “What kind of a game?”

“Well, more of an illusion, I suppose,” Lauren clarified. “Created by a spell, to help you break through the curse.”

I was still completely confused by this explanation. “How would meeting Cali like that… How would any of that break the curse? *Did* I break the curse?”

“By saving your brother, yes,” Posie said. “In a way.”

“What does that mean?” I snapped.

“The curse that bound your mate to killing either you or your brother if she chose one of you is broken,” Posie went on.

I stared at her, shocked. “What? *Really?*”

She nodded. “By choosing to save Xavier, you proved yourself capable of selflessness. If you had not acted—and chosen Cali for yourself—the curse would not have been broken.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. Relief was trickling in, making my shoulders unknit, though I still wasn’t exactly sure if I had it all straight. “But what about all those dreams?”

“Dreams?” Lauren asked.

“All the possible futures you kept showing me.”

The witches smiled at each other again, the expression sly.

“Those were to tempt you into failing,” Lauren explained. She sighed. “Sadly, you didn’t. Noble as ever.”

I thought back to the visions—the visions of being with Cali, happy and untethered from the curse. “But what about the future you showed me? Is any of that still possible?”

A log in the fire fell, sending up a cloud of smoke. The outline of each of the witches blurred. I waved the smoke away, but even when it cleared, the witches didn’t come back into sharper focus. They were fading away.

“Hey!” I called again. “Is any of it still possible?”

“No one can predict the future,” Chloe said with a smile.

“It’s what you make of the present,” Posie added.

The invisible barrier that had been holding me back disappeared, and I stumbled forward. I lunged for the witches, reaching out for them. “I have more questions! You have to answer my questions!”

“You know how to reach us,” Lauren said, waving.

They disappeared, and so did everything else. The beach vanished, and suddenly I was spinning into darkness again. The smell of the ocean was gone, as was the crash of the waves. The ticking started again—softly at first, but growing louder and louder—just as it had before. The watch bumped against my chest, and I reached for it and looked at the face. The hands were spinning forward. They stopped, and I stared down at the watch. It was just after midnight. Or was it? That couldn’t be right, could it?

But those thoughts slipped from my head as I looked down at my bare chest.

The veins—the black, swirling, necrotic curse veins—were gone.

**Episode 2159**

XAVIER

I glowered into the cracking fire, which burned merrily in the fireplace of the living room. I knew I should probably get some sleep—it would probably help me think more clearly—but I had no idea how the hell that was going to be possible. How was I supposed to just brush my teeth and drop off to sleep knowing there was a bunch of fucked-up hunters prowling around somewhere out there? Possibly even watching the pack house at this very moment?

Feeling edgy at the thought of it, I got to my feet. I walked out of the living room and headed for the stairs. If I couldn’t sleep, then Greyson shouldn’t either. Greyson should be the one awake, worrying about this shit. He was the one who claimed he wanted to be Alpha. Part of being Alpha was being the slightest bit concerned about the pack’s safety—not snoozing peacefully in his damn bed.

I stomped up the stairs and turned toward his room, but before I could reach it, his door burst open.

He stood framed in the doorway for a moment, looking around wildly. He was breathing hard, like he’d just been sprinting, and when he saw me, his face broke into a huge smile.

“*Xavier!* It’s great to see you!”

This stopped me. The fuck? “What the hell is wrong with you?”

He didn’t answer, just rushed toward me. He came at me so fast my instinct was to shift—this might not be an official Lupo Finale, but if Greyson wanted to challenge me, now was as good a time as any.

But before I could, Greyson grabbed me by the shoulders and looked into my eyes.

“How do you feel?” he demanded.

“What?” I asked, stunned. I shook him off me. His attitude was really freaking me out. “Are you drunk, man?”

I didn’t smell any booze on him. Could he be on drugs? I couldn’t figure out what the fuck was going on with him. He was so… *chipper.*

Greyson grabbed the neck of my shirt and yanked downward. I stumbled forward a step as he ripped my shirt in half.

“What the *hell*?” I snapped, shoving him away from me. “What the hell’s gotten into you, Greyson?”

Greyson grasped my shoulder and spun me around, shoving me roughly in front of the mirror on the hallway wall. “Look!”

“Look at what?” I snarled. “My ruined shirt? Like I don’t fuck up enough clothes shifting. I really liked this shirt—”

“Look at your chest, Xavier,” he growled. “Look!”

Rolling my eyes, I looked into the mirror. Greyson was out of his mind. He was deranged. I was going to have to talk to the pack about this. I was going to—

“Shit,” I whispered, leaning toward the mirror. I ran a finger down my chest, pushing away the fraying edges of my shredded shirt. “Holy. *Shit.*”

I looked up into the mirror and met Greyson’s eyes. He was smiling at me.

“They’re gone,” he said, nodding. “The veins are gone.”

I stared into the mirror in disbelief. “But how? Why? What’s happened? What changed?”

Greyson lifted his shirt. “Look. Mine are gone, too.”

I turned to look at him. He was right—his chest looked perfectly normal again, completely free of the swirling black veins that had plagued us for months.

“This makes no sense,” I muttered, shaking my head. “What happened? Something has to have happened…”

Then a thought hit me, and it felt like my blood had been turned to ice.

I looked at up at Greyson. “Cali. Something happened to Cali. The veins are part of the curse, and so is Cali. Where is she?”

I shoved past Greyson and started down the hall toward her room, but Greyson caught me by the shoulder.

“Get off me,” I growled, shoving his hand away.

“Stop it!”

I turned to see Cali hurrying toward us.

“Stop!” she said again, stepping between us and pushing us apart. She held us each at arm’s length and looked between us, clearly exasperated. “I am sick and tired of seeing the two of you fighting all the time! I thought we were past all this.”

Relief flooded through me. Even though Cali looked pissed, she also looked alive and perfectly well. Cali was still Cali.

Greyson smiled at her. “Don’t you notice anything different about us?”

Cali frowned in confusion. Her gaze ranged over Greyson. “Did you cut your hair?”

Greyson’s smile widened. “Look a little lower.”

Cali’s eyes dropped, and then went wide as dinner plates. She gasped and clapped a hand to her mouth. The she whipped around to look at me. “They’re gone,” she whispered through her fingers. “The veins are gone.”

I reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. “Gone.”

“But… How—” she started, but then her voice cracked and her eyes filled with tears.

I pulled her toward me and wrapped my arms around her, cradling her head as she took a shuddering breath. I wished I had an answer for her, something to fully confirm for her that we were all safe from that curse now. I looked up at Greyson, who was still smiling. It was strange—he didn’t seem to mind me holding Cali.

That was… weird.

But what *wasn’t* weird at the moment?

Cali took a deep breath and—collecting herself—pushed away from me. She wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand and looked between us.

“I’m going to need to know what happened here,” she said with a watery smile. “I mean, I’m cursed. It’s not like the veins are supposed to just go away.”

“I guess not,” I admitted. “I don’t know, honestly. I figured something must have changed, but I have no idea what that could have been. We were just talking about it,” I said, gesturing to Greyson.

Cali turned, leveling a look at him. “Greyson? Do you know how this has happened?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I do. The curse is broken.”

“*What?*” Cali and I both asked, at the same time.

“What do you mean, ‘the curse is broken’?” Cali gasped. “What are you talking about, Greyson?”

“I know how it sounds, but just hear me out,” he said. “I had a chance to break the curse, and I took it.”

Sorry, what?

I rolled my eyes. “What the hell does that even mean?” I demanded. It sounded like Greyson just hyping himself up again. “You had a chance to break it?”

He looked at Cali. “Do you remember the three witches?”

“Yeah,” she said slowly.

“What three witches?” I demanded, not appreciating being the only one out of the loop. “What are you talking about? We only have two witches—Kira and Big Mac. Who’s the third?”

“No, not them. I ran into these three witches in Portland a few months back. Maren introduced me to them. I sort of did them a favor, and they gave me this,” he said, holding what looked like a silver pocket watch out for us to see. “I was able to go into kind of an alternate dimension—a simulated reality kind of thing, I don’t fucking know—and live this other life.”

My eyebrows shot up. I had no idea what the hell Greyson was talking about.

“Anyway,” he went on, “in that reality, I had a chance to save you, Xavier, by sacrificing my own life. And I took it. I ended up not dying—obviously—but when I met with the three witches, they told me that my actions had broken the curse.”

I stared at him. “Are you kidding me? And you actually believed them?” I had to laugh. “Greyson, I don’t know these witches you’re mixed up with, but how can you be so… *gullible*?”

Greyson’s eyes flashed. “The veins are gone. I’m not imagining that. So maybe it was worth whatever risk it required.”

I felt my jaw clench tight. “You must have messed with the curse in some way, and that’s not really your call to make, man. Whatever you did was a risk to any of us, and you should have talked to us about it first instead of rushing off to do your own thing, like always.”

I hated that Greyson was always making those kinds of decisions completely on his own.

Greyson narrowed his eyes. “The risk was mine and mine alone, little brother, and I didn’t need to come to you to ask for permission. But it doesn’t matter now. The veins are gone. The curse is broken.”

I didn’t believe him, and I shook my head. “No. I don’t think so.”

“They’re *gone*,” Greyson insisted.

“We both know the veins have disappeared and reappeared before,” I countered.

“This time is different,” Greyson insisted. He looked frustrated, and he reached for Cali’s shoulders, turning her so she faced him. “Don’t you see what this means?”

“What?” Cali asked, looking up at him. “No. What does it mean?”

Greyson’s gaze was intense on hers. “It means that you can choose one of your mates now, without killing the other.”

**Episode 2160**

MARTA

When I opened my eyes, I felt sick to my stomach, like I did whenever I rode too long in a car. But that couldn’t be right. I hadn’t been in a car, and I hadn’t been sick since I was a little girl. I blinked hard, trying to clear my spinning head, and looked around. I was lying down, but the space surrounding me was compact. The light was soft and dimly blue, and it was very quiet. The strangest thing was the fact that the walls on either side of me sloped gently up, coming to a rounded point on top.

Was I in an egg? Better question—*why* was I in an egg?

Before I could answer either question, there was a soft hissing sound, and the egg opened. I sat up quickly and looked around. I was inside a room, with a dozen other egg-like shapes. The space was quiet and dim, and completely unfamiliar to me. I frowned, trying to get the sequence of events back into the right order. How the hell had I gotten here?

*The junkyard.*

In an instant, everything came back to me. My bracelet had shattered, and Big Mac had been screaming at me. One second I’d been in that junkyard surrounded by vampires, and the next… I wasn’t.

I cast another look around the room. I had no idea where I was, but there wasn’t anyone actively trying to murder me and drain my blood, so it was probably an improvement. But how the hell had I gotten away?

My body protested as I got to my feet, pain shooting through me from the cramped quarters, and from being roughed up by the vamps, but I stepped out of the egg. I’d just taken a step toward the door when it opened and a young man with a scrubby red beard walked in.

He glanced up at me—or I thought he did. His face was partially hidden by the grey hoodie he wore. “Sorry we had to put you in here, but we weren’t expecting you so soon.” He waved me toward him. “Come on, I’ll check you in.”

I had no idea what the hell he was talking about, but—lacking a better plan—I followed him from the room. I glanced over my shoulder as the door closed behind us. The sign on the door read “Sleep Pods—Do Not Disturb”.

What the hell were *sleep pods*?

“Hey, you want some ’booch?” the guy in the hoodie asked.

“What?” I asked, wondering if he was speaking a different language.

“Some ’booch? Or whatever you want.” He pointed toward the end of the hall where I could see what looked like a college dining area. There were a number of small round tables ringed with chairs, counters filled with more snacks than I’d ever seen outside of a 7-Eleven, and two glowing, glass-fronted refrigerators filled with drinks. “We’ve got the Synergy Trilogy, the Multigreen, Gingerberry, and the Tantric Turmeric. But if you’re not in the mood for that, we also have some pretty solid IPAs, and some locally sourced vitamin water, if you’re feeling depleted. And some regular sodas, if you’re into the toxic shit.”

I stared at him for a moment, then looked around in puzzlement. “Where the hell am I?”

“Oh.” Hoodie looked taken aback by my question. “You’re at the San Francisco chapter of the witch council.”

My stomach dropped. The council had transported me here—*alone*? But… where were Big Mac and Kira? I needed them!

I twisted my hands together nervously, but when I looked down, I was surprised. The bracelets were back on both my wrists—but that couldn’t be right. One of them had just broken, thanks to Frank and his hatchet. How had it been replaced?

Yet another worry pulled at my thoughts—what was going to happen to Lilac now?

“So anyway, yeah, you’re in San Fran, I’m Kyle, and this is the best place in the city. We’ve got the snacks, and the ping pong tables are just across the way. Over there are the pool tables, and some couches for lounging are right behind them. There are guitars if you feel like jamming. The beanbag chairs are for one person at a time—we’ve had some problems with that—but the gaming consoles host pretty much every multiplayer game on the market.”

My gaze shot around the room as Kyle pointed. “People actually work here?”

“Heads up!” a voice called from behind us.

Kyle and I turned to see a woman shooting down the hall on a scooter, and we stepped out of her way.

“My bad! In a hurry!” she called over her shoulder.

“Yeah, people work hard and play hard. We’ve got scooters for getting around the campus, and a company Zipcar—zero emission, of course.”

“Of course,” I repeated, though I didn’t have the foggiest idea what *zero emission* meant. When I’d first gotten the summons and started to imagine the witch council, this was *not* what I’d had in mind. Maybe I’d been brought to the wrong place? “This is the witch council, right?”

Kyle nodded. “Yep.”

“The people who are going to hold my trial?” I asked incredulously.

Kyle chuckled. “A lot of people are surprised when they first get here. The council’s abandoned the Salem method. We’re charting a new course. We’re evolving, keeping our options open, navigating outside the box. Anyway.” He reached behind himself into a wall of cubbies and pulled out a white resin hand mirror.

I took it as he held it out to me. “And what am I supposed to do with this?”

Kyle rolled his eyes. “Haven’t you ever registered before?”

“No. I haven’t done *any* of this before.”

“Put your hand on it.” He grabbed my hand and pressed it, palm-down, onto the mirror.

I felt a strange sensation climb from my hand up through my arm before Kyle pulled the mirror away and replaced it in the cubby.

“You know,” I started, “if this is all because of the bracelet, that really wasn’t my fault—”

“Hey, bro,” Kyle said, putting up his hands to stop me. “Tell it to the judges. I’m just an intern.”

“An intern?”

He nodded. “Well actually I’m a UX designer. I’m developing my own game that’s going to disrupt the entire industry.”

I stared at him, a thousand questions spinning through my head. I was starting to feel sick again. “Wait, is UX the judge?”

Kyle shook his head, looking disappointed. “Always the same with the doubters,” he muttered. “This way.”

He led me around the pool tables and toward a dark-haired woman seated in a beanbag chair. She was looking down at a small tablet, but she looked up as we walked over.

Kyle handed the mirror to the woman and turned to me. “She’ll answer your questions. I’ll catch you later.”

The woman looked at me as Kyle headed back the way he’d come. “You’re Marta Zhao?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Do you know why you’re here?” she asked.

My heart thumped. “I assume because of the necromancy thing?”

The woman eyed me for a moment longer, then looked down at her tablet, her fingers flying as she entered some information.

“But I thought my trial wasn’t for another week,” I went on.

The woman shrugged without looking up. “Timelines change, and you apparently violated the terms by breaking the bracelet.” Her gaze wandered up to look at my wrists, then back down again.

My palms were starting to sweat. “About that—that wasn’t my fault—”

“Save it for the council,” the woman said briskly.

“What about my representatives?” I asked. “I thought I was going to be allowed to have someone here to represent me. Big Mac and Kira.”

“They have been notified,” the woman said coolly.

I swallowed hard. “And what about my boyfriend?”

The woman looked up at me. “What?”

“His name is Lilac?” I asked tentatively, my voice raising as if the question was what his name was and not how important he was to the actual trial. *Get it together, Marta*.

“That,” the woman said, shrugging her shoulders, “will depend on the outcome.”

That was not the answer I’d wanted to hear. I remembered what Big Mac had told me about the possible outcomes if I was found guilty. They could trap my soul forever, or they could send Lilac back to the spirit realm. Neither of these sounded like ideal options.

“In any case,” the woman said, with an air of finality. She braced her feet to stand, but the beanbag chair kept sinking. She dropped her tablet to the side and rolled off the thing, looking a little undignified. “Stupid beanbags,” she muttered. “I specifically asked for a standing desk. Just ridiculous…”

She finally got to her feet, looking red in the face after her fight with the beanbag, and gestured for me to follow her.

“Come with me,” she said, a little breathlessly.

I followed, hurrying to keep up with the woman’s long, brisk strides. “Okay. Um, where are we going?’

The woman gave me a curious look. “Your trial is about to begin.”

**Episode 2161**

I stared at Greyson, stunned. I’d never seen him act like this before. As much as I hated seeing Greyson and Xavier fighting, it would’ve felt more familiar to see them going at it. Of course I always wanted them to get along, but… not like this.

I shot Xavier a quizzical look. He shrugged, looking as confused as I felt.

“Okay,” I said, turning to Greyson, “let’s just slow down for a second. It seems like there are two problems here. The first is that I *can’t* choose—we all know that. And second, how do we know if the curse is *really* broken? It’s great that the veins are gone, but a potentially deadly curse doesn’t seem like the kind of thing you want to be only *mostly* sure about.”

“Cali’s right,” Xavier said. “We’ve seen the veins come and go before, and I’m not interested in having her test it out. If you’re wrong, one of us dies.”

I shook my head. “I’m not doing it. I’m not going to risk it. And I can’t believe you would even want to put me into that position, Greyson.”

“It’s not a risk,” Greyson started. “I promise you it’s not. The witches assured me that—”

“Stop!” I cried. “Just stop! I don’t want to hear it.”

I turned on my heel and stormed toward my room. My heart was racing, my head was spinning, and my stomach was clenched so tightly it felt like I was going to be sick.

Just before I closed the door, I heard Xavier’s irritated voice.

“Well that was just great, man. Nice touch. Really well done.”

I shut the door and leaned against it, thinking hard.

If Greyson was right—if the curse *was* broken—shouldn’t I be overjoyed? Without the curse hanging over all our heads, I could finally choose a mate. I could finally live a normal life, without feeling like I was being pulled in a thousand different directions. Wasn’t that what I wanted? Wasn’t that what everyone wanted?

So then why did I feel such dread at the thought?

I felt overwhelmed by the tsunami of questions and fears in my brain. I needed time to think this through, but I was exhausted. I couldn’t face either of them—not now. I needed to go to sleep. I needed to let my brain sort this out.

I stripped off my clothes as I walked to the bathroom and pulled on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. I brushed my teeth and crawled into bed, pulling the covers over my head. I’d just closed my eyes when there was a knock on the door, so soft I barely heard it.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I rolled over, my back to the door. “I’m asleep. Or trying to be. Go away.”

I heard the gentle swish of the door opening and shutting, then the sound of feet padding across the floor.

“Cali,” Greyson said, and the bed sank down as he sat. “I’m sorry. I know that was a lot to dump on you—and on Xavier—all at once. I know how much it is to take in. I should have thought about it more before springing it on you.”

“Yeah, well,” I muttered, burrowing into my pillow. “Too late for that.”

He put his hand on my shoulder, then slid it down my arm to take my hand. He gave it a gentle tug, rolling me over to face him.

“I was excited to tell you because I thought you’d be happy. I thought you’d be relieved—one less thing to worry about in our crazy lives,” he said, and I could see that his eyes were sincere.

The feel of his hand on mine was calming, and I felt my heartbeat slow down to something normal. Just having him near me helped. But then I thought back to what he’d said in the hallway, and fear flooded through me again. I pulled my hand away and turned my back again.

“Cali,” Greyson said quietly, and I could hear the plea in his voice. He reached up and stroked a gentle finger down my cheek. “Can I prove to you the curse is truly gone?” he asked. “Would that make it better?”

I hesitated for a moment, then turned to look at him. “It *should* be better, knowing that the curse is gone, but it doesn’t feel that way, somehow.”

“What is it that’s bothering you?” he asked.

I looked up at the ceiling with a gusty sigh. “This whole time, I’ve been able to avoid choosing between you and Xavier because of the curse. I wasn’t going to choose and be the reason one of my mates died. So, we were in limbo. Which sucked—I get that—but we were all alive. And I got to love both of you. It was hard, and complicated, but also amazing. But now…” I looked over at Greyson and felt tears prick the corners of my eyes. “How can I possibly choose?”

“Cali…”

I shook my head. “I know this is hard to hear—it’s hard to say—but I love you both. You’re both my mates. And if I were to choose… Even if it didn’t kill you, it would break your heart. I know it would, because it would break mine, too.” I closed my eyes as tears started to stream from them. “How can I live like that?”

“Oh, Cali.” Greyson cupped my cheek. “I hadn’t even thought of it like that. I’m sorry. I can see why this is so hard for you. I was thinking about myself, I guess. I just wanted to be with you. I still do. Tell me what I can do to make this better.”

I opened my eyes to look at him. His grey eyes were so sad and so worried, it nearly broke my heart. I took a deep breath. “Tell me what happened with the witches.”

Greyson hesitated for a moment, then reached into his shirt and pulled out the watch. When he pulled down the neck of his shirt, I caught a glimpse of his chest, which was still unblemished.

He held the watch out for me to look at. “I told you that I didn’t know why the witches gave this to me, but that wasn’t the entire story.”

I frowned. “So you lied to me?”

“I didn’t lie,” Greyson said quickly. “I… withheld some information.”

I sat up, anger rising in me hot and fast. “I don’t see the distinction, Greyson, and I don’t think you do either, so stop trying to pretend otherwise.”

“Cali, let me explain,” he said quickly. “I promise, I’ll tell you everything.”

I didn’t answer, just folded my arms over my chest. I was angry and confused, now, on top of worried and scared.

“Listen,” he said. “I know how the curse has been tormenting you. It’s been like that for me, too. And it’s true that the witches gave me the watch, but what I didn’t tell you was that when they gave it to me, they told me it would give me the chance to break the curse.”

This caught my attention. “What did they mean?”

“I wasn’t sure. I’m still not, to be honest.”

“What?” I asked, frowning.

He sighed. “It’s hard to explain. I’m not sure if it was a dream, or some kind of alternate reality, but I was able to go back to the beginning.”

“The beginning?”

“Yeah, but a different beginning.”

I shook my head. “I don’t understand. What do you mean, the beginning?”

He gave me a small smile. “In the alternate reality, I met you for the first time at Mrs. Smith’s café. In Minnesota. Before you met Xavier.”

I stared at him. “But that’s not true. I met Xavier first. Lola and Colton had come up with that ridiculous scheme, and I went through with selling my virginity because I needed the money. My mom was so sick. *That’s* how I met Xavier.”

“I know,” Greyson said, leaning toward me. “But because of the witches, that’s not how it happened in that reality. We lived a different experience. And the truth was, you liked me better.”

“Stop,” I said, my heart thumping. “Stop, Greyson. How can you say that? How could you know that?”

He leaned even closer. “Because you slept with me,” he said, his voice husky.

I felt my face flush. “I did not.”

“You did,” he said, looking into my eyes. “It was destiny.”

“Slow down,” I said, closing my eyes. The intensity of his gaze was making me feel all sorts of things in all sorts of parts of my body. “Exactly how far back did you go?”

“You were still a virgin,” Greyson said.

My eyes flew open as I gasped. “But that’s not possible! Xavier—”

Greyson put a finger to my lips to stop me speaking. “You fell for me first.” He smiled. “Just like you’re falling for me right now.”

And without giving me a chance to respond to that, he leaned forward and pressed a kiss to my lips.

**Episode 2162**

GREYSON

When Cali kissed me back, her hands slipped around my neck and up into my hair. I loved the feel of her hands on me, and I wanted *more*. After the last few days—hell, after the last few *months*—I was so grateful to be here with Cali. Especially here in her bed, like this. Everything about the witches’ spell had felt real at the time, but now—holding her—I could tell that it hadn’t been. *This* was real. The feel of her satin skin beneath my hands, the soft brush of her hair as it fell across my face, and her incredible smell as it washed over me. This was as real as it got.

I pressed her down into the mattress as I deepened the kiss. The last thing I wanted to do was pressure Cali into making a choice she wasn’t ready to make, but—fuck—I wanted her to choose me.

I slid my hand down and slipped a finger into the waistband of her shorts. She sucked in a breath as I tugged them down. It made me smile, so I pulled back so I could watch her face as I pulled them down her legs. She watched me, wide-eyed, and bit her lip as I ran my hand up the inside of her leg on the way back up.

“Oh, *Greyson*,” she murmured.

I lifted the hem of her shirt and kissed a line across her stomach, right above the black lace of her panties, and her breath hitched.

“What are you doing?” she breathed, digging her fingers into my hair.

“Worshipping you,” I murmured, kissing my way down.

When I kissed her panties just over the seam of her sex, she gasped. I smiled to myself and breathed, warming the spot, making her squirm and moan with pleasure. I kept my mouth in place and reached up to pull off her T-shirt.

She reached for mine, and we threw them off the bed, a snowstorm of discarded clothes.

I teased her, keeping my mouth on her panties as I massaged the inside of her thighs. She panted with want, her hands at my shoulders, her fingernails digging in.

Finally she couldn’t take it anymore, and she sprang. She flipped me onto my back and hooked one knee over my waist to straddle me. Her hands fumbled with my belt and then the button of my jeans, but she couldn’t even get them off before she started to press against me, pushing herself against my hardening length.

I reached up and cupped her breasts in my hands. “You are so goddamn beautiful,” I said, my voice a throaty rasp. “I don’t know how I got so lucky.”

She tossed back her head. “We’re both lucky,” she murmured, but gasped as I thumbed over her nipples.

The way she was grinding against me was driving me wild, and I didn’t know how much longer I was going to be able to stand it. I pulled down my jeans and yanked her panties aside, sliding myself into her slick core.

She gasped, then smiled. “This is everything,” she breathed. “Everything I’ve always wanted.”

“Me too,” I said, grasping her hips and pulling her down, filling her even more.

She closed her eyes. “I love you, Greyson. From the moment I saw you. I don’t know what my life would be like without you.”

“You’re never going to have to find out,” I said, though my breath had started to come fast. “I’m not going anywhere, love. I’m always going to be right… here…”

She cried out as I rocked into her, and I felt her body start to shake. Her hips bucked, her breasts swung, and her knees dug into me as she came.

“Oh god, *Greyson*,” she gasped. “Greyson! Oh god, *yes*! YES!”

I could feel her tightening around me, and it pushed me over the edge. Making love to Cali was like surfing—exhilarating and terrifying and like I never wanted it to end. I gripped her hips and pulled her close, driving into her as I pulsed, panting like I’d sprinted a marathon.

Our rhythm slowly wound down, and she collapsed, pressing her breasts against my chest. I slipped my arms around her, feeling the rise and fall of her breath against me.

She was exhausted, and her eyes drifted shut, but a smile played across her lips.

“Greyson,” she breathed again, but this time my name sounded like a song.

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When I opened my eyes, Cali was nestled in my arms. I looked down at the winter sunlight falling across her sleeping cheeks, and I knew this was how I wanted to wake up every day for the rest of my life. And—for the first time ever—that felt truly possible.

She sighed in her sleep and rolled away, and—sliding my arm carefully from beneath her so I wouldn’t wake her—I slipped out of bed. The wooden floor was cold beneath my bare feet, but I stepped over to the mirror above the dresser and stood before it. I needed to see it again—to reinforce this new reality that I was living in. And, to my relief, my chest looked perfectly normal. No ominous black veins, swirling across my skin.

No curse.

I glanced over my shoulder at the shape of Cali, still sleeping in the bed. She had doubts. So did Xavier.

And I would’ve been lying to myself if I didn’t acknowledge to myself that I had some doubts too. I believed the witches—I’d lived the alternate reality, and my decision that had broken the curse—but if I was wrong…

When Cali chose me—and she would—and if Xavier died because of her choice, then it wouldn’t matter if Cali had chosen me or not. She’d be devastated. I knew that much. I stared into the mirror, but I wasn’t looking at my reflection. I was thinking hard. I had to somehow *prove* that the curse was broken. And not just for Cali and Xavier, but for me, too.

Suddenly I felt a prickle on the back of my neck and turned. Cali was sitting up in bed, awake and watching me. She smiled. “What are you doing?”

I glanced down. “I was looking at my chest. Nice to see it looking so normal.”

Cali climbed out of bed and moved toward me. She pressed a kiss to my chest and looked up at me. “You looked like you had some pretty serious thoughts on the brain.”

I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her close. “I was thinking that I need some coffee.”

“That sounds good,” Cali hummed, hugging me back.

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

Cali pulled her hand away. “I *want* coffee, but I *need* a shower.” She smiled. “Save me a cup, okay?”

“You got it,” I said, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

I watched as she walked into the bathroom, then pulled on my jeans and T-shirt and headed for the stairs.

It was early, and the house was blissfully quiet, which was good, because I was still thinking hard. Maybe I shouldn’t have dodged Cali’s question. Maybe I should have told her that I was thinking about the curse—she was probably thinking about the same thing. Maybe I should have told her that I was trying to figure out how to prove it was really broken.

I glanced up the stairs. I could still tell her, but something held me back.

I wanted to find a way to prove the curse was really broken on my own. I didn’t want to get her hopes up until I knew I could deliver.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” a sharp voice bit out, dragging me from my thoughts.

I looked up, frowning. Who the hell was arguing so early in the morning?

“If I leave a bowl of strawberries out,” another voice said, “cut just the way I want them, that doesn’t mean they are yours to ruin!”

I stepped into the kitchen to see Sage and Zainab staring at each other across the kitchen island. No, not staring—glowering.

“And I’m telling you again that I didn’t ruin them, Sage,” Zainab snarled. “I put a light sprinkling of sugar on them.”

“Which is the same fucking thing!” Sage snapped back.

I rolled my eyes as I walked toward the coffee machine. “Cool down, ladies,” I muttered.

Like I needed to listen to this dumbass lovers’ quarrel first thing in the morning. They both looked mad as hell, but they were mates, and I figured they’d work it out without too much input from me, so I turned my attention to the coffee.

“I don’t need you telling me what I can or can’t do,” Zainab growled.

“Oh, I’ve had it,” Sage ground out. “That’s just about fucking *it*.”

There was the sound of ripping cloth, and I turned around just in time to see Sage shift and lunge—teeth bared—for Zainab.

**Episode 2163**

CHARLIE

When I woke up, I couldn’t move. I looked around the bedroom, confused. Had I been tied up? What had happened? Then, as my sleep-slow brain finally caught up, I realized that I hadn’t been restrained—I was just tangled with Violet in the sheets of the bed, my legs pinned against hers. I struggled to move, but we were stuck fast. My eyes were still bleary with sleep, but it was hard to tell where my leg ended and hers began.

I rubbed my eyes and blinked into the clean morning sunshine, then reached for my phone to check the time. But it was a little farther away than I’d thought, so I had to stretch to reach it, and as I stretched, I suddenly felt myself—and Violet—slipping off the bed.

“Holy shit!” Violet squeaked, waking up as we slid off the bed into a disorganized heap on the floor. She looked around wildly, blinking in panic as she tried to figure out what the hell had just happened to her.

“I’m sorry,” I gasped, barely able to get the words out as I laughed. “Are you okay, Violet?”

Violet blinked at me. “What?” she slurred. “What happened?”

I couldn’t stop laughing at her confusion. “I’m sorry, babe, but you should have seen your face.”

She scowled at me and kicked at the sheets, trying to free herself. “What the hell is going on?” she asked grumpily. “Why’d you push me off the bed?”

“I didn’t,” I laughed. “I swear I didn’t. I was just trying to see the time.”

“Ugh,” she groaned, and kicked harder.

But all her struggling just seemed to pull the sheets tighter around us. She squirmed around, ending up on top of me with the sheets tight around both of us, like they’d been tied in a bow.

“What the hell happened?” Violet demanded.

“Come on,” I said, slipping my arms around her. “It’s not all bad, is it?”

Violet’s cheeks flushed a pretty rose color, and she smacked my shoulder—as hard as she could without the full use of her arm, anyway.

I tightened my grip on her to keep her from going after me and reached up to kiss her. Violet couldn’t really have been that grumpy, because she kissed me back, deepening the kiss and relaxing her body into mine.

I could feel heat starting to pump through my veins when I heard a low rumble.

“What was that?” I asked, pulling away from Violet.

She grinned. “My stomach. I’m hungry.”

I grinned back and kissed her shoulder. “That’s as close as I can get to your stomach, but I love that stomach.”

What I also loved was this—the closeness, the fun, the relaxed vibe. Everything about Violet, and all the reasons I’d fallen in love with her. I was lucky to have her, and to be her mate. Which was why I had to make sure Zachery never bothered her again.

“Okay, I’m starving,” Violet announced. “I have to get out of here.”

She eased herself out of the sheets and got to her feet.

Freed from the knot, I reached for my phone and checked my notifications. No call from Zachery. Which meant that either he was too cowardly to respond, or that he was up to something. Before I could decide which it was, Violet threw a pair of jeans at me.

“Get dressed,” she said. “Let’s get breakfast.”

Grabbing the jeans, I untangled myself from the sheet and stood, but I looked up when there was a knock at the door.

“Who is it?” I asked.

“Charlie? I need to talk to you.”

Shocked to hear my mom’s voice on the other side, I stepped toward the door to stop it from opening, but I tripped over my jeans, which were only halfway on.

“Hang on—” I started, but it was too late.

The door swung open. My mom stood framed in the doorway, taking in the scene and looking less than pleased.

Violet had her jeans on but very little else, and she grabbed for the sheet to cover her chest.

My mom eyed her with ill-disguised disgust, then turned to me. “I didn’t mean to interrupt,” she said coolly.

Somehow, I doubted that. “Did you need something, Mom?”

She rolled her eyes. “Pull up your pants, Charlie.”

She was speaking to me like I was a misbehaving child, and I gritted my teeth against a sharp response. I got to my feet and pulled up my pants but kept my expression cold.

Seeing it, she sighed. “I’m sorry, Charlie. I’m still trying to come to terms with the fact that you are a grown man—and a werewolf. And are… spending time with another werewolf.”

Violet blushed, apparently understanding the implication of how my mom thought we were *spending time*.

“Anyway,” my mom said, in a more business-like way, “I didn’t get much sleep. I was up most of the night thinking about our problem.”

I frowned. “It’s not really *our* problem, Mom. This is between Zachery and me. It’s personal.”

But my mom was already shaking her head. “No, Charlie. It might have started out that way, but now that Zachery is associated with Shanna Paiyn, it’s much bigger than you. I’d say it’s bigger than whatever grudge he has against Violet, bigger even than Zachery himself.” She looked grim. “It’s a hunter problem now.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, my stomach clenching.

My mom crossed her arms. “I’ve already talked to your father, and he agrees. I’ve decided the best course of action is to call in some support.”

“Wait,” Violet said, speaking for the first time since my mom showed up. “You’ve invited *more* hunters here?”

Her tone was incredulous and angry, and though my mom bristled at the sound of it, I understood why Violet was asking.

“You really can’t do that, Mom,” I said. “Hunters hunt werewolves, remember. And this is a pack house—*for werewolves*!”

“I understand your concern,” my mom said mildly, looking unbothered, “and normally I’d fully agree that hunters and werewolves shouldn’t mix, but I’ve made it clear to everyone involved that this a special assignment outside the normal hunter purview and will not include hunting werewolves.”

“Are you kidding me?” I asked. “You think that’s going to *work*? It’s impossible. You saw what happened at camp when they were reacting to werewolves. Look at Zachery!”

“These hunters aren’t a bunch of kids,” my mom said calmly. “They know how to stay in their lane. You’ll be protected, Charlie.”

I shook my head, feeling my heartbeat in the base of my throat.

“I’m not worried about myself,” I snapped. “I’m worried about Violet. And about Greyson and Xavier and Cali and Sage and Jay. Who’s protecting them?” I thought of the reaction I’d gotten from the pack when I’d told them my mom—*one hunter*—was coming. “And I don’t even know how the pack’s going to take the sudden appearance of a bunch of hunters, but I wouldn’t expect them to throw out the welcome mat.”

“Charlie—” my mom started.

“This is a terrible idea,” I said flatly, cutting her off, “and I’m not going to let you go through with it. Call them back. Cancel it.”

My mom gave me a hard look, then turned to Violet. “Maybe you can talk some sense into my son. Like I’ve already explained, the hunters are coming here to help. They won’t bother your…” Her eyes swept down Violet. “Your kind.”

Violet’s cheeks colored, but her eyes were steely. “I’m sorry, Iris, but I agree with Charlie. You say these hunters won’t go after werewolves, but the entire camp tried to hunt me down when they found out I was a werewolf. In case you’ve forgotten.”

“That won’t happen,” my mom said fervently. “They’ve given me their word.

We’re not like Shanna. We only kill when given ample reason. Our promise of protection is binding.”

“No,” I said. “No, forget it. I’m not going to risk Violet’s life on a handshake. Or the lives of anyone else in this pack. You have to call this off, Mom, because I’m telling you—if they show up here, it could be a war.”

My mom rolled her eyes. “Charlie, I think you’re being a little dramatic, don’t you?

“I think he’s being smart,” Violet said, eyeing my mom, a dangerous glint in her eyes.

My mom heaved a gusty sigh and rolled her eyes up to the ceiling. Then, in a tone that made it clear she was trying to deal with us, asked, “Okay, so what will it take to convince you?”

I shot a glance at Violet. “I’m not sure,” I said slowly.

But Violet stepped forward. She was still half-wrapped in a sheet, but she looked defiant and certain. “The only way you can bring more hunters here is if you make a deal with us.”

“A deal?” my mom asked suspiciously.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Violet said. “A deal. So what do you say?”

**Episode 2164**

Hearing yelling from the kitchen, I hurried down the stairs, pulling on my sweater as I ran. “What’s going on—” I started, but stopped mid-sentence when I reached the kitchen door.

I stared at the scene. Sage had shifted and was lunging for Zainab, who was red-faced and screaming at her. Zainab looked like she was about to shift as well. Greyson was in the middle of the two, holding Sage back.

Sage and Zainab looked furious… at each other? I didn’t understand. Those two were mates, and I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen them have so much as a disagreement. They were usually both such chill people.

But definitely not right now.

Greyson grabbed Sage’s fur and yelled into her face, “Sage! Listen to me! You need to calm the fuck down, right now!”

Sage snarled at Greyson, but he didn’t flinch.

“There’s no reason for any of this!” Greyson snapped.

Sage growled again, and I gasped. The Sage I knew wouldn’t hurt Greyson, but the Sage I knew also wouldn’t shift in the kitchen and try to attack her mate, so everything about the situation was weird and made me deeply anxious.

“What’s this about?” I demanded.

Zainab looked over me, noticing me for the first time. She pointed to a bowl of strawberries on the counter.

“What am I looking at?” I asked, baffled.

“I put sugar on the strawberries, and Sage freaked out. She kept yelling, ‘Who the fuck puts sugar on strawberries? They’re already sweet!’ She went insane!” Zainab said.

Greyson’s face was livid with rage. “You idiots are seriously fighting about *fruit*?” He turned to Sage. “What the hell?”

Sage stopped lunging for Zainab and shifted back, though she still looked mad as hell. “I cut the strawberries; I should be the one who decides what the fuck *happens* to the strawberries!”

“You don’t *own* the strawberries!” Zainab snapped back. “I can do whatever the fuck I want with the strawberries. If I wanted to cover them in cocaine, big fucking deal!”

Sage started to reply, but Greyson put up a hand to stop her.

“Enough,” he said firmly. “That’s enough. We live in a pack house, not a frat house, and everyone here needs to exercise proportional responses to situations.” He glared at Sage. “And getting ready to tear your mate to pieces over some sweetened berries is not proportional. Get your act together.”

Sage glared at Zainab for a moment longer, then turned on her heel. “Whatever. I don’t even want the fucking things. Enjoy your sugar bombs,” she muttered, skulking out of the kitchen.

Zainab watched her go for a moment, then her expression softened. “Hang on! Sage! Wait! I’m sorry!” She ran after her.

“What was *that*?” I asked into the sudden quiet of the kitchen.

Greyson shoved the bowl of strawberries away from the edge of the counter and shook his head. “No clue.”

“I thought you handled that really well,” I said, smiling a little. It’d been thrilling to see how Greyson had taken charge of the situation—he was a born Alpha.

“Thanks,” Greyson said, though he still looked frustrated.

I stepped toward him and pulled him into a hug. “You did. That was intense, and you talked them both down.”

“Yeah,” he said, frowning. “But why did I have to? That wasn’t about strawberries. What could have set them on each other like that?”

“I heard yelling, is everyone okay?” Torin said, walking in before I could answer Greyson’s question. He spied the bowl of strawberries on the counter, and his eyes lit up. “Oh, sugared berries! My favorite!”

He popped one in his mouth and, with a grin, headed back out of the kitchen.

“They weren’t really fighting about strawberries, were they?” I asked, looking down at the bowl.

Greyson shrugged. “That’s what they were arguing about when I came in. It was so weird. Those two never even raise their voices at each other. They’re like the perfect mates.”

He looked so confused by the fight, I started to feel a little shaken myself. Could that kind of thing happen between me and one of my mates? Some small, trivial thing that could trigger a violent argument?

Between Greyson and Xavier, I’d had my fair share of arguments, but I just couldn’t imagine either of them shifting to attack me. I shivered at the thought.

“Hey,” Greyson said, pulling me close. “I would never do that. You know that, right?”

“Of course I do,” I said quickly.

He nodded and kissed the top of my head. Then he moved toward the coffee machine. “Come on, let me make you a cup.”

He was pouring coffee into two mugs when Xavier came into the kitchen. Right away, I saw that he looked grumpy, and my stomach clenched. Was he upset because he knew I’d spent the night with Greyson?

The part of me that reflexively wanted to make everyone happy wanted to ask him, but I knew better, so I kept my mouth shut.

Without a word, Greyson handed Xavier one of the mugs of coffee, then reached into the cupboard for another mug for himself.

This stopped Xavier. He looked down at the cup, clearly stunned. After a moment he leaned closer and gave it a sniff, his face suspicious.

Greyson rolled his eyes. “I didn’t spit in it, man. I just thought my little brother looked like he could use some caffeine this morning.”

This explanation didn’t seem to satisfy Xavier, who continued to look suspicious. He set the coffee down on the counter. “We need to talk.”

“What’s up?” Greyson asked, taking a sip from his own cup.

“We’ve got a hunter problem.”

I looked over quickly. “We do?”

Greyson and Xavier both looked at me.

“*We* do,” Xavier said. “*You* don’t.”

I gritted my teeth. “I’m a member of this pack, too, remember? And an asset. And if you need me to prove it, I’d be happy to blast you both.”

Xavier’s eyes flashed. “Why don’t you take your asset somewhere else for a while? Greyson and I have some stuff to figure out.”

“Fine.” I thunked down my cup hard enough that the hot coffee splashed onto the counter. “*Fine*. I’m going upstairs to get my phone.”

And I turned on my heel and stomped upstairs.

Frustration surged through me as I reached the top of the stairs. I loved Xavier and Greyson, but they could be so… *Alpha-ish* sometimes.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

I looked up at Artemis, who was walking down the hall toward me. “Oh, nothing.”

“You sure? You look annoyed about something.”

“Xavier just *dismissed* me,” I bit out. “He and Greyson had things to discuss.”

Artemis raised an eyebrow. “Hey, I have just the thing to cheer you up. Do you want to help me practice? We can blast things,” she offered in a sing-song voice. “That always makes me feel better.”

“Your magic’s working better?” I asked, surprised.

“Ever since I talked to Orla—to Mom,” she corrected, “I’ve been feeling a lot better about it. I think I’m ready.”

“That’s great, Artemis,” I said sincerely. I grinned at her. “And I’m glad that talking to Mom helped. Just like I hoped it would.”

“Okay, okay,” Artemis grumbled. “You can stop patting yourself on the back now.”

I laughed. “Okay, I’ll meet you downstairs. I’m just going to grab my phone.”

As I walked to my room, the smile stayed on my face. If Artemis had her magic back, that was good news for everyone, not just Artemis. And I was really glad I’d been able to help her. I’d only just gotten my own magic, and the help from Artemis had helped me get control over it, so I was grateful to have the chance to return the favor.

And, if there was a hunter problem, getting a bit of practice in might be a good idea.

Inside my room, I stepped to the bedside table, but stopped, surprised. My phone wasn’t where I remembered leaving it. I looked around, confused, trying to remember if I’d moved it.

I checked the dresser and the desk, then the bathroom, wondering if I’d been holding it when I’d walked in for my shower. Nothing.

I was starting to get desperate, so I got down on my hands and knees and started looking under the furniture. Finally, I found it under the bed, and I racked my brain trying to imagine how it had ended up there.

Then, as the memories came rushing back, I felt my face growing hot. Greyson and I had been pretty… *active* the night before. I guess it must have, uh, bounced its way down there. Note to self: be kinder to the most expensive thing I own.

I wriggled out from beneath the bed and turned the phone on. Then I stared at the screen. I had *thirteen* missed calls, and all from the same number. Who was this? I opened the notifications.

*Steinar?!*

**Episode 2165**

XAVIER

Greyson leaned back against the counter, cradling his coffee cup. “So, what’s this hunter development?”

I narrowed my eyes. Why the hell did he look so damned relaxed? He had no good reason to be looking relaxed. “Are your veins still gone?”

He nodded. “Yep. Yours?”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “So, if you’re right about the curse being broken, that means Cali’s going to choose her mate.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Maybe, maybe not.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I snapped.

He sighed. “Just because the curse is broken, that doesn’t mean she’s ready to choose.” He gave me a steady look. “I just hope you keep that in mind when you talk to her.”

I didn’t like being given relationship advice by Greyson, but I had other questions for him. I opened my mouth to ask about the alleged curse-breaking he had done—his explanation of events had been a little light on details—but I stopped myself. We needed to talk about the hunters.

“So, yeah, the hunter problem,” I said. “We’ve got one, and it’s right under our noses.”

“You mean other than the one trying to kill Violet or the one who’s currently staying in a guest room?” He shrugged. “I know she’s Charlie’s mom, but I don’t know if I trust her. She *is* a hunter.”

“I know, but I’ve seen her in action, and she does seem to be on our side. And she was pretty helpful when we found the tunnels and the secret hunter camp.”

Greyson’s eyebrows shot up. “The *what*?”

I blew out a breath and rubbed a hand through my hair. “We found it when we were out trying to catch whoever’s been going after Violet. We were chasing this clown through the woods, and we stumbled on this minefield of werewolf traps. And then we found some tunnels. Iris was pretty sure they were hunter-made, so we followed them. Found some people, and Iris recognized one. Didn’t engage. But we need to go back. Obviously.”

Greyson took this in. “Iris recognized someone?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Just the one. Said she’s a piece of work, and really dangerous. But we’re still looking for this asshat who’s going after Violet.”

Greyson nodded. He looked surprised, but what he said next shocked the hell out of me.

“What do you want to do?”

I looked at him for a moment. “Maybe we should go check it out. Together.”

Greyson nodded. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

Everything about this threw me. We hadn’t argued, our conversation hadn’t devolved into a fight, and Greyson wasn’t being a dick for once. Did it have something to do with the veins? But no, it couldn’t have been the veins that were making him a dick—he’d been a dick all his life.

What the hell was going on? Was Greyson up to something?

“Let me just finish this and do a couple of things,” Greyson said, holding up his cup. “I’ll meet you outside.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, still wary.

I grabbed the coffee he’d given me from the counter and headed outside. I stood on the porch, scanning the border of the property. If there was anyone out there, I wanted to know about it. I didn’t want any hunters surprising us.

Iris didn’t think they would—not yet, anyway. But, as Greyson had pointed out, she *was* a hunter, and I wasn’t sure I completely trusted her.

The scent hit me first, and I wasn’t surprised when I heard the door open behind me. I didn’t even bother looking over as Ava stepped onto the porch.

“I hope you’ve come out to tell me that you’re done packing and are about to leave.”

“Oh, you can’t get rid of me that easily,” she said, and I thought I heard a smile in her voice. “Besides, the situation has changed. There are hunters out there. Your pack is going to need all the help it can get.”

Before I could stop myself, I looked over at her. I could feel the mate bond between us, and it was growing stronger. I could sense it, and it made me sick. It didn’t help matters that the warm light of the sun made her skin glow like gold.

I gritted my teeth. “The situation might have changed, but it hasn’t changed anything between us.”

She smiled at me. “Everything changes, Xavier. It just takes time.”

And without waiting for an answer, she turned and walked back into the house.

I gripped my coffee cup, forcing myself not to chuck it after her. I couldn’t give her any indication that she was getting to me. That was what she wanted—she’d always liked to get under my skin—and I couldn’t allow it.

But our conversation had been useful, in a way. It had reminded me of what I already knew. It was time to unmate from Ava again. I’d gone through plenty of excuses until now, but it was time. Before I got into it with the hunters, I wanted to get that taken care of, once and for all.

I put my mug down on the porch railing and stepped into the yard, the ground damp and spongy under my feet. I ran over the spell in my head, but I could feel my heart pounding. Why was I nervous? Why was I hesitating?

I knew the answer—it was the mate bond. It was almost like a living thing within me, and it was fighting for survival the only way it knew how—by making me think of Ava. Making me remember the depth of our love. Making me want her again. And then, as if on cue, the memories came back. I thought of just the other night at Lucian’s palace, and how it had felt to kiss her again. It had felt so easy to fall back into her, I’d almost been seduced. I’d wanted her, but—in the end—I’d been able to resist. I’d been able to fight back because I’d thought of Cali, and how much I loved her.

There was no point in lying to myself—I had loved Ava once. But even when things had been good between us—before everything had turned to shit—my feelings for her had never been as deep and intense as they were for Cali. *Nothing* was like what I felt for Cali. And I knew that would never change. That was what had freaked me out so much when I’d first met her. Even before I’d been able to admit it to myself, part of me had always known that Cali was a once-in-a-lifetime woman.

I needed to stop screwing around.

I drew in a deep breath. I just needed to stop overthinking it. I just had to do it and get it over with. The spell might not have been permanent the last time I’d tried, but it had worked. And even something temporary would be better than nothing at this point. I just had to feel disconnected to Ava. Especially now.

If the curse really was broken, I wanted Cali to be able to choose me—without any fear of fatal consequences, and without the long shadow of Ava falling over us.

I cast a look around the yard. Everything was quiet. It was early, and I was alone. I closed my eyes and began, murmuring the spell my mother had made me memorize all those years ago. “*Nego illam mate foedere iungit*.”

Even as I spoke, I felt my muscles tensing, bracing for the pain I knew would hit.

And hit it did. It came like a lightning bolt, knocking the breath out of me. I fell to my knees, then down to the ground, writhing as the pain washed over me, wave after wave. I was sweating and aching, every nerve-ending in my body screaming with agony.

After what felt like hours—though it was probably only a few minutes—the pain subsided, and I crawled onto my hands and knees, breathing like I’d been sprinting. My whole body still ached with an echo of the pain, but I had done it. It was over.

No more Ava.

I looked up at the house. My eye was drawn to movement in a window on the second floor. It was Ava. Her back was to me, and it looked like she was about to step into the shower. She was naked, her body covered with a towel.

A fireball of desire flamed within me, nearly knocking me backward. I gasped for breath, and—almost as though she could hear me—she turned and looked out the window. Our gazes locked, and she hitched the towel up an inch.

*Are you okay, X?*

*I—I’m… Wait, were you not in pain just now?* I asked, baffled.

I could see her brows furrow in confusion, but—wait. I’d just heard her voice in my head. We were both in human form; we shouldn’t have been able to mind link. Which meant it had to be the mate link.

*Fuck.*

The spell hadn’t worked.

**Episode 2166**

MARTA

I stared at the dark-haired woman.

“No, there has to be some kind of mistake. My trial can’t be starting now. I just got here.” I looked around, feeling a growing sense of desperation. “There’s got to be some kind of a queue, right? Someone else’s case that’s a priority?”

The dark-haired woman gave me a level stare. “Issues of necromancy are very serious. They’re about as high up on our priority list as you can get. Well, that and messing with basic human interactions like love. You’re a…” She flipped open the folder in her hand and scanned down a page. “A medium.” She looked back up at me. “And as such, you should know better than to mess with death.”

“But I *didn’t* know,” I argued. “How could I? I was held prisoner by a crazed poltergeist for fifty years! The freak never explained any rules to me! He wouldn’t even let me open a window!”

The woman looked stern. “Ignorance of the law is no excuse. And I must remind you that you were warned.” She held up the file. “It’s all in the evidence.”

Panic was making my throat tighten. I sucked in a ragged breath.

“You can’t do this,” I managed. “How am I supposed to defend myself? I’m not a lawyer! This isn’t fair.”

My breathing was getting shallow and rapid; I was on the brink of hyperventilation. My thoughts went to Lilac. I wished he was with me. He always knew how to calm me down. If he were here, he’d take my hand, tell me everything would be all right. Even if we both knew it wouldn’t. There was nothing right about any of this.

The woman was starting to look alarmed. “Calm down, Miss Zhao. It’s not going to do you any good to go into the court blubbering. It certainly won’t impress the judges, and these kinds of emotional displays won’t sway things in your favor. Trust me—they’ve seen it all. Come on.”

She turned and walked briskly toward a set of large, grey, industrial-looking doors. She pulled a handle, and one of the doors slid open on giant wheels. The sign on each of the doors read *San Francisco Regional Courtroom.*

I took a deep breath and planted my feet. “No.”

She looked at me. “Excuse me?”

“No,” I repeated, more firmly. “I’m not talking one step in there without a lawyer.”

The woman rolled her eyes. “One will be provided for you. Go in, already. They’re waiting for you,” she said, and pulled open the other door.

Hesitantly, I stepped across the threshold—and then I gasped. The courtroom that met me was *not* what I’d expected. It was a large room, but there was no tall judge’s bench, no jury box, no flags—not even any unflattering overhead lighting. It was a large, high-ceilinged room, and instead of a judge’s bench or the table for the prosecution and defense, there were a number of lounge chairs on wheels in brightly striped patterns. There was a large, round table in the middle of the room stocked with bottles of water, sodas, and baskets of snacks. In the corner of the room, I spied what looked like a couple of massage chairs, and on the far side of the room was a neon sign that flashed the message “Justice is Served… 24 Hours a Day”.

Stunned, I looked around. “Um, where’s my lawyer?”

“Hey, Marta!”

I turned to see Vander walking toward me. They were dressed in their ranger clothes, and they were smiling at me.

I gaped at them. “What are you doing here? Are you my lawyer?”

The dark-haired woman, who had stepped into the room behind me, looked irritated at my ignorance. “Vander is the Keeper of All Nature. Of course they’re not your personal attorney.”

Vander ignored the woman and pulled me into a hug. “It’s nice to see you. How are you?”

I didn’t know Vander all that well, but just the presence of a friendly, familiar face was enough to fill me with a glimmer of hope, and I hugged them back, fighting off tears of relief. “I’m okay, I guess.”

When we separated, the dark-haired woman was looking shocked. She looked at Vander. “You *know* this medium?”  
 Vander smiled and slung an arm around my shoulders. “Of course I do. I know everyone.”

I looked up at them. “So, why are you here?”

“A firefly told me your trial had been moved up, and I wanted to be here to offer my support.” They gave me a piercing look. “You said you were okay, but is that the truth? How are you really faring?”

A sob bubbled up in my chest, and I had to fight to swallow it back down. I had no idea how to answer. How *was* I faring? I had no idea. About anything. I didn’t know where I was, I didn’t know what to do, I didn’t know what to say. I was totally, completely, unquestionably lost.

Vander looked at me, their piercing gaze somehow seeing through me. They nodded, their face perfectly calm. “Just speak the truth, Marta, and the balance will be restored.”

Before I could respond, the lights flashed, then changed, bathing the room in a dim, ghostly light. Techno music boomed through the speakers, and, with a mechanic hiss, fog began to gather at our feet.

I was about to ask Vander what the hell was going on, but before I could get the words out, three women suddenly appeared on the lounge chairs. Each of them wore a stern expression, and one held a tall glass.

She took a sip from the glass and grimaced. “Kyle!”

Kyle, the kid with the red beard who’d shown me around earlier, walked in through a side door.

The woman held out her glass for him to take. “The GingerFusion kombucha is flat. Fetch me another.”

“No prob,” Kyle said, snagging the glass and disappearing through the door again.

The GingerFusion woman looked at me over the top of her half-moon glasses. “The accused shall rise.”

I stared back. I was already standing. What the hell was I supposed to do? The question was answered when I felt my feet leave the floor and I rose gently into the air. I looked back down at the ground, my heart beating wildly.

No one else in the courtroom seemed surprised by this turn of events, and one of the other witches—this one with a purple streak in her grey hair—took a scroll from her robes and unfurled it. An image of a scroll leapt off the page, and the witch read from the hologram.

“You are Marta Zhao?”

I swallowed. “Yes?” I squeaked.

The witch narrowed her eyes at me. “Aren’t you sure?”

I tried to take a deep breath—trying to clear my head—but it didn’t work. I just felt so unsteady. Literally unsteady, as I floated three feet above the floor. I wasn’t about to throw up in the courtroom, but I did feel sick with nerves. I’d just never known this kind of thing existed—magic, witches, witch councils. I mean, sure, I could see ghosts, but that had never seemed like such a big deal. I was just a girl from Portland who could see the dead.

“I’m sure,” I managed.

The witch with the purple streak harrumphed and looked back at the scroll. “You, Marta Zhao, have been accused of necromancy. Specifically, of violation of Section Three, Paragraph Seven, Subsection Five of the official Necromancy Doctrine for all Supernatural Beings. Now.” She leaned closer and squinted to see. “According to your summons, you used your powers as a medium to return a spirit who had previously died to the world of the living—”

“That—It—It was an accident!” I spluttered, cutting her off.

The witch gave me a quelling glare. “We will do the speaking until we say otherwise. Now, you stand here today, before the witch council, accused of one charge of violating a restraint of unauthorized magic. And of flagrant necromancy. Both very serious charges.”

The third witch, who had not yet spoken, looked at me. She had iron grey hair pulled up into a knot on the top of her head, and when she looked at me, I saw that her eyes were completely black, so the iris blended with the sclera. She leaned toward me. “How do you plead, girl?”

Panic seized me completely. My whole body felt cold and frozen with fear. Where was my lawyer? Why wasn’t Vander standing up for me? Why did this feel as serious as life and death?

The witch with the purple streak rolled her eyes. “Now is the time for you to speak, girl.”

I opened my mouth, but before I could get a word out, there was a commotion behind me—the sounds of angry shouting, and the thunderous roll of the doors being forced open.

Then Big Mac’s booming voice echoed through the room. “She pleads *not guilty*!”

**Episode 2167**

I stared down at my phone. Steinar had called? A *lot*. I hadn’t even known he had my number—I didn’t remember ever giving it to him—but he must have gotten it somewhere, because his number displayed on my phone as “Maybe: Steinar”. And, as far as I knew, there was only one Steinar—one gentle, studious, rock giant named Steinar.

My stomach clenched as I scanned through the notifications. *Thirteen* missed calls? Apart from thirteen being an extremely unlucky number, what could he possibly have to tell me that was so important he had to call me thirteen times?

I navigated over to my voicemails.

“Holy shit,” I breathed. There were thirteen of those, too. Apparently Steinar wasn’t aware of voicemail etiquette.

“Hi, Cali, it’s Steinar here, from the Obaltarion. Give me a call back when you can, okay?”

In the next one, his tone was a little less chill.

“Hi, Cali. It’s me again. Steinar. I know I just called, but give me a call back when you get a chance, okay?”

The third one definitely had a note of panic. “Cali? Steinar here. Again. Can you give me a call back when you get this?”

The tone of Steinar’s voice got progressively more urgent as the messages continued, and I pressed play on the last one with a rapidly beating heart.

“Cali! CALL ME! I HAVE TO TALK TO YOU! RIGHT NOW! Oh, it’s Steinar, by the way, from the Obaltarion. CALL ME BACK!”

With trembling fingers, I pressed dial on his number. His line rang. And rang. And rang.

And then it went to voicemail. “Hello, you’ve reached Steinar of the Obaltarion. If you would like to make a reservation to visit the library, please visit our website. If you are calling regarding Ephraim’s weekly D&D game, please leave a message after the beep.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I muttered. He’d left me thirteen freaked-out messages and I got sent to voicemail? “Hey, Steinar, it’s Cali. I got your messages. I guess just… call me back?”

I hung up and looked down at my phone in disbelief. I couldn’t believe I was going to play phone tag with the librarian of the Obaltarion. I tapped my fingers against the sides of my phone. Maybe I should try calling again? He’d just seemed so freaked out in his messages, like it was a matter of life or death. My heartbeat sped up again. *Was* it a matter of life or death? A year ago I would have laughed at the suggestion, but I was wiser now, and the world I now inhabited had higher stakes. Life or death was definitely on the table.

I was thinking so hard and so intently that when my phone rang, I panicked and screamed, tossing my phone onto the bed.

*Maybe: Steinar*

Feeling like an idiot for freaking out, I lunged for the phone. “Hello? Steinar?”

“Cali? You finally called me back!” came Steinar’s gravelly voice.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” I said. “I was downstairs, and I didn’t have my phone with me for a while—”

“A *long* while,” Steinar interjected. “I called ten times.”

“Thirteen, actually. So what’s going on? You were pretty vague in your messages, and you sounded… um… kind of scared? Is everything okay? Is the library okay?” I asked, remembering the time we’d found it wrecked because of Letifer’s revenants. That had almost broken Steinar’s heart.

“No, no, the library’s fine. That’s not why I called,” he said quickly.

“Then what is it?”

“I was calling about you!” Steinar said. “I was calling to see about your well-being, of course. And your mates.”

I frowned. It was kind of Steinar to want to check in, but *why* was he checking in? Had something happened?

Greyson had said that he’d broken the curse—and the veins on their chests *had* disappeared. Had that triggered something? Something big enough that even Steinar knew about it?

My palms started to sweat. “What do you mean?” I asked.

“You know how you asked me about the Eden pack?’

“Um…” I thought for a long moment before the memory came back to me. “Oh, yeah! That werewolf pack from the sixties, with the co-Alphas. The ones with the farm share and the werewolf co-op and stuff. Yeah, I remember them.” That account was what had given me the idea to ask Greyson and Xavier to be co-Alphas. My stomach clenched, but this time it was with excitement. “Wait, did you find something?”

If he had, maybe it could be the important piece I’d been waiting for. The thing that would unite the pack and address all the tension everyone had been feeling because there was no official Alpha. Maybe Steinar had come across a ceremony we could do or something. I was willing to do whatever it took.

I sat up a little straighter. “Well, what did you find? I have to know!”

Steinar took a gusty breath, and it sounded like grinding gravel. “What I initially found on the Eden pack wasn’t the full story, apparently.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, feeling suddenly cold. I didn’t like the edge to his voice. It was like when the music in a movie turned scary, and you just knew things were about to go down.

“It looks like that while the co-Alpha thing worked for a while in the Eden pack, I found another piece of their history that was a bit more… concerning.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, my heart beating a rapid tattoo. “Concerning how?”

Steinar didn’t answer for a moment. He wasn’t the quickest off the mark in any situation, but I wasn’t in the mood to be patient.

“Steinar!” I burst out. “*Concerning how?* Are Xavier and Greyson in some kind of danger?”

I closed my eyes at the thought. This couldn’t be happening. It just couldn’t. I’d just started to let myself believe that the curse might really be broken. That they might not be walking around with the threat of death constantly hanging over them. They’d only just gotten rid of the veins, for god’s sake! How could there be something else to add to all this?

“I’ll start at the beginning,” Steinar said, in his most academic tone. “As we read that first time, things with the Eden pack started out very idyllic. They grew their own food, made their own clothes. There’s record of them speaking about the harmony they were seeking individually and as a pack. But then, the records kind of… stop.”

“What do you mean, *stop*?”

“Just what I said,” Steinar explained. “They stop. There was a kind of pack historian keeping an account of things, because they thought what they were doing was so revolutionary, and they wanted other packs to follow in their footsteps, but at some point, all the writing just stopped.”

“Why?” I demanded. “What happened?”

“Well…” He paused. “How do I say this without sounding crass?”  
 My head was pounding, my heart was pounding, and my pulse was pounding.

“Just tell me!” I snapped, practically screaming. “What happened?”

“The Alphas killed each other.”

I gasped and covered my mouth with my hand. I felt faint and dizzy and—even though I was already sitting—I swayed, like I was going to fall over. I couldn’t breathe.

“Cali? Cali? Cali, are you still there?”

Steinar’s voice sounded far away. I could barely hear it over the panicked buzzing in my ears.

“I’m here,” I rasped, my voice barely a whisper. “Steinar, are you sure about this?”

“I’m sure,” he replied.

“Positive?” I whimpered.

“Cali, my research is sound. I found a few articles detailing everything that happened after the records from the Eden pack stopped.”

“Will you email it to me?” I murmured.

“No, Cali,” Steinar said gently. “You don’t need to read it. It’s… too much.”

“Too much what?” I asked. My blood felt like it had turned to ice.

He cleared his throat, making a sound like an industrial rock crusher. “The account goes into some detail of what the Alphas… did to each other. It’s quite graphic. You don’t need to read that.”

“Oh god, Steinar,” I said, leaning my head back on the bed. Tears burned in the corners of my eyes, and my throat felt tight.

“Cali, that’s not all.”

“What else could there be?” I practically wailed at him. I couldn’t handle much more surprise news from Steinar. I felt like I was going to be sick, like the emotional rollercoaster of this phone call had been a real one. I didn’t think I could handle any more.

“The rest of the pack, they turned on each other.”

“Oh god.” Tears started coursing down my cheeks. I’d thought the co-Alpha thing was going to be such a good idea. The Eden pack had made everything seem so great! So good! And it was all a sham.

“They killed each other, Cali. And based on the evidence I’m examining, I’m afraid the Redwood pack might be on track for the same fate.”

**Episode 2168**

A wave of horror washed over me. “Are you saying that what happened to the Eden pack is going to happen to the Redwood pack?”

Steinar paused, a deep, stony crease etched between his brows. “You… You know that’s what I just said, right?” He tapped something on his end of the connection. “Can you hear me, Cali?”

“Yes, Steinar,” I groaned. “I can hear you. It’s only that I… I can’t believe—I can’t even imagine the pack turning against itself.”

We’d been through so much together. Fighting off the Manus Cruentae, the first Lupo Finale, Silas’s army, the vampires, then Letifer’s horde of revenants. How was it possible that after all the times the Redwood pack had proven it was made of tougher stuff than your average pack, we were somehow destined to fall apart, to destroy each other through infighting?

“I mean, sure, there have been a few gripes here and there,” I continued, “but overall, everyone gets along. Maybe things between Greyson and Xavier could be better, but still, everyone seems to like each other.”

“I hear what you’re saying, Cali, loud and clear, but do you think it’s possible that those feelings might change? That there may come a time when everyone in the pack won’t seem to like everyone else?”

Honestly? No. I couldn’t even wrap my head around the concept. The idea that we’d all start killing each other seemed somewhere beyond impossible. And yet Steinar was warning me for a reason. I’d thought the Eden pack was this bastion of unity, this amazing opportunity for me to have both of my mates, along with the pack—for everyone to get what they wanted. And because I’d believed what Steinar had told me about them, I’d pushed for Xavier and Greyson to share the title of Alpha. By that logic, wasn’t it equally possible that Steinar was right? That he had new information and that I should act on it just as quickly as I’d acted the first time around?

Everything inside me fought against the idea that the Redwood pack would ever—*could* ever—turn on itself. But if something happened because I’d refused to listen to Steinar’s warning, I knew I’d never forgive myself.

I pulled in a deep breath. “Okay, walk me through this. Why did the infighting start? I thought having two Alphas brought unity and balance to the pack? Everyone compromised. Everyone got at least something they wanted. What’s so bad about that?”

“According to the one survivor, because there were two Alphas, the werewolves faced two conflicts: one internal and one external. Their human selves were able to accept two Alphas for all the very logical reasons you mentioned, but the wolf-self… It doesn’t work like that. It only recognizes dominance and hierarchy, and there’s no room for anything like compromise. So, because the wolf-self favored the single Alpha system, and likely one of the two leading Alphas, a rift was created inside each member of the Eden pack. The rift took a toll, and ultimately disrupted the harmony. The pack members constantly struggled to reconcile the two sides, to bridge that gap, but remember—the human and wolf-selves spoke different languages, valued different things. There was no compromise to be found. And things can only remain peaceful for so long when one side of a whole being is being actively repressed. In this environment, aggression quickly built. Within each pack member, a fight for dominance inside and outside manifested. Soon, it was wolf against wolf, and human against human. They tore each other apart, Cali, and that isn’t even the worst of it.”

I tried to imagine the Redwood pack members fighting this inner battle every day since I’d pushed for Xavier and Greyson to be co-Alphas, and I wasn’t even remotely prepared for the guilt that rushed in. I’d done this to them. I’d sentenced them to this fate, this fight that nobody would win.

Tears blurred my eyes as I asked, “How could anything be worse than what you just described? That pack literally tore itself apart. All those werewolves who loved each other… They—they killed each other.” I sniffled. “Nothing can be worse than that.”

Steinar was silent for a beat, and then, “There was evidence of cannibalism.”

“*What?*” I gasped. “You mean they *ate* each other?”

“Yes, that is what cannibalism means, I’m afraid.”

“Oh my god.” The tears spilled freely down my cheeks. “Oh my god. What have I done?”

“I’m sorry for not telling you all of this before, but I didn’t even know until I uncovered the other part of the article. If I had unearthed the truth sooner, I can assure you I certainly wouldn’t have made it seem like sharing Alpha duties was a simple solution.”

“Right. Now you know better,” I cried. “And apparently sharing Alpha duties is all part of the slippery slope to full-on cannibalism!” I shuddered at the thought of my pack members gnawing on each other. It was too horrifying to even consider, beyond a worst-case scenario. “Steinar, what am I supposed to do?”

He paused, his expression grim. “I don’t know… I’m not a werewolf.”

“I know that!”

“What I’m saying is, gargoyles are not pack creatures, but it seems that the best course of action would be to have the pack choose one Alpha.”

“But that was the problem in the first place. That impossible choice was why we opted for the co-Alpha solution—because my mates were ready to kill each other, and that aggression was trickling down to the rest of the pack.”

“I understand. But you do realize that if you continue with the co-Alpha hierarchy, the pack will eventually be affected in a much worse way, right?”

“Right. Murder with a side of cannibalism. Got it.”

“I’m sorry, Cali.” Steinar sighed. “I promise I’ll look into this further and hopefully get back to you, but right now I have someone returning a book a hundred and twenty-seven years past due.”

I bit the inside of my cheek so hard it hurt. He was seriously going to drop that kind of news and then just bail on me? “But—”

The line went dead, and I let out a loud, pissed-off groan.

I *really* wished I’d known about this before. The co-Alpha thing had seemed like such an easy fix at the time, the break we’d been waiting for. How was I going to unfix this? Would that mean I’d have to support one of my mates over the other? I supposed I could technically do that without any sort of penalty, now that the curse was broken. But being technically able wasn’t the same as being emotionally prepared to choose one of my mates over the other—in any capacity. Certainly not one as important as this.

Still, I had to do *something*. Before it was too late.

Suddenly, the strawberry fight between Sage and Zainab took on a new and horrifying meaning. *Is that a sign of trouble ahead? Or, worse, is the rift already happening?*

I hurried downstairs. I had to find Xavier and Greyson. Had to talk to them, to warn them. I wished Big Mac were here. Maybe she had an anti-cannibalism spell in one of her books, or maybe she could turn everyone into vegans so that even if they did fight and it was horrible, they at least wouldn’t be tempted to eat each other.

I stumbled into the kitchen. My mates weren’t there, but Lola was. *If anyone will understand the shock I’m going through, it’s Lola.*

“Hey.” I rushed up to where she was seated next to the window. “You won’t believe what I just found out. Steinar called, and it turns out that if we stick with the co-Alpha hierarchy, the pack is going to destroy itself!”

She scowled. “I’ve got my own problems.”

I frowned. “But this is everyone’s problem!”

“I’m brooding, and you're intruding. Go dump your problems on someone else.”

“But, Lola, this isn’t some joke—”

She growled. “Seriously! I don’t have time for your latest crisis. Now step out of my brood-space.”

I backed up, and she went back to staring out the window.

*What’s happening? Is Lola turning on me? Is the rift already taking place in my best friend? Oh god, is she looking at me with barbecue eyes? Her vampire side already likes my blood—what if her werewolf side thinks I’d taste good too?*

I swallowed audibly. “You’re not going to eat me, are you?”

Her head whipped around. “Excuse me?”

“Simple question: yes, or no?”

“What is *wrong* with you? Just leave me alone!”

I held my hand up. “Okay! Sorry! But have you seen Greyson or Xavier? I really need to talk to them. It’s urgent.”

She frowned. “I’m sorry, don’t you know where they are at all times? I thought that was how you three worked.”

Just… wow.

“This is a problem for the entire pack,” I pressed. “Did you see them or not?”

Lola shrugged. “Last I saw, they were heading outside together, and they did *not* look happy.”

“Oh no!” I gasped. Already my worst nightmares were coming true. “Are they going to fight?”

**Episode 2169**

XAVIER

I stretched away the ache from the unmating spell. The pain wasn’t nearly as bad as it had been the first time I’d tried the spell—further confirmation that the spell hadn’t worked, just like last time.

If anything, I felt worse now. No less tethered to Ava, but now I had the additional joy of pain pulsing through my body as the magic moved through my bones. What a monumental fucking waste of time.

I didn’t know why I’d even bothered. Ava’s mind link had made it perfectly clear that she was still going to pursue me, that rather than being weakened by the spell, or by my general hatred for her, our mate bond was only getting stronger. My wolf and I were diametrically opposed, it seemed. I loved and wanted Cali. My wolf wanted Ava—even though killing her was the reason why I’d been separated from my wolf for all that time. Even though *Cali*, not Ava, was the one who’d brought my wolf back to me.

I growled. *Ungrateful little asshole.*

I felt trapped, out of control of my own life, and it pissed me off. This was why I was actually looking forward to scouting out the hunter encampment with Greyson.

Speaking of…

I glanced over to where Greyson was speaking with Rishika. *What the hell is up with him?* *Did someone give him a lobotomy in his sleep?* He was all smiles, and it seemed like a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. I probably should’ve been happy to see him like this, but the whole thing unnerved the hell out of me. I was *not* a fan of this new version of my brother. Not. One. Bit.

*If I catch him smiling anymore, I swear to god I’m going to rip his lips off.*

“Hey.”

Speak of the devil. Greyson had walked over while I was busy thinking about how creepy he was. It was kind of perfect, actually. Perfectly low-key horrifying.

“I spoke to Rishika,” he continued. “She’s agreed to watch over the pack while we’re gone. Are you ready?”

Going out on a special mission, sans Ava, to scope out and potentially wreck a bunch of rogue hunter shit? “I’m more than ready.”

“Wait!”

I turned to see Cali kicking the porch door open and racing out into the yard.

“Don’t fight!” she screamed. She skidded to a stop right in front of us, panting. “This whole thing is my fault; you don’t need to take it out on one another.”

My brother and I raised a brow at each other.

*Do you have any clue what she’s talking about?* I mind linked to him.

He shook his head once. *I was just about to ask you the same thing.*

“Love, we’re not fighting,” Greyson said.

I pulled our mate into my arms. “What’s wrong?”

She hugged me for less than a second before pushing out of my arms, rambling about cannibalism and a lone survivor, all at a speed way too fast for me to comprehend.

“Everything Steinar said… it’s all so horrible,” she concluded with a sob.

“Hey.” I caught her shoulders. “Look at me.”

Her wide, terrified eyes snapped to my face.

“Everything’s fine,” I said gently. “Nobody is fighting. Nobody is… eating one another?”

Surely I hadn’t heard that part right. I didn’t know if she was upset because she’d found out about Greyson and me scoping out the hunter camp, or if there was something else going on that I didn’t know about yet.

Knowing Cali, things could go either way.

“Why don’t you go get some rest?” Greyson suggested. “Xavier and I are going to do a little scouting, and—”

“Together?” she cried. “No! You can’t. You can’t keep pairing up like this!”

I blinked. This was new.

“We thought you wanted us to work together,” Greyson said.

She shook her head. “Not anymore. I was wrong, and I think I put the whole pack in danger.”

This was confusing as hell, and a little irritating too. I loved Cali more than anything, but I really didn’t want to deal with whatever the hell this crisis was right now. I wanted to rip a hunter in half, and maybe picture Ava’s face on the corpse.

Was that so much to ask?

“If the pack’s in danger that’s even more of a reason for us to work together to protect it. We’ll talk about this later,” I said. “We have to go. I’m sure nothing is as bad as you’re making it out to be—you’ll see.”

I brushed a quick kiss against her lips, and Greyson winked, seemingly not the least bit jealous. “We’ll be back, love.”

Jesus, I was already over this well-adjusted version of my brother and we hadn’t even made it out of the yard. “Are we going or what?”

Finally, we shifted and ran into the woods.

Cali’s voice called out to us. “Be careful!”

As we raced toward the hunter encampment, I tried to make sense of Cali’s change of heart. What did she mean, we couldn’t do things together anymore? She was always telling the both of us to work together, and now, when we finally were actually trying to work together, suddenly she didn’t want us to anymore?

It didn’t make any sense, no matter how I approached the problem. Cali could be truly confounding at times, and this situation just proved that.

Still, I felt good about my call to table her concerns until we got back from scouting out the hunter camp. Whatever was going on with her, I couldn’t be drawn into it right now—I needed to be laser-sharp. Even if it would be a goddamn delight to kill a hunter or two, I knew they were dangerous. Maybe more dangerous than most of the foes we went up against. If I let my guard down, it’d be the end of me.

It didn’t take long before the watchtower loomed ahead. Greyson slowed to a stop behind a thick cluster of trees, far enough away that we could make out the tower, but still be protected by the cover of the trees.

*So what are we up against?* he asked. *How many hunters are there?*

*I’m not sure how many there are total, but their leader is someone named Shanna Paiyn. We can’t be too careful—they use a scent mask of some kind, and they could have set more silver traps. They basically turned the forest east of here into a deadly werewolf obstacle course.*

He scanned the ground around us before moving forward, and we proceeded cautiously through the woods, occasionally stopping to listen. The forest was quiet, but not eerily so. We approached the camp and found it empty, at least for now.

The fire was still smoldering, though, and some weapons had been left behind. This was likely still an active hunter camp. They’d be back soon enough.

I mind linked to Greyson. *We have the element of surprise. They don’t know that we know they’re here.*

Greyson nodded up at the watchtower. *What’s in there?*

*There’s one way to find out.*

I shifted back to human, and Greyson followed suit. We started our way up the rickety stairs.

Since I was slightly more familiar with the camp, I went first, carefully testing each board as we ascended the staircase. I honestly had no fucking clue why the hunters had chosen this place. The entire structure looked like it could collapse at any second.

*Not exactly a formidable defense. You could drop a match in here and the whole thing would burn to ash.*

I made it just beyond the halfway point when I heard a snap—but it didn’t come from me. I spun around as Greyson started to fall through the now-broken step. Instinctively, I reached out, snagged my brother by the arm, and hauled him up to safety.

He blew out a breath and dusted himself off. “Thanks.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

As I continued my way up the stairs, I couldn’t help wondering if it would have been so bad to watch Greyson fall through that busted step. At worst, he would have ended up with a temporarily broken leg. Not exactly a life-or-death situation, though it would likely mean that I’d have to haul his ass back to the pack house. Plus, he’d have Cali nursing him back to health while his leg healed.

*Never mind. I definitely made the right call.*

Finally, we reached the top of the staircase, only to find the door closed. We braced ourselves on opposite sides of the door, and I reached out to push it open. My body thrummed with tension, ready to shift and fight at the slightest provocation. I wouldn’t have put it past the hunters to lay some kind of trap for anyone who tried to trespass in their shitty little tower.

Nothing jumped out, so I peeked around the edge of the doorframe. The room beyond was empty, save for an old desk and a chart of some kind on the wall. We moved closer to examine it, and a wave of horror shuddered down my spine.

“They’re surveillance pictures of the pack house,” Greyson growled.

Lines connected various pictures like in detective shows. It was clear some of the pictures had been taken at ground level, and others had been taken from the air. Along with expensive silver traps, it seemed like the hunters also had access to at least one sophisticated drone.

“How the hell did we not notice this happening?” I growled.

Greyson frowned. “And how long have they been doing it?”

I noticed a stack of pictures on the desk and began to rifle through them. More shots of the pack house. A few pictures of pack members. Some shots of the pack eating together at Thanksgiving.

I flipped through the rest of the photos, and my blood ran cold.

Someone had taken pictures of Cali and me making out behind the shed.

And Cali was circled in red.

**Episode 2170**

MARTA

I was so relieved, I nearly burst into tears. I wasn’t alone anymore! Big Mac was here! She’d come to help plead my case against the witch council, just like she’d promised. And, even better, Kira, Lilac, and Mrs. Smith were here too!

Vander smiled. “The team’s all here. How lovely.”

I blinked back tears. “You really made it.”

I couldn’t quite believe it. Just when I’d thought I was all alone—except for Vander, of course—my team had finally pulled through. “Happy” or “relieved” didn’t even begin to cover the emotion rushing through me. “Joyful” was much closer.

Lilac smiled up at me. “Did you really think we’d leave you to face this all on your own?”

I let out a happy sob. “I didn’t know if you’d be able to get here in time.”

I tried to reach for him, to throw my arms around him and never let go, but it was awkward to try to move while I was still suspended, and as I tried to airwalk toward them, a warm jolt of magic ran through my body.

“Stay put!” one of the witch judges barked.

As undeterred by positions of authority as ever, Lilac still reached out, and our fingers touched. It was the smallest, simplest thing in the world, but feeling him, knowing he was truly there right in front of me, made me feel like I could breathe for the first time since the witches had brought me here.

And inside my chest, where all that fear and dread had been weighing me down, a tiny spark of hope was kindled. Maybe all wasn’t lost. Maybe I could walk away from this. Have a real future with Lilac and Big Mac and everyone else.

“Everyone quiet,” the judge in the middle said, standing. “I’m Judge Hawthorne, Head Judge, and this court will come to order.” She gestured for Big Mac to step forward. “And who are you?”

The witch approached the judges’ lounge chairs. “I’m MacKenzie MacEvoy, a witch in good standing.”

Judge Hawthorne sat back down, and the judges whispered to each other. They didn’t even bother to be subtle about it. I wasn’t sure if this was normal behavior for them, or if it was their witchy way of disrespecting Big Mac, but either way, I couldn’t assume it was a good sign. My stomach sank, and I held onto that kindling of hope even tighter.

*It’s going to be okay*, I told myself. *Big Mac, Kira, Lilac, even Mrs. Smith—they won’t let anything bad happen to you. They’re here to help. You’re safe. Just relax and follow Big Mac and Kira’s advice, and you’ll be heading home soon enough.*

Hawthorne sniffed. “There is some debate about how good your standing actually is, Ms. MacEvoy. But nonetheless, why are you here?”

Big Mac thrust her shoulders back. “I’m here to represent the defendant, Marta Zhao.”

The judges started whispering again, and, if possible, they were even more obvious about it this time. I realized I was holding my breath, waiting for the judges to tell Big Mac no, to throw her out for associating with me.

Instead, one of the judges lowered her tinted bifocals, gesturing to Lilac, Kira, and Mrs. Smith. “And who are they?”

Kira stepped forward. “I’m Kira Boniolo, Big Mac—I mean, MacKenzie’s co-council, Your Honors.”

Then Mrs. Smith took her place in front of the judges. “I’m Sabine Smith.”

A delighted shock ran across the judges’ faces. At least, I was pretty sure it was delighted. They were all smiling now and seemed a little starstruck. It was probably good to know the range my judges were capable of—distaste for me and anyone openly associating with me. And… delight for Mrs. Smith.

*It’s a shame she’s not the one on trial. She’d definitely walk.*

“We’ve heard of your white chocolate mocha, Mrs. Smith,” Hawthorne said. “We’re big fans of your work.” Then her smile disappeared and was replaced by a stern look. “Please let the record show that Mrs. Smith’s association with the beloved beverage will not be a factor in this case. And what are you, a werewolf, doing here?”

“She’s a character witness,” Big Mac cut in.

“And MacKenzie’s fiancée,” Mrs. Smith added.

“Irrelevant!” one of the judges snapped.

I caught Mrs. Smith sharing a look with Big Mac.

“It seems pretty relevant to me…” Mrs. Smith mused.

But the judges had already moved on. Hawthorne narrowed her gaze at Lilac. “And you? Are you engaged to Ms. MacEvoy as well?”

“No!” I blurted out as Lilac stepped forward. “He’s my boyfriend.”

Lilac caught my eye and smiled. “What she said.”

I thought I heard Big Mac curse under her breath. Something about “dumb teenagers”?

“This is Lilac Blackburn,” Big Mac corrected, “and he’s also a witness.”

Hawthorne frowned, and then the whole group of witches conferred among themselves, clearly agitated by something, but they were whispering quietly enough now that I had no hope of overhearing them. The whole thing set my nerves on edge.

Vander reached out and squeezed my shoulder. “Don’t worry. You’ve got a whole team here now. It’ll be okay.”

The judges faced forward again, and one of them beckoned Lilac forward to approach her. “Come here, boy.”

He did as he was asked, and seeing my boyfriend so close to those witches made my heart race.

“Are you the Lilac who was recently pulled from the spirit world?” the judge asked.

Lilac not so surreptitiously glanced back at Big Mac, who nodded. He turned forward. “Yes, Your Witchliness.”

Again, the witches had a quiet discussion before another faced forward and said, “So you are both a witness and evidence.”

I gasped. *Oh my god. Are they going to use Lilac as evidence against me?*

“O-Objection, Your Honor!” I blurted out.

Hawthorne frowned. “On what grounds?”

I shrugged helplessly. “For trying to turn part of my defense team into a piece of evidence?”

The judge rolled her eyes and clasped her hands. “Enough. Let us stop dilly dallying. Counsel, you may present your opening statement.” She leaned forward, her brows raising. “And keep it brief, hmm? No grandstanding allowed. Believe me, we know what witches are capable of.”

Big Mac didn’t so much as blink. “Your Honor, may the witness-slash-evidence be allowed to sit with the defendant during the trial?”

“My name is Lilac,” I heard him mutter.

The judges discussed this question quietly before Hawthorne nodded. “It will be allowed.”

Suddenly, I was lowered to the ground, and my feet touched the floor.

“Oh, thank god,” I breathed.

Lilac raced over and wrapped his arms around me.

“You came for me,” I whispered. “You have no idea how much this means to me.”

He laughed. “Come on, Marta. You know you can’t get rid of me that easily.”

Kyle returned with the judge’s kombucha and directed my team and me to sit at the table. Lilac squeezed my hand as Big Mac stepped forward to deliver her opening statement.

“Your Honors, the defendant today”—she pointed to me, as if my role in this wasn’t already obvious—“is a young, untutored medium, who was recently freed after being held captive for fifty years by a malicious poltergeist. Having no family or friends to rely on, Marta was thrust into a modern world she didn’t understand and was expected to fend for herself. Additionally, shortly after she was released from her captivity, she was informed she was also a bridge, and was immediately thrust into a battle with the warlock Letifer.”

At the mention of that name, the group of witches glanced at each other anxiously. Clearly they were uncomfortable with something to do with Letifer, but why?

Big Mac continued. “If it wasn’t for Marta’s tenacious spirit and fearlessness, Letifer might have succeeded in his attempt to seize control of our world. She literally saved us all.”

The witches exchanged another round of anxious looks, and I frowned. Seriously, what was going on with them? Then, a new question rose to the forefront of my mind. If these witches were so concerned about unsanctioned necromancy, then where they hell had they been when Letifer was building his army? How was I getting in trouble for bringing Lilac back when Letifer could have filled a football stadium with his revenants? It didn’t seem like they’d done anything to stop *him*. Somehow I doubted a mere trial would have been enough to contain him, but the image was a funny one, and it settled my nerves temporarily.

“During all of this chaos,” Big Mac added, “the defendant was understandably overwhelmed, and she may have inadvertently pulled her boyfriend from the spirit world. These are special circumstances, Your Honors, and they cannot be ignored when considering Marta’s actions. I will prove that, given these circumstances, there’s no justifiable reason to charge Marta with any crime.”

Holding my breath, I tried to read the judges’ reactions. Hopefully they hadn’t already decided to convict me. Would they even listen to anything Big Mac presented, or was this all totally useless?

Hawthorne clapped her hands. “Before we proceed, there will be a short recess. I need a double organic fair-trade espresso with skim oat foam. This is going to be a long day, and I need a boost.” She gave me a nod. “When we return, you will take the stand, Miss Zhao, and tell us what happened.”

**Episode 2171**

GREYSON

My jaw clenched so hard I nearly cracked a molar. It was bad enough the hunters had pictures of Cali and Xavier making out in their creepy, invasive photo album. But, more importantly, they’d singled her out by drawing that circle around her.

Protective instincts rose to the surface the moment I saw the photo. There was no mistaking what it meant. I would have felt a hundred times better if Xavier was the one who’d been circled, and that was putting all jealousy aside.

Xavier could handle being singled out. He was a strong, mean Alpha, who was tough as nails. He was the kind of werewolf hunter parents probably warned their kids about in bedtime stories. But Cali? She was still coming into her Fae powers. She didn’t possess the same killer instinct that Xavier, the hunters, and I did. I never, ever wanted her to be pulled into something like this.

But clearly these assholes had plans going beyond the sadistic games they’d been playing with Violet and Charlie. And whatever the hell their intention was for Cali, I’d protect her. Me and Xavier both. It might have been one of the few things we could agree on, but it was the only thing we’d never change our minds about.

Xavier looked around the tiny room. “Isn’t it strange that they’ve cleaned up the campsite but left all of this?”

I hadn’t given any of it a second thought, but now that he mentioned it…

“It’s as if they wanted us to find it,” I realized.

“Bingo.”

I hoped, for a myriad of reasons, that Xavier was wrong. “Maybe the hunters knew we’ve been tracking them.”

“But these were taken before they ever got on our radar.”

I frowned, then gestured to the photos. “So if they’ve been watching us this closely, they may know more than we think.”

A new realization hit me, and I saw the precise moment it sank in for Xavier too. We looked at each other in horror.

I cursed. “We’ve been played.”

My brother’s brows knit together. “Cali…”

We both shifted and rushed out of the tiny room, leaping off the deck of the tower and landing on the forest floor below. We didn’t miss a beat before darting off back toward the pack house.

I mind linked with Xavier. *We should have figured it out sooner. They managed to get both Alphas out of the pack house—and we made it really goddamn easy for them.*

Xavier snarled. *If they touch a hair on her head…*

He left the thought unfinished, but I couldn’t have agreed more. Those hunters had messed with the wrong pack, and now they were going to face the wrath of two Alphas.

As we sprinted toward the tree line, a strange buzzing sounded somewhere nearby. I slowed to a stop, and, a few feet ahead, Xavier did the same. A shadow passed over us, and the buzzing grew even louder.

I looked up—the source of the buzzing was right on top of us now. It was a drone. I was certain that the hunters, wherever the hell they were holed up, were watching us right now. And that just wouldn’t do.

It was bad enough that the hunters had so much intel on us already. We had some catching up to do if we wanted to defend ourselves, much less get the upper hand on these psychopaths. I stalked back a ways, then raced forward and leapt into the air, catching that bastard drone between my teeth.

Xavier backtracked too, meeting me as I landed hard on all fours, the drone whirring uselessly in my mouth. This thing looked top of the line—all sleek sophistication. It was probably fairly durable for a piece of tech like this. But it was no match for the strength of a pissed-off Alpha.

I shifted back into my human form and caught the drone in my hands before it could take off again. Sure enough, a camera was mounted on the top of it. I ripped it off the drone and brought it close to my face, snarling, “Movie’s over.”

I crushed the camera in my bare hands and dropped it to the ground, stomping it beneath my heel until it was nothing but a pile of shattered metal and plastic.

*You think that’s the one they’ve been using to spy on us?* Xavier asked.

*No idea. Either way, now they’ve got one less tool to use against us.*

I snapped the drone in half and dropped it on the ground. These hunters were probably stellar fighters—for humans, at least—but since their bodies were physically limited, they relied on tools to complete their jobs. The fewer resources they had to use against us, the better our chances at gaining the upper hand.

I looked back to the watchtower, standing sentinel in the distance.

*It sure would be a shame if something happened to that tower of theirs…* I mused over the mind link.

*We can’t just leave the pack and Cali undefended*, Xavier said.

*Get back to the pack house. Make sure Cali’s okay; there’s something I need to take care of first.*

Like making sure these hunters thought twice before fucking with my pack—or my mate—ever again.

For once, my brother didn’t hesitate to do as I asked. He disappeared into the tree line, and I shifted and hustled back to the campsite.

At the base of the tower, I shifted back to my human form and grabbed all the kindling I could find. I placed it in a loose ring around the base of the tower, well packed to feed a fire, but loose enough that plenty of oxygen could get through.

I glanced around the campsite again. The trees were far enough away to not be at risk. Unless something went terribly wrong, this would be a controlled burn. I gathered up all the camping supplies in sight and placed them around the base with the kindling. Then I used a jar I’d found in the camping supplies to scoop up a few still-burning embers from the campfire, and I looked up at the tower.

“Time to say goodbye.”

I distributed the embers around the kindling, feeding the tiny flames like a good Boy Scout until three small fires were burning at the base of the tower. Once the flames caught onto the tower itself, it went up in a shockingly short amount of time.

I knew I shouldn’t linger, but I stood and watched the fire for a moment, admiring my work. This would send a clear message. If the hunters were smart, they’d get the hell out of Dodge.

I glanced around the remnants of the campsite. Xavier had said the hunters used a network of tunnels to get around.

*Maybe I should take a moment to check them out, see just how sturdy they are. It would be a shame if they collapsed and trapped our neighbors inside.*

I grinned at the thought.

I didn’t have to explore the area long before I found an opening in the ground, hidden behind some bushes. I knelt down to listen. The last thing I wanted was to walk into a nest of hunters all by myself.

At first, the tunnel entrance was quiet. It seemed empty. I was about to drop in when a rhythmic scuffling caught my attention.

*Footsteps?*

So, there *was* someone home.

I lowered my head into the opening and allowed my eyes to adjust to the dim light. The footsteps sounded close, but not quite in the opening of the tunnel. It sounded like just one set of footsteps.

One hunter, I could take.

I slowly lowered myself onto the floor of the tunnel, pausing to listen over the pounding of my heart. If there was more than one hunter down here, I was fucked. Even with all the fighting I’d done, both as a Rogue and as an Alpha, I’d had very few run-ins with hunters.

But if these hunters had singled out Cali, they’d made a grave mistake.

I didn’t care how many there were down here. They could have a whole army stalking these woods, and I would still make sure they were eradicated. Nobody threatened my mate and lived. I might not be able to take them all out myself, but the pack wouldn’t hesitate to join the battle. Hell, we could even call on the Blue Bloods, if necessary. If hunters were moving into our territory, it was everyone’s fight. And we wouldn’t be safe until these hunters went back to where they’d come from, or were six feet under.

The footsteps stopped, and from the sound alone I imagined the hunter had to be about twenty yards away. I briefly considered shifting, but the crack of bones would only alert whoever was nearby.

I slowly, carefully crept forward until I came face-to-face with a hunter, weapon in hand, ready to pounce.

**Episode 2172**

VIOLET

I looked from Charlie’s face to Iris’s, waiting for her response.

I had no idea what the hunter was going to say, if she was open to the idea of making a deal with us, a pack of werewolves. So far, Iris had been surprisingly supportive of the pack going up against this rogue band of hunters, but I had a feeling that had more to do with Iris’s son being in danger than me being the target. Which wasn’t ideal, per se, but it was still better than being on our own against Paiyn and Zachery.

Or worse, having to fight Iris off, too.

I held my head high as I waited for them to respond. I was so very proud of my mate for sticking up for the pack. I knew it couldn’t have been easy with the way things were between Charlie and his mother. He was torn between his past as a normal human with a loving mother—a side of Iris I struggled to believe had *ever* existed—and his future as my mate and a member of this pack.

The woman had a special case of denial—it was like she constantly put blinders on to the fact that Charlie was, in fact, a werewolf. And it seemed like Charlie had to constantly remind her that not only was he her son, and a hunter, but he was one of the monsters she’d probably hunted without mercy.

I put a hand on his shoulder. “Well, what do you say?”

Iris’s eyes flicked to me, narrowing slightly, and suddenly I didn’t feel quite so confident anymore, but I pushed through the instinctive fear she never failed to bring out in me. I forced myself to meet her eyes, to not look away, not show her an ounce of insecurity or worry.

To my surprise, Iris smiled. “I’ve been working with werewolves as well as any hunter could, probably even better. If you recall, I offered to be an ally to one of your Alphas, but it didn’t seem that he fully trusted me. It’s their loss.”

“We have no reason to trust any hunters, that’s true,” I said. “We’re natural enemies. We don’t normally get along. I’m sure we both see each other as unnatural, but if Shanna Paiyn is as loose a cannon as you’re saying, I think it’s in everyone’s best interest to put our prejudices aside and work together on this.”

Even more surprisingly, Iris nodded. “I couldn’t agree more. I’ll do whatever it takes to form a temporary alliance between the Redwood pack and the Land O’Lakes Defenders—as long as your Alphas agree. I can’t deny that your help, your werewolf abilities—they made a difference during the vampire siege. I think if the two of you hadn’t been there, things would have gone very differently.”

I glanced at Charlie, who smiled.

Iris continued. “At minimum, our losses would have been catastrophic, and I don’t take that lightly, unlike our current adversary.” Iris straightened her shoulders, looking more determined than I’d ever seen her. “Shanna Paiyn is a notorious rogue hunter who doesn’t follow any code but her own. She’s a threat and an embarrassment to the hunter way of life. Nothing would make me happier than to see her brought to justice. She may be a skilled hunter, but her disregard for human life in pursuit of killing the supernatural is unacceptable. So, yes, Violet. I agree. Let’s work together to take her down.”

Charlie nodded. “Thanks, Mom. It means a lot to me that you’re willing to help us.”

Iris was just full of surprises today, wasn’t she? I mean, don’t get me wrong, this was the scenario I’d been hoping for. The pack was strong, but Iris surely had a ton of insider knowledge about fighting hunters that would come in handy. Still, I’d spent so long seeing Iris as a threat that even now, when I was asking her to make an alliance with us, I still didn’t trust her to have our best interests at heart.

*But maybe it’s not so much about her supporting our best interests as it is making sure our goals and hers line up. It’s worth trying, at least if Greyson and Xavier agree, otherwise we’re out of options…*

“So, what’s next?” I asked. “Are you going to invite a bunch of other hunters here?”

“I’ll put out a call if the Redwood Alphas let me. We can have some of the Land O’Lakes Defenders come here as soon as possible.”

*Great. A bunch of highly trained hunters are on their way to be bunk buddies with a werewolf pack.* The idea wasn’t very comforting. Having Iris here alone had me enough on edge, and adding more hunters to the mix?

I tried to ignore the nerves fluttering in my belly. Was the idea of this truce terrifying? Absolutely. But ultimately, part of this fight did seem to belong to the hunters. Shanna was their problem, their threat to eliminate—much like Silas had been ours. If this truce between the Redwood pack and the Defenders allowed us to take out Paiyn and Zachery, well, then it seemed like a no-brainer.

Charlie gathered his mom up into a hug, and I stood back awkwardly. Iris met my eyes, and I swallowed roughly. There was still no love lost between us, that much was for sure.

When Charlie let Iris go, she cleared her throat. “I have some business to attend to.”

Once Iris stepped out, Charlie scooped me up and spun me around. “This is great news, isn’t it? Finally, we’re going to have the help we need to eliminate this threat to you once and for all. Zachery will never know what hit him.”

I forced a smile. “Yes, it’s good news. But it means putting all of us in danger—again—and I don’t want that for the pack, for anyone. I don’t want anyone to get hurt trying to protect me. Not even your mom.” I gave him a rueful smile. “I just wish you and I could go to an island somewhere and be done with all of this nonsense.”

He set me down and kissed the tip of my nose. “Keeping you safe is worth anything and everything. And everyone in this pack would agree with me on that. I hope you know that. Besides,” he added, his voice brightening, “this will all be over soon, and when this nightmare is finally in the rearview, I’m going to take you on a beautiful vacation—just the two of us.”

This time, the smile that pulled at my lips was one hundred percent genuine. “Really?”

“Really. I mean, have we had any relaxing downtime since we met? Any chances to make memories, just the two of us?”

I blinked. We hadn’t. With the exception of a few days here at the pack house in between life-altering threats, we really hadn’t had any time for just each other. “That sounds amazing.”

“And I promise it’s not just out of my desire to see you in a bikini either.”

I smacked his arm playfully. “Oh, so that’s your motivation. I see how it is.”

He laughed. “I can’t say it *isn’t*.”

My phone chimed with a text alert, and I jolted upright, stepping out of Charlie’s arms as I pulled my phone out of my pocket. “It’s Lilac! He’s finally texting me back.”

“That’s a good sign. Does this mean they got to San Francisco?”

I shrugged. “I assume so? I hope they made it to the witch council in time. That was so sleazy of the witches to just teleport Marta to California without alerting her counsel.”

Charlie frowned. “Do you think they bumped up the trial, then?”

“I don’t know.” I didn’t really understand how any of this witch council stuff worked, but I knew it was safe to assume that the council’s interference wasn’t great news for Marta. It wasn’t a stretch to think that Lilac could be at risk too, since the “crime” Marta had committed was bringing him back to life.

My thumbs flew across the keyboard. *Give Marta hugs from us. Is she doing okay?*

Lilac’s response came through quickly. *She’s okay. This place is so wild. They have like, five types of kombucha. And the judge just ordered a recess so she could go get a fair-trade coffee or something. They’re total hipsters.*

I frowned and showed Charlie the text. He looked just as confused as I felt. Was Lilac telling the whole truth? Or were the witches truly that strange?

I texted him back. *You need to update me on everything. ASAP. Okay?*

He sent back a thumbs up, which did exactly nothing to ease my anxiety. Was he even taking this seriously? If something went wrong, I had to know. Marta was my friend, and I hated to even think that she might be in danger. But even more than that, I was terrified for Lilac. What if the witches tried to send him back to the afterlife?

I’d lost my brother once already. I couldn’t lose him again.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed the thought away. I couldn’t dwell on that fear. I wasn’t going to let Lilac go for anything, and I could only assume Marta felt the same way.

“Do you think everything’s okay?” I asked Charlie.

“I don’t know, but with Big Mac and Kira there, what can really go wrong? Marta’s a good person; she brought back a good person. How is that a problem? Who are they to decide that that’s wrong?”

“I feel the same way.”

Still, I couldn’t quite shake the fear that Lilac was in danger. Maybe even more danger than I was.

I knew one thing for sure, though. If the witch council hurt him, there’d be hell to pay.

**Episode 2173**

I stared out at the woods for… I didn’t even know how long. Hoping and watching for the boys to come back. *I hope they come back in one piece.* After Steinar’s revelation, I was absolutely terrified for my mates. I knew I’d probably confused them when I’d come running out screaming at them—of course I *wanted* them to work together and get along. I was so, so tired of them fighting over me, or over the role of Alpha, all the time.

But you know what else I wanted them to do? Not kill and eat each other!

Steinar’s warning had chilled me to the bone, a feeling that still lingered long after I’d watched Greyson and Xavier disappear into the tree line. What had I done? And how fucked up was it that after all my efforts trying to get them to just get along and work together for once, I was apparently at risk of creating a pack full of cannibals?

*If Steinar’s right about what happened to the Eden pack, then the road to hell is definitely paved with good intentions—and I’m dragging the Redwood pack down with me.*

My mind kept creating helpful and gory scenarios of one of my mates coming back from scouting, covered in the blood of the other.

*Come on, Cali. That’s not rational.*

*But when is anxiety ever rational?*

I took a deep breath and started pacing back and forth on the grass.

*Steinar said the rift took time. Surely the Eden pack didn’t descend into cannibalism overnight. Xavier and Greyson will be fine.*

Besides, there were a lot of things out there that were much more likely to harm my mates than some inner wolf rift.

Somehow, though, that didn’t help my anxiety. What had they said? That they were going scouting?

Ugh, I should have explained myself better. And then asked them to explain what *they* were doing better. But maybe the miscommunication wasn’t entirely my fault. My mates didn’t always listen as well as they should. And they definitely had a history of keeping important information close to their chests if they thought it benefited me to stay out of the loop.

Spoiler alert: being kept out of the loop never helped anyone.

I heard footsteps behind me and spun around, hoping that Greyson and Xavier had finally returned. But it wasn’t my mates. It was my mom.

She kissed the top of my head. “Hi, sweetie.”

“What are you doing out here? Is something wrong?”

Mom shook her head. “No, I just needed a little space after your father and I got into a stupid argument about how we’re going to deal with his shifting once we’re back in Minnesota. It’s not something one can easily explain to the neighbors.”

My eyes widened. “You and Dad argued?” I looked back at the house in a panic. Was the rift happening to my parents too? Were they going to turn on each other because of the co-Alpha hierarchy? Oh god, were they going to eat each other?

“Are you okay?”

I turned back to my mom. “Are you and Dad okay? Was it a bad fight?”

Mom frowned. “No. No, it’s nothing you need to worry about. We had a little disagreement, but show me a marriage where there aren’t any of those.”

I blew out a sigh of relief. “Okay, good.”

Now that I thought about it without a gallon of anxiety being pumped into my brain, I realized I may have overreacted. My parents weren’t pack members, even if Dad had become a wolf. They were just… visiting. The pack hierarchy shouldn’t have any effect on them.

“Why don’t you come inside?” Mom suggested. “Torin’s making pierogies. I’m sure they’ll be delicious.”

“I will. I’m just waiting for Greyson and Xavier to get back.”

Mom paused. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

I nodded, and she started to make her way back to the pack house.

Suddenly, I spun around and called out, “Hey, Mom?”

She turned back to face me. “Yes, sweetie?”

“Have you noticed any arguments or any… um… bad fights in the pack house recently?”

“No. At least, no more than usual.” Her lips twisted into a wry smile. “Tensions can get high with so many passionate people living under one roof. But I don’t think things have gotten any worse lately. Why?”

“It’s nothing.” I didn’t see a reason to worry my mother when things still seemed to be relatively peaceful in the pack house, Sage and Zainab’s strawberry fight notwithstanding. “I’ll be in soon.”

Mom headed inside, and I turned back to face the woods. Where were Greyson and Xavier? It felt like they’d been gone forever.

Footsteps pounded on the grass behind me, and Artemis and Rishika came racing up.

“Are you ready?” my sister asked.

I frowned. “Ready for what?”

“We’re supposed to practice our magic?”

“Oh. Right. I forgot.”

Rishika sighed. “I wish I could watch, but I need to keep an eye on the pack house while Xavier and Greyson are away. Good luck, you two.” She kissed Artemis and sprinted toward the house.

Another reason to be relieved? Artemis and Rishika didn’t seem to be fighting.

*But maybe that’s because Artemis is Fae? Then again, Rishika’s a werewolf. And definitely a member of the pack. She’s practically a Luna with the way she takes charges when needed.*

It seemed likely that the rift would affect her, regardless of who she was coupled with.

“So, are we going to do this, or not?” Artemis asked, pulling me out of my anxious tailspin.

I really needed calm the fuck down. Obviously this could become a problem if Steinar’s information was accurate, and I’d have to deal with it if it became one. But it didn’t seem like things had reached a critical point yet, and it did me no good to stress out about something that might never happen. One strawberry fight didn’t mean it was the end of the world.

“Yeah.” I smiled. “Let’s do this.”

We set up target practice—a line of empty cans we’d dug out of the recycling bin—and stepped back to give ourselves some space.

To her credit, Artemis was improving at a rapid rate. Her control of her magic was increasing, and it didn’t seem to be draining her as quickly either. She’d had much more control before this, so maybe that was why. In ten attempts, she managed to knock seven cans down. I had a feeling that pretty soon she’d be just as much of a badass as she was when she and I had first met.

I, on the other hand, hadn’t managed to hit a single target. I tried to focus, tried to hone that well of power inside me. But I couldn’t stop thinking about everything Steinar had said. Everything I’d told myself *not* to think about.

Artemis, of course, noticed. It was no use trying to sneak anything past my sister.

As we set up the cans that had survived our assault and added a few new ones to replace the ones Artemis had blasted to bits, she glanced over at me and asked, “What’s bothering you?”

“Believe me, you don’t want to know.”

“I wouldn’t have asked otherwise.”

I sighed. “I might have caused a… a really big problem by insisting that Greyson and Xavier co-Alpha.”

My sister frowned. “I don’t understand. It’s a problem when they share the Alpha title, and it’s a problem when they don’t. What’s the difference?”

*Cannibalism, mostly.*

I tried to find the words to explain the situation to my sister, but before I could speak, Xavier’s wolf came bounding out of the woods. He approached me, shifting back to human, and I looked back at the tree line. Oh god. My worst fears were coming true, weren’t they? Xavier and Greyson had fallen victim to the rift and now—

“Where’s Greyson?” I asked in a panic. “What have you done with him?”

He shrugged. “Nothing. Greyson’s taking care of something, should be here in a few minutes.” Then his eyes narrowed. “Wait. Why would you assume I did something to him?”

I bit my tongue. “I was just worried that the two of you had gotten into a fight.”

“Why? We agreed to work together.”

“No!” I cried. “You have to stop.”

“Stop… what?”

“Working together! No more teamwork, okay? Just… stop.”

“But… I thought you wanted us to get along?”

How could I possibly explain all of this to him in a way that would make sense? In such a way that he wouldn’t laugh? Xavier was sometimes far too pragmatic for his own good. It was entirely possible that he wouldn’t believe me, even if I did manage to explain things without giving into my panic.

He gently grasped my shoulders. “Is this about that cannibalism stuff from before? Believe me, the last thing I will *ever* desire is to feast on my jerk of a brother.”

I really wished it were that simple.

Xavier turned to Rishika as she approached. “We have to call a meeting of the entire pack. Now.”

**Episode 2174**

GREYSON

The hunter, a blonde woman with a long, thick braid and a scar running down the side of her neck, raised a silver sword high above her head and swung it straight at me. The tip of the sword kissed my chest, barely stopping short of breaking my skin as I lunged backward. Once the sword was down, I leapt at the woman, planting my foot in her chest. She, and the sword, went flying backward. The sword clattering against the ground was music to my ears.

I wasn’t going to give her a chance to pick it back up.

She reached for the crossbow strapped to her back, but I crashed into her, forcing her to fight me hand-to-hand. No silver weapons, no fancy tools. This bitch was gonna have to face me with her strength and fighting skill alone.

I dodged a right hook—which put me perfectly in line for her to sucker punch me with her other fist.

*Okay, so maybe I underestimated how mobile she’d be without all the fancy hunter gear.*

Clearly, this woman was a skilled hunter. I dodged and wove to avoid the volley of hits she was throwing my way, darting in to strike with my fists when I could. There was no chivalry here. This woman would gut me right now if I let her. She’d probably do the same to everyone I loved and not lose a moment of sleep over it.

She had to be taken down.

The hunter danced back with surprisingly fast steps, grabbing a spear from the wall. I couldn’t tell from here whether or not the spear was silver-tipped, but either way, it would hurt like a son of a bitch if she sank it into me.

I sidestepped the spear and threw her against the wall before shifting.

*This has been fun, but all good things come to an end.*

I snarled and clamped my powerful jaws down on the hunter’s chest. Her ribs creaked under the pressure, and she let out a wheezing cry.

But, of course, she wasn’t going down that easy. She grabbed a nearby lantern and smashed it on my back. Instantly, my thick fur erupted in flames. Letting go of my prey, I rolled on the ground to extinguish the fire and shifted back to human.

If I wasn’t giving my opponent any relief, then this hunter wasn’t either. She advanced on me, raising a crossbow loaded with a silver-tipped bolt. I grabbed the spear lying on the ground and swung it out in a wide arc, knocking the hunter off her feet.

The crossbow fired, the bolt whizzing past my head. I ducked away. The hunter screamed and fell silent. And then I realized that when she’d fallen, she’d impaled herself on her own sword.

I lay on the ground, my body aching, the skin on my back hypersensitive with the ghost of a burn, waiting for an attack, waiting for the hunter to miraculously rise and keep fighting.

But she was dead. And nobody was coming.

Slowly, I got to my feet and stood over the dead hunter. I’d had no choice but to kill her—it had been her or me, after all. But it wasn’t a satisfying kill. And I had a feeling that this little skirmish was only going to escalate things between the Redwood pack and the rest of the hunters.

I looked around the tunnel. Between the weapons strewn about and the patterns on the ground, it was easy to tell something had gone down here, even without the dead body bleeding out on the dirt. I didn’t have the time or resources to clear all of this out, and I wasn’t touching those silver weapons with a ten-foot pole.

Should I leave the body? Or was it worth trying to hide it to buy myself some time?

Footsteps sounded at the opposite end of the tunnel. My time had run out. I backed out of the tunnel and quickly scrambled out of the opening, leaving the hunter’s body for her comrades to find.

On the surface, the air was thick with smoke, and the tower looked like it was ready to collapse in on itself. If nothing else, this would send a message. The hunters would be forced to accept that the Redwoods weren’t going to be pushovers.

“Oh my god! Isabella!”

Hearing her name made me wince. But she’d been ready to kill me too. Once of us had to go, and it wasn’t going to have been me.

I stayed topside, listening to the hunters’ reactions to finding one of their own dead. I knew it was risky to stick around, that I had to get back to the pack house before it was too late, but I wanted to see what we were up against. The more information we had, the better prepared we could be if things escalated to an all-out battle. Any kind of preparation was pretty goddamn essential at this point, since we’d gotten a late start on this hunter problem.

I shifted into my wolf form and ran into the woods just beyond the campsite, watching and waiting. With their drone down, and my not leaving any tracks, it was unlikely they’d realize just how close the enemy was.

The group of hunters appeared at the mouth of the tunnel and moved topside. Their faces were contorted with grief and fury, and I heard one hunter say, “I just saw her earlier! I asked her if she wanted help covering the sentry shift, and she told me she didn’t. I should have been there…”

In an act of truly perfect timing, the tower collapsed in on itself, sending a wave of heat flying outward.

“What the hell?” another of the hunters cried. “Who did this?”

They began to look around for the culprit, like they were hoping a big bad werewolf wearing a sign that read “I burned down your tower” would just pop out and surrender.

I crouched low, safely hidden from sight in the brush. I counted six hunters in the group, a mix of men and women of different ages. One of them, a woman bearing enough weapons to be a single-person armory, moved to the foreground of the group.

This hunter held herself differently. Not with a soldier’s air, but a commander’s. One with authority.

*This must be Shanna Paiyn.*

As the other hunters watched in disbelief, she took three steps in my direction before kneeling down and picking up the remains of the drone and the camera that had been mounted on it. She looked directly at me, almost as if she could see me crouched in the shadows.

“Looks like we have a pest problem,” she muttered. She turned to face the other hunters. “Scavenge anything you can from the tower, and we’ll meet back at the other site.”

The group of hunters dispersed toward the fire, and I took this opportunity to carefully retreat. I had a feeling “the other site” was below ground, and I’d already pushed my luck with how long I’d spent eavesdropping.

My wounds from the fight with the first hunter, mostly superficial, had healed by now, but I wasn’t in a rush to engage with six hunters at once. As much as I hated to admit it, I had a sinking suspicion that Paiyn might be too strong for me to take on by myself.

If I’d learned anything, it was that burning down their base probably wasn’t going to send them packing for good. It seemed much more likely that they’d double down and would probably come back seeking revenge.

I needed to get back to the pack house, to warn the pack and make preparations. It was very likely that we were about to go to war. Again.

First things first, I had to make sure Cali was safe. Although I was sure Xavier would see to that himself, I needed to see for *my*self that my mate was okay.

I arrived back at the pack house to find that Xavier had already gathered the whole pack together.

*Did he call a meeting without me?*

The whole thing rubbed me the wrong way. I’d broken the curse, and Cali was safe. Didn’t that mean I could go back to being Alpha? Rishika had as good as told me she wanted me to face Xavier in a Lupo Finale. Was now the time for that?

Sure, Xavier wanted to be Alpha, but ultimately this position had given me a great deal of purpose. And right now, the pack needed a clear leader more than Xavier and I needed to get along.

Cali ran toward me. “I was so worried about you!” She stopped in front of me, panting. “I know you and Xavier agreed to co-Alpha, but I actually think that’s a terrible idea and—”

I grasped her shoulders gently. “Don’t worry, love.”

I brushed past her to step up in front of the pack.

“The co-Alpha experiment is over,” I announced. “Starting now…” I locked eyes with Xavier. “I am the sole Alpha of the Redwood pack.”

**Episode 2175**

XAVIER

In that moment, with Greyson standing in front of the pack—the pack *I’d* gathered together, the pack he’d just claimed leadership of with no warning, no discussion—I hated my brother more than I’d ever thought possible.

Had this been his plan all along? To play along with Cali’s request that we co-Alpha, to give me the chance to lower my guard, and then blindside me with this? What the hell was I supposed to do with this? Tell him hell no? Challenge him to a Lupo Finale right now, in front of the whole pack? When a band of fucking werewolf hunters was on our doorstep and rigged with all the silver weapons and tech we could possibly imagine?

I looked over at Cali, who was standing by Greyson’s side. She’d just rushed over to him, babbling about something. I’d assumed it was more of her anxiety, the weird fear she had that we were going to eat each other or whatever the hell *that* had been.

Had she talked Greyson into this? Not five minutes before Greyson had finally shown back up, Cali had told me all about how worried she was about us continuing to share the mantle of Alpha. She wanted us to stop. And considering how she had Greyson wrapped around her finger, and considering how much my brother actually did want to be the sole Alpha, it was more than likely that she’d convinced him to take the lead.

But… that didn’t feel right. Even torn between us as she was, Cali wouldn’t just sell me out like that. She wasn’t capable of it.

Which meant this was all Greyson’s doing. Of course. What I still didn’t know was whether he’d been planning this, or if it was a spur-of-the-moment thing. Honestly, it seemed like either option was possible. This really had come out of nowhere.

I noticed a few pack members, like Jay and Lola, glancing over at me, clearly waiting for my response. These were the people who supported my claim over Greyson’s, and they would take their cues from me on what to do with our new “leader.”

If things were peaceful, I’d have been sorely tempted to put all my efforts into tearing Greyson’s throat out. But since a new and formidable threat was looming on the horizon, it was probably best for me to stow my ego and play along. The pack needed unity right now, more than I needed to shove my good-for-nothing brother’s face into the dirt.

But as soon as this latest threat was over, I *would* challenge Greyson and end my brother’s short-lived reign as the Redwood Alpha.

Cali caught my eye and mind linked. *Did you know about this?*

Even though I’d told myself that I trusted Cali, that I knew she wasn’t behind Greyson’s little coup, I was still so pissed off and shocked that I couldn’t help myself. *Did you?*

Hurt flashed in her eyes. *How can you even ask that? Of course not.*

My stomach clenched. Great. Now I was making a shitty situation even worse.

*I believe you. I’m sorry.*

I glanced around the pack. In the absence of any objection from me, it didn’t look like anyone objected to Greyson taking the lead. I had to assume Rishika was feeling pretty pleased with herself. She’d been cheering for Greyson to take the lead since the day he’d stepped down before our battle with Letifer.

But what about Ravi? Or Zainab and Sage?

Jay met my eyes and gave me a quick nod. He and Lola were in my court, of course. But it didn’t matter either way. We didn’t settle things around here using a popular vote. A decisive Lupo Finale would put an end to any questions about who was the rightful Alpha—once and for all.

Greyson broke through the crowd to approach me. “Do you have any objections, Xavier?”

I ground my teeth together. “You know I do, but we’ll settle this later.” I glanced over at Cali, who was watching us closely, and the reason for my quick return to the pack house reared its head again—the rogue hunters and their fucking Redwood pack photo album. “What happened at the tower?”

“It’s gone,” Greyson said simply, “but I’m afraid I had to kill one of the hunters while I was scoping out one of the tunnels.

There was nothing questionable about this account. No respectable werewolf would lose sleep over a dead hunter. We killed when necessary—especially when killing meant protecting our pack and our mates. It was an unspoken code.

I shrugged. “I assume you had your reasons.”

I noticed Iris approaching from the front porch. She was still scary as fuck. If every hunter out there was cut from the same cloth as Charlie’s mom, then one less hunter in the world could only make it a better place.

Iris stopped in front of me. “I’d like to address the pack.”

I glanced at Greyson. “Then you’d better talk to him. Apparently, he’s in charge now.”

The words tasted like poison, but I reminded myself that this was all temporary. A brief inconvenience before I took matters into my own hands and made sure I got what I deserved.

Iris talked quietly with Greyson for a moment before turning and addressing the others. “After discussing matters with the Alpha, my unit of hunters has agreed to work with the Redwood pack in order to defeat the malignant rebel hunters led by Shanna Paiyn. I’ll be arranging to have some of the most loyal and skilled hunters from my region come to help us with this fight.”

A murmur rippled through the pack until Greyson held up a hand.

“Listen to me. We must accept this help. Based on what Xavier and I learned during our scouting mission, we’re going to need it.”

Greyson dove into an account of what we’d seen when we infiltrated the camp, and I walked away. Greyson had stepped into his role just as quickly as he’d announced it.

Ava’s voice slipped through my mind. *It should be you, Xavier.*

*Shut up*, I snarled. *I don’t want you to mind link with me* ever *again.*

*There’s a reason why I’m still here. I saw what you tried to do, and it failed again. Stop fighting this—let me help you. I’m the only one who will. Not even Cali can do what I can.*

I wanted to scream. Hearing her voice inside my head only made me feel worse. About everything. Wasn’t it bad enough that my brother had just pulled the rug out from under me? Did my ex-mate really have to rub the whole thing in my face? She needed to *stop* mind linking with me. I wasn’t kidding about that. The side of me that still wanted Ava woke up every time her voice slipped into my head, and it made me want to tear my hair out.

Cali followed me away from the pack. “Are you okay?”

“How could I be?” I snapped.

She frowned. “Sorry.”

I sighed. *Xavier, get a grip.* “No, I’m sorry. I just… I wasn’t prepared for what just happened. I thought Greyson and I had agreed to work together. Now I just feel like a fucking idiot.”

Cali rested her hand on my shoulder, and I reached up and caught it.

“I know you probably don’t want to hear this right now, but don’t you think this might be for the best?”

I shoved her hand off. “Seriously, Cali? How could this possibly be for the best? Maybe it is for Greyson, but it’s pretty much my worst nightmare.”

“It’s dangerous for everyone here if you and Greyson keep sharing Alpha. Just look at what happened to the Eden pack! They were this co-op in the sixties that had two Alphas. Everything was great until they all ripped each other apart! They were driven crazy by the lack of hierarchy and ended up destroying each other. I don’t want the same thing to happen to us.”

“It won’t.”

Nearby, the pack meeting broke up, and I headed inside. I still hadn’t cleaned up after patrolling.

In the bathroom, I tugged my clothes off in a series of jerky movements. I was so fucking fed up with Greyson, with Ava, with everything. Even having the curse broken and the veins gone was doing absolutely jack shit to lift my spirits.

I turned on the water and stepped into the shower, Ava’s words echoing in my mind. She might have supported my desire to be Alpha, but I’d be an idiot if I thought for even a second that she didn’t have her own agenda.

How many times had I tried to get rid of her? And how the hell was she still here? No, it didn’t matter that she might be one of the few people here who wanted me as Alpha. I wasn’t going to be fooled into thinking anything between us had changed. I was going to find a way to sever our mate bond—permanently.

Because there was only one woman I was truly mated to. *One* woman I desired.

I closed my eyes and imagined Cali. Her face. Her smile. Her voice, and her scent—

“Xavier?”

My eyes shot open, and I peeked out of the shower. Cali was standing in the bathroom doorway.

“Can I come in and talk to you?” she asked shyly.

I reached out and grabbed her hand, pulling her toward me. “You can come in, but we’re not going to talk.”

Then my lips crashed into hers, and I forgot about everything else.

**Episode 2176**

I’d followed Xavier into the bathroom because I thought he needed to talk after Greyson had blindsided him. I hadn’t been prepared for him to pull me into the shower and kiss the daylights out of me, or for all the worries swirling in my brain to completely disappear.

Xavier pressed me against the shower wall as hot water pelted down on us and steam filled the air. Things between us felt different, somehow, more intense, more sensitive. Just… *More*.

Was this a side effect of the curse being broken? With nothing holding us back anymore, did that mean we could both let our guards down? I certainly felt a new sort of inhibition as Xavier pressed every inch of his firm body against mine. His lips were demanding, leading my mouth in a deep kiss and nipping at my lips if I didn’t respond quite fast enough.

His hands slipped over my soaking wet shirt and settled on my breasts. A simple graze of his fingertips against my nipple sent a bolt of pleasure racing through me. The friction of his touch, my wet shirt and bra… It was all enough to make me clench with need.

Reality crashed in on me for one brief moment—the shower!

I broke away from his kiss. “My clothes are soaking wet!”

“That’s the opposite of a problem.” He grabbed the neckline of my shirt and ripped it open right down the middle, taking my poor bra with it. I let out a gasp of shock and, let’s be honest, pure delight. I knew he was strong, but it was something else to see it up close, to feel it.

“Take your pants off,” he rasped, mouthing at my exposed collarbone. “Now.”

His dark, demanding tone made something tighten low in my belly, and I fumbled with the button on my jeans. I was too slow. Xavier jerked them down my legs, then held out a supporting hand for me to step out of them—a dichotomy of rough and gentle that made my head spin.

Kneeling in front of me he smirked at my soaked panties. A simple light blue cotton. “These are cute.”

*Rip.* The now useless scrap of fabric fell to the floor.

“Xavier,” I breathed.

I stood in front of him, naked beneath the showerhead just like he was, and yet I felt so much more exposed. The way he stared at me with that dark ravenous hunger, the way he touched me, rough and demanding and overwhelming and so fucking good I never wanted him to stop… I’d never been both scared and excited before.

And god help me if I didn’t want more.

His eyes traveled down my body before he crowded me against the cool tile once more.

“Such a pretty little thing,” he growled. “What am I going to do with you?”

His callused fingertips reached between my legs and found me wet with something slicker and thicker than water. Xavier groaned his approval and I gasped, canting my hips against his hand as those rough fingertips brushed against my swollen clit.

His other hand pushed my hips back against the wall. “Be still, Cali. You’ll take what I give you, and nothing more.”

He captured my lips in a deep kiss while his fingers teased between my legs, stopping when I jerked my hips up to meet his touch and pushing me right back to where he wanted me. Before long, he’d brought me to the edge at least twice, and then left me dangling the moment my body started chasing its own release.

“Xavier,” I groaned. “I’m so close.”

“You want something?” He smirked, clearly enjoying the control he was wielding over my body. “Ask nicely.”

My moan echoed off the tiled walls. I didn’t know what it was, but Xavier taking control was getting me so hot. His fingertips found my swollen clit again, and I bit back a cry as they slipped lower and two thick fingers sank into me, his thumb coming up to caress my clit.

He didn’t give me a warning before his hand started working me with a ferocity that danced down the line between ecstatic pleasure and *oh my god too much*. I was so far gone, so desperate, that I savored his rough touch. It was exactly what I needed, and in mere seconds I was right at the edge.

He stopped again, and my eyes shot open. “Xavier!”

His face was dark, serious. “Ask. *Nicely*.”

“Please, Xavier. Please!”

His fingers slipped out, his hands braced themselves on my hips, and in one smooth movement, he lifted me up against the wall, notched himself at my entrance, and slid inside me.

I came around him with an ecstatic cry. Pleasure flooded my veins, and white lights exploded behind my eyes, but Xavier didn’t miss a beat. He fucked me against the tile, slow but hard, like he was trying to imprint himself inside me while the still-warm water pelted down on us.

I came a second time, and his mouth smothered my cry. He nipped my lower lip hard enough that the metallic tang of blood slid across my tongue, then broke away from my mouth.

“Mine,” he snarled in my ear. His hips sped up, smacking my lower back against the wall with each thrust. “All mine.”

His cock thickened inside me, and I clamped down on him with a scream, pulling us both over the edge into oblivion.

Afterward, Xavier carried me to his bed. He’d fucked me so well that my legs had kind of forgotten how to work. We lay together, our bare skin drying as I drew circles on his chest.

“So that was… a lot?”

He hummed. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

I shook my head. “No, it was all… amazing, really. Way more intense than usual.”

“Today’s been that kind of day.”

I couldn’t argue with that. I glanced down at his bare chest, still amazed that the veins were gone. I wanted to believe the curse had disappeared along with them, but I was still so wary of being caught in a position where I had to choose one of my mates over the other. What if Greyson was wrong? What if we were all just as cursed as before, even with the veins gone? What if I made some small choice in favor of one of my mates, and the other one dropped dead?

God, I wanted so badly to believe that the curse was behind us, but even if it was, that didn’t change how impossible this choice was to make.

Even if their lives were no longer on the line, how could I possibly decide between the two men I loved more than anything in the world? The two men I loved equally. There was no competition, no clear winner or loser.

I loved Xavier—I couldn’t possibly imagine living without him. I’d hoped that if we were all honest with each other, if we set the petty jealousy aside, things would finally be better for the three of us. In some ways, it had seemed like they were. At least, up until Greyson had decided to name himself sole Alpha.

Xavier would never admit it, but he’d been hurt by Greyson’s decision. He probably even felt betrayed. I hated to see him hurting like this, even if his anger did make the sex about a thousand times hotter.

I wish I knew what had prompted Greyson to make that decision. He’d seemed so happy to have broken the curse. He’d been so willing to work with Xavier, so compliant, so at peace with things. What had made him change his mind?

I realized that silence had set in while I’d mulled over Greyson’s change of heart, so I tilted my head up to look at Xavier’s face. “What are you thinking about?”

His arms tightened around me. “I tried to do it. I tried to unmate from Ava again.”

I blinked. “When? Why?”

“Just before Greyson and I left to scout out the hunter camp. I’m so fed up with it. I don’t want Ava around anymore.”

“Okay, but did something happen?”

He was quiet for a moment, and my heartbeat sped up. What wasn’t he telling me?

“Xavier?” I pressed. “What is it?”

“I’m still struggling with the pull the mate bond with Ava has on me. The unmating spell didn’t work the way it did last time, even if that was just temporary.” He sighed. “I know you don’t want to hear that. I’m sorry.”

Well, he wasn’t wrong. I *definitely* didn’t want to hear about his mate bond to Ava. But I also knew he was struggling, which meant he didn’t want Ava. I knew that logically. Xavier was fighting against something he didn’t have a lot of control over. It wasn’t his fault.

But that didn’t change the fact that Xavier had been overcome by the mate bond to such an extent that he’d kissed Ava. It had already happened once. Could it happen again?

Or… could he give in to more than just a kiss?

**Episode 2177**

GREYSON

After washing all the smoke, dirt, and hunter blood away in the shower and getting dressed, I went downstairs in search of Cali. I needed to explain everything to her.

It was both validating and a huge relief that my declaration that I was now the sole Alpha of the Redwood pack had gone uncontested—both by Xavier and by those I suspected would much rather see him in this position. If things had been peaceful for the pack, there might have been more of an uproar, but with the hunter threat on our doorstep, it seemed the pack was holding the need for order and unity above any personal preferences over who should lead.

Still, I knew Cali had been just as blindsided as the rest of the pack. My decision to take the mantle of Alpha may have seemed rash to her, and I wanted an opportunity to explain why I’d done it.

I walked through the house, looking around for Cali. Rishika and Ravi were speaking in the library.

“Hey, have either of you seen Cali?” I asked.

Ravi shrugged. “Last I saw, she was outside talking to Xavier after your big announcement. Ballsy move, by the way.”

My eyes narrowed. Was that a genuine compliment, or a challenge? “Thank you?”

Rishika rolled her eyes. “Show some respect. He’s the Alpha now.”

“Oh, I wasn’t being sarcastic. I meant it,” Ravi said earnestly. “All of us have been wondering how long the co-Alpha thing would last, and whether or not you’d do a full Lupo Finale, but instead you just walked in and took it. Like I said—ballsy.”

“Looks like you’ve got a new fan.” Rishika smirked, then her expression went serious. “But did you really mean it? That you’re the Alpha now? With all the constant changes around here, I’m never sure what to believe,” she added quickly.

“I meant what I said—I’m the Alpha now. There will be no more co-leadership. It was…” I tried to think of the right way to describe that awful experiment. “Worth a shot, I guess. But I think we all know that ultimately, a werewolf pack isn’t meant to have two Alphas.”

Rishika smiled. “You’re right. This is how it’s supposed to be. So, what’s your first order? Should we get a team together to scope out the hunter camp? If so, I volunteer. Call me petty, but I love the idea of hunting down whoever’s been making Violet’s life a living hell. Give them a taste of their own medicine, if you know what I mean?” She raised her eyebrows at me.

“Your brother’s not going to be happy about this,” Ravi interjected.

“I know. I’m sure it was just as surprising to him as it was to the rest of you. But Xavier stepping in to lead was only ever supposed to be a temporary arrangement. I may not have seemed like myself during the battle with Letifer, but I’m back now, and I’m here to stay.”

Ravi nodded. “Well, welcome back then, Alpha.” He ducked out of the room.

I frowned slightly as I watched him go, then turned to Rishika. “I don’t know how Ravi feels, but I hope that when the time comes, I can count on everyone in the pack to fall in line.”

“They will.”

I smiled at her confidence. If I’d had half the confidence in myself that Rishika had had in me for all this time, I might’ve taken Alpha back sooner. “What makes you so sure?”

“Every pack wants a strong, defined leader. And that mess between you and Xavier was pretty much the opposite of that.” She shrugged. “So, what do you want me to do to prepare?”

“I’ll let you know. We’re waiting for the contingent of hunters to show themselves. I have a feeling they’re gonna want a little chat.”

“Keep me posted. I’m here to do whatever you need.”

“Thank you, Rishika.”

She nodded and headed off.

I left the library and continued my search for Cali. Why was it that whenever I needed to talk to her about something important I could never find her? I couldn’t help but notice that Xavier wasn’t anywhere in sight, either. Were they together? I ground my teeth at the thought.

*Xavier’s probably pulled Cali in to help him lick his wounds.*

And our mate—being the loving, supportive, wonderful person she was—probably hadn’t hesitated to comfort him. I sighed. I knew that what I’d done earlier was divisive, and hell, it *was* ballsy. But that didn’t mean it wasn’t the right thing to do. I was finally free of the witches and their cryptic messages, free of the curse. And with all that bullshit behind me, why the hell shouldn’t I move forward? I’d waited long enough, and I’d indulged Xavier in meaningless compromise for long enough, too.

My time in that alternate reality spell had shown me that I did care about my brother. Deeply. I never wanted to hurt him, and I’d even go out of my way to protect him under the right circumstances, but sharing the role of Alpha wasn’t feasible. There was only room for one Alpha in this pack, and the position belonged to me.

I was moving forward with what I wanted—being Alpha and having Cali. And right now, the only person potentially standing in my way was Xavier. But unless my brother tried to do something, I wasn’t going to take him out. I had to believe that things between us weren’t so far gone that fighting was our only option.

And when this conflict with the rogue hunters was over—and it would be, soon—I was going to find a way to prove to Cali that the curse was broken, that she could choose freely. And I knew, deep down in my heart, that she would choose me. She might not know it right away—and I understood the position she was in, how she felt divided by the *due destini*—but whether it happened today, or tomorrow, or five years from now, Cali would choose me.

It was *our* destiny.

In the kitchen, a group of pack members was discussing some sort of party, but there was still no sign of Cali or Xavier.

Jay headed over. “Hey.”

“What’s the celebration for?” I nodded toward the group clustered behind him.

“It’s actually for you. There’s a push to do a pledge of loyalty tonight to make your return as Alpha official.” He slid his hands in his pockets. He was avoiding my eyes, but there was an unmistakable nervous energy thrumming through him. “The hope is that a loyalty pledge will put an end to the divisiveness and uncertainty that has shadowed the pack for so long.”

“That’s actually a great idea.” At first, I wished I’d thought of it myself, but then I realized the suggestion was a thousand times better coming from someone else. Someone who hadn’t just abruptly announced themselves as leader of the pack.

Jay lingered in front of me but didn’t say anything.

“Is there something else?” I asked.

He heaved a sigh. “You know Xavier and I are close, but… Xavier doesn’t know I’m talking to you right now.” Jay finally met my gaze. “Do you understand what you’ve done?”

“I feel like everyone keeps asking me that. Yes. I’ve done what’s best for the pack. If you recall, I’ve been the Alpha before. I was the Alpha here for a long time. All I did today was reclaim what was already mine.”

“Sure, but—”

I held up a hand. “You’ve been one of the most loyal members of this pack for even longer than I have, and regardless of who the Alpha was, you have always sought to do what was best for the pack. You have my respect and appreciation for that, and I hope that in time you can see I’m only trying to do the same thing you are. I’m not doing this to piss Xavier off. It’s not personal. I’m doing this because it’s the right call. I imagine you’ll come to realize that, if you haven’t already.”

I wanted him to say he agreed, that he understood where I was coming from and that even though Xavier was his best friend, he would still support my claim as Alpha. But instead, Jay was stone-faced as Rishika came over.

“Everyone is in agreement. We’re going to do the pledge of loyalty tonight.” She smacked my arm. “This will unite the pack like never before. I can’t wait!”

I smiled, but it felt forced. Somehow, I didn’t share her enthusiasm. Part of me wondered if asking for a pledge was too much, too soon. If it would alienate those who followed Xavier. But another, even more troubling complication quickly rose to the forefront of my mind.

Now that Alpha was sorted out, I realized that this was only part of what the pack truly needed. As Lucian had pointed out the other night, the pack would be weak until they had a strong Alpha *and* a Luna.

Was it time to make Cali my Luna?

**Episode 2178**

MARTA

My palms were slick with sweat, and I nearly jumped out of my skin when Lilac grabbed my hand. I recovered quickly and shot him an apologetic look. I was completely on edge, and getting more nervous by the second.

“It’s going to be okay,” Lilac whispered as he gave my hand a reassuring squeeze.

I winced and shook my head. “I know you’re being positive for my sake, but I’m not sure I believe that this will all be fine. Being here with all of this, it’s so intense and scary. I feel like if I make one wrong move my fate will be sealed, and that’s a hell of a lot of pressure for me. I haven’t even really gotten to *live* all that much. I’m only eighteen, after all.”

I’d missed out on so much being trapped in Bert’s house, and now that I was free and able to actually live my life, it was in danger of being snatched away again because of some accidental necromancy? *Talk about bad luck!*

“Believe me, I get it, you know that I do. I know you think I’m being too positive, but I believe you’re going to come out of this whole thing better than ever.”

Lilac leaned in and planted a warm kiss on my cheek and then lingered there, clearly wanting to take things further and kiss me on the lips. I wanted that, too. I wanted to be anywhere but here, and kissing Lilac didn’t sound half bad. In fact, it sounded like the most amazing thing in the world. I squeezed my eyes shut and hugged Lilac tight. I breathed in his scent and was just starting to calm down a little when an announcement rang out.

“All rise for the Honorable Judge Hawthorne, Judge Bates, and Judge Williams. The court is now back in session.”

We all rose and floated up into the air again, drifting back down to the floor only once all three judges were seated on the bench that now stood before us. *This is more like what I’d been expecting*, I thought. *More formal… even scarier, if possible. Ugh.*

Wasting no time, Judge Hawthorne trained her eyes right on me. “Marta, we would now like to hear your side of the story.”

I swallowed hard and looked around at my crew, needing every bit of reassurance that I could get.

“Don’t worry, you got this,” Vander said.

“Yeah, no sweat,” Kira added.

“All you have to do is be honest. We’re all here, and we were all there when it happened. We’ve got your back,” Big Mac said.

Mrs. Smith reached out to squeeze my hand. “You’re going to do great, honey; you’ve got the truth on your side.”

“We don’t have all day, Miss Zhao,” Judge Williams boomed. “We all have other things to attend to, so if you don’t mind, can we get a move on with this?”

I swallowed thickly and stepped forward, reluctantly letting go of Lilac’s hand. As I approached the bench, I floated up off the floor again and drifted through the air it until I was hovering right before the three stern-faced judges.

The bailiff—a short man in long velvet robes and a hood—approached with a toadstool and held it out in front of me, directing me to place my hand on top of it.

“Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, my eyes on Lilac. I floated over to the witness stand and sat down. I was shaking like a leaf, and I only hoped that the judges wouldn’t notice, since they’d probably take it as proof of my guilt.

“So, Marta, why don’t you start from the top?” Hawthorne said, settling into her seat and crossing her arms.

“Well, that’s just it, Your Honor. I’m not entirely sure *where* to start. I’ve always been able to see ghosts, and I was trapped for a long time in a house with a poltergeist—”

“No, please skip ahead to the event in question. What events led up to you resurrecting Lilac Blackburn?” Judge Bates cut in.

I blinked, a little stunned by the terse interruption. “Well, like Big Mac said, we were battling this warlock named Letifer. He’d resurrected an army of the dead.”

The judges just stared at me with blank looks on their faces.

“Wait, have none of you heard of Letifer? How is it possible that you’re so focused on my little magic use when Letifer raised droves of revenants from the dead? And let me tell you, that was way worse than anything I did. Why weren’t you all paying any attention to *that*?”

Williams slammed her gavel down. “Irrelevant. Must I remind you that you are not here to interrogate us? We are asking *you* to recount the events that led up to you practicing unsanctioned necromancy.” She cast a smug look at her fellow judges, and they all nodded and trained their razor-sharp gazes right on me, as if attempting to pin me to the spot.

I wanted to roll my eyes, but I knew that probably wasn’t the best idea under the circumstances.

“It was in the midst of the battle,” I continued, trying to keep the agitation out of my voice. “I was opening up the pathway between the living and the dead so that we could try to send Letifer back to the spirit realm. Lilac got sucked back in, somehow—I remember the feeling of seeing him there, and it felt so wrong that I had to do something. I just wanted to be able to help him—”

Williams interrupted again. “So you wanted to help him? And then what?”

I looked at her, confused. “I don’t know. I just… grabbed Lilac’s hand and pulled him through.” The judges plied me with those blank looks again, and my face went hot. “Am I saying something wrong? I’m being honest. I saw him there in the spirit realm, and I couldn’t help myself. I grabbed his hand and—”

“We understand,” Hawthorne interrupted.

“So, it was a love connection,” Bates added. “Interesting. Love tends to make magic act most erratically. It’s possible that you didn’t realize what you were doing.”

Hawthorne rolled her eyes. “How could she not have known that she was going to bring a spirit back by reaching through a portal and grabbing his hand? There’s clear intent there.” She shook her head in exasperation, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

*All right, now they’re really ticking me off!* “But I didn’t! How the heck was I supposed to know that I was going to bring him back to life? I just thought that I was going to help him out of the spirit realm!”

*Granted, if I’d known that I could bring him back just by grabbing his hand and tugging him out of the spirit world, I would’ve done it way sooner.*

“Ah HA!” Hawthorne yelled. “So you admit that you knew what you were doing?”

“Uh, no—that’s not what I meant! I knew that I—Well, I thought that… No, I didn’t know that was going to happen! I just knew that I didn’t want Lilac to be on the other side of things. I wanted his ghost to be with me, like it had been before. I didn’t know that it meant he’d become real again. *Alive* again.”

I shot a quick glance at Lilac, who gave me a supportive nod.

Williams shuffled through a few papers. “But then it appears that you wasted no time entering into a physical relationship with him.” She arched an eyebrow at me, as if she’d backed me into a corner.

*Now that takes the cake! And what the hell are those papers she just looked through? An official report of when Lilac and I decided to go steady?*

“How is that even relevant?” I countered.

“Yes, how is that relevant at all?” Big Mac added.

Hawthorne shrugged. “It’s clear that Miss Zhao meant to bring him back in order to engage with him, but that doesn’t negate the truth that the necromancy performed was unsanctioned and unapproved. It’s a silly love fantasy.”

That irked me more than everything else they’d said, and I could feel the anger ballooning inside me.

*This is such bullshit! They keep talking over me, telling me what I meant to do when they weren’t even there—they don’t even know the first thing about me! What’s the point in me testifying if they’re not even going to listen to me?*

I looked right at the judges. “I’m not going to apologize for what I did. You three might not be on trial, but maybe you should be. I think you need to answer a question now, for everyone to hear.” I took a deep breath, building up every ounce of bravery I possessed so that my voice wouldn’t waver even a little. “Tell us—where were the three of you when Letifer was attacking, and why didn’t you help?”

**Episode 2179**

I could see the frustration written all over Xavier’s face, and I knew all too well how he was feeling.

“I know better than most how hard this whole thing with Ava must be for you—because of the *due destini* curse, and the way it’s pulled me between you and Greyson. Maybe you don’t want to hear it, but this is something we have to face. Together.”

Xavier gave me a wan smile. “I appreciate that, Cali, but I’m pretty sure that I can deal with Ava on my own. I don’t want you to worry about it.” He sighed. “I don’t know… Maybe I’ll just banish her.”

“Trust me, I like the sound of that, but didn’t you try that before? She always comes back.”

Over and over and over again. No matter what we did, she was always there.I didn’t even quite understand how she’d latched back onto us after the Vanguard party, but she’d managed to insinuate herself back into the Redwood pack house nonetheless. She was an expert at popping up where she wasn’t wanted, that was for sure.

“I know—she’s such a pest. That’s what makes it all so frustrating,” Xavier grumbled.

I paused, thinking it over. “Maybe the mate bond is the only reason Ava keeps coming back. It doesn’t matter how far apart you are from your mate, the pull is still there. I hate to admit it, but it gives Ava some kind of excuse. It’s the reality of being a mate, right? Nothing can stop the connection and the need to be with your mate.”

The mate bond was strong, and since Xavier was the only one fighting it, of course it was growing stronger day by day. Especially since Ava was all too happy to fan the flames.

“True. It’s just like how nothing can stop me from being with you.” Xavier gazed right into my eyes, and my heartbeat quickened.

“You know I love hearing that, but it worries me. Is that how Ava thinks of you? That nothing will stop her from getting you back? I wish that the unmating spell had worked.”

It was painful thinking about even the possibility of Xavier rekindling things with Ava. I knew that he had every intention of resisting, but what if it got too hard for him to fight their bond? What if he had no choice in the end?

Xavier sighed again and swiped a strand of hair behind my ear, letting his hand linger on my face. “Don’t worry, I’ll figure something out. Regardless of anything that might try to come between us, you and I are mates. That will never change. I love you, and I always will.”

He leaned in and kissed me, and I kissed him back, just happy to be close to him. Despite everything, it felt good to know that he was going to fight for us, no matter what. Xavier slid his arms around my waist and pulled me close, gently running his hands through my hair as his tongue pressed into my mouth, causing a burst of heat to ricochet through my body.

The moment broke when I heard a commotion rising up from the hallway—someone yelling about a pledge of loyalty. I felt Xavier’s body tense, and we broke apart.

“What’s that all about?” I asked.

“I assume the pack is going to formalize Greyson becoming Alpha. It’s a ceremonial gesture, but it still pisses me off. It’s like the pack has turned its back on me—even after everything I’ve done to keep them united and safe.”

“I know how hard you tried to be the best leader that you could for the pack, and I know I encouraged you two to co-Alpha, but that was because I wanted you two to get along and stop attacking each other every chance you got. I do think it’s best for the pack’s health that there’s only one Alpha, but please do not put me between you and Greyson on this. *Please*.”

I was starting to think that things for us would never be simple.

“I’m not asking you to take sides, though of course I wouldn’t object to you choosing me.” Xavier arched an eyebrow and smirked. “Besides, you’ll choose me, eventually.”

“Xavier, you can’t say that. I can’t choose—”

“Cali you have to stop worrying so much. Greyson and I have been through way worse—we’ll get through this. It’ll all work out.” Xavier was doing his best to at least *sound* levelheaded about the whole thing, and I appreciated it—even if I didn’t entirely believe him.

I forced a smile, wondering how the hell these two Alpha brothers would ever be able to just “work it out.” They’d tried to do just that numerous times, and it always ended up just like this—complete chaos. The *due destini* didn’t help anything.

I gave Xavier a peck on the lips. “I’m going to get dressed and find out what this whole pledge thing is about.”

I left Xavier’s room and went back to my own, where I changed into something comfy before heading downstairs. I couldn’t stop thinking about Xavier. I knew that he was feeling a lot more troubled than he was letting on, but at least he’d talked to me about it. He used to be so secretive about everything, hell-bent on hiding everything he was thinking, feeling, and doing. I wanted to help him, and show him that talking about his feelings was a good thing.

I found Greyson in the living room. He didn’t notice me at first, clearly lost in some troubling thought.

“Hey,” I said. “You thinking about Xavier?”

Greyson snapped out of whatever he was lost in and smiled. “No, I was thinking about you, love.”

I took a deep breath. Hearing him call me “love,” even when I was angry, still got to me like nothing else could. *Get back on track, Cali. Don’t let him throw you off.*

“Well, you should be thinking less about me and more about what you’re doing.”

“What? Is this about me taking my *rightful* place as Alpha?”

I snorted. “You think?”

Greyson stood up, looking cool and collected. “I know you’re upset—”

“It’s not just me,” I interjected. “Xavier’s not happy about this. I know that you both want to be Alpha, and I get it. The veins are gone—great—and you’re feeling better than ever. I totally understand that, and I’m happy that the stress of that is gone and all. But…”

“But what? Are you trying to tell me that you don’t want me to be Alpha?”

“No—no, that’s not it at all! It’s only, I don’t really like how you went about it—announcing it in front of everybody like that. Don’t you think Xavier deserved to be told beforehand? You just sprang it on him, Greyson. Not cool.”

I knew that Greyson was going to think I was sticking up for Xavier—and I was—but it didn’t mean that I didn’t support him. There was a world of difference between a lack of support and wishing for a little more tact in how it was handled.

“So what, you want us to go back to being co-Alphas?”

“*No!*” I said quickly. That was the last thing I wanted. “I know now that that was a bad idea. If we go that route, the pack will turn on itself. I talked to Steinar, and he pretty much confirmed that if that situation continued, everyone would… Well, they’d eat each other, like the Eden pack. So that’s a hard pass.”

Greyson winced. “That’s all hard to believe, but no, we shouldn’t risk it. So that means that me becoming sole Alpha again—because if you remember, I only stepped down temporarily during the battle with Letifer—is better than sharing, right?”

“Yes, but still… I just feel like it could’ve been handled better.”

I thought back to how Xavier and Greyson had seemed to be getting along—kind of—and how refreshing it had been to see them communicate without being at each other’s throats. Now, with this newest issue, I didn’t think I’d see them on the same page again for a long time—if ever.

“Listen, I know that Xavier’s upset, but that’s to be expected. I’m sure you realize that even if I’d pulled him aside before making the announcement, he still would’ve been pissed—not to mention that he would’ve done everything in his power to stop me. You know that, and I know that. He’s already made it clear that he’s willing to challenge me to a Lupo Finale to settle our differences.”

*A Lupo Finale? Double no!*

“What do you mean? Did he say that?” I hadn’t heard Xavier say anything about that. Although, I guess I wasn’t surprised. There was no way Xavier was going to lie down and take this sudden turn of events lightly. “If… If Xavier does push the Lupo Finale, will you fight him?”

**Episode 2180**

XAVIER

The pack house was abuzz with activity as everyone set about prepping for the pledge of loyalty. I stood by watching it all come together, feeling isolated and separate from the pack that I’d done so much to preserve and protect. It was like they’d turned their backs on me. Didn’t they remember how I’d come through for them during the battle with Letifer, when Greyson hadn’t been able to? Greyson had been weak, and in no position to lead them to victory, and I’d done it. Didn’t that count for anything?

Apparently not.

I’d told Cali not to worry—that it would all work out—but what I hadn’t told her was that I was going to challenge Greyson and show the pack who the true Alpha was, once and for all. Once I defeated Greyson in the Lupo Finale, there would be no questions, no uncertainty about who the real Redwood Alpha was. I knew that Cali would be distraught over my decision to fight Greyson for my rightful position, but he’d left me no choice in the matter. It had to be done.

“Hey man, how’s it going?” Jay said as he came over to join me.

“It’s going,” I replied.

We watched in silence as Torin asked Rishika a million questions about the pledge of loyalty. They were acting like this was some joyous, exciting event, and I couldn’t help but be annoyed by how lightly they were taking it. Someone like Torin—even though I appreciated and respected him—didn’t understand how important the mantle of Alpha was. And he clearly didn’t understand that I was the better man for the job.

“I can, uh, imagine that you’re not too happy about all of this,” Jay said.

“No, I’m not. But a ceremony won’t change the outcome—this is my pack, always has been.” And once Greyson was lying bloody at my feet, they’d all realize it, too.

“I hope you’re not planning on doing something rash, man.”

“Jay, I know you’re in a tough spot. You’ve always put the pack first, but you’ve also been a real friend to me—and I appreciate it. You might think it’s rash, but I’m going to challenge Greyson. I have to.”

Jay sighed and nodded. “I can’t say I’m surprised. I wish it didn’t have to come to that, but it’s the way things are always settled.”

“Exactly. And I know that even the Greyson supporters like Rishika will respect the winner of a Lupo Finale.” I slapped Jay on the shoulder. “I told Cali not to worry, and I don’t want you to worry, either. In the meantime, we should do all we can to support our rising Alpha.”

Over the next few hours, I did my best to join the preparations, but to say it was a listless attempt was the understatement of the century. Not surprisingly, my heart just wasn’t in it. I could feel everyone looking at me, clearly wondering how I was taking this new turn of events. Conversations hushed to silence when I entered a room. People made small talk with me, doing their best to avoid talking about the elephant in the room. I knew why. They either felt sorry for me—which pissed me off more than anything—or they were happy that I’d been unseated as Alpha.

Either way, I hated the attention. I needed to get the hell out of there. Even Cali was acting a little strangely around me, like she was worried I might snap and lose it at any second—and I was starting to feel like I would do just that if I hung around much longer.

I went outside, deciding to busy myself watching for the rogue hunters. At least that was something useful. It wasn’t like they really needed—or wanted—my help in preparing for the pledge ceremony, anyway. I figured that this newest threat from the hunters would be a big test for Greyson—a way for him to cement his fitness for Alpha if he handled it right. If it wouldn’t put Cali and the pack in danger, I would wish for Greyson to fail—and fail horribly. I was damn angry, but I wasn’t stupid or reckless. Cali and the pack always came first, even at a time like this.

I walked around the perimeter of the property, keeping an eye out for any signs of hunters, when a memory of Ava flooded my brain. It was of a trip we’d taken to watch the lunar eclipse, back when we were mates. It seemed like a lifetime ago, now. As the moon had started to fade and her face had disappeared into the shadows, I’d kissed her. I remembered how sweet her lips had tasted, and how good it had felt to be near her.

*Why the fuck am I thinking about that right now?*

“Xavier?” Ava’s voice came from behind me, startling me back to the present.

“What do you want now?” I snapped. The memory still lingered, and I shook my head, trying to dash it away as I took in the sight of Ava standing before me, her eyes searching mine like they always did these days. I knew she was looking for a shred of what had once existed between us, and I was doing my best to make sure she didn’t find anything in my eyes that would give her even the smallest hint of hope.

“I don’t want anything. I just came out because I couldn’t bring myself to help with planning for Greyson’s pledge of loyalty tonight.” She rolled her eyes and looked out into the distance.

I chuckled bitterly. *At least I have one fan.* *Though I still wish she’d go fall of a cliff.*

Ava fell into step beside me.

“I guess I could use a fan right about now,” I admitted.

Ava placed a hand on my shoulder, and every muscle in my body tensed up. “I know what it’s like to feel shut out, Xavier.”

I was about to shove her hand away and tell her to get lost when I was hit by a sudden wave of desire for her. I shook my head, trying to clear the surge of heat from my body as I stepped away to put more space between us.

“I hope you aren’t afraid of me,” Ava said.

*No, quite the opposite. If anything, I want to kiss you. That’s what I’m afraid of.* It was as if instead of weakening, the mate bond was gathering momentum and building in intensity as each moment passed, pulling me toward her.

“Why do you keep trying to unmate from me, Xavier? Why do you keep fighting what’s natural and real between us?”

“Ava. Do I have to keep listing the reasons for you over and over again? At the very top of that list is the fact that you murdered my mother—or did you forget that? Because I didn’t. I think about it every single time I look at you. Add in a dose of ‘I just don’t fucking want to be near you,’ and you get the picture.”

I scowled and looked away, wishing like hell that those reasons were enough for me to lose every ounce of longing that I felt for her, but it was becoming clear that they weren’t.

“Xavier, don’t you get it? The war made me kill your mother! I would never have done that of my own accord. How many times do I have to explain that to you?”

“But you did kill her,” I spat.

Ava stopped walking, and I kept going. I just needed to put some distance between us. Every single reason that we could never be together was rolling around inside me, yet something else was there too, countering all of that and eating away at my resolve.

*Xavier, I’m the only one who knows*, Ava mind linked.

I whirled around to face her, wishing that she would stay out of my fucking head once and for all.

“What is it that you *know*, Ava?” Was this just another one of her mind games? A cheap attempt to keep me at her side? Another ploy to keep me talking to her?

*I know that you are the best Alpha for the Redwood pack*, Ava replied.

She walked over to join me, and suddenly I was hit by the memory of the kiss we’d shared at the Vanguard palace. I shook it off as Ava pointed at the pack house.

“They don’t know, and frankly, they don’t seem to care. But I do. And there’s another pack that does, too.”

“What? What are you getting at?” I stared at her, curious, my interest piqued despite my desire to get away from her as fast as I could before I lost all control and something happened between us that I would regret for the rest of my life.

“The Samara pack needs a strong, determined Alpha,” Ava continued. “Why can’t it be you?”

**Episode 2181**

GREYSON

I hesitated as I tried to choose my words carefully. I knew that Cali wasn’t going to like my answer, but I couldn’t lie to her, not about something like this.

“Xavier’s ego is bruised, and all too often, he gets totally consumed by impulsive rage.”

Cali put her hand up to stop me. “Answer the question, Greyson. If Xavier challenges you to a Lupo Finale, will you fight him?”

“I will.” As much as I wanted to avoid going that route, if Xavier challenged me, I wouldn’t even give it a second thought.

A look of pure anguish passed across Cali’s face. “I can’t believe you, Greyson! Why would you do that? After everything we’ve been through!”

I could see the plea in her eyes, a reminder of how torn she was between the both of us.

I pulled her into my arms and stroked her hair, hating how much the rift between Xavier and me continued to affect her. It was sobering to realize that lifting the curse had done nothing to improve our situation. In fact, things were as complicated as ever.

“Cali, I have no choice,” I said. “If Xavier formally challenges me to a Lupo Finale, I have to accept.”

“But do you *want* to?”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t want to. But when you’re an Alpha, what you want to do and what you have to do are often at odds.”

I knew that I was the right Alpha to lead the Redwood pack, but a part of me would give it up if I knew that it would stop the pain that Cali was dealing with. Unfortunately, that part of me was overshadowed by my need to do the right thing for the pack.

Cali pulled away and cradled her face in her hands. “I don’t want my mates trying to kill each other, regardless of duty or tradition. None of that matters.”

“Cali, it does matter. We’re werewolves, and whether you like it or not, whether *I* like it or not, there are rules that we have to follow—customs and traditions that make us who we are.” I pulled Cali close again and lifted her chin so that I could look her in the eye. “I love you, Cali, and I would never do anything to hurt you. But this is what Xavier needs.”

Cali pulled away, incredulous. “I can’t believe that.”

“Cali, listen to me, please. At the last Lupo Finale, Xavier never fully accepted his defeat because Ryker injured him and put him at a disadvantage. But this time? There’d be no excuses, no loose ends, no questions. Xavier may be a hothead who always wants things his way, but even he knows that the results of a Lupo Finale are binding. If that’s what it takes to make him respect my claim to be Redwood Alpha, it’ll be worth it to go through with the fight. And when I defeat him fair and square, it will settle things between us for good.”

Cali’s eyes went wide.

“For *good*?” she repeated, her voice shaking. “Are you planning to *kill* Xavier? Is that what you mean by defeating him?”

She turned away from me just before I saw a tear spill from her eye.

I laid a hand on her shoulder to comfort her as I flashed back to the three witches’ spell—to that strange alternate universe where I’d decided to throw myself in front of the crazed Rogue’s bullet to save Xavier’s life. That decision had broken the *due destini* curse, and when I really thought about it, there was no other way things could have gone. I’d always tried to save my brother’s life. No matter how much we fought, he was still my brother.

“Cali, look at me.” She turned around slowly to face me, struggling to hold back her tears. “You have to believe me when I tell you that I have no intention of killing Xavier. That’s literally the last thing I want. But if—*when*—it comes down to it, I will beat Xavier in the Lupo Finale again. It will help him, to have the decision made in such a final, official way. You have to trust me on that.” Cali nodded, but she didn’t look any less anguished. “Honestly, you might be getting all bent out of shape over nothing. It’s still possible that Xavier will decide not to challenge me after all and accept me as Alpha.”

I only hoped that I sounded more convinced than I felt. I knew my brother well, and there was only a slim chance that Xavier was going to take this lying down. Honestly, I probably would have felt the same way in his position.

I got up and kissed Cali on the forehead. “I need to go check in with Rishika. I’ll come find you later.”

I headed off, knowing that I should’ve stayed with her a few minutes more to make sure she was feeling better about everything. I only hoped that she believed me when I told her that I didn’t want to hurt Xavier.

*But how? How am I going to defuse this without either of us getting hurt? The Lupo Finale is unpredictable, so can I really promise Cali that we’ll both come out of it alive?*

One thing was for certain—I had to focus on the pack first, no matter what Xavier did or didn’t do. I was Alpha of the Redwood pack now, the one and only Alpha, and I had to act like it.

I thought back to when Lucian said that the Redwood pack would be seen as weak for having two Alphas. Now, that was no longer a problem. But would we be seen as weak for not having a Luna? Cali was the obvious choice, but there were so many risks to consider. Not only could the ceremony be dangerous—fatal, even—for Cali, but she was in love with the man who wanted to take my place.

*How can I have a Luna whose loyalties are torn between two mates? What would that do to the pack?*

Even if Xavier did end up accepting a secondary position in the pack, he would still remain a primary part of Cali’s life. That wouldn’t be good for the pack. It was one of the reasons why I’d picked Joss before. She was arguably a better Luna, but more than that, she hadn’t been compromised by an allegiance to two mates.

I couldn’t—*wouldn’t*—put Cali in that position. It wouldn’t be fair to her, or the pack.

I reached the kitchen just as Rishika was coming in through the back door.

“I just spoke to Xavier,” she said. “He did a search around the perimeter, and he says that everything’s secure.”

“Thanks for letting me know.”

It wasn’t at all surprising that Xavier had taken it upon himself to check for threats from the rebel hunters, but I couldn’t help but wonder if he’d done it to be a good pack member, or if he was just trying to assert himself by taking any opportunity to remind the pack of his unwavering devotion, even at a time like this. I wouldn’t be able to stop second-guessing Xavier’s actions until he officially accepted a secondary role—if he ever did.

“How do you feel about the whole ‘working with hunters’ thing?” Rishika asked. “I get such a cold vibe from Iris.”

“I’m not her biggest fan, but I do trust her word. It helps that her son is mates with a member of our pack. Charlie seems to think she’s above board, and so does Violet, so I’m trusting their judgment. Of course, it would be better if we didn’t have to wait for the other hunters to arrive. The sooner we go on the offensive with Shanna Paiyn and the rogue hunters, the better.”

“Agreed.”

“So, how’s the mood around the pack right now, with everything that’s going on? You know I appreciate your support, Rishika; it means a lot. But as you know, I need to have the entire pack on my side if things are going to run smoothly from here.”

None of this was easy for anyone, and I only hoped that it wasn’t weakening our bond—especially when we needed to present a strong front to face the new threats coming our way. There wasn’t time for uncertainty, or for any splinters to grow within the group.

Rishika shrugged. “There have been some rumblings, not gonna lie, but there’s also been a collective sigh of relief. The pack just wants an Alpha, one person to look to for guidance without worrying that we’re stepping on the other Alpha’s toes when we do so.”

“I get that, Rishika. Thanks.”

We both turned at the sound of footsteps running toward us. It was Sage. Shit, this couldn’t be anything good.

“I’m so glad I found you two,” she said, breathing hard. “There’s been a breach!”

**Episode 2182**

VIOLET

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t stop looking at my phone. I kept picking it up every few minutes, hoping that I’d just missed a notification that Lilac had called or texted—but there was nothing. I was just so worried about him and Marta, and since I hadn’t received any updates from them for a while, my imagination was running wild.

“I just wish Lilac would call and let me know that everything’s okay!” I burst out. “I mean, what’s going to happen if they find Marta guilty?”

I didn’t even want to give voice to the possibility that they would banish Lilac back to the spirit world, or worse. I’d only just gotten him back, and I couldn’t imagine losing him again. It would be too painful to handle.

“Take a deep breath, Violet.” Charlie took my hand. “There’s nothing we can do right now but wait.” He gave me a quick hug and wrapped his arm around my waist.

Being so close to him definitely calmed my nerves a bit, but my mind was still racing. “I know, but I just can’t help worrying.”

“Even if they do find Marta guilty, there has to be a way to appeal the verdict—maybe there’s some sort of Supreme Court of witches?” Charlie said.

“Oh, I wonder! I hadn’t really thought about that.”

Witches were mysterious and could be unforgiving, but I wondered if they would give Marta a chance to redeem herself if they found her guilty. At the very least, I hoped that if things did go that way, her sentence wouldn’t be that harsh. I’d never even heard of a witch council before, so there was no way for me to even imagine how things might turn out if Marta was convicted.

There was a commotion outside, and Charlie and I rushed to the window and peered out into the yard. I could see pack members gathering out on the lawn, and it was clear that something was going down. “What’s going on now?”

Charlie shrugged. “Beats me. We should go find out.”

We ran downstairs and joined everyone outside. Almost the whole pack was here, but I didn’t see Iris. I was starting to wonder where she was when I spotted Greyson and Rishika staring out toward the southern end of the property.

“Someone breached the perimeter,” Sage was telling Zainab.

“Do you think we’re under attack?” Charlie asked.

“Hell if I know, but I wouldn’t be surprised if we were,” I replied.

“Everyone stay calm!” Greyson called out. “But be on high alert!”

Charlie took my hand and pulled me behind him, as if to protect me. I was perfectly capable of protecting myself, but the gesture warmed my heart. I trusted Charlie and knew that he would have my back through whatever might come our way, and I would do the same for him. I only hoped that we wouldn’t have to watch each other’s backs tonight.

*Maybe it’s a false alarm.*

No such luck. We all watched as a small group emerged from the forest. Hunters.They were heading straight for us, led by none other than Shanna Paiyn.

“What’s she doing here?” I whispered to Charlie. “Are they here for me?”

A chill raced down my spine at the thought. I was still so shaken up by the attempts that had been made on my life over the last few days, and I only hoped that another attempt wasn’t forthcoming.

“I don’t know what her little squad wants, but I doubt that they’re here to fight. There are too many werewolves; we outnumber them easily,” Charlie said.

Zachery stepped out from behind Shanna as they all came to a stop a few feet away. The hunters spread out into a straight line behind him, as if getting into formation. They definitely looked ready to fight, even though I didn’t think that was why they were here.

“Hello, Charlie,” Zachery said through clenched teeth. “Hello, Violet.”

I felt Charlie’s grip on my hand tighten—which was good, because I was doing my best to resist shifting and ripping Zachery to a million pieces and scattering them to the wind. I gritted my teeth, knowing that if it came to that, I would be happy to make Zachery pay for everything he’d done.

“That’s her,” Zachery said to Shanna as he thrust a finger at me. “That’s Violet, the one we came for.”

*So, they* are *here for me.* I clenched my fists and took a deep breath, bracing myself.

“I’ve got you, don’t worry, Violet,” Charlie said as he attempted to push me further behind him.

I pushed him aside and stepped forward. There was no way I was going to show any fear to Zachery of all people. If he wanted to go toe to toe, I’d make sure to show him that he was no match for me.

It was still strange that it had come to this. Not long ago, we’d been bowling and having fun. Sure, it had been a little awkward and things hadn’t exactly gone smoothly, but I never would have thought we’d end up here, facing off, threatening each other. What had happened to Zachery, anyway? He’d been so cheerful and harmless when we’d first met—at least I’d thought so. It was like he’d turned into a monster.

*We all used to be friends.*

Greyson stepped forward. “What is this all about? Why are you here? You’re trespassing on Redwood territory.”

“We know that,” Shanna said with a smirk. “It’s a risk we’re more than willing to take in order to collect what we’re owed—to balance the sheet. We want the girl.”

She turned her gaze on me, and I shuddered. There was something menacing and chilling about Shanna. She was confident and completely fearless—even in the face of the pack. It was strange to see a human so unshaken by our presence, as if she didn’t care that we could shift at any moment and tear her apart. I supposed that she was confident that she could take us on, no matter what.

Shanna dragged her gaze away from me, and her eyes combed through the pack. Her voice was loud and when she spoke. “You killed one of ours, and we demand that you hand over the girl. It’s only right.”

Xavier pressed to the front of the pack and angled himself in front of me. “Fuck no.”

“Think. Hand her over, and we’ll have no more scores to settle. This is your last chance to right your wrong. I won’t give you another.”

I couldn’t stop myself. I stepped around Xavier and trained my attention on Zachery. “Zachery, I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings, but are you really doing all of this because I didn’t want to *date* you?”

I thought back to when he’d grabbed me in the tunnel, back at the hunter camp. I’d known then that he was capable of doing some crazy things, but it was still strange that his little unrequited crush had brought us to such a tense moment.

“No, it’s because you’re a werewolf! You lied to all of us and pretended to be a hunter!” Zachery snapped.

“You’re lying!” Charlie shouted. “You turned on her because she rejected you—you found out I was a wolf too and didn’t react the same way.” Charlie stepped forward to stand beside me.

Xavier laughed. “So you mean to tell me that all this is happening because Violet turned you down? Are you fucking serious? Did it ever occur to you that the reason she turned you down is because you’re a piece of shit?” He drove the point home with a smug laugh.

Zachery’s eyes flashed, and he looked at Xavier with pure hatred in his eyes. “That’s not true!” He turned to Shanna. “I promise you, Shanna, that’s not true!” he whined.

Shanna held up a hand in Zachery’s face, silencing him. “None of that matters. One of you killed Isabella, and we’ve come to collect. Hand Violet over.”

“No, that’s not an option. Look, I’m sorry that I had to kill your friend. I know better than anyone how painful it is to lose one of your own,” Greyson said.

“Oh? I didn’t think werewolves were so sentimental.” Shanna snorted. “Isabella was nothing more than a hunter to me. Hunters risk death every single day. It’s the life we choose, and so we’re prepared to face it. To me, it doesn’t matter who you kill—the debt is always the same.”

I couldn’t help but wonder if this was all my fault. Had I brought all of this on us because I was trying to protect my mate?

*But what if it isn’t just me? What if there are others like me? What if Zachery turns into a murderous asshole every time someone rejects him?*

There was no way I was going to let Zachery do this to anyone else. He had to be stopped.

Greyson shook his head slowly at Shanna.

“You have two options. Turn around and get the hell out of here”—Greyson shifted partially and bared his claws—“or die trying.”

**Episode 2183**

My entire body tensed as I watched Xavier and Greyson stare down Shanna and her group of hunters. This face-off wasn’t going well (face-offs rarely did), but I was glad to see Xavier putting aside how he was feeling, for Violet’s sake. He was being the bigger person, defending the pack even though I knew that he wasn’t feeling particularly supported by them right now.

I was still nervous, though. We’d come to blows with Letifer not that long ago, and Lucian’s less than friendly appearance had already set the entire pack on edge. We’d been gearing up to defend ourselves against the Vanguard pack, and now we had to pivot and direct our attention to the most immediate threat. The hunters. Fighting with them now felt like we were dodging yet another grenade in a constant flow of exhausting conflict that the pack just couldn’t get rid of. It was one thing after the other, and this latest problem was no one’s fault—especially not Violet’s. It was just getting to be so damn tiring.

Shanna and Greyson were staring daggers at each other, and I flexed my hands, shaking off my nerves and readying myself. I kept my eyes on Zachery. I was mad on Violet’s behalf. What kind of creep came after a girl and brought all his violent friends along just because he got turned down? He seemed like a grade A asshole. If he even tried to make a move, I was going to blast him so far with my magic that he wouldn’t know what hit him.

Shanna put a hand up, signaling to the group behind her. “Hunters, fall back.” She flicked her gaze across the pack. “For now.”

Greyson and Xavier both stepped forward at the same time, a united, intimidating force calling Shanna’s bluff. If I were the hunters, I’d think twice about going up against either wolf—now, or ever. Even though Shanna was making it clear that they would be back and that they had no plans to back down, I was hoping that we’d be able to resolve this without bloodshed. And for tonight, at least, it seemed that would be the case.

The hunters threw menacing glances our way as they turned and headed back the way they’d come. Only Zachery lingered, his eyes riveted to Violet, before he finally followed the others as they slipped back into the trees.

The moment they were out of sight, I went over to Violet. “Are you okay?”

Violet looked shaken, but she was holding her head up high. “I’m fine. I just can’t wait to be done with all this.”

“I know, they completely suck, right?” I said.

Violet chuckled a bit, and I pulled her into a tight hug. After a moment of hesitation, she hugged back. She was tense, and I felt bad that she was having to deal with this. She’d had a rough couple of days, and I had a sinking feeling that things might get worse before they got better.

“Violet,” I said, “I hope you know that Greyson and Xavier won’t let anything happen to you, and I won’t either.”

“Me either,” Charlie added. “Zachery’s going to have to answer to me for all of this.” Charlie clenched his jaw and stared off into the distance, in the direction that the hunters had gone. “I can’t believe he ended up being such a tool. I considered that guy a friend. But not anymore. He’s going to pay for this.”

Violet pulled away. “Thanks, everyone. I’m going to head inside and get some water. Staring at that bunch of hunter assholes made me thirsty.”

I watched her go, Charlie right beside her, and then I turned to my mates, who were still standing right where they’d been before, their eyes on the trees.

“Rishika, could you take some others out on patrol?” Greyson said. “We need to make sure that they actually left. You and the others should set up stations at all the tunnel entrances, make sure that we know their every move. One thing we can’t let them do is get the jump on us.” He turned and looked around. “Where’s Iris?”

I looked around too. I actually couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen Charlie’s mom.

Xavier snorted. “Seems like the hunter would’ve wanted to be involved in that little discussion.”

Without responding, Greyson took off, seemingly to go looking for her. I followed right behind him. “What are you going to do, Greyson? Are you going to go after them?”

“I’m not sure yet.” Greyson stopped, looking back and forth between the darkness of the woods and the safety of the pack house.

I knew that this was one of those moments when he had to tap into what the right decision would be in his role as Alpha. I didn’t envy him in the least.

“Why wouldn’t we go after them?” Xavier pressed. “They threatened Violet outright. They wanted to take her and kill her. We know they had photos of the pack, of Cali. There’s no reason to think that they’ll stop at Violet.”

“Photos of *me*?” I was shocked. “Why? Doing what?”

I shivered, imagining them lurking in the trees outside the pack house, watching us, snapping pictures while we were vulnerable. If they’d been able to take pictures of us without us catching them, what else were they capable of?

We all went inside to find Iris standing in the living room like she was waiting for Xavier and Greyson. Greyson looked her right in the eye.

“Great question, Cali,” he said. “Why would hunters—who claim that they only want one of our wolves to even the score and then they’ll be done—go to the trouble of taking surveillance photos of the entire pack? Of my mate?”

“They had them of her before we killed one of their own,” Xavier said. “They’re clearly lying.”

My cheeks warmed as Iris’s attention snapped right to me. I was scared. I felt more violated and exposed with every passing second. We’d been so vigilant, and they’d still managed to surveil us without our knowledge. Greyson and Xavier were definitely capable of protecting the pack, but Shanna didn’t seem like she scared easily, and I wondered what her real intentions were for us.

“How would she know?” Xavier said, casting a pointed look at Iris. “She wasn’t even out there to make herself known.”

“I did that on purpose,” Iris countered. “If Zachery had seen me, we would have had an even bigger issue on our hands. I didn’t want to give away our alliance, not yet. We have more hunters coming. We don’t want to reveal anything that would make us lose our edge.”

“So,” Greyson began. “What do you think their next move will be? They’re obviously upset about this Isabella person.”

Greyson pinched the bridge of his nose, looking wary. I felt for him. I’d hoped that we’d have more time to be calm and relax, especially now that we didn’t have the curse to worry about, but clearly that wasn’t going to happen.

Iris paused, thinking.

“Shanna doesn’t mind bloodshed. She’ll only use Isabella’s death as a reason to come after you, but the manner in which she chooses to do that could be unpredictable. They might want to hit you where it hurts, draw things out,” Iris said, gesturing at me.

“UGH! Why am I always the target?”It was frustrating. There was a pack house full of people here, and no matter what, the threat was always zeroed in right on me. It wasn’t that I wanted the hunters to have their crosshairs on anyone else—it was just tiring to always have to be on high alert.

Rishika came in and looked between Xavier and Greyson, something on the tip of her tongue. “Sorry to interrupt, but I was just about to leave and heard everything. I was thinking… We’re facing another potential confrontation with the hunters. They left, but we all saw that this Shanna person means business. Do you think that means that we should unite everyone one step further? Get the entire pack on the same page before we have to face them?” She looked at Greyson. “The pledge of loyalty. Don’t you think we should just do it right now? Get it out of the way so that we can focus on strategy?”

I looked at Xavier, my heart racing. He was going to go ballistic, I could feel it. He’d been putting on a brave face and hadn’t really rocked the boat since Greyson had announced that he was taking over as Alpha, but I knew that wasn’t permanent. There was no way Xavier was going to give up leading the pack without a fight. The timing of all this was just horrible.

I braced myself as I waited for Xavier to challenge Greyson to a Lupo Finale. I was crafting the perfect protest in my mind. I just had to find a way to make my mates to understand that a Lupo Finale wasn’t necessary, that they could find another way to govern the pack without going for each other’s throats.

But before Greyson could even answer, Xavier said, “I think that’s a great idea. Let’s do it.”

**Episode 2184**

GREYSON

“I’m sorry, did I hear you correctly?” I asked, stunned. “You, Xavier Evers, think it’s a great idea for me to be recognized as Alpha?”

I stared directly into Xavier’s eyes, trying to pick up on anything there that didn’t match his sudden turn toward being easygoing about one of the strongest points of contention between us. He wasn’t acting like himself; there had to be some sort of ulterior motive, something that could give me a clue to what he was really up to. But I saw nothing but resigned sincerity in his eyes.

Xavier shrugged. “Yeah. I mean, it’s going to happen sooner or later, right? And Rishika’s right—it makes sense to do it sooner.”

He flashed a half-smile that looked at least partially genuine, but I couldn’t be sure. Xavier was good at hiding his true feelings. All the Evers boys were, to an extent.

I was beyond surprised—and a tad suspicious, if I was being honest with myself. I never would’ve predicted things going this way in a million years, and I was a little thrown off.

“It does make sense, Xavier,” I said. “I just find it hard to believe that you’re on board with it. Before now, you made it abundantly clear that you want to be Alpha.”

Xavier shrugged again, cool as a cucumber. “It’s all about what’s best for the pack, right?” He gave Rishika a pointed look before he turned his attention back to me.

Rishika shot an awkward glance between Xavier and me before clapping her hands. “All right, it’s settled. I’ll go assemble everyone outside.”

She rushed through the screen door, and a moment of silence passed between the three of us as we watched her rejoin the others. We couldn’t hear what she was saying, but I saw looks of relief on everyone’s faces.

Cali stepped up to Xavier’s side. “Are you sure about this?”

“I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t mean it,” he snapped.

Cali gave me a nervous glance. I knew she was worried about Xavier, but I couldn’t get caught up in any of that right now. If it had been the other way around, Cali would’ve been worried for me. It was just the way things were.

Cali looked between me and Xavier, and I could see that she was panicking a little. “Do you both really think this ceremony thing is really necessary? Couldn’t we wait for a few days, until—”

“Until what?” Xavier cut in. “The pack needs an Alpha. The ceremony will put one in place.”

Xavier headed out to join the others on the front lawn.

I watched him go, and then I pulled Cali aside. “I’m going to go talk to him, wait here.”

I caught up to Xavier just before he stepped off the porch.

“Hey, what about your own claim?” I demanded.

Xavier smiled. “Don’t think I’ve changed my mind about that. Our time will come. Just not right now.”

With that, he went to join the rest of the pack. They shot him nervous looks as he approached. They were still unsure of how he was taking things, and I didn’t blame them. Xavier could be unpredictable, and his light attitude about all of this had proven to be the most unpredictable thing he’d done since I’d announced that I was the Redwood Alpha.

I went back into the house, and Cali came rushing up to me.

“So, what did he say?” Her face was drawn with worry, and I knew that she felt the same way I did—like the other shoe was going to drop at any moment.

I smiled at her, trying to assuage her worries and hoping that I looked convincing enough after what Xavier had said. It hadn’t exactly been a threat, but it also hadn’t been that far off. All things considered, this was still the most favorable outcome I could’ve hoped for under the circumstances, even if Xavier’s calmness was a little strange.

“Xavier’s doing what’s best for the pack,” I told her. *But for how long?*

“That’s good,” Cali said slowly. I could tell she was mulling it over in her head, probably trying to determine if there was some hidden agenda beneath Xavier’s sudden agreeability about the ceremony. “I wonder if he’s really going to participate in the ceremony.”

She looked through the screen door at where the pack was gathered, laughing and talking while Xavier lingered on the fringe.

I shook my head. “Not sure. If he’s being sincere and wants to do what’s best for the pack, then he should be ready to put his money where his mouth it.”

Rishika came in from outside, clearly excited and eager to get things started. “Hey, everyone’s gathered in the yard, ready when you are. I’m so happy we’re doing this. I think this will be the best thing for everyone. Who’d have thought Xavier would be so supportive? It really means a lot to the pack that you have his blessing. I really think you’re the best option to lead the pack, Greyson.”

“Thanks, Rishika, I appreciate your support. But I want to make it clear to everyone that this isn’t about me—it’s about the mantle of Redwood Alpha, a role I accept with great honor and the utmost respect.”

“Exactly, which is why you’re the right man for the job,” Rishika said.

“Thanks. I’ll be out in a sec.”

Rishika nodded and dashed back outside.

I took Cali’s hand in mine. “I have a favor to ask you, Cali. Will you stand with me during the ceremony?”

Cali hesitated. “That doesn’t mean I’m your Luna or anything, right?”

I recalled my thoughts about choosing her as my Luna, but I tamped them down. “That’s a completely different ceremony—you should know that by now. I just want you by my side. It’s not an official position, but it is what mates do.”

Cali looked even more uneasy. “What about Xavier?”

“Xavier knows the tradition. He might not like it, but he can’t really object.”

“Okay. I’ll do it, but I need to tell Xavier first.”

I was a little miffed by her hesitation, but I didn’t dare show it. “Fine, but you’d better hurry. The ceremony’s going to begin soon.”

Cali hurried out to Xavier, and I stepped out onto the porch right after her. I looked out over the familiar faces, reminding myself of how much I’d come to appreciate the pack and my role within its ranks. Silas might’ve been my father, but where he’d destroyed, I had a chance to build, to repair the Evers legacy by promoting unity and growth for our pack. And it all began with the Redwoods and Cali.

As I walked down the steps into the yard, I saw Cali talking to Xavier. I wasn’t surprised by the obvious look of displeasure written across my brother’s face. Tough*.* There were a lot of things that Xavier was going to have to get used to, and seeing Cali by my side was one of them.

The pack spread out into a circle as I approached.

“You ready?” Rishika asked.

“I’m ready.” I looked over at Cali and gestured for her to join me.

She squeezed Xavier’s hand and then came to stand by my side. “Am I supposed to stand anywhere in particular?”

I pulled her close. “Just be here at my side, that’s your only obligation.”

I knew that having her standing there beside me would send a message to the pack—that she was my mate. Maybe they would wonder about the *due destini* and all that, but right now, with everyone about to kneel before me, Cali would be at my side, and that was all that mattered. My only regret—and I was surprised to feel it—was that my mother wasn’t here to witness this.

Rishika was the first to kneel down in front of me. “Greyson, I pledge my loyalty to you as Alpha of the Redwood pack.”

Then, one by one, the others followed. I was pleased when Charlie came to make his pledge. He was a great asset to the pack, and I was happy that he’d taken me up on my offer to be an official pack member.

I acknowledged each and every pack member with a nod of thanks as they came to pledge their loyalty, acutely aware of the gravity of the role I was stepping back into. Above all, it felt good to have Cali by my side at such a pivotal moment. This was how it should be. It was as if the three witches’ spell was working, and all the pieces were falling into place.

Jay was one of the last to kneel before me. “Greyson, I pledge my loyalty to you as Alpha of the Redwood pack.”

I nodded at him, happy that he was able to align himself with me despite his allegiance to Xavier. Jay got up and stepped away to join the others.

Xavier was next. He looked from me to Cali and then back again, but he wasn’t moving. The air was getting more tension-filled by the second, and I could feel the pack growing uneasy as a weighty silence drifted down over all of us. I looked at my brother, unable to read the expression on his face.

I couldn’t help but wonder, after all that we’d been through and with the entire pack’s eyes on us—*is Xavier going to kneel?*

**Episode 2185**

XAVIER

All eyes were on me, and I planned to milk this awkward moment for everything it was worth. I had to admit that I was loving it, and I wasn’t nervous in the least. Everyone was worrying for nothing, since I was going to do what they expected of me, but I wasn’t going to make it pleasant for them. I wanted to make them squirm.

I took a quick look around at the nervous expressions etched onto everyone’s faces as they stared at me, watching, waiting.

*That’s right, everyone. Will I, or won’t I, bow before your chosen Alpha? Will I cause a scene, or will I make nice?*

I was equal parts pissed off and amused. Despite all my brother’s posturing, the truth was, he *needed* me to kneel. Whether Greyson liked it or not, that gave me all the power, and it was an absolute thrill, watching my brother sweat.

I looked at Cali. She was watching me with the same unsettled look on her face as the others. I hated that Greyson was using her as a prop. When she’d asked if it would bother me if she stood at Greyson’s side for this sham of a ceremony, I’d been honest with her and told her, without mincing words, “That fucking sucks.” She was meant to be at my side, no matter what.

Still, I hadn’t wanted her to feel like any of this was her fault. I’d forced myself to tell her that despite how I felt, she should be by Greyson’s side. I would’ve expected the same if things were the other way around. As much as I hated seeing her standing there with him, it was tradition for the mate to stand by their Alpha’s side during a pledge ceremony. However, knowing that it was the right and normal thing did nothing to lessen the sting. Seeing the two of them together only infuriated me, and most definitely added salt to the wound.

It was such a hard pill to swallow. My brother was taking over *my* pack, with Cali by his side as if she were part of it. The only solace I had was in knowing that all of this was only temporary. I was going to be Alpha, and then Cali would be at *my* side while Greyson bowed at my feet. *All in due time.*

Gritting my teeth, I dropped to one knee, doing only the bare minimum.

I cleared my throat and paused for dramatic effect before I continued. “I, Xavier Evers, pledge my loyalty to my jerk of a brother.”

I couldn’t help but look up at Greyson and smirk as I finished. He stared right back at me with an expression that said exactly what he thought of my pledge. I could tell by the set of his jaw that he wanted to haul off and hit me, but I knew that he wouldn’t dare. Not in front of everyone, during a moment that was supposed to galvanize the pack.

I stood up, and it was almost as if I could hear the tension slowly seeping away like a balloon leaking air. I wondered what would have happened if I’d refused to kneel. How would things have shaken out then?

I turned away, aware that Cali was watching me, along with everyone else. If nothing else, I’d held the entire pack in my hand, if only for a brief moment. It felt good.

I was heading back to my place in the circle when I caught sight of Ava lurking in the background like a specter. She looked angry, which was an expression I was accustomed to seeing on her face. Curious to see what she was up to, I joined her.

“What, you here to watch the show from the cheap seats?” I asked.

“You’re a fool,” Ava hissed as she whirled to face me.

I arched my eyebrows, surprised. Just a short time ago, she’d been trying to convince me to run off with her and become the Samara Alpha. Now, I was a fool.

“Tell me how you really feel,” I said with a smirk.

“Why did you kneel before your brother?” Ava’s contempt was palpable, and I grew a little uncomfortable at the venom in her words. “It’s beneath an Alpha like you.” She yanked me further away from everyone else as the ceremony continued. “That should be you up there receiving the pack’s pledges of loyalty, not Greyson.”

“Hey, don’t you think I agree with you?” *That was a first.* “I have my reasons for doing what I did.”

It almost seemed as if Ava was more upset than I was, which was interesting. I had to admit that it was refreshing to have someone so vehemently on my side at a time like this. Except for Cali and Jay, no one had checked in to see how I was dealing with everything. They were all too afraid to hear what I really thought about Greyson’s fitness for the job, and I didn’t really blame them. They needed stability, and I understood that.

“Well explain it to me, then, because I don’t get it.” Ava put her hands on her hips and flipped her long hair over her shoulder, her gaze boring into mine.

I snorted. “Why bother? It doesn’t concern you.”

She shot me a bewildered look. “How do you not understand? Haven’t I made it clear that no matter how hard you try to convince me that you want nothing to do with me, I still believe in our connection, and I support you as Alpha? I always have, and I always will.”

I tried to come up with a snappy reply, but I didn’t have one ready. A quiet moment passed between us as a smattering of claps rose up from the pack as Greyson gave a little speech.

“I want you to answer one question for me, Xavier, and I want you to answer honestly. Put aside any feelings you have about me.”

“That’s a tall order, since I can’t stand you.” It was unbelievable how Ava refused to take a hint. On the one hand, it was pitiful, but on the other, I knew that it was the mate bond at work, and that she probably couldn’t help herself.

Ava’s eyes flashed, and she gave me an imploring look. I remembered seeing that expression on her face in the seconds before I’d killed her. “Are you going to answer my question, or not?”

“Fine. What’s your question, Ava?”

Ava turned and gestured at the pack. “Who amongst them has never wavered about you being Alpha? Who?” She paused, and I waited, knowing more was coming. “Not one of them. Not even your precious mate.”

“Leave Cali out of it!”

There was a lot I would take from Ava—clearly—but one thing I wouldn’t stand for was her speaking ill of Cali. Didn’t she realize by now that I didn’t even want to hear Cali’s name come out of her mouth? Especially after everything she’d done to try to tear us apart.

I turned to walk away from her, tired of this conversation and wanting a moment to myself to process everything that had happened over the last few hours.

Ava grabbed my hands, yanking me back to face her. “Don’t walk away from me, Xavier. I know you don’t want to hear it, but it’s the truth and you know it. Ever since I came back, I’m the only one who’s stood by your side through all of this. Me. No one else.” We both fell into silence, turning to look at the pack as they crowded around Greyson and Cali, whoops of relieved laughter and snatches of excited conversation reaching us where we stood, separate from the rest. “And no matter how hard you try to get rid of me, I’ll always be here for you.”

I looked down at her hands as I realized that her touch had sent a shock of heat racing through me. I felt a sudden pull between us, and as hard as I tried, I couldn’t ignore it. My wolf growled awake inside me, longing for her and prodding me to get her to stop talking.

*Kiss her. That’ll shut her up—and give us what we both want.*

I knew that I should fight back and push away my rising desire, but it was growing by the second and I wasn’t strong enough to push it down. When my wolf got like this, it was too powerful to resist.

Thoughts of the lusty haze that had overcome me at Lucian’s party returned with a vengeance, and I stepped close to her. I remembered how familiar and soft her lips had felt that night, how I’d lost myself in her scent, how right it had felt to have her close to me again.

*Damn it, Xavier. She isn’t your mate, Cali is! Resist her! You don’t love her, you love Cali!*

In my mind, I knew all of that was true, but at that moment, I wanted Ava. The pull was too strong.

I tugged Ava toward me just as Cali came walking up, looking back and forth between us. “Xavier, is everything okay here?”

**Episode 2186**

I didn’t like how close Ava was to Xavier, and I was about two seconds from ripping her a new one. I might have been mistaken, but it had almost looked like… No, it couldn’t be. Xavier would never… not so openly. I was imagining things. Letting my own paranoia get the best of me.

“Hey, Cali. It’s nothing, everything’s fine,” Xavier said as he stepped away from Ava like she’d suddenly come down with the plague. “I was just telling Ava that she’s not part of the pack, and there’s no reason for her to be here. And she should leave. Soon.”

He gave Ava a pointed look and took a few additional steps away from her.

Ava didn’t take her eyes off Xavier as she spoke. “Think about what I said.”

Then, with one of her patented hair flips, she turned and left without even looking at me.

Xavier and I both watched her go, a moment of awkwardness passing between us.

“What was that about?” I finally asked.

“You know Ava, just her typical bullshit. Nothing to worry about.” Xavier shoved his hands into his pockets and looked away.

*Is he avoiding eye contact?* I wanted to believe him, but there’d been something in the look between them—just before they’d realized I was there—that was troubling. It had almost looked like they were about to kiss or something, but that couldn’t have been what was going on. *Xavier would never do that to me… again.*

Xavier plastered on a smile that didn’t quite look genuine and put his arm around me. “How about we go join the others?”

He was trying to sound light and cheerful, but I knew that making nice with the pack who’d just pledged themselves to Greyson was the last thing he wanted to do.

“Okay—the pledges are all done, and the celebration is winding up. A few people are having some drinks.”

Everyone was relieved and happy that the ceremony had gone down without incident, though things had been a little touch and go there for a moment when Xavier had taken his sweet time making his pledge. And then the pledge he’d made hadn’t been quite… *right*, but I knew that the pack would take what they could get when it came to Xavier and Greyson calling anything resembling a truce.

“Drinks and celebration, that’s great,” Xavier said. “Now we can all bow down to our glorious leader, Lord Greyson of Redwood.” He snorted.

I stopped him. “Why are you acting so… weird?”

He shrugged and looked away. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s because my brother just took my place as Alpha.” He pulled away from me. “I’m going to get a beer. You want one?”

“You know I don’t really like beer—” I started to say, but Xavier was already heading inside. I looked after him, annoyed and more than a little put off by his strange behavior.

*What was all that about?* I knew that he was upset about Greyson being Alpha, but still. He knew how important it was to present a united front to the pack. The Redwoods deserved to have clear leadership, and while things hadn’t gone according to Xavier’s plans, he had to understand that him putting his best foot forward at a time like this was in the best interest of the pack.

Lola came walking up. “What the fuck was going on with Xavier and she who shall not be named?” Lola already had a drink in hand.

I shook my head and sighed. “I don’t know. Xavier says it was nothing.”

As much as I didn’t want to, I flashed back to the little moment that I’d interrupted between them. He’d been standing so close to Ava, and the look in his eye…

I pushed it out of my mind. It was nothing. It had to have been nothing. Xavier knew what the stakes were, and there was no way he’d betray me—even if he was having a hard time with his mate bond with Ava.

Lola didn’t look even a little convinced. “Even from across the yard, that didn’t look like nothing.”

I sighed. “I felt the same way. I’m not sure what to make of it.”

“Well, *I* know what to make of it, and what I’m making isn’t good.”

“Stop, you’re not helping—you’re only making me worry more.”

I was already drained from worrying about how Xavier was going to behave during the ceremony—I didn’t have the energy to start worrying that he was going to fall into Ava’s trap again.

Lola rolled her eyes. “Oh, so you *do* have concerns about that murderous backstabber and Xavier?” Lola took a sip from her cup. “What a bitch. She just won’t leave Xavier alone. He’s told her a million times that he’s not interested, right? Why won’t she just leave?”

“It’s complicated.” I paused, wondering whether I should let Lola in on Xavier’s current struggle with Ava, and their strengthening mate bond. Lola was my best friend, and I knew I could trust her, but it was still such a touchy subject to discuss—and talking about it with my best friend would somehow make it feel real. I decided to let it all out. “It’s the mate bond between them. It’s not broken, and it’s causing Xavier to have… feelings.” I cringed at even saying the word. “According to him, it may even be growing stronger.”

“That bastard,” Lola muttered.

“Lola, calm down before you overreact. It sucks, a lot, but I also understand what he’s going through. He doesn’t want anything to do with Ava. The mate bond isn’t exactly something he asked for, and he’s trying to break it.”

That wasn’t what it had looked like when I’d walked up on them earlier, but I was trying to convince myself that it had been just as harmless as Xavier claimed.

“Yeah, well, actions speak louder than words.”

“I agree, but this isn’t that simple—I know how he’s feeling. It’s not exactly the same as how I’m constantly being pulled between two mates, but it’s not entirely different, either. Does that make any sense?”

It made sense to me, at least. It was kind of hard to completely paint Xavier as the bad guy when he had to deal with me having another mate, too—a mate who also happened to be the brother he couldn’t stand. The brother who was snatching away the role that Xavier thought rightfully belonged to him. There was no question that seeing me standing beside Greyson had torn Xavier up inside, so maybe he’d just been acting out.

*Can I blame him for gravitating toward Ava at a time like this?* I thought about it. *Yes, I can blame him for sure.*

“I guess I get it, but the question is, what are you going to do about it? Are you going to lay down the law and tell Xavier to stay away from her?”

I shot Lola a look. “You know I’ve tried that approach with Ava. Millions of times at this point.”

Lola thrust her finger toward her mouth and made a gagging motion as she rolled her eyes. “Like you can tell Ava anything. She’s the worst.”

“She’s a damn pest, for sure.” I paused for a beat, getting mad all over again as I pictured Ava fluttering her eyelashes at Xavier. She had no shame. If Xavier had wanted to strip her down and take her right there on the lawn, I was sure she would’ve allowed it. “I suppose I can go tell Xavier to steer clear.”

“NO! You can’t do that,” Lola said quickly, her eyes wide.

“What? Why? I thought you just said… What did you say?” I was confused. Hadn’t she *just* told me to lay down the law with Xavier?

“Cali, imagine that you baked an amazing cake and you put the cake on the table. What do you suppose would happen to that cake?” Lola cocked her head as she waited for my answer.

I shook my head. “Uh… I have no idea. The cake sits there until someone eats it?”

Lola smiled. “Exactly. But what happens when you tell someone not to taste this cake, which is the most delicious cake in the world? What do you think someone’s going to do?”

I shrugged. “I have no idea where you’re going with this. I suppose they’ll leave the cake alone? Because I asked them to?”

Maybe Torin could answer these questions better. He was always baking cakes and telling people not to touch them.

“Wrong! They’re going to stick their fingers in the cake and taste it. Why? Because you tempted them by telling them not to. That’s why.” Lola had a satisfied grin on her face, like she’d just done a perfect job of laying it all out for me.

“So what does Xavier have to do with the cake? I don’t get it.”

Lola rolled her eyes and slapped her thigh as if she couldn’t believe that I wasn’t following her. “Stay with me, Cali. Ava is the cake. You tell Xavier not to touch the cake—Ava—and he’s going to want to. It’ll be all he can think about. It’s called human nature. We all want what we can’t have.”

My head was spinning, and suddenly I wanted cake. *Or can I not have the cake? I’m confused.*

Lola sighed and looked me straight in the eye. “Okay, forget the cake analogy.” She paused, as if deciding whether she was going to say whatever was waiting on the tip of her tongue. “This probably isn’t a good idea… In fact, it’s most likely a terrible one. But… should you… maybe… just, like, I dunno, let Xavier and Ava bang it out?”

**Episode 2187**

CHARLIE

The ceremony was over, and the pack was in celebration mode. There was a lightness in the air that hadn’t been there before the ceremony, and I was happy that it had gone off without a hitch. *Well, without much of one*, I thought as I remembered Xavier’s less than stellar pledge. Still, I knew that was as good as we were going to get from Xavier, and the moment had passed without fallout. It felt good to finally know, without a doubt, who was leading the Redwood pack.

Now that I was an official member of the pack and had sealed the deal by pledging my loyalty to Greyson, I was ready to take on more responsibilities—and to protect Violet.

I put my arms around Violet and snuggled her. “Do you think I’m the first werewolf-slash-hunter to join a pack?”

“Huh?” Violet replied, snapping to attention as if she’d been a million miles away. I realized then that she hadn’t really said much for a while. She was preoccupied, and rightly so.

“Oh nothing. How are you? Do you need anything?”

Violet smiled at me, but it was only a half-smile. She was trying to be present, but I could tell that she was struggling. “I don’t need anything, Charlie. I’m just happy to be here with you.”

“Me too, Violet.” I gave her a squeeze. “Are you still upset about Zachery? I hate that it’s all come to this. I never imagined that one of my best friends would turn on me like this.”

I’d spent all that time at hunter camp fighting with Chad, and in the end, he’d turned out to be an ally while Zachery had morphed into more of a nightmare than Chad had ever been. It was such a crazy turn of events, I was still trying to wrap my head around it all.

“Yeah, I guess I am. To hear him accuse me like that in front of everyone… He was so spiteful, so angry.” Violet shook her head in disbelief. “I don’t get why he hates me so much.”

I pulled her close. “Don’t worry about him. I’m here for you, Violet, whatever you need. There’s no way I’m going to let that bastard get anywhere near you. Now that I’m a pack member, I can be with you all the time.” I kissed her gently on the lips. “Unless you don’t want me to be…” I teased.

“Yeah… Too much of a good thing, you know.”

I laughed, happy to hear her cracking jokes. If she could keep that sort of attitude throughout all of this, she’d be able to pull through for sure.

I gazed out at the dark tree line, and a chill raced down my spine. Zachery was still out there, and there was no way I was going to let him get away with what he was trying to pull.

But for now, in this moment, there was nothing bothering us, and I was happy for the chance to relax and enjoy the festivities with my mate.

My mother came walking up to us. Her gaze dragged slowly across Violet before she trained her attention directly on me. She gave me a stiff smile. “Can I talk to you, Charlie?”

“Sure,” I said. “What’s going on?”

She shot Violet a look. “In private.”

“Uh, okay, I don’t see why not.” I gave Violet a quick kiss on the cheek. “You’ll be okay here?”

“Yup, I’ll be fine!” Violet assured me. She smiled at us both, and while I knew that she’d caught the look of distaste that had flickered across my mother’s face as she’d approached, she was taking it in stride.

“So, what’s up, Mom?” I asked as she led the way to one of the libraries and shut the door behind us. I figured she wanted to discuss hunter strategy or something, especially since the other hunters were due to arrive soon.

“Charlie, how could you?” she said, the smile on her face collapsing into a rigid scowl. “Do you have any idea how embarrassing this whole situation is?”

She leaned against the wall and covered her face with her hands, as if she was working to maintain her composure.

I wasn’t sure what to say to that sudden accusation. *Wow, that escalated quickly.* “What? What did I do?”

“What did you *do*? You’re really asking me that? You’re supposed to be a hunter—that’s your legacy, Charlie. You come from a long line of hunters.”

“Um, yes, I know that, Mom. What did I do wrong?”

“You knelt before a werewolf and pledged your loyalty! That’s what you did wrong. The fact that you don’t realize the gravity of the mistake you just made is the worst thing about it all! I couldn’t believe my eyes! My son, pledging his loyalty to a *werewolf*? What were you thinking, Charlie? What will your father—our family—think of you doing such a thing?”

I was starting to understand, and a sour feeling rose in my stomach. “Are you forgetting that *I’m* a werewolf, Mom?”

“Of course I remember! How could I forget? You throw it in my face every chance you get. You’re always joined at the hip to Violet, and when you’re not with her you’re running around rubbing shoulders with these—these—”

Then it hit me. “These what, Mom? These supernaturals? These werewolves? Is that why you’re so embarrassed? Because I’m a member of a werewolf pack?”

She was fuming. She turned her back on me and started pacing. “What about your hunter family? Aren’t we good enough for you?”

“Mom, it’s not about who’s good enough for me. I’m never going to be *just* a hunter, or even *just* a werewolf. I’m both! And I can *be* both! I’m a hunter *and* a werewolf. I hope you realize that it’s an honor for me to be accepted by the Redwood pack, and it’s unfortunate that you can’t understand why it’s so important to me—to belong to a group of people who understand me.”

She fell quiet. “I admit, this has all been quite hard for me to accept. When I saw you kneel in front of Greyson, it was overwhelming.”

She was starting to tear up, and I pulled her into a hug. “Mom, come on, don’t cry. I still love you and Dad; that will never change. But I also have an obligation to protect my mate. If nothing else, even if you can never accept Violet for the amazing person she is, you have to accept that mates look out for each other. No matter what.”

She looked up at me and swiped the tears from her eyes. “For you, I’ll try. But, if you don’t mind, could you give me a warning the next time you do something like that? You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“I promise,” I said.

I gave her another hug before I left her to go find Violet—only to discover that she wasn’t where I’d left her. I looked around and asked a couple of people if they’d seen her.

“I saw her head upstairs,” Ravi told me.

“Thanks, man,” I said, before I bounded up the steps.

Violet was probably tired. It had been an emotionally draining day, to say the least. I found her in her room, lying on her bed, looking super cute, as usual.

I sat down beside her. “Why didn’t you wait for me?”

“I didn’t know how long you’d be. Your mom looked like she had a lot to get off her chest—not to mention that she didn’t look too thrilled to see me.”

“Yeah, we kind of had it out.” I took Violet’s hand. “I know all of this has been tough on you, but like I said, I talked to her and I’m trying to help her get used to us—”

“You mean me,” Violet interrupted.

“Well, yeah. She’ll come around. It’s me you should be worried about, anyway.”

“What?” Violet asked, just before I planted a kiss on her lips.

“Well, I’m never going to get used to you…” I took her in my arms and covered her body with mine.

“Oh yeah? Well, I guess that’ll keep things interesting.” She nibbled at my ear and ran her hands up and down my back. “Thanks, Charlie.”

“For what?”

“For being amazing,” she said as she popped open the first few buttons of her blouse, wrapped her legs around my waist, and kissed me.

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“Can I get you something to drink?” I didn’t think I’d ever get tired of having Violet in my arms. We were snuggled together under the covers, and I couldn’t think of anywhere else I’d rather be.

“Oh, yes please, I’m parched after all that… cardio,” she said with a sly smile.

“Coming right up!”

I got up and pulled on my boxers, then hurried downstairs, thinking that the quicker I got her a glass of water, the quicker I’d be back in her arms. I’d heard people talking about their head being in the clouds before, but now I knew firsthand what that felt like.

I headed for the kitchen, but I stopped short as I passed by a window. *What was that?* I stopped and peered out into the darkness. I’d seen something—it looked like movement outside in the trees.

*Could it be Zachery lurking around, trying to catch us off-guard?*

Without another thought, I burst out onto the porch and ran toward the trees.

**Episode 2188**

MARTA

I stood there, patiently waiting for them to answer my question. To be honest, I’d been wondering about it ever since I’d gotten the bracelets and the summons, and now it was all I could think about. If they’d had their eyes on me and my necromancy during the battle, why the hell hadn’t they done anything about Letifer? He’d been raising revenants left and right, and had even opened a door to the spirit realm—literally! All in all, I was sure that he’d practiced unsanctioned necromancy at least a thousand times, but *I* was the one in the council’s crosshairs? It literally made no sense, and I was tired of ignoring the Letifer-shaped elephant in the room.

I silently thanked the mock trial—something I never would’ve thought I’d do—for preparing me for this moment.

The three witches looked back and forth between each other, and finally Judge Hawthorne cleared her throat.

“As was stated before, we are not the ones on trial here.” She straightened in her seat and looked right at me. “You are—and I’ll thank you to not go off track again, or we might just hold you in contempt.”

Big Mac shot up from her seat. “I’m sorry, Your Honor, but Marta’s question is a valid one. We all had to fight for our lives without any help—or even a thank you—from anyone. Our entire pack fought to destroy Letifer, people were injured, and we even lost one of our own, and still we fought for the good of humanity. If it hadn’t been for Marta and what she was able to do as a bridge, the entire world would have been overtaken by Letifer and his army of revenants. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

Kira nodded and stood up beside Big Mac. “It seems that resurrecting one person should be the least of anyone’s concerns, after all that.”

“Order!” Judge Bates called out as all three judges banged their gavels. “That’s quite enough from the lot of you!”

Feeling smaller than ever, I looked at Lilac, who mouthed, “It’s going to be okay.”

I wanted more than anything to believe that he was right, but it wasn’t feeling that way at all. In fact, it seemed like I was only making things worse for myself for calling out their negligence. They were completely laser focused on me and didn’t seem to care that we’d been on our last legs against Letifer. Things could’ve gone so much worse—and they would have, if we hadn’t stepped in. Not only were we not getting a pat on the back, we were being punished. It was unbelievable.

*Why don’t they care? Why can’t they see that by not acting against Letifer, they’re complicit in what could have been?*

“Marta, please step down,” Judge Hawthorne said, her voice tight. “We would now like to hear from the witness, and the evidence—Lilac Blackburn.”

I swallowed audibly. There was so much more that I’d wanted to say, and now I wasn’t going to get the chance, all because I’d called them out—and rightly so—about their role in letting Letifer run wild. I was feeling so angry and frustrated.

*The witchy judicial system is a complete joke.*

Without another word, I stepped down from the stand, and Lilac stood and headed up to take my place. As we passed each other, he took my hand and squeezed it.

Judge Williams banged her gavel. “There will be none of that!”

Lilac quickly let go of my hand, and I hurried to settle back into my seat next to Vander.

“Good job up there,” Vander whispered. “It’s not over yet.”

Big Mac, Kira, and Mrs. Smith nodded in agreement. I was so happy to have them by my side. I didn’t know what I would’ve done if I’d had to go through all of this on my own.

“So, Mr. Blackburn,” Judge Bates began. “Please explain your side of the story.”

Lilac took a deep breath, and I watched him, feeling helpless. It didn’t seem to matter what we said—the judges were clearly itching to find me guilty. I didn’t even know why they’d bothered with a trial, since their minds already appeared to be made up.

“I was killed by a werewolf,” Lilac began. “And from the moment I entered the spirit world, it was very unstable. Because of that, it was easy for me to pass through the divide and into the world of the living from the very beginning of my… death journey. I was, of course, a literal ghost when I met Marta. I became tethered to her, probably because she was a bridge, though we didn’t know that then. We certainly didn’t expect to be attached to one another like that, and it was definitely strange, and we didn’t know how to fix it.” He smiled at me, and I smiled back until Judge Hawthorne shot us both a look. “But over time, we realized we didn’t actually want to fix it, and we grew really close.”

I blushed as I remembered the journey that had brought us to where we were today. All the bickering and the awkward moments we’d shared had ended up paving the way for us to form a real bond.

“At first, it was kind of annoying. Neither of us had much privacy, and we were just trying to get to know each other, but then we both started to like each other—and then we grew to really care for each other,” Lilac continued.

“Kind of annoying” was an understatement—he’d driven me crazy in the beginning, and even now he knew just how to get under my skin. Still, I couldn’t imagine my life without him. Every moment we spent together brought us closer together. It was crazy how much things had changed, and how much I considered him a key part of my life.

Maybe everything in my life had happened this way because I was supposed to meet him.

“When Letifer started his biggest attack, the spirit realm grew even more unstable, and I was sucked back in. That—as I’m sure you can all understand—was the last place I wanted to be. I wanted to be with Marta, with my sister, with my pack.” Lilac looked at the judges. “Have any of you ever died?” The judges were silent. “Exactly. So you have no idea what it was like. It wasn’t the best experience, let me tell you—especially when the girl you love is on the other side.”

Hearing that made me blush even more.

“Did you just say love?” I blurted out, before smacking my hand over my mouth just as Judge Hawthorne slammed her gavel down.

“No interrupting!” Judge Hawthorne shouted. She turned to Lilac and held up her hand, stopping him from continuing. “So, I was right. It was just a silly little love affair.”

Lilac grew visibly angry, and he twisted in his seat so that he could face Judge Hawthorne head-on. “Who are you to call what we have silly? You don’t even know us, and on top of that, you’re all cowards for not helping or doing anything at all when the world was under siege by Letifer. If you’re all-powerful witches like you’re trying to appear to be, why didn’t you step in? Why didn’t you use your magic for good? Vander is the Keeper of All Nature and knew it was happening, and even they came to warn us about what we were up against and let us know that it wasn’t in their abilities to help. Surely it was well within your powers to support us in our battle against Letifer, but you didn’t.”

Vander raised their hand. “Yes, that’s true. I tried to help, but I was way out of my depth, unfortunately. The Keeper of All Nature must hold the balance, for without it, everything would further crumble.”

The three judges exchanged a look, and I finally realized that I knew that look all too well.

I stood up. “I get it now. You were all afraid.”

The witches all snapped around to look at me, and I knew that a gavel was going to slam down at any minute—and I was shocked when it didn’t.

“You all were so afraid that you just put your heads in the sand and didn’t even *try* to deal with the problem. You didn’t even want to get involved—because you didn’t have the guts. I’m sorry, but Lilac’s right. You’re all cowards.” I took a deep breath, feeling more empowered with every word I spoke. “Yes, I brought Lilac back—not knowingly, of course—but at this point it doesn’t even seem to matter to you what my intentions were. But at least I took a chance! At least I was able to save someone. It was the right thing to do. What did you all do? Nothing at all. You should be ashamed of yourselves.” I knew I was pushing it, but I couldn’t stop myself. “If we don’t fight for the people we love, then what’s the point?”

I locked eyes with Lilac, and a warm feeling spread through me from head to toe. I wasn’t sure if I was in love, but I was glad about one thing: Lilac was here. He was a living, breathing person because of me, and I was proud of that—and I wanted to keep it that way.

Suddenly, Judge Hawthorne brought her gavel down again. “Enough! We’ve heard all we need to hear. We will now pass our judgement on Marta Zhao, without delay.”

**Episode 2189**

Lola was suggesting the unthinkable, and I couldn’t believe it! She was supposed to be my best friend in the entire world, and here she was urging me to let my mate do the worst thing imaginable.

Why would I want Xavier to—and I couldn’t even *think* the word that Lola had used—*sleep with Ava?* That was the absolute last thing I would ever want! In what world would that be okay?

“Well, you’re right about one thing,” I snapped at Lola. “That’s a seriously stupid idea.”

I moved to storm away from her, planning to pretend like this conversation had never happened. Maybe she’d already had too much to drink… Though she didn’t seem drunk at all.

Lola grabbed me and forced me to face her. “All right, all right, calm down! I know that sounded crazy as hell, but you have to give me a chance to explain. Stay with me here—I think you’ll understand where I’m going with this.”

“Okay, but make it quick before I write you off forever,” I said dryly.

“Fair enough. Here’s the thing, Cali. You have to stop looking at this from an emotional point of view. Look at it logically.”

“How can this NOT be emotional?” I asked. “I love Xavier—that’s the most emotional claim anyone can make about another person. How could I possibly remove the emotion from this?”

“I know you love him, Cali, but hear me out. If you try to prevent Ava from seeing Xavier, it will only make things worse. Ava will try harder, and she’ll be more cunning—and then Xavier will be the one who suffers as he tries to fight his mate bond while staying true to you. Remember the cake analogy—forbidden cake is the best cake, the most irresistible cake, the cake most likely to be eaten!”

“Let me stop you right there, Lola—and I’m not even going to touch that weird analogy,” I said. “There’s a key element missing from your argument. If I let them… *you know*… Then *I’ll* be the one suffering!”

I could see it now, images of them in each other’s arms—in BED—playing over and over again in my head as I cried and cried and wished that I hadn’t been stupid enough to *encourage* such a thing.

Thinking about them with their hands all over each other? UGH. Could I turn my brain off?

“Sure, sure, you’d suffer, Cali, but just for a short while! In the end, if everything you’ve told me is true, then Ava will finally realize the inevitable—that Xavier will *never* let you go. He already knows without a doubt in his mind that you two are mates, meant to be, literally made for each other. He knows—hell, we all know—that whatever is left with Ava pales in comparison to the connection that you two have. Up against that, she has no choice but to give it up and slink back to whatever trash pile she dragged herself out of. We’ll never see her—or her perfect hair, body, and face—again.”

“Lola, that’s not helping.” I rolled my eyes. “Yes, her being out of our lives permanently sounds good to me… But what if it doesn’t work out like that? What if it just encourages her?” I shook my head in disbelief. “I can’t even believe I’m having this conversation.”

“Well, then it wasn’t meant to be,” Lola said with a shrug. “Besides, you’ll still have Greyson.”

I smacked her on the arm. “Don’t say it like that! That’s horrible!”

I’d never thought of either of my mates as a fallback, and I wasn’t about to start now.

“Ouch! Watch it!” Lola said, rubbing her arm. “It’s true, though! And may I remind you that you’re dealing with a mate bond, here? You have to take drastic action. What, are you going to make Xavier feel worse about it? He’s probably beating himself up about it as is. I know that you don’t want to make this worse for anyone—you want everyone to be happy, right? Maybe not Ava, but you get my point. Remember when you were feeling the *due destini* pull toward Greyson, and I advised you to kiss him?”

“Yes, I remember. You *do* always seem to be a little looser when it comes to other people’s mates. Would you ever let Jay sleep with someone else?” I cocked an eyebrow at her, waiting for the answer that I knew was coming.

Lola’s eyes flashed. “Hell no! I’d fillet him! And I do understand more of where you’re coming from. I had the hots for my professor, remember? All this mate stuff isn’t as clean-cut as I once thought it was, I’ll admit it.”

I narrowed my eyes. It was pretty big that she was admitting that, considering she’d also been the one to screech at me for being attracted to Greyson at all, kiss advice or not.

“Okay Cali, look at it like this—imagine that Xavier’s a *due destini* mate. Given that you have two mates, wouldn’t it be hypocritical for you to point the finger at Xavier?”

I sighed. She’d just said what I’d kind of been thinking, but I was still overwhelmed—even though there was a certain kind of crazy logic to what Lola was pitching. Still, the thought of granting permission—downright *encouraging* my mate to sow his wolfy oats—was just too much. Especially when it was *Ava* who he would potentially sow those oats with.

She wasn’t just some random girl. He had history with her, he’d *loved* her once upon a time. What if all those feelings came back full force, and he realized that I *wasn’t* the one for him? It all seemed like such a big risk. I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose, feeling like a headache might be on the horizon.

“Cali, I didn’t bring any of this up to make you feel worse, I hope you know that. I just want you to find a way out of this whole mess. So take it or leave it. Now, all of this talk of sleeping around has kicked my vampire heat into overdrive. I need to find Jay.” Lola hurried off.

I stood there for a moment, trying to collect my thoughts before I went into the house, my mind still reeling.

*Can I really do this? Can I push Xavier into Ava’s arms to save our relationship?*

If there was a chance that taking this route might sever his mate bond with Ava, I had to at least consider it.

I found Xavier in the kitchen alone, brooding over a beer.

“Hey. I need to talk to you,” I said, dragging him into one of the studies before I shut the door behind us.

“What’s this all about?” Xavier asked.

I took a deep breath, preparing myself. “I saw that something was happening between you and Ava out in the yard earlier.”

Xavier laughed. “What? I told you—”

“I know what you told me, but I saw a different picture than the one you painted.”

Xavier rolled his eyes, but I pressed on.

“You’ve already admitted to me that you’re attracted to her. I know that already.”

Xavier opened his mouth to protest, but I didn’t give him a chance.

“And I’m so glad that you were honest with me about that. It’s messed up mate bond stuff, I get it. And… it’s okay. I can’t believe I’m saying this, and I’ll probably kick myself in the morning, but given the circumstances with the mate bond, I just want to let you know that it’s okay that you’re… attracted to… Ava.”

Even saying her name threw my stomach into a violent lurch. I just wanted her out of our lives, and evidently, I was willing to go to great lengths to do it.

Xavier’s face twisted in confusion. “What? What are you even talking about?” he asked. “Cali, I love *you*. Why are you saying this?”

He pulled me close, his forehead pressing against mine. “Don’t say something like that.”

Then he kissed me. I lost myself in the feel of his lips against mine. All the reasons why I didn’t want him to even go near anyone else came rushing back to me. I wanted him all to myself—and it still pained me to think of him kissing anyone else like he was kissing me right now—especially Ava.

“I love you so much,” he said between kisses. “There’s nobody else. Whatever lingering effects of the mate bond with Ava that remain, I’ll find a way to end them. I promise.”

Reluctantly, I pulled away. “Xavier, let’s be real. Even when you did break the mate bond with the spell, Ava never went away. She’s always been here.” I motioned around us, at the house. “And here.” I pointed to his heart.

Xavier took my hands in his. “Stop it, Cali. Where is this coming from?”

I took a deep breath. “You can’t keep avoiding the facts. You’ve seen how that hasn’t done any good. You have to confront this situation. *We* have to confront it. The only way out is to see it through.” I paused, my voice catching in my throat. I couldn’t believe I was saying this. It had all seemed so crazy when Lola had suggested it, but now that I was right here discussing it, it seemed like the only real solution. “You have to confront it, no matter where it takes you.”

“Cali, I—” Xavier shook his head, staring at me in complete and utter disbelief. “I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Are you actually telling me to sleep with Ava?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m telling you.”

**Episode 2190**

CHARLIE

I ran toward the woods, the urge to tear apart any and all threats that could go after my mate overwhelming. These werewolf instincts were hard to handle sometimes, especially when Violet was in danger.

Who was that figure by the trees?

Could it be Zachery, or Shanna Paiyn?

I should’ve thought about this more before running out of the pack house and chasing after shadows like a fucking madman, but it was too late now. The scent of trees and other foreign aromas twitched under my nose as I came to a halt before a clearing. I paused to listen—whoever or whatever I’d seen had stopped moving entirely. Cautiously, I stepped forward, ready to shift in an instant. The forest was eerily quiet, and that always spelled trouble—

*Crack!*

There was a loud noise above me, and I flinched, looking up, ready to attack. A dark figure came crashing down onto me, screaming, “Kowabunga!”

What. The. *Hell?*

I hit the ground, the weight of my attacker knocking the air out of me for a moment, fury and fear merging into one. I didn’t hesitate, though—I shifted my fingernails into claws and grabbed at the throat of the dark hooded figure that dared to hold a knife to my throat.

“Who the fuck are you?” I snarled, pulling off the hood.

My eyes widened.

“*Chad?*”

The doofus laughed, dropping the knife from my throat. “Hey, Chuck! I heard you missed me.”

I shoved him off. “What the hell is wrong with you? I could’ve killed you!”

“You didn’t, though.”

“I could’ve! And don’t call me Chuck.” I shook my head. “*Never* Chuck. I could’ve hurt you, do you realize that?”

Chad rolled his eyes and pocketed his knife. “The Chadster is invincible.”

Good god. This guy was impossible. I instantly remembered why I hadn’t actually missed him.

“What are you doing here?” I asked impatiently.

Chad grinned. “Came to help you with your rogue hunter problem.”

I frowned in confusion. “My mom sent for *you*?”

Chad seemed sheepish. “Yep. I’m part of the group that was put together for the task force.” He whistled, and within seconds, there was more rustling, and a girl stepped out from behind a tree…

“Sophie?” I asked, taking her in. She was dressed in camo, weapons hanging from her belt.

“Hey, Charlie!” She smiled and waved enthusiastically. She stared at me, unashamed, and I suddenly wished I had more clothes on than my boxers.

“What are you guys—”

“You good, Charlie?” Rishika’s stern voice made me jump. When had she gotten here? That woman was a master of not making any noise whatsoever before attacking. I pitied anyone she saw as prey. “Who’s this?”

“It’s—I—” I swallowed as I saw Rishika, Artemis, and Ravi marching toward us. Artemis was pointing a crossbow at Chad, looking pretty trigger-happy. “They’re friends!” I blurted quickly. “Hunter friends. Some of the ones my mom sent for.”

Artemis didn’t look convinced. Ravi was scowling.

Rishika narrowed her eyes at Chad. “How did you manage to get past the patrols?”

Chad gave her a shit-eating grin. I hoped to hell that he wasn’t trying to flirt. “We’re hunters—that’s what we do.”

Great start.

As if to highlight his point, all of a sudden, Sergeant Pepperdine and three other hunters that I’d never met before emerged from a thick line of bushes.

Ravi didn’t seem to appreciate this. “There are more of them?”

“Why didn’t Iris tell us they were coming here tonight?” Rishika asked, her jaw set.

Artemis swung her bow around, and Ravi dropped into a partial shift—claws out, canines elongating.

I needed to do something quick, or all hell might break loose.

“Guys, it’s okay!” I said, turning to Ravi. “This is Sergeant Pepperdine—I know him, too; he’s a decent man.”

“Doubtful,” Artemis said wryly, and Pepperdine shook his head.

“I’m who he says I am,” he said. “We’ve come to deal with Shanna Paiyn, and we would appreciate it if you put down your weapon.”

Artemis shook her head. Damn.

After a tense beat of silence, Pepperdine lowered his hand to the knife at his side. The three other strange hunters did the same, following his lead. I knew that Sophie wouldn’t randomly attack—that wasn’t her vibe—but the others? Pretty unpredictable.

I did not want a fight to break out right now.

“By the way,” Chad said, eyebrows arched as he nodded at me, “you should put some clothes on. Aren’t you cold?”

I groaned. Of all the hunters, my mom had to send for Chad? *Chad?* Granted, we’d gotten along okay toward the end, but for god’s sake, the guy called *himself* “The Chadster.” How was I supposed to deal with him and someone who wanted to kill Violet?

“Chad?” Violet ran up to us, shaking me out of my thoughts.

She was wearing shorts and an oversized T-shirt that exposed her shoulder. My eyes went straight to her bare skin, my wolf’s need to go over there and shield her from the others immediate. I hated the idea of Chad seeing her like this, and sure enough, the dickhead just stood there, staring appreciatively. My wolf growled at him, making my chest rumble.

God, couldn’t she have dressed a little… more?

I was about to ask Violet to go back and put some real clothes on, but then I stopped myself. I had no leg to stand on—I was in my boxer shorts, and even if I weren’t, I had no right to tell Violet what to wear. If she heard what I was thinking, she’d probably smack me.

Yeah, Violet was all cuddly and cute, right up until you pissed her off.

“Are you cold?” I asked, and that was actually a real question—my internal clothes debate aside. I put an arm around her.

“What are you guys doing here?” she asked.

Chad grinned at her. “Did you miss us?”

“Nice to see you, Violet!” Sophie said cheerfully.

Sergeant Pepperdine followed with, “We meet again, Violet. Good to see that you’re in excellent health.”

“Thank you. You too, I guess,” Violet said awkwardly before turning to Sophie. “What’s going on? Why didn’t you text me to say you were coming?”

“Charlie’s mom said not to,” Sophie explained. “She doesn’t want any digital trail of our arrival, you know?”

“I’m going to have a word with her,” Rishika grumbled.

“Oh,” Violet said, taking everything in. “Uh, well, I’m glad you’re here.”

“All this amiable chatter is getting on my nerves,” Artemis said, waving her bow around. Rishika nodded in agreement while Ravi huffed, still halfway shifted.

“Stand down, Artemis.”

To my relief, Greyson had arrived. The Alpha was here, so there would be no funny business. He was a level-headed dude, and I was glad to have been accepted by him into the pack. It seemed like he’d be able to take charge.

Artemis had gotten pretty aggressive, but I wasn’t exactly surprised. The girl had been possessed by Letifer, and Violet said that she’d been a bounty hunter in the Fae world before that. I had no idea what she used to hunt, but I was willing to bet that Chad was nothing complicated in comparison.

Despite looking intimidated, he did stare at Artemis with some interest.

His priorities were amazing.

“Lower your weapons. There’s no need to shift,” Greyson said, coming to stand between the hunters and the supernaturals.

Begrudgingly, Artemis did as she was told while Rishika said, “These hunters broke through our patrols.”

There was a hint of indignation in her tone—as if she couldn’t believe the nerve of them.

*Uh oh. Rishika’s pissed*, Violet mind linked.

“Mr. Alpha,” Sergeant Pepperdine said seriously, nodding at Greyson.

“Iris told me we would be expecting you soon,” Greyson said. “I’ll admit, I didn’t think you’d all be so prompt.”

Violet pressed her lips together to hide a smile.

Pepperdine went on. “I need to speak to Iris.” From his tone, I could sense that my former drill sergeant was a little on edge. “As you can imagine, it’s a matter of great importance.”

“I’m sure you do,” Greyson said.

“Why didn’t they let the rest of us know?” Violet asked.

I shook my head helplessly. “No idea. But my mom’s very cryptic.”

“Kinda like a witch, then,” Artemis said solemnly.

Neither Ravi nor Rishika seemed impressed. Chad seemed confused. Sophie, though, looked excited, locking eyes with Violet. “That a compliment?”

“No need for any more chatter. We need to speak to Iris,” Pepperdine repeated to Greyson, impatient. He slung his backpack over his shoulder and turned to the others. “I have the coordinates she gave us. We’ll settle in and then talk to her and figure out what’s next.”

He made a move to start walking, and I realized he was heading toward the pack house.

*Your mom gave them the exact location?* Violet mind linked, her eyes wide with alarm as she squeezed my hand. *Werewolves are super territorial!*

Yeah, this wasn’t good.

Greyson blocked the hunters’ way, his face cold.

“Thank you for coming to help,” he told Pepperdine seriously, “but you can’t stay.”

**Episode 2191**

GREYSON

The hunters’ faces said that they weren’t happy about what I’d just said.

The girl, Sophie, looked pretty confused, in a “I’m sure you don’t mean that” way. The boy, Chad—who called their kid Chad, anyway?—was frowning, though, right along with Pepperdine and the other hunters.

I opened my mouth to clarify before things got worse, but Iris beat me to it.

She stepped out of the shadows—very fucking ominously, I might add—and said, “Is this a joke?” She glared at me. “I called the hunters—after you agreed to let them come—got them here ASAP, and now you’re telling them to leave? I don’t understand.”

Iris looked annoyed, borderline pissed off. I was about to tell her to relax, but I knew from personal experience—a.k.a. Cali—that women *hated* that. So I chose the diplomatic route.

“I wasn’t clear earlier—obviously your colleagues are welcome here,” I told her. My mind flashed to the pictures that Xavier and I had found at the tower. “But Shanna’s rebel hunters are watching our pack, so if we’re not careful and they notice our new arrivals, they’ll realize that you’ve called for reinforcements, which would help nobody. Wasn’t this your concern earlier as well?”

Iris took this in. They were her own words. “He’s right,” she said. “We need the element of surprise,” Iris told the hunters. Pepperdine nodded seriously.

“Exactly. The longer we stand around here, the more likely it is that you’ll all be spotted,” I told the hunters. “The element of surprise that we’re relying on to defeat them will be wiped out.”

Pepperdine nodded. “So where are we supposed to go?”

“I didn’t know your Alpha was so intense,” Sophie told Violet, and I suppressed a snort. I wondered what the girl would’ve thought about Xavier.

“The logic of it all is fine, but I already had them come here,” Iris said. “Where’s my team supposed to stay now?”

“We have another pack house,” I told her. “It’s in some disrepair, but it should prove sufficient. New plumbing was installed recently. There are working space heaters and firewood to burn.” I turned to Ravi. “Take them to the lake house.”

Ravi nodded. Rishika and Artemis were silent, looking at each other.

“I’ll go with them,” Iris said right away.

I nodded. “Good. We can talk strategy later.”

Violet and Charlie said goodbye to the guy whose parents had decided to call him Chad, the cute happy girl who probably had a huge Instagram presence, and a frowning Sergeant Peppermint, along with his people. I’d be a fool to underestimate these people, of course—the fact that they’d bypassed our patrols was outrageous all on its own.

Once the newly arrived hunters, right along with Iris, had been led away by Ravi, I turned to Violet. “You’d better get back in the house. We don’t want to make it easy for Zachery to get to you.” I looked between her and Charlie. “Also, seriously, put some clothes on. Violet almost got hypothermia the other day—no need to push our luck.”

Charlie squeezed Violet to him. “Thanks, Greyson.”

Violet, despite her Team Xavier membership, said, “I appreciate you taking their help.”

They sauntered off, Charlie kissing the side of Violet’s head. These kids really loved each other, and it was always good to see a powerful, healthy mate bond in a pack. There was no doubt in my mind that if Violet was attacked right now, Charlie would die before letting anything happen to her. Which was why they really needed to go to the house and stay there—I wasn’t about to lose two good pack members just as I’d become Alpha again.

I’d started walking back toward the pack house when I noticed Artemis staring at me with arched eyebrows and Rishika smiling at me. She looked pretty satisfied, actually—in a way that she rarely was about anything. Other than Artemis’s tongue down her throat, I assumed.

“What’s with that shit-eating grin?” I asked her.

She kept on grinning. “This is how it’s meant to be! You’re the Alpha, making quick decisions without causing huge arguments.”

“Yeah, that could’ve been worse,” Artemis noted.

“It’s good to have you back,” Rishika said.

“Thank you. The hunters weren’t anything complicated, though,” I said. “Nothing we can’t handle.”

I was in charge now, and I didn’t have to prove myself to anyone. Though I did need to stay on top of everything and maintain the pack’s respect forever. How could I ever forget that?

“I thought the transition would be rougher than this,” Artemis commented.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Artemis snorted. “Xavier gave in *way* too easily. I thought we’d have to chain him to a tree or something.”

I shook my head. “Xavier hasn’t given in. Not really. He’s just waiting for a better time to challenge me. But make no mistake—he will challenge me. He’s just waiting for the right moment.”

“When would that be?” Artemis asked, frowning.

“Not when there’s trouble,” I said. “He’s thinking more about the pack instead of himself, which is actually good for all of us.”

“Because he’s being *selfless*?” Artemis asked.

“No,” Rishika said matter-of-factly. “Because he knows there would be consequences that he wouldn’t like. Whether those would be the pack seeing him in a bad light, or Cali being mad at him.”

I held back a snort. Now that was a sharp read of my little brother. And he thought he was *so* mysterious.

“I just want to thank you again for your support,” I told Rishika.

She shrugged. “This isn’t about loyalty. I just genuinely think you’re the best Alpha for us. I believe in you.”

“Make sure you don’t let her down,” Artemis teased.

There was a lot of truth in her words, though. I was humbled by Rishika’s trust. The fact that I was in this kind of position was constantly surprising to me, let alone the fact that I had someone like Rishika in my corner.

“I promise I’ll always do my best not to let you down,” I said.

“You’d better not,” she said, smirking. And even if there was humor in her expression, I knew it was true. The weight of her expectations didn’t make me feel shitty, though. It gave me a push in the right direction.

Now, if only the three witches had been as clear as Rishika about what they expected from me.

As Artemis, Rishika, and I walked back to the house, I ran through what had happened in my head. The three witches had given me an opportunity, and I’d taken it. But what did it mean for me and Cali now? The curse was technically broken—she could choose me. Xavier wouldn’t die because of it, and I wouldn’t feel guilty over it. Heartache and a death sentence were two very different things—he’d fucking survive.

All my life, I’d done all I could to protect my little brother, to keep him alive. Which meant it was high time for me to take care of myself, and that started with having Cali by my side. Having the curse broken was just one step that I had to see through, and now I could move forward with the next.

Down the line, I knew I wanted Cali as my Luna. Xavier would bitch and whine and stomp his feet like any younger sibling would, but when Cali chose me, it would be time for him to suck it up and face the music. He couldn’t brood or pout or punch his way out of this.

Besides, he had Ava.

He *couldn’t* be fully loyal to Cali, not really, not as much as I was.

I thought back to the visions, the perfect future I’d imagined with my mate.

Did that future finally have a chance?

Would I live happily ever after with my mate while my little brother finally shut the fuck up?

As if in answer, the front door burst open and Xavier stomped out. Great. The oversized toddler that I shared DNA with was even broodier and angrier than usual. What kind of crisis was he going through this time? Were his chips unsalted? Had Ava tried to kiss him again? Was he too tired being torn between a goddess and a demon? Or was it—

The kid had better not have changed his mind about accepting me as Alpha.

Xavier was many bad things, but he wasn’t stupid—surely he could see it would look fucking horrible to everyone?

Thankfully, Xavier barely acknowledged me as he passed by.

“People say hello, you know,” I called after him. “Wouldn’t kill you!”

He didn’t reply with a snarky response, so I was worried now. *Shit*. I had to go after him, make sure he was okay.

“What the hell?” Artemis’s voice made me snap out of it. She was looking at the front porch—more specifically, at Cali, who’d just walked out.

She was wiping tears from her face.

Anger and protectiveness flared up inside of me. Did this jackass actually hurt my mate? There was gonna be hell to pay. I raced up to Cali, grabbing her by the shoulders to pull her close. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“Greyson, it’s fine…” She sniffled, shivering.

Glaring over my shoulder where Xavier had vanished, I demanded, “It’s not fine. What the fuck did he do?”

**Episode 2192**

I looked past Greyson. Xavier was stomping off, devastated and hurt. For once, I couldn’t say that he was overreacting. I had fucked up. I wanted to apologize for what I said, but I couldn’t follow Xavier—not while Greyson was ready to pounce.

“Tell me what my brother did,” he demanded. “I’m gonna make him—”

“He didn’t do anything,” I whispered, wiping my tears. “I’m the one who upset him.”

Greyson paused. Most of the tension seemed to leave his body. “Oh.”

“Yeah. *Oh*.”

“That’s fine, then,” Greyson said breezily, pulling me into his arms.

I snorted, despite feeling horrible. Shoving him lightly, I said, “You don’t mean that. We both know you care about Xavier.”

He grumbled something, hugging me tight. Against my hair he asked, “What happened?”

I leaned into Greyson, taking in his scent and warmth and comfort.

*Could I really hide from him?* I asked myself.

I doubted it.

“I thought I was trying to help him. I suggested that he needs to find some resolution with Ava,” I said.

Greyson frowned. “What did Ava do to lead you to this?”

I frowned. “She’s just always here.”

“And Xavier is refusing to chase her away for good—”

“Because he’s still affected by their mate bond,” I said, finishing Greyson’s sentence. “So I just said—I…” I swallowed. “I thought if they slept together, Ava would realize that there’s nothing between her and Xavier, that the only thing keeping her around is the lingering mate bond—not real feelings.”

Greyson blinked slowly, clearly processing. “But how would either of them be able to tell what’s real or not? And why would Ava even care about what’s real?”

My lower lip wobbled. That’s what I was afraid of too.

“Sorry,” he said quickly, taking in my expression. “I’m just—I’m a little surprised that you would suggest Xavier sleep with another woman.”

“I just don’t know what to do anymore,” I said. “But that’s what sent Xavier walking. I never should have brought it up, but I listened to Lola’s stupid advice.”

Greyson paused. “What about you, though? How would you feel if Xavier agreed?”

I knew exactly how I’d feel. “I’d hate it.”

The thought of Xavier even thinking about her drove me nuts.

*It’s not his fault, though!* I reminded myself. The *due destini* had taught me what it was like to be torn between two people when you had no control. It really felt like a fucking curse, and the idea that Xavier had somehow trapped himself in a similar situation made me feel for him, no matter how much it gutted me. I understood.

“How would you react if I told you to sleep with Maren?” I asked Greyson quietly.

“I’d be upset,” Greyson said right away.

Just like Xavier.

“But only if I didn’t understand why you suggested it,” Greyson added.

I swallowed roughly. “Maybe I should try and explain it to Xavier more? I must’ve done a terrible job of it—”

“Or Xavier doesn’t want to do it,” Greyson said calmly. “Plain and simple. It doesn’t sound like you like the idea anyway, love.”

I laughed a little, and then Greyson added, “Might be better to let him stew on it for a bit, though. He gets overwhelmed when he’s upset, so—”

“I shouldn’t be talking to you about this, should I?” I said, biting my lip. “Not behind his back.”

Greyson’s gaze was soft. He tucked my hair behind my ear. “I would hope you wouldn’t be afraid to talk to me about anything. Especially when it comes to our situation.” He held up his hand and twisted three fingers together. “This is what we’re dealing with. We’re all in this together, and what affects one, affects all.”

I sniffled. “But it’s like we’re gossiping about Xavier. Isn’t it?”

Greyson shook his head. “We vowed to be honest with each other—that means not being afraid to speak the truth, even if it’s uncomfortable or even painful.” He paused. “I know I sound like a self-righteous prick right now, but when I’m right, I’m right.”

I smiled a little again, nuzzling him. “You’re sweet.”

He sighed, kissing the top of my head. “I just wish I could make you feel better.”

“I do feel slightly better,” I admitted.

He smirked and lifted me up in a front piggy-back ride, being all casual about it.

“What are you doing?” I asked, startled, but still wrapped my arms and legs around him, because it felt really nice.

He went into the house and started climbing the stairs. He was super strong and super hot and just carrying me around like it was nothing, so I wasn’t about to complain. He felt confident, solid, and I appreciated his certainty.

“I’m bringing you to bed,” he said. “To sleep. You need rest.”

His serious expression made me realize he was for real. Sleep, only. I was disappointed but relieved to have him comfort me right now. I knew that talking about Xavier wasn’t always the most comfortable subject for him. But despite that, what he’d said made sense. I needed to give Xavier some time.

*And if Xavier does hook up with Ava…*

My stomach lurched with disappointment.

*Well. We’ll have to deal with it. This mate business is insufferable, isn’t it? Where’s our free will?*

If this same thing were to happen to Greyson, I would tell him to do the same thing. At least in theory, because in reality…

*Could the kiss he had with Aysel “under Seluna” create something like this?* I wondered. *Are we all destined to be constantly screwed over by mate bonds?*

The answer to that question was intimidating, to say the least.

“Here you go,” Greyson said softly, placing me on the bed. He gave me a gentle peck and stroked my cheek. “I could talk to Xavier about this, if you want.”

I shook my head instantly. “Yeah, no. Dragging you into this would only make things worse.”

Greyson smiled a little, kissing my cheek. “You’re right. You’d better sleep now, okay? I’ll check on you later.”

I stared up at him. “Won’t you stay with me?”

He sighed. “I’d love to, but I have some things I should take care of. I’ll be back soon. You rest.”

He brushed his lips over mine one last time, and then he was gone.

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Trying to sleep proved to be a huge fucking problem.

Xavier’s angry response was tormenting me. He’d been so furious that I would even think of him with Ava that he’d stormed out before I’d been able to explain further.

“Ugh, Xavier!” I grumbled, tossing and turning. “Why won’t you just listen?”

Question of the century.

Now I couldn’t sleep. I wondered if Xavier had come back yet.

*I should go check! Obviously! In the middle of the night!*

Determined, I slipped outside after putting on my jacket. It was a full moon again, and I frowned. I hadn’t expected to see one so soon. Wasn’t it supposed to come out, like, once a month? How did science work? Also, why was I outside again?

I shook my head, ready to go back inside when—

“*Caliana…*”

Someone called my name. I turned and saw a beautiful woman dressed in all white emerging from the woods. I recognized her immediately—it was Seluna.

*Oh my god! What is she doing here?*

“I know you are troubled, being a *due destini* mate,” she told me. “It’s a gift that can quite often not be seen as such. But to love once is a gift, and to love twice is a blessing.”

Shit. Not only was she a goddess, she was also a poet? I wasn’t prepared for this!

“You are Fae,” she went on, “but I still care for you, because I watch over the children of the moon, the wolves. One of your mates has been kissed by the moon with a moon-colored wolf, blessed since he was young…”

I frowned. Moon-colored? I only knew one fully grey wolf. “You mean Greyson?”

Ignoring me, Seluna continued. “And your other mate has been blessed as well, with the return of his first mate. All three of you are precious to me.”

What a bunch of bullshit.

“Right,” I said dryly. “If we’re so precious to you, then why are you torturing us?”

The goddess seemed confused. “Torture? How?”

*HOW, SHE ASKS!*

“The *due destini* isn’t a blessing or a gift, it’s a horrible thing. It’s a curse that tears me in half and hurts the ones I love,” I said sharply.

Seluna’s gaze darkened, but I didn’t care. This couldn’t be real.

“Is any of this real?” I asked.

Seluna moved closer. I held my breath. She reached for me, caressing my cheek. “Caliana, heed my words and listen to me. Talk to Lucian. He is the key.”

*Talk to Lucian. He is the key…*

*Talk to Lucian…*

*Talk to Lucian…*

I was startled awake. My head was pounding. This was the third time I’d dreamed about Seluna since the Vanguard party. But why? I felt kind of queasy, thirsty.

I went downstairs to get a glass of water, but then I heard a rustling by the door, breaking the silence of the quiet house.

A letter had been slipped through the door’s mail slot.

*This is so freaking creepy*, I thought. *Should I even touch the letter? Should I just run away screaming? What should I do?*

Because I’d never been good at turning down danger, I approached the letter. When I got close enough, I could see that it was addressed to me. What the hell?

I picked up the card and flipped it over, immediately recognizing the ornate script.

*Caliana,*

*Let’s start over.*

*Lucian.*

**Episode 2193**

XAVIER

I stood in the middle of the woods, in a clearing, looking up at the half moon.

It was late—I knew I should probably just go back to the pack house and pass the hell out. But I knew there was no point in trying to sleep. My head was pounding, my heart was heaving, and I just—

I just didn’t understand.

Cali was trying to push me toward Ava when I was trying—tooth and nail—to push Ava as far away from me as possible. I didn’t see how getting closer to Ava would help put an end to the pull she felt toward me, which was bullshit. It made no sense at all. I knew Ava, and it would only encourage her. I didn’t want that—I didn’t *need* that.

But where the fuck did this leave Cali and me now?

I couldn’t wrap my head around why Cali would suggest I sleep with Ava. What mate would do such a thing? What mate would risk that kind of thing? Because it was a huge fucking risk. It was a fear that had been eating away at me, because…

What if sleeping with Ava strengthened the bond?

What if instead of pushing Ava away, it sealed our fates together, bound forever, all that bullshit?

Had Cali just cooked up some sort of fucked-up scheme to make her choosing Greyson easier? No, she wasn’t that devious. She’d never do that, she’d never be so dishonest as to do that.

But still, the simple idea of it made my blood boil.

It was fucking bad enough that Greyson was now the Alpha, but to lose Cali too? Never.

I’d rather fucking die.

Footsteps from behind me made me turn. They were familiar, so I wasn’t alarmed.

When I faced Ravi, he said, “Hey. I’m coming back from showing Iris’s hunters to the lake house.”

It was good that he’d explained himself without my asking. It meant that he still respected me, despite everything.

“Was taking them to the lake house Greyson’s idea?” I asked.

Ravi nodded.

I frowned. Greyson’s line of action made sense. It was bad enough to have Iris around, but a group of complete unknown hunters living in the pack house seemed risky. And they would have been easy for the rogue hunters to spot.

“You coming back home?” Ravi asked me.

I paused. I was mad at everything, so no. “No. See you later.”

Ravi shrugged and headed back. He was a chill dude—just the right player to deal with the newly arrived team of hunters. It was absurd to think, though, that we were working with hunters to get rid of more hunters. I was pretty sure I could trust Iris, since she was being forced to help us because of her son, and I had no doubt about Charlie and his loyalty to Violet. But still—working with *more* hunters? We were on thin ice.

The only real solution here was to remove the threat. That meant Zachery and Shanna had to go. Zachery had a messed-up, personal grudge against Violet, and Shanna was the head of the rebel group. Without her, they’d be just a bunch of rogue hunters without a leader. Nothing that couldn’t be dealt with.

This kind of problem could be solved in one of two ways. Wait until the hunters have organized, planned, and attacked—or take them out covertly. It was something that I could do—after all, I’d learned a few things as a mercenary. I could be in and out within minutes, before the hunters knew what hit them.

Something like that would piss Greyson off, though. It would mean his authority had been ignored. But if I succeeded, it would also settle the problem for good. And the new, supposedly innocent, hunter team that had just casually arrived in our territory would get the hell out of here. Either way, though, even if I didn’t attack tonight, I could always track Shanna and Zachery and go from there.

I shifted, processing my options. I doubted that they would’ve returned to their camp—that would’ve been too easy. They’d probably set up their base somewhere else.

Sniffing the air, I dashed off in the direction Shanna and her rebels had taken, and within minutes, I picked up their trail. It was easy. I was great at tracking, and even the best hunters left a trace. Humans always did.

I was running for at least ten minutes before I came across a small clearing and took in the scene. The rebels had found a brand new home. The setup was even worse than what I’d expected—there was nothing to stop me from entering, nothing to stop me from leaving.

Or so it seemed.

This could still be a trap. I had to make sure that I could get in and out without setting off an alarm. Otherwise, retreating was my best option. I wanted to be the hero, but not at the risk of getting caught.

I decided to take a look around the perimeter, ready to go in cautiously, but then I heard rustling behind me.

I froze.

Had I been detected?

The idea of me getting captured and having to wait for Greyson to come save me was so infuriating that I broke into a run, heading away from the hunter camp at the kind of speed that no human could ever compete with on foot. Maybe if they were on a dirt bike, but I heard no sound to indicate that—only the noises of other animals and birds.

I stopped running, scenting the air again to make sure I was all alone, and the wind changed direction.

I smelled her before I saw her.

Ava.

Gritting my teeth, I turned around to face her.

What the fuck was she doing here?

*Was that the rogue hunters’ camp?* Ava mind linked.

I couldn’t fucking believe this girl. I shifted back to human, refusing to create any more intimacy between us by mind linking. Instead of taking the hint, she shifted back as well, standing there naked in front of me. I refused to look anywhere besides her face.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I demanded. “Did you follow me?”

She shrugged coyly. “I was just curious. I saw you storm out of the house, and I was worried you might do something rash.”

I scoffed. That was rich, coming from her. “You’re literally acting like a stalker, do you know that? You’re following me everywhere, and you have to stop. You’re fucking obsessed with me, Ava.”

Her eyes flashed with indignation. “It’s not my fault we’re mates, Xavier. Destiny is to blame. We were brought back together for a reason. Don’t you know that?”

“Stop,” I snapped. “Just fucking stop. And stop saying that you were worried about me, because we both know that’s bullshit.”

She closed the distance between us until it was reduced to two feet. She stared at me in a way that was so intense that my mouth went dry. “Don’t you dare doubt the way I feel about you. Loving you is the only thing I have right now.”

My throat constricted. What the fuck was I supposed to say to that?

“Do you think I like this?” she snapped, pointing at her chest. “Do you think I get off on following you around like a lovesick puppy? Do you think I like seeing you with Cali? It’s not something I can control, Xavier! It’s the fucking mate bond! It’s—”

“You should just leave,” I said gruffly. “How many times do I have to tell you?”

She scoffed. “We’re not in the pack house, and you’re not my Alpha. I don’t have to listen to you.”

She took another step closer, and my wolf got a whiff of her scent. He started stirring, growling, and I couldn’t control myself—I glanced down at her perfect bare body and internally shuddered.

Fuck.

“You need to leave. I—”

“You were just putting your life in danger, checking out the hunters without telling anyone what you were doing,” Ava said sharply. “It was suicide.”

“It’s none of your business,” I declared.

She changed the subject, eyes narrowing. “Why did you storm out of the house then? Huh? Did Cali do something?”

“Don’t say her name,” I snarled.

I was furious; and yet, the angrier I got, the more my wolf wanted Ava. Ever since I’d fucked up that unmating spell, he’d grown more fervent. He wanted to attack and bite and fuck her into submission, to push her down and ride her hard. To have her do it right back to me. The mate bond was working against me, drawing out the animal inside me.

I couldn’t bear it.

This had to end.

I remembered what Cali had said, her words and weird explanations she’d talked about with Lola that made no sense to me… But what if there was a truth somewhere in all of it? What if the most fucked-up, absurd solution was the right one?

Staring Ava dead in the eye, I asked, “If I sleep with you, will you leave me alone?”

**Episode 2194**

I stared at the letter, flipping it over to see if there was more to the message, but *nope.* Nothing. Lucian had had this delivered, but how and why in the middle of the freaking night?

Frowning, I opened the door and looked out. Everything was dark and quiet; I couldn’t see anybody around. God, what did this man even want? I had zero desire to start any funny business with Lucian. I’d had enough of him and his Seluna moon goddess to last me a lifetime.

*If only I could stop having dreams about Seluna*, I thought. *Ugh!*

Was it a coincidence that I’d received this letter right after I’d had that dream? I hoped Lucian didn’t expect me to respond, because I certainly had no time for that. Besides, what would I even say to the self-proclaimed prince? I didn’t have a return address. Was he still at the Vanguard palace? Did even *have* a registered address?

*You should tear the letter up and forget this ever happened, Cali*, I told myself.

It *was* a letter from a self-proclaimed prince, though. I’d never gotten mail from royalty. Maybe I should hold onto it? And in my dream, Seluna had said that Lucian was the key. If only I knew what the damn key was for.

I flipped the envelope in my hands and wondered if I should mention the letter to Greyson and Xavier. Had Xavier even come back yet?

My stomach clenched with guilt over what had happened. If he was here, he’d be back upstairs in his room. I quickly drank some water and returned to the second floor, my heart pounding at the thought of seeing him. When I go to his door, I noticed that the light was on.

*Bingo!*

Should I talk to him right now, though? What if he was still mad at me? Would he even want to talk to me? There was only one way to find out.

Holding my breath, I knocked quietly. Five seconds later, there was no response. My eyes felt achy, like I was ready to start crying again.

“I’m sorry. It was a stupid idea,” I whispered. With his werewolf hearing, Xavier would be able to hear. Taking a deep breath, I opened the door, but…

The room was empty. I frowned—it was super late, and Xavier hadn’t come back. He only stayed away if there was some clear danger to the pack as a whole and he was out tracking it, but we weren’t at war anymore. There was no reason for him to be out this late, unless…was there a hunter attack? Or… My thoughts went to an even darker place.

*Oh my god! Did he leave to go hook up with Ava?*

I was hyperventilating now. Jesus, I needed to calm the hell down! Xavier wouldn’t do that—he could be out doing all kinds of things. After all, he was a werewolf. They were a weird bunch who enjoyed outdoor activities in the dark, because why the fuck not?

*I shouldn’t rush to conclusions and drive myself nuts*, I thought, turning to leave. *Because I will go nuts. I will lose my mind if Xavier actually*—

I let out a short, shrill scream at the sight of a shadow moving in the dim light of the window. I slapped a hand over my mouth before I could bring half the pack down on us as soon as I realized who it was.

Lola was just standing there behind me in the dark like a creeper, a sly smile on her face.

“Lola!” I huffed, shoving her. “You scared me to death!”

“You seem fine to me.” Lola waggled her eyebrows. “What are you up to? Late night hookup?”

I took a deep breath and prayed for patience. “I was looking for Xavier. Thanks to you, he ran off.”

Lola frowned in confusion. “Wait, what did I do?”

I groaned. “Did you already forget? You gave me some crappy advice, like, not even two hours ago.”

“Oh,” Lola said, cringing. “So it didn’t go over too well?”

“Ya *think*?” I snapped, grabbing her by the arm.

“But—”

“I’m not gonna discuss this in the hallway in the middle of the night, so you’d better come with me.” I dragged her back to my room and slammed the door.

I sat Lola down on my bed and started pacing, explaining how Xavier had reacted to her brilliant idea.

She hummed. “I’m sure he’ll calm down.”

“I sure hope so, because I don’t know what I’m gonna do otherwise,” I grumbled, pausing in front of her and raking my hands through my hair.

“Hey, what’s that?” Lola asked, pointing at the paper sticking out of my pajama pocket.

“Well, I’m glad you asked,” I said. “*This* is a weird letter that Lucian sent. More like a note.” I thrust the letter at Lola, whose eyes went wide.

“Isn’t he the prince?” She gasped, scandalized. “Don’t tell me you’re now a *tre destini*?”

I grimaced. “Gross, *no*.” I paused. “Though Lucian did say that all Lunas end up falling for him. He’s so cocky it drives me up the wall.”

“So, this *is* a booty call request?” Lola asked, intrigued.

I snatched the letter back. “Lola, stop. I have no intention of doing anything with Lucian—and I’m not a Luna, anyway.”

Lola smirked. “That’s a good point, but it’s clear that this prince isn’t going to give up without a fight. He’s got a creepy stalker vibe, a big wallet, and a handsome face—all those things always pay off in romance novels.”

I huffed at her teasing. “Oh my god, stop messing with me!”

Lola grinned, looking like she was enjoying herself, the monster. I considered telling her about my weird Seluna dreams but decided not to, because it would only give her bullshit more fuel. I needed to focus on the important thing right now, not get distracted.

“Do you think Xavier will come back?” I asked.

Lola rolled her eyes. “*Due destini*, remember? He’ll be back. He’s literally stuck with you. Ain’t that fun?”

I cringed. “What if he… Do you think he’ll really sleep with Ava?”

Lola shrugged. “You did give him permission, so it’s a possibility.”

I glared at her. “Well, I wouldn’t have without your advice. This is all your fault!”

She gasped. “How’s it my fault? You’re literally the one who’s got two mates, and you’re sleeping with both of them—it’s only right for Xavier to do the same!”

“But what if this doesn’t make Ava’s feelings fade?”

“I don’t know! I just shared a dumb idea with you—I didn’t expect you to actually do it!”

I groaned. “Can’t I just take it back? Explain to Xavier that it was a mistake?”

“It’s too late. It’s out there. You can’t just delete the tweet. And I still think it’s the best remedy. Let him realize you’re the greatest thing in the world.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “But we don’t know if I *am* the best thing in the world—Ava might be a magician in bed.”

Lola gaped like a fish. “I didn’t think of that.”

I slapped my forehead. “The point is, I should never have let this happen. There are better ways to go about dealing with Ava.”

Lola sighed deeply. “Whatever happens, you’ll have to accept the outcome. And there’s really nothing you can do about it right now. What’s done is done, and it’s not my fault. You’re a big girl, you make your own decisions. I’m innocent.”

I scowled. “I hate you.”

“Love you too, boo.”

Grumbling, I shoved Lucian’s letter into a drawer.

Lola gasped. “Wait, you can’t just ignore a prince! He could have you beheaded or something.”

I rolled my eyes. “What era do you think we’re living in? Besides, we’re not even sure he really is a prince.”

Lola grabbed the letter from the drawer, obviously unwilling to let me try and shove this issue aside. Because she was literally the most annoying person ever. Jay was a saint. Or a masochist. Or both. Same thing went for me, probably, because I loved her to death.

“Why didn’t Lucian leave a way to contact him?” she wondered. “There’s no number—how are you supposed to respond to this?”

“I have no idea,” I replied honestly.

“But what did your mates say about the letter?” Lola pressed on.

“I don’t know that either,” I said. “Since it’s not threatening or anything, I don’t see the upside of getting Xavier and Greyson all fired up.”

“But you have to respond,” Lola said seriously.

“Can you please stop giving me bad advice?”

“It’s up to you to take it or leave it,” Lola huffed. “And you should totally respond.”

I groaned. “But we’re back to square one—how am I supposed to reply to Lucian? Send up smoke signals?”

Lola seemed skeptical. “Yeah, that won’t work. Has Lucian tried to contact you before?”

“He hasn’t.” I paused. “But I’ve been having these weird dreams.”

I couldn’t resist any longer, and I explained it all to Lola. It was probably a bad idea to give her madness and horrid advice more fuel, but anyway—where was the fun in having a normal friend when I could have her?

“Well, this is a no-brainer,” Lola said. I braced myself for whatever the hell she was going to say next. “If Lucian holds the key, then you need to talk to him, find out what this is all about.”

I scowled. “*Again*, I can’t talk to him. There’s no phone number, remember?”

“Then maybe there’s only one thing you can do,” Lola said.

“What?” I asked cautiously.

Lola smirked. The devilish look on her face matched what she said next. “Why, you should go see him in person, of course.”

**Episode 2195**

XAVIER

Ava looked at me in disbelief and hurt. “How can you joke about us having sex? I’m dying over here, and you’re just—”

“I would never joke about something like that,” I snapped, cutting her off.

“But do you even *want* to be with me?” Ava asked, aghast.

I paused, my head burning as I processed. My wolf wanted her. I knew that. But my interest—my true interest, how I felt as a person and not an animal—ended with this strange push and pull between us. If sleeping with Ava would provide the much-needed kick to get her out of my life, if it would indeed give her closure, then I could consider it. It would be so easy to grab Ava right now, kiss her, bite her, shove her to the ground, watch her spread her legs for me, and then—Cali’s face appeared in my mind shutting all of those other thoughts straight down.

*No.*

I snapped back into the present, refraining from indulging in fantasies that made me feel as fucked up as they were. “I wouldn’t have asked you this question if I wasn’t for real. But I’d only fuck you if it meant I’d never have to touch you again.”

Fury flashed through Ava’s face—a kind of humiliated rage that I’d never seen on her before. “You really want to make me hate you, don’t you?”

I had barely opened my mouth before she reared back and raised her hand to slap me. I probably deserved it. She wanted to hurt me like she’d been hurt, to draw blood with no shame or regret. I was an Alpha, though—too fast for her. I grabbed her wrist, sneering.

“I’m only speaking the truth,” I said.

My voice was gruff, so broken that my mocking smile vanished. My hand was trembling as it held hers, and as she stared at me with that fire in her eyes, my wolf howled to claim and devour.

The silence was so heavy I could feel it like gravity. Like the pull between us.

“Go fuck yourself,” she spat, struggling to pull her arm free, growling like an animal.

She was an animal.

Both of us *were* animals half the time, both of us predators, and the carnivore in me was in charge right now. I couldn’t refuse my wolf—I couldn’t stop long enough to think, so I did what he demanded.

I pulled Ava closer, her other hand slamming into my chest.

And when she looked up at me, all her rage had turned into devastation.

“You’re nothing like the man I loved. You’re cruel. You treat me like I’m less than human, and your words—your words fucking hurt, Xavier!” She slapped me on the shoulder, hissing, “If you want to let me go so badly, then do it!”

She hit my shoulder and chest again, and again, but I didn’t let go. My brain said to release her, to send her off, to tell her to go to hell. But the mate bond throbbed between us, lust making my body react, my heart race. I was furious at myself for it, for feeling aflame at her proximity, at the sight of her.

At the sight of her as she said, “If you fucking hate me so much, just let me go!”

Something in me broke.

I wasn’t thinking when I grabbed her by the nape and dragged her in for a kiss.

It was hot and hard and violent—teeth clashing and biting, like we both wanted to make this hurt, to make it count. I wanted to fucking devour her, and she felt the same. I could feel the need rolling off her under my tongue, her naked body quivering against me, her skin hot, every inch of her shaking at the friction between us. The scorching frenzy I’d fallen into stopped me from breaking the kiss, even if her nails dug into my neck and my hands left bruises on her hips, even as I gripped her hair to lead the kiss and tugged hard enough for her to moan.

She *liked* the pain.

We both did.

My brain screamed that I didn’t want to do this—that I was only doing it to bring that closure Cali had talked about. But the truth was, I wasn’t thinking of Cali while Ava kissed me. I was thinking of her—Ava. All Ava. The feel of Ava. The smell of Ava. How I wanted her in a way that I hadn’t in a long, long time. How I needed her so badly I was ready to break.

Ava. My mate.

My wolf recognized her as his mate, and the kiss at the party had only whetted his appetite. My wolf was ready for more. He was ready to push Ava to the ground and flip her onto her stomach, fuck her on the forest floor and show her who she belonged to.

It had never felt like Ava belonged to me, though. Not really.

Somehow, it was always the other way around.

“Xavier,” she whimpered against my mouth, and her hand, possessive, hot, and so fucking greedy lowered from my chest to my abs. And then it went lower, to where I was so hard for her that it made me ache, and I realized—

If she touched me right now, I wouldn’t be able to stop myself.

“No!” I shoved her back with a snarl, panting.

I felt dirty, ashamed, even while my wolf howled for me to continue what I’d started, to solidify the mate bond like he needed me too. My instincts were going haywire, and I could barely keep myself together.

“This can’t… Whatever *this* is, can’t happen,” I rasped, my chest heaving.

Ava laughed, breathless as she pointed at me accusingly. “It’s what you want, Xavier! You were the one who came to me—you are the one who’s made it crystal clear! It’s just…”

She moved closer again, so fast that I didn’t have the time to withdraw, to focus. She touched my chest, and I flinched the moment her hand made contact, the heat of the bond and the lust of the contact shooting through me like dynamite.

“It’s what we both want…” Her voice was a whisper. She looked up at me, her lips red and swollen, and my wolf howled again.

I didn’t want Ava, no, but my wolf did.

My wolf craved her.

My wolf yearned for her.

My wolf had abandoned me, *punished* me when I’d killed Ava.

He had always loved her, hadn’t he?

Ava glanced at my mouth, about to go in for the kill, when suddenly…

*Crack!*

We both flinched.

“Is it the hunters?” Ava whispered.

Honestly, at that moment, I’d have been thankful if it were them. They could shoot Ava or me, and I’d be happy to get this nightmare over with at this rate.

No… *No*.

What the fuck was wrong with me? Why would I think that? I had to be there for Cali. I had to protect her, always. I knew Greyson had her back, but I’d always be special for Cali. I was her first. Her true mate.

I had to be.

I quickly shifted, ignoring Ava’s protests, and ran toward the sound.

“Xavier, no!” she called. “This could be dangerous!”

I didn’t listen to her. I was thankful for the sound, thankful to be away from Ava. But a moment later, she was back.

Fuck, I was never going to shake her.

*Do you smell any hunters?* she asked.

I growled. I wanted her the fuck out of my head. I was about to tell her not to mind link with me again when we both saw what had made the sound.

A deer.

It saw us and ran like hell for its life.

I shifted back to human, rubbing my face. What the hell was wrong with me? Since when did I fall for a deer’s nightly shenanigans? How the fuck hadn’t I been able to figure out what the noise was without spotting it? The deer’s scent was the only thing in the air—I should’ve known.

But I hadn’t known, because I’d let my emotions get the better of me.

The mate bond was fucking me up, twisting my mind, and my wolf kept begging to have Ava. It was an insistent hunger that had turned into an ache. I used to be able to ignore it, hide it, but now it was ever-present, my wolf front and center, howling with mindless need.

What the fuck was I supposed to do when my whole body was on fucking fire at the thought of her?

“Xavier…”

I went rigid at the sound of her soft voice. Slowly, I turned to face her.

She had shifted back. She was naked, and a werewolf’s vision left nothing to the imagination. Her whole body was shadowed, but I could clearly see how flushed she was where it counted—on her lips, her neck, her breasts, between her legs…

She wanted me so badly, I could smell it.

She was shaking, panting hard as she approached me, her eyes locked onto mine. Her voice was a shiver crawling down my spine as she asked, “Are we going to finish what you started?”

**Episode 2196**

MARTA

I had never been more terrified in my life, and that said something, considering all the stuff I’d been through. The witch judges were deliberating, and I stared at them, holding my breath as they whispered among themselves in rumbles that I couldn’t make out.

Why was there no jury?

I was pretty sure a group of well-meaning supernatural beings would’ve been far more understanding of my predicament. They’d have listened to what Lilac and I had to say, and would’ve seen how right we were about the witch council’s inactivity when it came to Letifer. How the hell could the witch council make an unbiased decision when their inactivity was directly linked to my accidental necromancy shenanigans?

Swallowing thickly, heart pounding, I turned to Lilac.

He nodded and mouthed, “It’s going to be okay.”

I had no idea if Lilac was right, though. How could he be so certain? I was terrified over here. I was ready to break at the idea of this being the end of the road for the two of us, when we’d barely even started.

Judge Hawthorne suddenly banged her gavel again, startling me out of my thoughts. “The verdict has been decided!”

Oh god, it was happening. I knew the verdict was coming, but I still wasn’t ready. Somehow, I thought I’d have a bit more time, but even as I thought about that I contradicted myself. The waiting had been too much; best to get it over with. I wanted to know, but also I didn’t. Ugh, this was the worst.

“The witch council’s judgement on Marta Zhao shall be as follows: in the matter of performing unsanctioned necromancy…” Judge Hawthorne paused. Then she said, “We find the defendant guilty.”

My heart dropped to my stomach. Guilty? I mean, technically, I was guilty—I had brought Lilac back, but it had been for all the reasons we’d just told them. How could they punish us for feeling the way we did?

*How could they punish something like…*

My stomach flipped.

*… love?*

I was so devastated that I didn’t dare look at Lilac.

“This cannot be true,” Big Mac declared, fire in her eyes. “How can you all stand there and judge a child for doing her best while the lot of you didn’t even—”

Judge Hawthorne banged the gavel again, yelling, “Order! Order in the courtroom!”

Big Mac looked like she was steaming in righteous fury. I felt grateful to have her. I felt like I’d fought this as hard as I could—I had stuck up for myself in a way that I hadn’t in a really long time after being trapped at Bert’s. That had to be worth at least something, right?

There was a lump in my throat.

I could feel Lilac staring at me, feel his energy almost pleading me to look back, and I couldn’t resist. When our eyes met, his gaze was angry, but sad too. I’d never seen him look so broken. So unlike himself. He stared at me, unmoving, his jaw set, his eyes dark and searing. I wished I could memorize his face with one look.

When would I see him again?

My eyes watered with painful tears.

“Order in the courtroom!” Judge Hawthorne banged her little hammer again, before finally putting it down and continuing to speak. “You didn’t let me finish, counselor. While we do find Miss Zhao guilty of unsanctioned necromancy, we have decided not to sentence her.”

Big Mac gasped.

I couldn’t believe my ears. “What?”

Judge Hawthorne wagged a finger at me. “Don’t get too excited. We’re not sentencing you to imprisonment, but we are going to be putting you on magical probation.”

What the hell did that even mean? I looked over at Lilac, who seemed equally stunned and confused. But still—this had to mean something good, right? Hope surged inside me.

“We admit,” Judge Hawthorne went on, looking shifty, “that we were not quick to act when it came to Letifer. We were intimidated by the warlock’s powers, but Miss Zhao was able to stop him. This deserves a reward, despite the necromancy that occurred. However, her magic is clearly still developing, and it needs to be controlled.”

I was torn between feeling ecstatic and apprehensive. Should I jump up and down and run to Lilac and kiss all over his face? Should I stay put and wait to see what they meant by “controlled”? God, I hoped there would be no magical handcuffs involved.

“We are sentencing her to probation,” Judge Hawthorne continued, “and she will work with a mentor to get her magic in check so that she can no longer interfere with matters of life and death accidentally. She will learn what it means to be a necromancer, a witch. She will abide by all the rules, and no longer be a danger to herself and others.”

I smiled big and wide. So my being controlled simply meant getting a mentor. That actually sounded amazing. It already felt like I had a mentor, kind of, in Big Mac. I turned to look at her, and she was smiling softly at me, looking hopeful as well. It was such a rarity to see her expression so open that I cherished it.

“Any other conditions?” Big Mac asked the witches.

Judge Hawthorne cleared her throat. “Of course. If Miss Zhao fails to train, or performs any undue magic…” She glanced over in Lilac’s direction. “Lilac will be sent back to the spirit realm.”

I gasped, gut-punched. “What?” I spluttered. “No, you can’t do that!”

Judge Hawthorne banged her gavel for about the millionth time and then pointed at me with it. “We can, and we will. Get your magic in check, girl, and there will be no problems. Until we find a court ordered mentor, the bracelets will remain on. We have spoken.”

The witches all nodded at one another.

Then they all banged their gavels at once and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

There was a moment of complete and utter silence, laced with astonishment, before Lilac exclaimed, “We did it!”

I couldn’t believe it. The entire group ran up to me, everybody cheering as they wrapped me up into a huge group hug. Lilac was the closest to me, kissing my cheek, my forehead, my neck, his arms tight around me. Tears had spilled down my cheeks, and I was so grateful for him. I was so grateful for all of them.

“Thanks so much for…” I sniffled, wiping my eyes as I looked around. “For believing in me, I guess. I was so scared.”

“This was a piece of cake,” Big Mac deadpanned. And if I hadn’t seen her get furious earlier, I would’ve bought her cool demeanor.

“We’ll be there for you, no matter what,” Mrs. Smith said, squeezing my arm.

Kira smiled. “Whatever magic help you need, mentor or not, you know where we are. Always ask for our help. We believe in you.”

“Of course you do!” Lilac enthused and picked me up, shouting, “Marta’s such a badass!” I clung to him, looking at his huge smile and fond eyes. And then he said, “When you asked them why they didn’t do anything about Letifer, it was incredible! Nail on the head!”

I was so flattered and fluttery that I wanted to grab him and kiss him right in front of everybody. Feeling all flustered, I mumbled, “Put me down, you menace!”

Laughing, he did, then kissed the side of my head. I took his hand in mine, looking up at him with a smile.

“We have to figure out how to get out of here,” Big Mac said with authority. “I’ll go check with—who was it again? Kyle?”

Mrs. Smith and Kira said they’d go with Big Mac, and all three of them headed off. Vander approached, then, smiling at me.

“I’m very proud of you, Marta,” they told me. “I knew you’d get through it.” They winked. “If you ever need me, just call.”

“Thank you, Vander,” I said.

With a playful wink, Vander disappeared.

“We should go find the others,” Lilac said cheerfully, squeezing my hand as we headed in the direction Big Mac, Kira, and Mrs. Smith had vanished. I paused, staring at him.

“I owe you the biggest thank you, Lilac,” I murmured. “You’ve always been there for me. Literally.”

He smiled, tucking my hair behind my ear. He was so sweet and handsome that my heart was pounding overtime. “You make it easy by being awesome, and ridiculously hot.”

I laughed, smacking him playfully on the chest. Smirking, he gripped my wrist and pulled me closer for a kiss. I opened up my mouth to him, filled with this floaty feeling of relief and pleasure and home. After years of feeling lost, I finally had a home in the Redwood pack. And I had a boy who cared for me as deeply as I cared for him.

Lilac deepened the kiss, making my toes curl, my heart pound. I clung to him tightly, eager for more and kissing him back with equal fervor.

“Easy there, tiger,” he finally said, grinning as he broke away. He brushed his lips over mine softly. “Hold that thought for when we get home, okay?”

I blushed. “Okay.”

He looked around. “Do you think we can bring some kombucha back to the pack house with us? Did the witches say anything about that?”

His words made me remember something else that the witches had said. Something really important for me and my future.

Who was this mentor going to be, and would they actually be able to help me control my magic?

**Episode 2197**

GREYSON

I was trying to sleep, but I could clearly hear Lola and Cali chattering. I snorted, shaking my head. I’d thought Cali had gone to sleep, but no. Instead, she was up in the middle of the night, talking with her best friend, who always seemed to help her make the worst decisions.

It was almost like a ritual for the two of them.

I heard Cali’s door open and close—Lola leaving—and I hopped out of bed. I knocked quietly on Cali’s door and then opened it to see Cali sitting primly on her armchair. She looked far too innocent.

I arched an eyebrow. “Why did you disobey me, Caliana?”

Cali’s head snapped up, all deer caught in headlights as she took in my stern expression.

“What, are you gonna start ordering me around now that you’re Alpha?” She scowled. “I didn’t sign up for that.”

I broke into a laugh that made her smirk. “I’m just kidding…” I shut the door and came closer, loving the way she looked at me, bending to lower my face to hers. I glanced at her lips as I murmured, “Or am I?”

Before she could reply, I grabbed her by the waist and swung her over my shoulder, caveman style. She squealed, smacking my back. “Greyson! Put me down!”

She gave the order while snickering, so I gathered we were good here.

“Are you sure?” I asked playfully, groping her ass hard enough that she yelped.

“You’re so annoying,” she huffed. “And also, no, don’t put me down.”

I chuckled and walked over to the bed. She was basically lying over my shoulder, her head upside down, but she still managed to casually ask, “So how are you?”

I chuckled. “Pretty good. Trying to get my mate to bed. Wanna take care of her and stuff. Part of being a good Alpha, and all.”

She poked my tailbone. “You’d better think of that as a two-way street, Greyson. You could use some looking after.”

I gently lowered Cali onto the bed. “I like the sound of that.”

I stroked her cheek, pulling her into my arms now that she was upright. She looked a little woozy but satisfied as she grinned up at me.

“Will you lie down with me?” she asked, nuzzling against me.

“Of course,” I said, pulling her close as we lay in bed.

I wished things could stay like this between us forever. Just Cali and me, no Xavier bullshit to tear us apart. In the greater scheme of things, having him and Ava back as mates would solve a lot of problems for me and Cali. Especially for me, really, because Cali’s choice would be obvious. I would be her only choice.

I didn’t want her to be forced to choose me, though.

I wanted her to want me the most.

I wanted her to pick me because she felt as fiercely as I did, but Cali was…

She was rightfully concerned that the curse might not be broken. I could prove it to her, though. At least in theory. I could make her see that she was free to choose, and I could have her, if she’d take me.

I didn’t want to consider that she might choose Xavier over me, despite it all.

My ultimate dream was to keep my place as the Alpha of the Redwood pack, with Cali as my Luna. I couldn’t ask that of her, though. Not until she officially chose me. Not until she stopped having feelings for Xavier. Could she ever stop having feelings for him, though?

The idea that no matter what I did, this would remain a fucked-up love triangle—it was a nightmare.

Either way, I couldn’t pressure Cali into choosing by asking her to be my Luna. It would only complicate things further for her, and intensify her dilemma.

“What are you thinking about?” Cali whispered.

I looked down at her as she lay in my arms, gazing at me in a way that made my heart melt. “You. Always you,” I whispered.

“Will you stay with me tonight?” she asked, wide-eyed and hopeful.

I raised an eyebrow. “To rest.”

She pouted.

I smirked. “Cali, you have to rest.”

“I don’t—” She yawned, shaking her head. “Okay, fine…”

She nuzzled my neck, pulling the covers over us. She snuggled closer to me, and I kissed her forehead, so grateful to share this with my mate. With her in my arms, we both drifted off into a deep sleep.

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“We expect you at the lake house before noon,” Iris told me over the phone the next morning.

When I’d gotten out of bed, Cali had still been sleeping. As much as I hated to leave her behind, it was good to see her rest.

“I’ll be there ASAP,” I told Iris.

“I want Charlie to come along with you.”

I didn’t like the idea of bringing any other werewolves along, but how could I argue? Charlie was her son. The fascinating part, though, was that Violet had told me recently that Iris had tried to kill Charlie when she realized he’d turned. Attempted murder was usually grounds for someone to cut off their mother in human relationships that weren’t part of a Greek tragedy. But apparently Charlie hadn’t taken that step, because Iris was remorseful and all that. How could you apologize for attempted murder, though?

And they said werewolf dynamics were a mess.

“I wanna come with,” Violet said, when I went to their room to pick up Charlie.

I shook my head. “I don’t want to risk having you exposed.” I also needed Charlie to stay focused instead of obsessing over her safety.

Ten minutes later, Charlie and I were driving to the lake house. I glanced over at him in the passenger seat. He was uncharacteristically broody.

“Okay, spill it,” I said.

Charlie spoke up right away, as if he’d been waiting for me to ask him what was up. “I just wish my mother would accept Violet. I know she’s trying, but every time she’s around, Violet feels bad.”

“I think your mom should suck it up,” I said bluntly. “Also, Iris is pretty lucky you’re even talking to her. I heard she tried to kill you? And she still thinks she’s allowed to have a say in who you love? That’s hilarious.”

Charlie blinked at me. Oh, no. Had I offended him?

I cleared my throat. “Anyway, all that is to say, I feel sorry for Violet—she’s a sweetheart, and she doesn’t deserve to have anyone looking at her with suspicion, much less the mother of her mate.”

Charlie swallowed. “You’ve been thinking a lot about this, huh?”

I paused. “Wouldn’t be a good Alpha if the troubles of my pack mates didn’t linger on my mind. I guess I relate to what Violet’s going through. I know what it’s like for someone to look at you like you’re a monster. I went through the same thing when I returned to the pack after being a Rogue. Everyone thought I was responsible for all kinds of atrocities.”

Charlie nodded. “Heard about that. It must have sucked.”

“The key is not to let it get to you,” I said. “Sooner or later, Iris will realize how special Violet is. And if she doesn’t, you can always set boundaries that she won’t be able to cross. Politely. That will at least make your mother respect your choice.”

Charlie stared at me. “You think this is about respect?”

“For sure. Respect is key,” I said.

“The Redwood pack used to call you a monster, and now you’re their Alpha…” Charlie trailed off. He let out an amused chuckle. “I guess you know what you’re talking about.”

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Phil had made a ton of progress on the lake house. It was in much better shape than I’d imagined.

“Do we have plans to come back here?” Charlie asked as we got out of the car. “The lake is gorgeous.”

I shrugged. “Not sure yet. There’s no rush—we have bigger issues at hand.”

“Charlie!” Iris and the other hunters came out of the house. She made a beeline for Charlie to offer him a—thankfully non-lethal—hug.

“How were the accommodations?” I asked her, after the greetings were done.

“They were fine,” Iris said. “Though Sergeant Pepperdine insisted on camping out in his tent.”

Everybody looked at a spot a few feet away. Sure enough, the gruff hunter was emerging from a pitched tent. This dude was so weird.

I liked it.

“How’s it going?” I asked him.

“Good morning, Alpha.” He reached out to shake my hand, which was interesting.

“This is a warm welcome,” I said after our handshake.

Pepperdine scoffed. “I’ve never been a big fan of werewolves, but I’ve learned that they aren’t necessarily the enemy. Charlie and Violet certainly taught me that.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Sorry, but I’m still on the fence when it comes to hunters.”

Pepperdine snorted. After a brief moment of awkward silence, he asked, “How much do you know about Shanna Paiyn?”

“Not much. Doesn’t matter, though. We’re going to put an end to her threats.”

“Do not take her lightly,” Pepperdine said cautiously. He swallowed, a distant look and sadness settling on his features. He suddenly seemed ten years older. “Shanna won’t hesitate to kill anyone to get what she wants.”

“Sounds like you know her…” I trailed off.

“A long time ago,” he said. “She’s changed. Or maybe I never realized what she always was.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Shanna’s the type to use a nuclear bomb to take out a sniper,” he said. “She will lay everything to waste. She doesn’t care who gets hurt. She’s ruthless. Get it?”

I nodded. “I promise I’ll be careful.”

Pepperdine took a deep breath. “I hope you realize this won’t stop here. Shanna has it out for all supernaturals.”

I paused, processing.

Was this going to be an all-out war?

**Episode 2198**

Snuggled in the safety of Greyson’s arms during the night, feeling safe and warm and nice, I didn’t have any Seluna dreams. I was so grateful for him—nobody could ground me like he did.

When I woke up the next morning and saw him drive off with Charlie, though, my stomach panged. Greyson was off on Alpha duty, and I was staying here with my thoughts. Which were instantly redirected to Xavier.

*Did he come back last night?* I wondered.

After getting ready as quickly as possible, I walked out of my room and down the hall to Xavier’s. I swallowed nervously, anxious. I knocked on his door, but—just like last night—I got no response. Where the hell was he? God, was he really mad enough to just run off like a moody teenager? Yes, I’d messed up, but what the fuck—

“Looking for someone?” Ava’s voice startled me, interrupting my thoughts.

I turned around to face her. She just stood there, eyebrows arched. The only thing she had on was a semi-sheer cream robe. I couldn’t believe she’d just wear that to roam around the house. And yet I could, because werewolves had no shame.

“What do you want?” I asked her briskly.

She arched an eyebrow. “Xavier isn’t here.”

“Did I ask you?” I asked, eyebrows raised. This girl just loved popping up out of nowhere like a ghost—maybe because she’d been an actual ghost. But anyway, she wasn’t even part of this pack, so she could just leave again.

Without prompting, the ghost-demon before me said, “I was surprised Xavier got up so early—he was so worn out after last night.”

*Oh my god… That can’t mean… Can it? CAN IT?*

Ava was fucking evilly smirking, and my worst fears were ready to erupt.

*No, Cali! Don’t give her the satisfaction!*

I told myself to get a grip. I wasn’t gonna bluntly ask this woman if she’d slept with my mate. I wasn’t gonna play her game—she’d say yes just to mess with me, even if it wasn’t true. But she was definitely implying something, and that made me suspicious and anxious.

She wasn’t allowed to look so goddamn self-satisfied and cocky this morning.

I needed to get the hell away from her before this broke into a fight that only Xavier would be able to resolve.

“I’m ignoring you,” I told her sharply, thrusting my chin upward and walking away from her, straight back to my room.

Once I shut the door behind me, though, my stomach clenched in fear and disgust. What the fuck had I done? Had I pushed Xavier into Ava’s arms? Had I ruined everything between us? Was this how it all ended? Because if so, it was fucking horrible!

*I need to get a grip! Right now!*

No. Xavier wouldn’t sleep with her, even if I *had* been enough of a moron to tell him to do it, in the name of some sort of weird justice that was rooted in the *due destini* curse.

Taking a deep breath, I walked to my door, pressing my ear against it.

A moment later, I heard Ava’s soft footsteps as she walked past and toward her room.

*It’s fine*, I thought. *She’s gone. She’s—Wait a second…*

What if Xavier was in *Ava’s* room? Naked! I needed to find my mate ASAP and get the truth out of him, no matter how bad it was. Xavier wouldn’t lie to me—not about something as messed up as sleeping with Ava.

I couldn’t believe I’d even considered telling him to do this. What the hell was wrong with me? Why would I suggest him exploring his relationship with Ava? *Why, god, WHY?*

The answer came in the form of my best friend the moment I got downstairs. Lola, my lovely advisor, to whom I had to listen only when I was interested in chaos. What a fucking mess.

“Have you seen Xavier?” I asked her impatiently.

Lola sipped her coffee. “Good morning to you too. And no, I haven’t seen him, but I’m sure he’s around somewhere.”

Encouraging. NOT. Maybe I should check Ava’s room anyway, just to make sure. My paranoia was getting out of control.

“Don’t worry,” Lola told me casually. “It’ll be fine. You should get ready, by the way. We have big plans.”

I frowned. “We do? Since when?”

Lola smirked. “Why, we’re going shopping, silly.”

I blinked. “So first you help me blow up one of my relationships, and now you want to drag me to the mall. Aren’t you done torturing me for the week?”

Lola laughed. “Stop being so dramatic.”

“What are we even shopping for?” I asked, weirded out.

Lola looked around to make sure we were alone. Then, in a low, conspiratorial voice she said, “We’re not really shopping. We’re going to the Vanguard pack.”

I gaped. “Oh my god, Lola!” I hissed. “This isn’t a good time!”

Lola shrugged. “When *is* there a good time to go see a weird maybe-prince? Never. So we’re going to go. And we may have to pick up a few things, just to make it look like we went shopping.”

I crossed my arms, exasperated. “Seriously? Why do we need to act like secret agents?”

Lola shook her head. “Think about it. Literally nobody is going to want us to go to the palace. They’ll try to stop us.”

“And they’re gonna be right,” I added wryly, but Lola continued, unbothered.

“Bottom line, if we’re gonna go, we have to keep it on the DL.”

I scoffed, shaking my head. Sure, I would’ve loved to understand what the hell Lucian was up to, but I also wasn’t so keen on returning to the palace.

“You do realize that this guy basically imprisoned me the last time I was at his house, right?” I asked Lola.

She smirked. “But, like, in a sexy way.”

I huffed, exasperated. “There’s no sexy way! He’s creepy! And scary!”

She smirked some more. “But really sexy too, right?”

I rubbed my forehead, sighing deeply. “Why do I feel that this is more about you wanting to meet a prince than helping me?”

Lola gave me an innocent look. “Two birds, one stone.” She patted my shoulder. “Just think about it. I’ll see you in a moment.”

She ran upstairs, leaving me all alone in the kitchen with my thoughts.

This was a really, really bad idea. Why should I visit Lucian and ask for even more trouble? Hadn’t following Lola’s advice once already caused enough of that? And Xavier still wasn’t home yet! Where the hell had he vanished to?

*Please, let it not be Ava’s room… UGH!*

I wondered if I could “accidentally” go into Ava’s room. If Xavier was there, I’d know it. And I would blast Ava, just for good measure. Even though this was all my doing, I owed Ava a good blasting for all the other bullshit she’d pulled over the months.

Just as I was about to leave the kitchen to follow my brilliant plan, though, Torin came running in.

“Wait, I heard you’re going shopping? I’d like to come along!” he said excitedly. “I still haven’t finished my Christmas list!”

I shook my head. “Sorry, Torin. The shopping trip is just an excuse for Lola and me to spend a little time together. Alone.” *Not to sneak off to try to resolve the potential Vanguard situation, oh, and hope not to get killed by hunters along the way.* “I hope you’re not disappointed?”

Torin offered a sigh. “I get it. But if you change your mind and need a fun Fae companion, I’m ready.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Great. I’ll go light up the fireplace!” Torin smiled at me and dashed into the living room.

He was so cute and wholesome that I felt bad leaving him behind. But I hated the idea of dragging him into a rogue trip to the Vanguard pack. I reserved that kind of danger for myself and my chaotic friend. Neither of us had any self-preservation instincts, so we were a powerful pair in that regard.

*Speaking of powerful…*

Heading upstairs, I thought how powerful my blast against Ava would be if I found Xavier in her room. I was ready to walk down the hallway and check when Artemis popped up out of nowhere.

“And where do you think you’re going, looking all grumpy?” she asked.

I glowered. “I’m not just grumpy. I’m pissed off.”

“As Rishika would say, *yikes*.” Artemis blinked. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ve got Ava problems,” I said, huffing.

Artemis scowled. “I really don’t understand why Ava is still here. It’s obvious nobody wants her around. Why is it so hard for you guys to just banish her?”

I pressed my lips together.

Artemis cringed. “Xavier’s not taking the plunge, is he?”

I sighed, hating everything.

“You know what?” Artemis said, “Maybe you need a break from the pack house.”

“A break?” I scoffed. “That’s the last thing I need—I’m not gonna leave Ava here alone with Xavier.”

“A trip would help clear your head, though,” Artemis said. “Help you think of your next move.”

“What kind of a trip do you mean?” I asked, intrigued now.

Artemis’s expression grew serious. Determined. “I’m going to go look for my uncle, Adair. Would you come with me?”

**Episode 2199**

XAVIER

I’d been in the shower for what felt like forever but had probably just been a couple of minutes, washing off the grime from last night. I couldn’t remember what time I’d come in or when I’d crashed onto my bed, exhausted. I ran my face under the water, bracing myself against the tile wall. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath, letting the steam invade my senses.

When I opened them, I saw a flash of Ava’s naked body in the reflective tile.

For a fucked-up second, I could feel her lips against mine again. My wolf stirred, satisfied, and my brain was overcome by images of last night. The way Ava had grabbed onto me, devouring my mouth, rubbing herself all over me, the scent of her desire overwhelming enough to cloud my judgement. She’d been insatiable, moaning, ready to drag me down on top of her, her thighs shaking with need. I could just see it, could feel it—my hand between her thighs, where she was so fucking wet for me that she trembled.

I could just see it—my teeth against her neck, biting there with the kind of ferocity she always welcomed, before shoving her to the ground. Her spreading herself for me to see what she offered, what she needed. Sinking into her, the slide smooth but my thrusts rough, demanding, the sex enraged, just like she wanted it. Just like I wanted it, with her clamping down on me, always eager for me as I spilled inside her, marking her from the inside out.

I growled, slamming my fist into the tile wall.

This woman was going to drive me fucking nuts. I needed to get her out of my head, right now, and that started with me turning the shower to cold. I drenched myself, cooling down every inch of my heated body.

I wanted to despise Ava, to hate her for what she did to me. I wanted to blame Cali for letting me indulge in this madness of a lost mate bond that just wouldn’t go away. But I knew that above all, I was the problem here. My wolf was the problem—he was the one driving this feeling.

I needed to figure out a way to end it before it destroyed me.

By the time I got out of the cold shower, my skin felt like ice. I ignored it, toweled off, and got dressed. When I got downstairs, I was half-expecting to see Greyson conducting a war council. Instead, though, I just found a few pack members eating in the kitchen. Jay noticed me, offering a half-smile.

“Hey,” he said. “You look like shit. Cali keep you up?”

I glared at him like he’d shot me with silver.

Jay flinched. “Damn, son. Everything okay between the two of you?”

I grunted, “Not exactly.”

Jay arched a quizzical eyebrow, but I wasn’t about to talk about what had happened with Ava the night before—not in front of everybody. I felt horrible about everything.

Especially the fact that I’d just had an extensive fantasy about her in the fucking shower.

While those thoughts remained in my head, I couldn’t be talking about my mate like everything was fine. My mate, meaning Cali. Not Ava. Of course not Ava.

Fuck.

“Dude, is everything okay?” Jay asked. “You don’t look so good.”

I took a deep breath, shaking my head. “I guess I could… use some advice.”

Jay was stunned. “This is worse than I thought.”

I shoved him on the arm. “I’ll go get some coffee. Then we can talk outside.”

A moment later, I had a cup of bitter coffee that Lola had probably made in hand. Jay and I were on the front porch, and the morning was quiet. Jay stared at me.

“So?” he asked, curious.

“My wolf has decided it wants Ava again,” I said. No need to stall.

Jay’s eyes—eye—went wide. He gaped like a fish. “Seriously?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?” I huffed.

“But are you— I mean, are you sure about that? How do you even know?” Jay asked.

I gritted my teeth. “I don’t know, Jay, how the hell could I know? Maybe because I want to fuck her raw and our mate bond has somehow returned stronger than ever?”

Jay winced in shock.

“Meanwhile,” I snapped, “the *due destini* is still there, and I fucking adore Cali, obviously, but the lust I feel toward Ava is almost uncontrollable. Do you get it now, or do you want me to be a little more explicit?”

Jay was blinking rapidly. “Got it. Just didn’t expect it.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

He hummed. “I mean, I thought your problem was that your car got scratched or something.”

I glared at him. “My car got scratched? Who did it?”

Jay cleared his throat. “The point is, all of that sounds really bad, man.”

I felt like bursting out laughing. “Bad is an understatement, Jay. I don't want any of these complications—I want to be with Cali, just us, and that’s it.”

Right now, as I thought about her, I knew that I was in love with her. What I felt for Cali was so much bigger than whatever animalistic haze Ava brought out in me.

“I know my bond with Cali is true and healthy. Sane,” I told Jay quietly. “What I feel toward Ava is more like desire and violence. It’s like a vicious zombie of what we once had. Like an undead link that’s lingering after I killed her.”

Jay paused. “That was poetic.”

I scoffed. “Fuck off.”

“I get that this is messed up, Xavier,” Jay said, then, serious. “It sounds like a huge problem that needs a solution ASAP, before…”

I snorted bitterly. “Before I do something I regret, like fucking Ava on the forest floor?”

Jay cringed. “Yeah. I can’t even imagine what she’d do after that. Probably rub it in Cali’s face. Ava’s dangerous, Xavier. We both know that. For god’s sake, she killed your mother.”

My rage intensified. My wolf stayed silent, as if knowing that this was a weak spot in his horny crusade to bring Ava back into my life.

Jay looked pretty worried now. “What are you gonna do? Does Cali know about this?” he asked, taking a sip of coffee.

“Cali told me to sleep with Ava,” I said bluntly.

Jay almost spat out his drink, coughing and choking. I patted him on the back. Didn’t want him to die on me just because of my messy drama. “She said *what*?”

“Me. Ava. Fucking. Cali said I should fuck another woman.”

“What the—what?” Jay looked stunned. “What was her reasoning?”

“Something or another about closure? Or Ava realizing her feelings weren’t real?” I scoffed. “I have no fucking idea, actually, I was too upset to listen. None of it makes sense to me. Mostly.”

Jay raised an eyebrow. “Mostly?”

I gulped down more bitter coffee, shaking my head.

Jay asked quietly, “Well, do you *want* to sleep with her?”

I shot him a sharp look.

Jay huffed. “Okay, okay, calm down. What can you even do right now, though?”

“The fuck do you mean?” I snapped.

“How can you force the temptation away?” Jay asked.

“I think I just told you that I can’t,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Then what is Cali even thinking?” Jay asked, bewildered. “Is it like a trap on her behalf? Is she playing mind games—one of those things when a girl tells you to do something just so you say that you won’t ever do it? Or is it more like a celebrity hall pass?”

I paused, peering at him. “Celebrity hall pass?”

Jay nodded seriously. “Yeah, like how if Lola ever somehow meets Pedro Pascal, she has my permission to do whatever she wants with him.”

“What?” I asked, confused.

Jay waved me off. “Never mind, that’s not a good analogy. With that celebrity stuff, it’s bound to never happen. Ava is too close to home. Can’t she just get out of here?”

I groaned. “I’ve tried to do that. She just keeps coming back, and I seem to be… incapable of getting rid of her.”

Jay squinted. “But have you *really* tried?”

I grunted in response.

“Can’t she just move cross country? Or, like, to Europe? I bet she could have fun there,” Jay said.

I rubbed my face, huffing. “I have no fucking idea, Jay. I don’t know if distance will make me forget about her. I don’t know how my wolf’s gonna react without her around—the fucker might just go berserk without her presence, and then I’ll have even *more* shit to deal with.”

Silence fell between us.

The coffee was undrinkable, so I stopped pretending I could stomach it.

And then Jay murmured, “Do you think that maybe the only way to stop this is if Ava dies… *again*?”

**Episode 2200**

GREYSON

I stood in the back yard, looking out at the lake.

I missed this place. It felt more like my pack house than Xavier’s. It was the house that Joss had bought for us with care and thought. It had been such a great choice when it came to both location—deadly ghost ponds weren’t something Joss could’ve predicted, obviously—and structure. She’d been a great leader.

I remembered when I’d chosen Joss to be my Luna. How I’d wanted it to be Cali, but how I’d known that that couldn’t happen. But things had changed since the spell and the veins vanishing. Plus, Cali was much more confident these days, much more grounded, and she was fully capable of being my Luna. The danger was always there, anyway, but now Cali was far better equipped to handle the pressure. One day, she would be my Luna.

Maybe we could live here. Together.

Charlie had asked me about us returning to this location, and right now, my answer to that question was yes, eventually. Yeah, when the house was totally fixed up again, I wanted the pack to come back here. I’d discuss it with the others first, of course—some of them could still be carrying a few psychological hang-ups, considering everything that had gone down at this location. But still. Knowing werewolves and how easily they brushed off violence and tragedy, the pack would be on board.

Xavier could stay at his own house, of course, and pout his days away.

I’d keep an open invite for him, though. Like, I hated him, because he was completely fucking annoying, but I also loved him. He was my little brother. He had pledged his loyalty to me, after all—albeit sassily—so I assumed there was a chance that he’d just suck it up and follow us here. For a time, at least.

Iris’s voice came from behind me, then, interrupting my thoughts. “We’ll be prepping this group with the lowdown on Shanna’s hunters. It would be best if the werewolves got ready to fight as well.”

“What’s the timeline?” I asked, facing her.

“We know that patience is not Shanna’s strong suit,” Iris replied. “It’s not in her nature to back down. She and her group will attack the other pack house sooner than later.”

“I don’t want to wait around for her to attack first, though,” I said. “I’d rather we go after them and get this over with.”

Iris arched an eyebrow. “That’s an idea. We can make it happen. Let me check with my people, and I’ll be in touch.”

I nodded. “Sounds good.”

Just as Iris walked away, a van pulled up to the house. Who the fuck—

Well, then. It was Phil. Poor guy looked confused as he got out of the car. Shit. I should’ve thought about him stopping by the house. He was still fixing stuff up around here.

“Oy!” Phil called, spotting me instantly. “Greyson!” He walked over to me, still looking baffled. “What’s going on here? Why are there people hanging out on the porch?”

Sure enough, the hunters were eating on the porch.

“Are you Airbnb-ing this out now? While it’s still under construction?” Phil asked skeptically.

I shook my head. “No, just helping out some friends. A simple arrangement—they should stay out of your way.”

“This ain’t that safe, you know,” Phil grumbled.

“It’s fine. From what I’ve seen, you’ve made a lot of progress,” I told him indulgently.

That seemed to appease him, but only slightly. As he walked away, I could’ve sworn I heard him mumble something about him being an artist and people interrupting his work.

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I returned back to the main pack house without Charlie—he’d said he’d stay to help get the hunters up to speed. I didn’t trust the hunters one hundred percent yet, but Iris was a good ally when it came to strategy and wits—I was definitely putting my trust in Charlie on that one. As for Pepperdine, his interest seemed pretty personal. I wasn’t sure if that was good or bad.

We’d have to wait and see.

When I got back home and parked the car in the driveway, I saw Sage and Zainab frolicking—or training—in the front yard. They ran up to me, looking intrigued.

“Greyson, hi!”

“How did it go?”

I replied, and they seemed satisfied. But as they turned around, I thought I heard one of them whisper, “Surprised he actually came back.”

And then both of them snorted, all sarcasm.

“Hey!” I called.

They froze.

“What was that?” I asked.

The two young women turned to look at me. They both seemed a little guilty.

“What?” Sage asked innocently.

I arched an eyebrow, walking up to them. “Don’t lie to me—I heard what you said.”

The two of them shared a look.

“Sorry Sage said that!” Zainab blurted out. “She didn’t think!”

Sage nodded, eyes wide. “It was just a joke! Ha ha, you know?”

I pressed my lips together, shaking my head. They were like a couple of kids caught trying to steal cookies.

“It’s fine,” I said. “I’m just curious, though—what did you mean by that comment?”

Both ladies swallowed roughly, exchanging another look.

“I won’t be mad,” I said. “Just tell me.”

Sage huffed, all awkward. “Well, you know, when you first became the Alpha, we really admired you and followed you.”

Zainab added, “Because of the Manus Cruentae. And you were super chill, but also authoritative. We felt safe around you.”

Sage nodded. “But then…”

“What?” I asked.

“Then you started…” Sage raised her eyebrows. “Just… going MIA?”

Zainab continued. “Who can forget all the stuff with Cali? You were constantly focusing on her instead of the pack, so—”

“We just don’t always know whether you’re here for good, or if you’re going to go off somewhere again,” Sage finished Zainab’s sentence, blurting it all out.

I paused, processing. These two had been truthful, and I appreciated that. They also had a fucking point.

“You’re right,” I told them.

They both blinked at me like owls.

“We are?” Sage said breathlessly.

Zainab elbowed her.

“I mean, of course we are,” Sage said. “We just… Alphas are usually… not used to getting called out. And accepting it.”

I shook my head. “A good Alpha needs to recognize when they’ve mishandled something. That’s part of a healthy pack.”

The two girls exchanged a look. They nodded as I continued.

“Bottom line, you’re right to have those concerns. I don’t blame you. But I want to reassure you that things are not like they used to be. Cali is here, she’s safe, and I’m fully committed to being Alpha. I’m not going anywhere.” I paused, taking in their appreciative expressions. “And if you have any other concerns, you can always come to me.”

The two werewolves stood there, exchanging another look. Their expressions were somber but confident, which I took as a good sign. They both nodded, and I nodded back before heading toward the front porch.

The girls seemed appeased, at least for now, but would that be enough?

Did more people feel this way? Should I make some kind of statement to everyone?

I wasn’t sure how to go about this, but I meant what I’d said to Sage and Zainab. My best bet would be to make it clear through my actions that I was here in the Alpha position for good, no matter what might get thrown at me.

Even if my own hot-headed brother challenged my authority.

When I walked into the house, Rishika spotted me. “Oh good, you’re back! How did it go?”

I gave her a brief update and ended it with, “We’re gonna be working on the offensive. I want to get rid of the threat as soon as we can.”

“Agreed,” Rishika said seriously before adding, “By the way, something came for you.”

I frowned in confusion. “Like a package? I didn’t order anything… Did Cali order anything? I don’t care how many YouTube videos she’s watched, I don’t need a whole skincare routine, or—”

Rishika snorted, shoving a letter at my chest. “Don’t spiral. It’s just this.”

I instantly recognized the paper. The Vanguard pack.

“When did this come?” I asked slowly.

Rishika shrugged. “This morning. We didn’t see who dropped it off.” Her gaze flicked to the envelope. “What? Is it trouble?”

“I guess we’ll see,” I grumbled.

I slowly opened up the envelope, noting that it was scented. Like roses or something. Lucian was insufferable. This had better not be another goddamn party, because if so, I wasn’t going. These prince types had too much fucking spare time on their hands.

“What does it say?” Rishika asked.

I started reading the letter. It was in Lucian’s flowery handwriting, and it opened by congratulating me on becoming the true Alpha of the Redwood pack, truly admirable to go with one Alpha, the way it had been for centuries upon centuries, blah blah blah.

This was boring me to tears.

How the hell did he even find out about our new Alpha situation?

I was ready to skip all the BS, preparing to throw the thing out, when I caught the end.

*The Vanguard pack has heard about your hunter problem.*

*Would the Redwoods like some help?*

*Lucian*

**Episode 2201**

I wasn’t surprised that Artemis was interested in finding her uncle—given her sudden interest in her family history—but I shook my head. “No, that’s not going to happen.”

“Why not?” she asked. “Why won’t you come with me?”

I rolled my eyes. “Artemis. I’ve got a lot of stuff going on. There’s no way I can just drop everything and go back to the Fae world for who knows how long.”

“You might not have to,” Artemis said, looking happy.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, according to Mom, the trees have been saying that Adair might not be in the Fae world at all. He’s been spotted in Las Vegas.”

“Really?” I asked, surprised.

Artemis nodded. “Or maybe New Orleans? Truthfully, I’ve never heard of either place, but Rishika showed me some websites about them. Apparently, you can win a lot of money playing cards. And in Las Vegas you can see someone named Celine Dion perform. And in New Orleans you can eat something called beignets—which sound amazing—and listen to something called jazz, and party in the streets.” She thought for a moment. “Except for the beignets, none of that sounds particularly interesting to me, though. And I don’t totally get why you’d want to party in the streets? What’s the point?”

I wasn’t in the mood to explain Mardi Gras to Artemis, so I dodged the question. “But Artemis, even if you know that Adair is in Las Vegas or New Orleans, those are both *really* big cities. How do you plan on finding him? *If* he’s even there anymore. He might have left by this point, right?”

Artemis gave me a level look. “Cali, do you remember what I used to do in the Fae world?”

“I know you were a bounty hunter—and you were good—but Las Vegas and New Orleans are very different places than the ones you’re familiar with.”

“You’ve been there?” Artemis asked curiously.

“Well… No,” I admitted. “But I’ve seen enough TV and movies to know that crazy stuff goes on in those places. Anyway,” I said, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear, “when were you planning on leaving?”

She shrugged with a sigh. “I was thinking I could go as soon as this hunter problem is all worked out. Which I suspect will be pretty soon.”

I bit my lip, thinking. I hated the idea of Artemis running off to a place like Las Vegas or New Orleans on her own. Artemis was strong and smart, but she was still very new to the human world. And I wanted to help my sister.

“Listen,” I finally said, “let me *think* about going with you. But please don’t go anywhere without letting me know first, okay?”

“Okay,” Artemis conceded. “I won’t go without letting you know. But if you *are* going to come, don’t wait too long to decide. I’m good, but even the best bounty hunter will lose a trail if she lets it go cold.”

“Okay,” I agreed.

I turned to look at the door to Ava’s room with a sigh. I had planned on making up some paper-thin excuse to barge through it, looking for Xavier, but I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. It was too pathetic, so I turned and headed back downstairs.

But the worry about Xavier was still with me, stinging like a cut. I couldn’t even imagine running off with Artemis while things with Xavier were still so unresolved. But I had a little time. Artemis sounded like she was open to waiting—at least for a while. And hopefully I’d be able to get some answers about Xavier and Ava soon. If things worked out, maybe I could even get Xavier to come with us. He used to be a mercenary, so he’d be helpful, too. And it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world to get Xavier away from Greyson for a while—and away from the constantly scheming Ava.

Downstairs, I still didn’t see Xavier, but I did see Greyson, standing with Rishika, holding a sheet of paper. He looked upset about something, and Rishika looked worried.

My stomach clenched. The paper in his hand looked a lot like the letter I’d received from Lucian. Had Greyson somehow found out about that and taken it from my room? How could that have happened?

I walked over hesitantly, listening hard.

“How did it even get here? You’re sure no one saw anything?” Greyson was asking. Rishika shook her head. “The last thing I want is Lucian as a pen pal.”

They were discussing a letter that Lucian had sent to Greyson. Maybe that should have made me feel relieved, but it didn’t.

“What the hell is Lucian up to?” Greyson snapped.

Rishika shrugged. “I don’t know, but it might be a good idea to think about his offer. We could use some more werewolves. We might need some reserves on hand, with this rogue hunter situation.”

Greyson’s eyes flashed. “The whole point of a pack is to protect its members. We can look out for ourselves.”

I stepped over to him. “Can I see the letter?” I asked, holding out my hand.

Greyson hesitated for just a moment, then handed it over.

I instantly recognized the thick, creamy paper, and Lucian’s distinctive looped writing. I scanned quickly through it and felt a little better. “Well, at least he’s not making any weird requests, right?”

Greyson grunted.

I looked up. “I mean, he’s just offering to help. Why wouldn’t we accept it?”

Greyson pulled the letter out of my hands, his mouth a thin, angry line. “We don’t need anyone else’s help,” he bit out. “*Especially* Prince Lucian’s.”

“With everything that happened, I know why you’re saying that,” I started. “But we’ve sought help outside the pack before, and it really paid off. Wouldn’t it be better to have the Vanguard pack working *with* us?”

But Greyson was already shaking his head. “I just don’t like the idea.”

“Why not?” I asked.

He ran an agitated hand through his hair. “Everything with the Vanguard pack comes with strings attached. Some you can see, some you can’t, but they’re there.”

I let this sink in.

“Well,” I started slowly, “this feels like an olive branch, don’t you think? What happens if we refuse their help?”

“I don’t care,” Greyson said shortly. He tore the letter to pieces and let it flutter to the floor. “We don’t need the Vanguard pack to protect our house or our pack. We have experienced hunters on our side. And we’ve taken on far more serious threats than these rogue hunters.”

He was right about that—we had taken on some pretty significant threats, though these rogue hunters didn’t exactly sound like lightweights either. I thought about the note I’d gotten from Lucian, and about Lola’s plan to meet with him face-to-face.

“Maybe…” I started slowly. “Maybe *I* could meet with him. With Lucian—”

“*What?*” Greyson snarled, whipping around to stare at me.

“I could talk to him. I think he thinks we have a connection or something. I could meet with him to discuss—”

“No fucking way,” he said firmly. “The creepy way he acts around you is exactly why you *shouldn’t* speak to him. And the less time any of the Redwoods spend with Lucian, the Vanguards, and their crackpot moon theories, the better.” He shook his head, looking shaken. “Why would you even suggest that, after everything you went through there? That clown basically kidnapped you.”

“It’s just that… Well, he might have kind of… reached out to me,” I stammered, my face heating.

Greyson swelled like he was going to explode. “*What?*” he asked, his voice low and icy.

“I got a note, too,” I said quickly. “From Lucian. It seems that he was reaching out to a few people—”

“*Cali!*” Greyson exploded. “When were you planning on telling me?”

“You know,” Rishika interrupted, “I know it doesn’t sound great, but it really might not be a bad idea to feel Lucian out on this, Greyson.”

Greyson rounded on her. “You have got to be kidding me!”

She didn’t even flinch. “Think about it. We’re relying on using hunters against hunters, right? We get a few more werewolves on our side, and maybe things will start to tilt in our favor.”

Greyson still looked furious, but he was clearly thinking, too. His eyes flashed, and that muscle in his jaw flexed. “I guess so.”

“We’re already trusting people we normally wouldn’t trust, right?” Rishika asked reasonably.

Greyson nodded, just once. “I guess that’s true. The trust we’re putting in Iris and the rest of her hunters is kind of a shot in the dark. It could certainly come back to bite us all in the ass. It’s in the nature of hunters to hate all supernaturals.”

“Right,” Rishika agreed.

I looked at Greyson hesitantly. “So, should I go and talk to Lucian?”

**Episode 2202**

CHARLIE

“I still can’t believe you guys are here,” I said, looking between Chad and Sophie.

“Why?” Sophie asked.

“I don’t know. I guess…” I shrugged. “Honestly, I thought my mom was calling in veteran hunters. Teachers and stuff.”

Chad snorted. “You don’t need veteran hunters when you’ve got me.” He reached for me and tried to pull me into a headlock, but I dodged out of the way. “You’ve seen me in action. I’ve got mad skills.”

I batted his hands away. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. You’re good, man. No denying it. But what about you, Sophie? What made you come out for this?”

She shrugged. “I heard that the rebel hunters were coming after you and Violet, so I had to come. You’re my friends.”

I smiled at her, and inside I was relieved to hear her say that. I liked Sophie, but I was still worried that she might be holding onto some more-than-just-friendly feelings for me. And the way she smiled back at me made me wonder even more.

“I didn’t come out because of any sentimental bullshit,” Chad scoffed, “but I *am* ready to kick some ass. I’m pissed as hell at Zachery.”

“Why are *you* mad?” I asked in surprise.

“*Why?*” Chad looked shocked. “He’s giving Bridgeham a bad rap, man. If we don’t take care of this, it’s going to get out, and we’re all going to have this stain on our reputations because we went to the same alma mater. It makes us all look bad.”

I hadn’t thought of it from that perspective. It hadn’t even occurred to me that hunters relied so heavily on their reputations, but Chad must have been right, because Sophie was nodding in agreement.

“Well, listen guys, I know this isn’t what you’re used to, but even with my mom around, while you’re here, the Redwood pack is in charge. You want to make sure you remember that—especially when the fighting starts, okay?”

Chad made a dismissive noise. “Don’t worry about us, Chuck. We’re here to fight. Check it out—I’ve been getting ready.” Pulling his hands into fighting position in front of his chest, he tipped his body to the side and brought his leg up in a quick, hard strike to the empty air.

Sophie rolled her eyes. “Please. That thing takes so long to execute, your opponent can go out to dinner, catch a movie, come back home, and pay the sitter before the kick lands.”

“Oh yeah?” Chad asked defensively. “What do you do, smartass?”  
 Without missing a beat, Sophie dropped down to the ground, wrapped her arms around Chad’s knees, and swept his legs out from under him, throwing him to the ground with so much force he let out a low, pained grunt as the air left him. An instant later, she had her knife pressed to his throat. “Maybe something like that?”

Chad sucked in a ragged breath. “I let you do that,” he rasped.

Sophie snorted and got to her feet, sliding her knife back into the sheath at her belt.

Chad clambered unsteadily back to his feet. “So, Charlie,” he said, turning to me, “what about you? You got anything up your sleeve?”

But before I could answer, Chad successfully pulled me into a headlock and spun, trying to throw me off-balance. But I *had* seen the Chadster in action, and I braced my hands against his arms and pulled, freeing my head, then pulled my knee up into his stomach, knocking the wind out of him.

Sophie laughed and shook her head.

“Boys will be boys… being idiots,” she said, and—using a single tidy leg sweep on both of us—knocked us to the ground.

Chad hadn’t seen it coming, and he looked up, surprised, but he laughed along with me when he realized what had happened. “Dammit, Sophie!”

She shrugged. “It’s just instinct.”

Chad got to his feet. “Hey, I meant to tell you—I finally figured out that move Pepperdine taught us, the Chopper. The one he uses to stun werewolves—”

Chad stopped suddenly and looked at me. The smile slid from Sophie’s face, and she shifted on her feet, looking uncomfortable. The silence between us stretched.

I could feel my stomach twist. I didn’t like being reminded of what hunters thought about werewolves. “Don’t forget, both Violet and I are werewolves, and that’s how we were able to fight those revenants back at camp.”

“We know that, Charlie,” Sophie said quietly.

“Werewolves can be allies. We’re not evil.”

No one responded, and the air between us was heavy with tension.

Then Chad snorted again. “Yeah, but you can still be a dick, Kim.”

I rolled my eyes. Some things never did change. “Listen, we’re going up against the rebel hunters as allies, right?”

Sophie nodded. Chad didn’t nod, but I could see that he was listening.

“So,” I continued, “I think it might be better if the three of us focused on fighting hunters, not werewolves.”

“Hey—” Chad started, looking suddenly worried.

“I get how this might be a hard idea for you to wrap your mind around,” I said, “but it’s not that weird. Werewolves have to learn to fight other werewolves—why can’t hunters learn to fight hunters?”

Chad shot Sophie a questioning look. She shrugged and nodded.

“I can take on anything and anyone,” Chad said, lifting his chin defiantly. “Just bring it on.”

And with that, he executed a lightning fast spinning punch, landing it on my forearm with enough force that my whole arm went numb. It was clearly the effect he was going for, and he laughed.

“That’s it,” I said.

I kicked at the back of his knee, making him drop awkwardly to one knee on the ground. But—being the bull that he was—he barreled at me again, wrapping his arms around my hips and driving his head in one direction, his legs in another, trying to take me down. But I kneed him in the solar plexus hard enough that he released his hold on me. Then I took the opportunity and pinned him down, pressing his face into the damp, muddy ground.

“Having fun?” came a sharp voice.

Chad and I looked up to see my mom walking over.

“Hi,” I said, letting go of Chad and getting to my feet.

“Looked pretty good,” my mom said approvingly. “But you should be saving your strength for the real thing.” Her smile turned to a scowl. “Taking on Shanna Paiyn and her group of rebels.” She dropped something heavy to the ground at her feet. “Do you all know how to set a spring trap?”

I looked at the shining, deadly-looking thing and noticed the teeth of the trap glinted menacingly. Silver. “You know, if I stepped into one of those, or even just knicked my finger on one, it would poison me. Can’t we use traps that aren’t made of silver?”

“We could,” my mom admitted, “if we had any. But we don’t, and we don’t have time to acquire a whole new set of traps. These traps are silver because they’re used by hunters to kill werewolves.”

I winced, but my mom didn’t seem to notice.

“But they can be used against hunters as well. Now, I know these are a danger to you and your…” She paused. “Your *friends*, Charlie, but they’re what we’ve got to work with.”

I nodded, but my stomach was as tight as a knot. It made me feel really uneasy to hear my mom still talking about werewolves like we were the enemy. I shot a quick look at Chad and Sophie. I couldn’t help but wonder if they thought of Violet and me that way, too.

“So, enough sparring. Practice setting up the trap and save your fighting skills for the actual fight,” my mom said. Then she turned and headed off, leaving the three of us alone.

Chad inspected the trap closely, then, grabbing a thick branch from the ground, he sprang the trigger. The teeth clamped shut in an instant, shattering the branch into wood chips.

We all stepped back in surprise, then regarded the trap warily for a long moment.

“That was… something,” Sophie said. “It’s one thing to see what it does to a stick, but it’s going to be intense when it clamps down on a hunter’s leg.”

Chad didn’t seem to be listening, and he crouched down to reset the trap. The guy was a good hunter—there was no way to deny how good a fighter he was—but when it came to everything else, like life, he was pretty useless.

Sophie looked over at me. “How have you been, Charlie?”

I shrugged. “Okay.”

She gave me a kind smile. “I’ve just been thinking that it must have been hard when you figured out that it was Zachery who’d turned against you.”

“Oh yeah, *that*.” My stomach ached with tension. “Yeah, that wasn’t fun.” I shook my head. “I just can’t believe the guy’s gone this far off the deep end.”

Sophie chewed her lip nervously. “I was thinking about it because—I know you two were friends at camp.”

“*Were*,” I emphasized.

“Still,” she said. “I was just thinking about it…”

“About what?” I asked.

She looked up at me, her eyes anxious. “I was just wondering—when the fighting starts, are you going to kill him?”

**Episode 2203**

XAVIER

I ran a hand through my hair, feeling agitated. Like I was going to crawl out of my skin.

“I’m not going to lie to you, man,” I said, looking over at Jay, “I’ve thought about it. Like, a lot. But…” I shook my head. “No. The last time—when I killed Ava—it almost killed *me*. I lost my wolf. I felt like I was losing my mind. I didn’t think I’d get over it. I almost didn’t—until I met Cali. And unless she did something or said something that made her into a true threat to me or the pack or Cali, there’s no way. The last time, I did it because she’d killed my mother. It was an eye for an eye. Things are different now. I can’t kill someone for being a pain in the ass.”

Jay chuckled. “I guess not. I mean, if you could, I’d be a serial killer by now. There are so many annoying people in the world.”

“Yeah,” I growled. “Definitely a few witches on that list.”

“Well…” Jay sighed, looking down into his almost finished coffee. “I hope you don’t fall for any of Ava’s tricks.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I just know how strong a mate bond can be. I mean, when Lola and I were apart, it was hell. I was suffering, man. It felt like I was going crazy.”

I shook my head. “You don’t have to remind me. I thought I was going to have to chain you to the wall a few times.”

“Yeah, that’s my point,” Jay said. “It’s just powerful. It feels more powerful than your will, sometimes. You didn’t have to lock me up because I was able to power through it. But I know your situation is different.”

“Of course it’s different,” I said, looking down into my cup. “You love Lola. I can’t stand Ava—”

“No, Xavier, that’s not what I mean,” Jay interrupted. “I mean that you’re fighting *against* a mate bond. Against what your nature wants you to do. That’s even harder.” He gave me a long look. “But you’re strong. I know you can do it, man. I just hope you believe in yourself enough.”

I chuckled. “Have you ever known me to doubt my own strength?”

Jay shook his head with a grin. “I guess not.”

I scrubbed a hand across my forehead. “But I do worry…”

Jay frowned. “About what?”

I shook my head. “The pull I feel for Ava keeps getting stronger and stronger. And my wolf…” I let out a gusty sigh. “I feel like my wolf is chomping at the bit, just dying to be let loose—despite my strong objections. He wants her, man. It’s like he finally woke up and realized she’s back. It’s these two opposing forces, and it’s just a lot to manage. I’m worried that I might not be strong enough.”

Jay looked worried.

“But there is one thing working in my favor,” I added.

“What?” he asked.

“Cali. Whenever I feel myself getting weak, I just think about her,” I said. “She brought my wolf back.”

“But your wolf left because of Ava,” Jay said. “The bond is a hell of a thing, man.”

“Yeah, but Cali’s the one.”

Jay shrugged. “Yeah, but Cali’s the one who gave you the hall pass.” He looked grim. “Just take my advice and don’t use it—whatever she says.”

Ha.

I clapped him on the shoulder. “Thanks, man. I appreciate the pep talk. I knew I could count on you to keep me in line.”

Leaving my undrunk coffee behind, I walked out. I was planning to head upstairs, but I stopped when I heard Cali’s voice, and I walked over to where she was standing with Greyson and Rishika near the living room.

“—and why we stay away from the Vanguard pack,” Greyson was saying, looking angry.

“What’s going on?” I asked, walking over.

Cali looked like she’d been about to say something, but she stopped herself and looked at me mutely, her eyes wide.

Greyson pointed at a pile of shredded paper at his feet. “Lucian sent a letter, offering to help with our hunter problem.”

I narrowed my eyes. “We don’t need that bastard’s help with anything. They’ve got their problems, and we’ve got ours.”

“*See?*” Greyson said, turning to Cali. “We both agree. *Now* will you listen to me?”

Cali took a deep breath. “Okay, I admit that it’s not an amazing idea, but all I was suggesting was *talking* to Lucian about his offer. That’s all.”

I snorted. “And let me guess—you volunteered to talk to him.”

Cali nodded, a little sheepishly. “I may have suggested it.”

“No way,” I said flatly. “The Vanguard pack can’t be trusted. You were there, Cali. Think about how much weird-ass shit happened when we were with them. I don’t see any point in going through any of that again.”

“Just ignoring the Vanguard pack won’t make them go away,” Cali said stubbornly.

This gave me pause. “You might have a point on that,” I admitted, “especially if they’re sending offers of help. But it doesn’t mean that you need to run off to their lair. *Alone*.”

“Who said she was going to go alone?” Rishika asked.

“Who said she was going at all?” Greyson asked.

I gritted my teeth. As much as I hated it, I agreed with Greyson.

“He’s right,” I ground out.

Cali blew out a breath. “Okay. Fine. I don’t go alone. Why don’t one of you come with me?”

“First of all, no,” I started. “And second of all, *hell no*. It could be another trap.”

“*Ugh!*” Cali cried, looking furious. “Why don’t either of you ever *listen* to me?”

Then she turned on her heel and stormed off.

“Cali!” Rishika called, and started after her, but I stopped her.

“I’ll talk to her,” I said. I could feel Greyson bristling behind me, but I didn’t stop to wait for his opinion on the matter. Something was bothering Cali, and I wanted to find out what it was. And I still had to talk to her—we hadn’t had a chance to speak since *I’d* stormed away the night before.

I caught up with her before she hit the stairs, and I pulled her into a small office.

“Hey, Cali.” I shut the door behind us and looked into her stormy eyes. “What’s going on?”

“You tell me,” she shot back at me.

I frowned. “Are you mad because of what happened last night?”

The blood drained from her face, and her eyes went wide. “Last night? Why? Did you… Did something happen?”

My frown deepened. “Last night, when you suggested I sleep with Ava—that made me really fucking pissed off.” I thought about Jay’s advice, but I really didn’t want to talk any more about Ava—especially not with Cali. It had to be addressed at some point, but for right now, I wanted to ignore it, so I changed the subject. “Listen, we need to talk about this Vanguard thing. Do you really not get why Greyson and I think going over to that fun house is a huge mistake? I mean, if anything, that little prince should be coming to us, begging for forgiveness for the way he treated us while we were there. We know he knows where we live. And why the hell would he send a note, like this is fucking middle school? Isn’t he brave enough to come here? Meet us face-to-face?”

Cali’s cheeks flushed, and her eyes flashed dangerously. “Xavier, you’re looking at this all wrong. This isn’t about who’s braver than whom, or about getting apologies you feel you deserve—”

“So what is it about then?” I demanded.

“It’s about doing what’s best for the pack!” she said. “It’s about doing what’s best in our fight against these rogue hunters. I don’t get why you and Greyson think that accepting help is such a bad thing. Lucian’s a little strange, but he clearly wants to help. He’s already reached out to me, and I have every right to respond to him.”

“Hang on,” I said, putting my hands up to stop her. “What the hell do you mean, he reached out to you?”

Cali looked out the window for a moment, then back at me. “Um, he sent a note—”

“A *note*?”

“Yeah. Last night.”

“*Last night?* Why didn’t you tell me about it last night, when you got it?” I demanded.

Cali looked down for a moment, quiet. “It wouldn’t have mattered,” she said, her voice low. “I couldn’t find you.”

My heart pounded.

She looked up at me, her eyes on mine. “Where did you go?”

I had a flash of the hot, angry kisses that I’d pressed against Ava’s lips, and my heart beat faster. “I… went to scout out the hunter camp.”

Cali gave me a searching look. “Is that all?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Her face flushed. “Did something happen between you and Ava that I should know about?”

**Episode 2204**

I held my breath, waiting for Xavier’s answer. I’d asked the question, but I already wished I hadn’t.

Xavier looked at me for a moment, and I could see the pain in his blue eyes. Then he looked away and shook his head. “I don’t get the vibe, Cali.”

“What do you mean?” I rasped.

“Like, do you want me to tell you about everything, or is it that you don’t actually want me to do this?” He looked at me, and his eyes seemed to bore into me. “What do you want me to do?”

“I… I…” I stammered. I wasn’t sure *I* knew what I wanted anymore.

“If saying anything or doing something is going to hurt you, then let’s just be done with this. This sucks enough already.”

I stared at him, shocked. Was he saying he’d done something with Ava, or that he hadn’t? I couldn’t tell. My heart gave a painful throb, but Xavier kept ranting before I could ask any questions.

“*You’re* the one who told me to explore what’s been happening. Remember that? But you never asked me what *I* wanted. Did that ever even occur to you? Because if it had, and you’d gotten around to asking me, I would have told you in a fucking heartbeat that I only want to be with you. I would have told you that I want whatever this bullshit is with Ava to just *go away*. That’s what I would have told you.”

I swallowed hard. My stomach felt like it was tied into knots, and I just felt terrible about everything. “I just don’t want you to feel bad if something… happens—”

“Well, that’s just fucking fantastic,” Xavier snapped. “Because something *did* happen, and I still feel horrible, so can we just stop talking about this right now?”

I sucked in my breath. It felt like I’d been struck in the chest, and I struggled to draw in a breath. Something *had* happened? Between Xavier and Ava? Last night? *Already?*

I knew what I’d said, and I knew it wasn’t fair of me to feel surprised or hurt about it, but… I did feel surprised, and really, really hurt. I blinked back tears. I was sure that Xavier hadn’t sought Ava out, but she was just *always* around, and I couldn’t stop myself from wondering what exactly had happened.

My head started to spin. Had they slept together?

Xavier must have seen some of my fear on my face, because he pulled me into his arms and wrapped me up in a tight hug. I breathed him in and returned his embrace, though the pressure of him made me feel like I was about to start sobbing.

“I’m sorry, Cali,” he said softly, and I felt him press a kiss to my hair. “I’m just frustrated. I don’t want to hurt you—that’s the last thing I would ever want to do—and I’m just sick of this old mate bond fucking with my head. I’m just frustrated.”

“I love you,” I said, hugging him tight. I knew he meant what he said—I could feel the tension in his back and shoulders. “And I trust you, Xavier. No matter what.”

He pulled away from me, just enough to look down at me. His blue eyes sparkled in the low light. Then he leaned down and pressed a kiss to my lips.

I leaned into him, opening my mouth when his tongue pressed against my lips. I wanted to disappear into him—I just wanted all of this to go away. It was hard enough trying to deal with my feelings toward my mates, but throwing Ava into an already fraught situation just made everything so much worse.

But then a thought occurred to me, and it rankled me so much that I pulled away from his kiss. “You still haven’t answered my question.”

He looked down at me, perplexed. “What?” he asked, as though the kiss had muddled his mind.

“Did you sleep with Ava?” I asked, my heart thudding.

He sighed. “Are you really sure you’d want to know?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, my mouth dry. “Does that mean you did?”

“No,” he said. “And I’m not going to. Everything about this ‘sleep with her, don’t,’ sounds like nonsense. It’s just the truth.”

In my heart, I knew it would hurt more than anything if Xavier slept with Ava. It wasn’t something I wanted to imagine, but how could I ignore the mate bond between them? I knew what it was like to be torn because of that connection.

I took a deep breath. “All I will say is that if something… notable happens with Ava, then I want to know. I know I might not like it—I know I would hate it—and hopefully it doesn’t happen, but—”

“Cali, stop.” Xavier looked into my eyes, and I looked back into his. “You need to stop all of this theorizing, okay?”

“I trust you,” I said firmly. “Regardless of all this craziness, I know you’re not going anywhere. I know you’re mine.”

Xavier gave me a long, even look, and my heart pounded so hard it felt like my whole body was vibrating.

“I didn’t sleep with Ava,” he said.

I felt my breath leave me in a rush, and in its place came a warm, spreading sense of deep relief. I smiled. I knew what I’d said—I’d been trying to make it sound like I was ready to be open to whatever happened—but my mind was playing tricks on my heart.

And Xavier seemed to know it, too. He tightened his grip on me. “If I *had* slept with Ava—no matter what you said—you would have been pissed at me, wouldn’t you? Even though you basically told me to?”

“Well,” I said slowly, “I’ll admit it makes me feel better, knowing that you didn’t.” I smiled.

But Xavier didn’t return my smile. He looked into my eyes, his expression dead serious. “Don’t *ever* suggest it again.”

“Okay,” I said breathlessly.

His jaw flexed, like he was fighting something within himself. “In the meantime, if something does happen, I’m not going to keep it from you—as long as you won’t use it against us,” he said, pointing between us. “*You’re* my mate, Cali. *You*. And what you and I have has nothing to do with anyone or anything else. Not Ava, not Greyson, no one. Just us. Mates.”

I nodded, my throat too tight to speak. I loved to hear this from him—that he was committed to our bond, no matter what.

He leaned down and kissed me again, and this time his hands slipped down around my waist, then slowly drifted down to curve around my behind.

I loved the feel of his hands on me, and I pressed closer as I deepened the kiss.

Xavier made a sound deep in the back of his throat—a half-growl, half-moan—and pulled away from me. He tucked a lock of hair behind my ear as he looked into my eyes with an intensity that made me feel hot and dizzy.

I glanced away, looking at his T-shirt so I could focus my thoughts.

“Thank you, Xavier,” I said, still breathless. “I know this is complicated.”

“I’m glad we got it all straightened out,” he said, gliding a finger around the curve of my cheek. Then he took a step back. “But we still need to talk about this Vanguard offer.”

I rolled my eyes, which made him scowl.

“You’re going to find that I’m a lot less understanding about that. I don’t want you to go,” he said. “Period.”

I took a deep breath, trying not to let the frustration in my chest grow—but it was hard to tamp it down. “You know, neither you nor your brother seem to understand that I just want to *talk* to Lucian. He sent us not one, but *two* letters. What if ignoring him is worse than meeting with him?”

Xavier chuckled darkly. “I’d fucking *love* it if that little prince took our silence as an insult.”

“*Xavier*,” I chided.

He thought for a moment. “I guess I see your point, though.”

Even that small concession gave me a spark of hope. “Even if we reject Lucian’s offer to help us in the fight against the rogue hunters—”

“We *are* rejecting his offer, Cali,” Xavier cut in. “There are no ifs about it.”

“Even if we do,” I continued stubbornly, “it still might be useful to talk to the Vanguard pack.”

Xavier looked interested. “Useful how?”

“We might learn more about them, see if they’re planning anything we should know about,” I suggested. “Just play the friendly neighboring pack card, you know?”

Xavier considered this. “I suppose it might be helpful.”

“But I agree with you, Greyson, and Rishika,” I said quickly. “I shouldn’t go alone.”

“No, you shouldn’t,” Xavier said.

I smiled. “I’m glad you agree. Does that mean you’ll come with me?”

**Episode 2205**

GREYSON

I’d watched Cali storm away, then Xavier follow after her. It pissed me off that he had gone—*I* wanted to be the one to go after her—but the tension with Xavier was high enough, and I didn’t want to cause another rift. Especially not now, just after he’d pledged his loyalty to me.

But I knew I couldn’t put it off too long; I had to talk to Cali. I’d been pretty forceful with her on the Vanguard issue, which I knew she didn’t like. And I knew that telling her something she didn’t like to hear always came with the risk of pushing her into Xavier’s arms. But I just couldn’t get comfortable with the idea of her running off to see Lucian. And I *hated* that the stupid “moon prince” had sent her a personal letter.

I balled my hands into fists at the thought of the smarmy bastard writing a letter to her. What the hell kind of game was he playing? I wasn’t an idiot—I’d seen the dress he’d sent her before his party, and the way he’d looked at her throughout that nightmarish ball. The idea that Lucian’s intentions had been even remotely pure when he’d reached out to offer help to Cali was fucking laughable.

If any other guy had looked at Cali the way Lucian had looked at her, there would have been a fucking funeral to plan. It was only the worry of increasing tensions with another pack that held me back. I wasn’t too interested in putting Cali back into Lucian’s line of vision. As it was, I felt pretty pleased with the way things had gone between the Redwood and the Vanguard packs. Considering the circumstances, it could have gone a hell of a lot worse, and we’d managed to get out of things without it devolving to an all-out war between the packs.

I heaved a sigh as I looked down at the torn letter. After witnessing my father’s brutal power play—and the years of bloodshed it had caused—I knew I never wanted to see anything like that ever again. I needed to keep the pack safe and secure and in a place of relative peace, and I knew that started and ended with my leadership.

The concerns that Sage and Zainab had voiced troubled me, mostly because I didn’t believe the two women were alone in their worries. There were concerns among the pack that I might take off. And I knew I had to put those concerns to rest. Immediately.

I looked in the direction where Cali and Xavier had disappeared. I just had to trust that Xavier was going to keep supporting my decision to not let Cali run off to visit with the Vanguard pack. This pack just didn’t need those kinds of problems at the moment.

Rishika had disappeared while I’d been thinking, and I turned toward the kitchen to find her, but I ran into Ravi before I could reach it.

“Hey, Greyson,” Ravi said, tipping his chin up in greeting. “How’s it going?”

“I’ll ask you the same question,” I said.

“Good,” he said shrugging. “I think everyone’s just getting ready for the attack on the rebel hunters. Getting ready to kick a little hunter ass.”

I was glad to hear it, but I had another question. “Hey, Ravi, let me ask you something.”

“Shoot,” Ravi said.

“Is there anything I’m missing in the pack?” I asked.

Ravi looked confused. “What do you mean?”

I shrugged. “Just general vibes. Anything I should know about?”

Ravi shifted, now looking uncomfortable. “Are you asking me as the Alpha, or as a Redwood?”

“Is there a difference?” I asked curiously.

Ravi ran a hand over his stubbled jaw, looking distinctly uncomfortable. “Listen, I don’t want you taking this the wrong way, man, but…” He paused, his gaze shifting around.

I sighed. “I get it, Ravi. This is awkward. But I’m really asking, and I’m ready to hear the answer. I’m asking so I can be a better Alpha. Whatever you’ve got to say, I promise I won’t take out the messenger.”

“Yeah?” Ravi asked, looking skeptical.

I raised my eyebrows. “I could just demand that you tell me, as your Alpha, but I’d rather not do that. If I don’t have to,” I added.

Ravi sighed, finally giving in. “There have been a few points of concern…”

“What points?” I demanded, glaring.

Ravi gave me a level stare.

“What points?” I asked again, trying not to glare.

Ravi ran a hand through his hair. “There are some people around here who think that this whole *due destini* thing can sometimes make you a little… Um…”

“What?”

“Just that sometimes your mind’s not totally on the pack,” Ravi said quickly. “That sometimes you’re a little… distracted.”

I raised an eyebrow. “*Distracted?*”

Ravi put his hands up. “Look, I know how that’s true of the regular mate thing, too. I had that problem with Ava, remember? Thank god I got over that,” he said shuddering.

“Yeah, what even was that?”

“I don’t know, man, I think it was the blood transfer. It’d done something to both of us. Connected us somehow.” He shook his head. “That first time she left really helped. Now that she’s back, I know it must be gone because I can’t feel what I did before. Blood is weird, huh?”

“Guess so,” I said dryly.

“But back to your thing. I totally get how much it must suck to have to constantly worry that there’s another mate trying to win your mate over.”

I could feel my glare growing icy. I knew what Ravi was saying was true, but just because it was true, didn’t mean that I liked hearing it.

“I mean, I can see that you’re focused on the pack, man, and your intentions are really clear. At least from my perspective. You’re here to lead. And as long as you just stay focused on that, I think things should be fine.”

I could see sweat beading on Ravi’s forehead, and I nodded, trying to keep my voice calm. “Thanks, Ravi. Really. I appreciate your candor about this. It’s good to hear. And you’re right about that—I’m here to stay. But I’ll keep what you said in mind.”

“Cool,” Ravi said, looking deeply relieved. “Okay. Sounds good, man.”

And he retreated toward the kitchen.

Now that the pack’s views of me had been made clear, I felt a more crystalized sense of purpose, and I wanted to get things cleared up with Cali before I did anything else. I just hoped she’d be open to talking to me and listening to my apology. Cali was a little unpredictable, but I just hoped she’d be able to see that I was looking out for her, and that we could just get past it. The last thing I wanted was for this to become an issue, because if it did, that would only feed into the pack’s concern that I was distracted.

I glanced into the kitchen, but Cali wasn’t in there. I checked the living room, and she wasn’t in there either, so I headed upstairs. I knocked on her door, and when there was no reply, I pushed the door open, but the room was empty. I looked around in confusion. I knew that Xavier had gone after her to talk to her, so where the hell where they? Where could they have gone?

Confused, and irritated about feeling that way, I headed back downstairs.

Rishika met me at the bottom step. “Hey, Greyson, there you are. I wanted to let you know that I’m assembling the whole pack to go over assignments. I just want everyone crystal clear about what’s happening and when. I don’t want any double coverage in one area and a whole empty window in another.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” I said, glancing around for Cali.

“You should join me,” Rishika said pointedly.

“Yeah, I will,” I said vaguely.

“It would help,” she added.

“Help what?” I asked.

“Help reaffirm your role as Alpha,” she said. “You know, the one we all pledged our loyalty to?”

“Yeah, I will,” I said again. “But have you seen Xavier or Cali recently?”

She gave me a long look. “Nope. Not recently. I’m headed outside. I’ll see you out there.”

“Yeah,” I said, taking another look around.

I knew Rishika was right—I did need to talk to the pack—but it was so strange that Cali and Xavier had just disappeared. Where could they have gotten to?

I’d just turned to head outside to meet with the pack when I heard a car start out in front of the house. I looked over my shoulder, confused.

“Why would anyone be leaving?” I wondered aloud. We were trying to get ready for this rogue hunter attack.

I took a step toward the front door and looked out the window. I saw Xavier’s car moving down the drive. He was in the driver’s seat, and next to him, in the passenger seat, was Cali.

Moving on instinct, I pulled open the front door and leapt down the steps. I went down after the car as it drove toward the road. “*Where the hell are you going?*”

**Episode 2206**

XAVIER

I glanced into the rearview mirror as a wave of disappointment hit me. I couldn’t *believe* I’d never thought to set up a camera, because I would have *loved* to have a video of Greyson’s face as I ignored his desperate screaming and kept driving as he shrank into the distance.

Some moments, you wanted to capture forever.

“Maybe we should stop,” Cali said, breaking into my thoughts.

I looked over at her. She was looking into her side mirror and biting her lip like she did when she was worried.

“Why?” I asked.

She gave me a level stare. “Um, because Greyson is yelling at us to stop? And we do still have the hunters out there. This could be a bad idea.”

“Oh, that’s funny, I couldn’t hear him.” I shrugged. “And it may be a bad idea, but at least it’s better than the Vanguards getting their claws into our business. That could prove to be even worse. Besides, we’ll be back before Greyson can even start to miss us.”

“You can be so stubborn sometimes,” Cali muttered, turning around and looking out the back window.

But by the time I looked, Greyson was just a speck in the distance, disappearing into a cloud of dust.

I managed to keep my chuckle to myself. If Greyson was against my taking a more proactive approach toward the Vanguard pack, then this moment more than made up for it. I knew he would be pissed at me for doing this, but that didn’t seem to matter much, as that was the default setting with us anyway, no matter what I did. One of us was always angry at the other.

“Yeah, but you love it. Don’t worry, everything will be fine,” I said casually.

“I guess this does seem a little impulsive,” Cali said, still looking worried. “Maybe we shouldn’t have taken matters into our own hands. Maybe we should have talked to everyone about it.”

I shrugged. “There’s no use sweating about it now. We’ve left, and what’s done is done. Greyson’s going to blame me for whatever happens, no matter what, so we might as well see this through.”

Cali rolled her eyes. “That’s not true. Greyson’s going to blame me for this too. *Ugh*.” She leaned back against the headrest and looked up at the roof of the car. “I hate this feeling. I feel like I’ve chosen a side—which I haven’t, for the record,” she clarified, looking pointedly at me.

“Got it,” I said. “Listen, just relax. This isn’t going to be a big deal. I think you might have a point about not being able to just ignore them, so we’ll go to the Vanguards and make our position clear. We don’t want their help, and we don’t want anything to do with their creepy asses. And next time, maybe they can leave a phone number for us to get in touch with them. I mean, all of this could have been handled with a phone call.” I pretended to pick up a phone. “Hello? Prince? Yeah, it’s Xavier. Hey, do me a solid and stay the fuck away from us. Cool?”

I pretended to hang up the phone and grinned at Cali, but she didn’t smile back. In fact, she looked more worried than ever.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I’m just hoping you’re not going to cause a problem with Lucian.”

I stared at her, shocked. “*What?* I think you’ve got that reversed, Cali. It’s *Lucian* who caused the problem the first time, remember? And this time he should have stayed the hell out of our business. We don’t go around trying to tell other packs how to deal with their problems. That’s just not how it’s done.”

“Xavier—”

“I’m only going over there to fix things,” I assured her, though in the back of my mind I was thinking a little bigger. It occurred to me that putting Lucian in his place once and for all would help my case when I took over as Alpha of the Redwood pack.

Cali turned to look out the window, her expression tense, and we rode on in silence.

As we drew closer to the mansion, I could feel my hands tightening on the steering wheel. It felt strange to voluntarily come back to a place we’d been so anxious to escape. There were things I wanted to do to Lucian and his precious sister as payback for the hell they’d put us through, but—as I glanced over at Cali—I kept all of that to myself.

“How did you remember how to get here?” Cali asked, looking over at me, baffled.

I smiled. “It’s a little trick I picked up from my mercenary work. I paid attention when we were driven out here the night of the party. And when we were thrown out, without you. It came in pretty handy when we had to get back here to rescue you.”

Cali smiled. “I’ll say.”

We pulled up to the gated entrance and slowed as a burly pack member stepped out of the guard shed.

“You expected?” he grunted, glaring at me.

I raised one eyebrow. “Do you know who we are?”

The guard didn’t look impressed. “Are you expected?”

“We were just here,” I said coolly. “You know, the Redwood pack. For the party.”

The guard looked closely at me. “I don’t remember you.”

“Well think hard, pal, because we were just here, and—”

I stopped when the guard looked past me to Cali, and his face cracked into a huge smile.   
 “But I remember you!” he said, brightening. He waved us through the gate. “Go on in.”

I felt anger burning in my chest, and I revved the car as I sped through the gate. “I’m going to have to make sure that guard doesn’t forget me this time.”

Cali looked at me, her eyes wide with alarm. “You’re not going to cause any trouble, Xavier. Are you?”

I pulled the car to a stop in front of the front steps. “I’m not making any promises,” I growled. I looked up at the house. “Okay, stay close to me, okay? I don’t want to risk losing you inside this madhouse again.”

Cali nodded, and I got out, walked to her side, and opened the door for her. She stepped out and hooked an arm through mine.

I pulled her close to my side, taking a moment to enjoy the warm feel of her body next to mine in the cool winter air. It felt good to know that she trusted me.

And that Greyson would be pissing himself with jealousy.

I sighed. It was the little things that made life sweet.

As we walked forward, the double front doors opened before we could knock. A uniformed servant stood waiting as we walked in.

“His Majesty has been expecting you,” he said. “Right this way.”

He led us through the massive entrance hall and into a tall-ceiling room paneled in oil painted reliefs. Lucian was in the room, lying naked on table draped in a snowy white cloth, on his stomach, getting what appeared to be a hot oil massage from a tall, blonde woman.

He looked up as we walked in, and his face broke into a huge smile.

“*Caliana!* My dear! What a pleasant—though not entirely unexpected—surprise!” He glanced up at me, almost as an afterthought. “Oh, and I see you’ve brought one of your mates.”

I narrowed my eyes.

Lucian didn’t seem to notice, and he propped himself up on his elbows to look at us. “Well, this promises to be quite a day.”

His eyes traveled over Cali with a distinct sense of ownership, and it made my blood boil to watch him. Every instinct in my body urged me to shift and lunge and just rip the boy prince to shreds, but Cali had been worried all the way here about this, and I’d promised her that I wouldn’t go out of my way to make things worse.

So I tried to tamp down my murderous instinct.

“Put some clothes on so we can talk,” I snarled.

Lucian eyes opened wide. “*Clothes?* Does my body embarrass you, Xavier Evers? Though I suppose I could understand that, if you’re jealous of my perfect physique,” he conceded.

He flexed his shoulders, and Cali looked away, flushing.

I gritted my teeth. This guy was really pushing his luck.

Lucian stepped off the table and stood, facing us, his eyes fixed on Cali. “Did you know I was royal of the year three years running? An unheard-of accomplishment. It’s never happened before.”

“Put something on, or we’re leaving,” I growled.

Maybe this whole idea was stupid. I was seriously regretting bringing Cali back to this place at all. Maybe Greyson had been right.

Lucian smiled, but he snapped his fingers, and the woman with the hot oil handed him a silk robe. He tied it loosely around himself.

“Come,” he said imperiously, and walked from the room.

Cali glanced at me, and I nodded, putting my hand on the small of her back and leading her after him.

We walked through the entrance hall again and into a narrower hallway. Just off the hallway, Lucian turned into a small room. It was furnished with sturdy, comfortable furniture in dark colors, and it looked like a private sitting room. It almost felt cozy, but there was a wolf in the corner of the room chewing on a hunk of raw meat, and it looked up warily as we walked in. Immediately I knew this was a wild wolf, not a werewolf, and after it realized we weren’t there to steal its meat, it turned back to its meal.

Lucian stopped and turned to face us.

“Before we enter into any negotiations, I must insist on a bit of honesty.” He smiled. “I know the only reason you’re here is because your pack is in danger and you’re in desperate need of my help, correct?”

**Episode 2207**

I felt my face heat with a flush. I was embarrassed, and also scared. Embarrassed because I had to look away from Lucian when I found myself scanning him from head to foot. The guy might have been a pompous ass, but he was also easy on the eyes. Maybe a little too easy, I thought to myself, as my cheeks burned like lava.

But I was scared, too. For one thing, not ten feet away from where we were standing, there was a wolf tearing the biggest steak I’d ever seen in my life to absolute shreds. It was a wild wolf, too. Even I could tell. But that predatory rage was nothing compared to the tension between Xavier and Lucian, which was so charged it nearly hummed with electricity.

I knew Xavier—probably better than he knew himself—and I knew that if he thought for one minute that Lucian might do something to me, all hell would break loose.

He narrowed his eyes as he looked at Lucian’s smug face, and I could feel the waves of anger rolling off him. “No, you’ve got it wrong. We *don’t* need your help. At all.”

Lucian looked taken aback. “Then why—”

“To tell you that—to your face—and then leave,” Xavier growled.

Lucian’s surprise melted away, and he laughed, the sound ringing through the high-ceilinged room. “Surely there has to be more to the story than that, or you wouldn’t have troubled yourself to come all the way here?” His eyes moved to me, then slid over me, head to foot.

“Well it’s not like you’re the easiest wolf to get a hold of,” Xavier snapped.

I was a bit distracted by Lucian’s eyes. It was like his gaze was a physical thing, and I felt my body heat as his eyes passed over me. For a moment, my mind went blank, erasing all thoughts, leaving nothing behind but a humming whiteness.

Then I remembered—there was something I’d wanted to talk to him about. It was why I’d come. What was it?

The letter.

I cleared my throat. “Why did you send me that letter?” I asked.

“I like to keep my royal duties separate from my personal ones.” He looked at Xavier. “The message I addressed to your Alpha was about pack business.” He looked back at me, and both his gaze and his voice softened. “The message I sent you, Caliana, was personal.”

I took a gulp of air, desperately trying to introduce oxygen back into my lungs.

Lucian raised one eyebrow. “I hope you won’t mind if I get dressed,” he said lightly. Then, without waiting for an answer from either of us, he dropped his robe.

I had to stop myself from gasping. His skin had an almost metallic glint—probably from the oils—and standing before us, he looked like a bronzed statue of a Greek god. I gritted my teeth and tried not to look at him, but it was hard. Every curve of his body was sharp and defined, and he glistened in the golden light of the room.

As though he could see the internal battle in me, a small smile formed on his lips as he stepped behind a brightly painted silk screen.

Anger mixed with the other confusing emotions roiling through my body. This was just like when I’d run into him during the party at the pool. Were “royals” always getting massages, or hot oils poured all over them? What the actual hell was up with them? And was it a prerequisite to be cool with exposing yourself to literally *everyone* you came into contact with?

“As I was saying,” Lucian said from behind the screen, “what I wanted to speak *privately* about with Caliana is *our* business.” He looked out from behind the screen at Xavier. “But don’t worry, we’ll just be a moment. Don’t look so concerned.”

Xavier gave a low, humorless laugh. “You? Alone with *my* mate? Yeah, that’s not happening, man.”

“Pardon?” Lucian asked, his voice icy.

Xavier smiled, but his eyes were furious. “I’m not leaving Cali alone anywhere in this house of horrors, and definitely not alone with you.”

Lucian smiled back, the expression as false on him as it was on Xavier. He stepped out from behind the screen, now dressed in perfectly fitted grey pants and a crisp white shirt. “Well, that is unfortunate, Xavier Evers, because it’s not strictly up to you.”

Xavier moved like he was going to lunge forward, but I put a hand on his arm, stopping him.

“It’s fine,” I said quietly, looking up at him. Then I glanced over at Lucian and spoke louder, for his benefit. “I’m sure the prince doesn’t want to risk another conflict with the Redwoods, especially after that last one turned into such a mess.”

Lucian’s eyes twinkled at me.

“Cali,” Xavier muttered, his voice a warning.

“It’s fine,” I repeated. I looked into his eyes and willed him to trust me. “I won’t go far. I promise. We’ll be in the car and headed back to the pack house before you know it, okay?”

I could see Xavier’s jaw working as he clenched it tight with anger. It clearly *wasn’t* okay with him, but he was doing some quick calculations in his head. Then, without warning, he pulled me tight against him and pressed his lips to mine.

The kiss was so sudden, it caught me completely off-guard. I found myself slipping my fingers into Xavier’s dark hair and letting him bend me back over his arm. As his tongue tangled with mine, I forgot where I was and what I was meant to be doing.

Until I heard the unmistakable sound of fingers snapping.

Xavier and I looked over to see Lucian glaring at us.

“Quite enough of that display,” he said briskly. He spared the barest of glances in Xavier’s direction. “You will leave the room. Now. Thank you.”

Xavier shot Lucian a poisonous glare, then looked at me, keeping his eyes on me as he walked out the door. “I’ll be right outside.”

I nodded. Then, with a shaking breath, I turned to look at Lucian. I just hoped I wasn’t making a terrible mistake.

Lucian smiled gently. “You seem a little tense, Caliana. I could call for some tea. It might help you relax a little—”

“No,” I said quickly. “No, thank you. I’m not drinking anything you offer me.”

He frowned. “Whyever not?”

I shook my head. “Who knows what could be in it?”

Lucian shook his head with a laugh. “Do you really think I would resort to such trickery?”

“I don’t know,” I said sincerely. I truly had no idea what Lucian was capable of.

He sighed, as though disappointed. “I was sincere in the missive I sent you. I truly want nothing more than to be on the very best of terms with you, Caliana. Why can’t you trust me?”

I looked at him for a long moment, thinking hard. “Did you do something to me while I was here at your party?”

“Excuse me?” he asked, looking genuinely surprised. “Do something? Such as?  
 “Like… plant a microchip in me so I’d dream about you?” I asked, all in a rush.

This made Lucian smile. “No, Caliana. That’s not something we’d do. Though I can think of some other, less invasive reasons you might be dreaming about me. I mean, how could you not?” He looked down at his shirt and brushed at some invisible spot. Frowning, he unbuttoned the shirt and pulled it off, giving me another glimpse of his perfectly sculpted chest and torso. He reached behind the screen and grabbed another shirt. “Why don’t you tell me about the dreams?” he said, pulling the shirt on and buttoning it up. He smiled as he caught me watching him. “What were we doing in them?”

“I—” I felt myself blush as I thought back to the vivid dreams. “I… would rather not say,” I said, absurdly, as though I had the option of pleading the fifth. “It’s hard to remember every detail.”

“Hmm, it’s hard to remember,” Lucian said, “so let’s go through it slowly. Let’s start at the beginning. Don’t be shy. You need to tell me everything. What did you do in your dreams?”

“It wasn’t anything like what you’re implying,” I cried quickly. “I mean… I can’t remember, exactly.”

Lucian raised his eyebrows, looking interested. “This is very interesting. My latest dreams have also been very… shall we say, *invigorating*?” He stepped toward me, so close I could smell him. He tucked a finger beneath my chin and lifted it, so I was looking into his bright eyes. “And they were much more *explicit* than you are being in this moment. Now, tell me what you remember.”

I swallowed hard, and my skin tingled where he touched me. “You were there…”

“That I assumed,” he said softly.

“And Seluna was there, too,” I murmured.

Lucian’s eyes flashed, and his usual smoothness disappeared in an instant. He looked at me with unmasked wonder.

“Are you saying that *Seluna*,” he said quietly, almost reverently, “the moon goddess, has appeared to you?”

**Episode 2208**

GREYSON

I stared down the driveway toward the road, though the car was long gone. My pulse was pounding fast in my ears, making it hard to hear anything else. The winter wind was whipping around me, but I didn’t feel a thing. I was beyond furious—I was so fucking mad I could barely see straight. I knew *exactly* where Xavier and Cali were headed. They were headed back to the Vanguard house—against my orders.

And the worst part was that I’d actually believed Xavier when he’d agreed with me that Cali shouldn’t go talk to Lucian.

Not that I blamed Cali. She’d had some hairbrained scheme about being some kind of neutral messenger, but I was sure this was all Xavier’s doing—probably just to get back at me for talking the Alpha role. This was just the kind petty of thing that bastard would do.

“—can you hear me, Greyson?”

I turned to see Ravi standing behind me, staring at me. I got the impression he’d been saying something to me that I hadn’t heard.

“What?” I snapped.

“I was asking if everything was okay?” he asked, looking baffled.

“Of course everything’s okay,” I shot back at him. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

Ravi raised his eyebrows, and looking over his shoulder, I saw the pack assembled near the front of the house, all staring at me with that same unsettled look.

Ravi gestured toward them. “Rishika got everyone together before the battle. They’re waiting for you to talk to them. You know, as Alpha,” he added pointedly.

“Right,” I muttered, stepping toward the pack.

Ravi joined the waiting pack members, and when he looked at me, I could see the questions in his eyes.

I had just finished assuring him—literally minutes ago—that nothing would distract me from the pack, and that he didn’t need to worry about the effects of the *due destini* on me. And the minute I’d walked away from that conversation, I’d gotten completely distracted. I was worried about Cali. I was worried about Xavier. And I’d let the dynamic of the *due destini* affect me.

Every eye was on me, and I could feel their stares burning into me as I stood in front of them. I balled my hands into fists so tightly they ached. I had to pull it together.

I took a deep breath and looked at the expectant faces. “I want to thank you all for your preparations for this fight. As you all know, we’ve forged a unique alliance with the hunters. It’s perhaps the first of its kind, actually, but we’ve done it for one purpose: to stop a dangerous rogue hunter group who has been taunting and threatening the Redwoods. I know you know what it means to have this alliance—we’ll have to keep our guard up at all times. We’ve never before had to put our trust in hunters, but they’ve never before put their trust in werewolves either. So be aware that this pact and this trust is going to be put to the test when we attack.” I looked around at the group of familiar, loyal faces. “I have faith in every one of you. You are all here to protect the pack. And remember—though this is a serious threat, we have faced far more serious dangers than this. We prevailed then, and I know we will prevail now.”

The pack surprised me by cheering in response. It started as a low rumble, but it grew in volume until it became a wild chant. The pack pulsed with the sound. All eyes were still on me, but they weren’t wary of me now—they were looking to me. I *had* them. I could lead them to victory. I knew it, and they knew it. I was their Alpha.

Ravi nodded, grinning at me, and Rishika clapped me on the shoulder. “Just give us our marching orders, and we’ll follow you, Alpha.”

“Make sure everyone’s ready to go,” I said.

She nodded. “You got it.”

I walked away from the group—far enough that I could hear myself over their yells, and for them not to overhear me. I dialed Xavier’s number, but it went to straight to voicemail without even ringing.

I ground my teeth. “I don’t know what the hell you think you’re doing, but get the fuck back here,” I growled. “*Now*.”

I hung up, but it still didn’t seem like enough. It would have to be. Furiously, I fired off a quick text to Cali, careful to make sure my anger at Xavier didn’t bleed into my words to her.

*I didn’t want you to leave because of the hunters. Be careful, love, please.*

I sent the text, but the feelings of frustration remained. I knew Cali was only trying to do what she felt was best, but we had promised to trust one another. It wasn’t her I didn’t trust. *No, it’s Xavier*, I thought. He should have known better than to take Cali out from the pack’s protection while we were under siege by hunters.

Nothing for it now. I had to believe that he’d protect her no matter what, the same as I would. I’d deal with my brother once he got back.

For now I could only deal with one threat at a time, and I had to deal with the rebel hunters before anything else.

“Greyson!”

I looked behind me to see Rishika walking toward me. I slipped my phone into my pocket. “What is it?”  
 “Everyone’s just wondering when we’re doing this thing?”

“What?” I asked, my mind going to Xavier and Cali.

“When are we going to attack?” she asked.

I looked over her shoulder to the waiting pack and then walked with her to rejoin them. “We’re waiting to get the exact coordinates of the rebel hunters from Iris and her hunters,” I told them.

“That’s not necessary,” a voice from the back said, far too confidently.

I looked at Ava, who had spoken. “What do you mean?”

She looked at me, then at the rest of the pack, her expression coolly casual. “Xavier already got the coordinates. We know exactly where the rogue hunters are.”

I stepped toward her and, taking her by the elbow, pulled her away from the rest of the pack.

“What are you talking about?” I hissed. “When did you find this out? Why didn’t you or Xavier tell me about it?”

Ava yanked her arm from my grip. “I didn’t tell you about it because you didn’t ask,” she shot back. “I assumed Xavier had already told you, since you’re the current Alpha.”

I bristled at that. I didn’t like the way she said *current Alpha*, like I was just filling the role temporarily. I wanted to snap back at her, but I knew I was in a precarious situation. I could feel the eyes of the pack on my back. Everyone was watching us. I had only one shot, and I had to turn this around.

I gritted my teeth, hating what I was about to ask Ava. “Can you lead us to the rebel camp?”

She looked at me for a long moment, then nodded. “Yeah, I can. It’s not far from here.”

“Okay. I’ll expect you to guide us when the time comes,” I said. “But I warn you now, Ava—you are not a member of this pack. You never pledged your loyalty to me, so I know where you stand. But let me remind you,” I added, leveling my gaze at her, “that loyalty goes both ways. And if you so much as *think* about disobeying my orders, I will see to it that you never return to Redwood territory ever again.”

She didn’t blink, and her expression didn’t change. It was hard to gauge whether she’d even heard me, and as I looked back at her impassive face, I couldn’t stop myself from thinking that I should have pushed harder to get rid of her a long time ago. I’d figured Xavier would be more motivated to have her gone than me, so I’d left it to him, and now I saw that that had been a mistake.

I’d left her alone because I’d thought of her as solely Xavier’s problem—and I had to admit, it had made me happy to see Cali irritated with Xavier about her—but now I could clearly see that Ava had become my problem, too.

Which was terrific. One more thing for me to deal with.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. My first thought was the message I’d sent to Cali, so with a final glare I stepped away from Ava and pulled out my phone. But it wasn’t Cali. It was Charlie’s name that popped up on the screen.

“Charlie, what’s going on?” I asked.

“Greyson, hey. It’s happening.”

“What is?”

“Shanna and her gang are on the move. My mom thinks an attack is imminent. How soon can you be ready?”

**Episode 2209**

MARTA

When I opened my eyes, I felt relaxed, and the strong arms around me felt good and safe. I rubbed my eyes, trying to remember where I was and what had happened.

I was in a hotel room. We had come here after the trial because it was nearby, and the witch council had given us parking vouchers. When we’d gotten to the front desk, we’d found out the place was full because of a barbershop quartet convention, but there had been one room available: the presidential suite. Big Mac had looked fit to kill, but Mrs. Smith had been tired and put her foot down, insisting that we weren’t going anywhere else.

When we’d made it upstairs and opened the door, she’d tried to put a good a spin on things.

“MacKenzie, look, what a beautiful room. It’s like a celebration for Marta!”

Big Mac hadn’t looked wholly convinced, but it had stopped most of her complaining. We’d all been starving—my appetite had returned once the trial was over—and we’d ordered pizza from a place Kira had found on Instagram.

I couldn’t exactly remember when I had fallen asleep with Lilac in the giant canopy bed, but, snuggling closer to him and feeling warm and safe, I was happy that I had. I took a deep breath, relief and contentment flowing through me like water. I snuggled closer to Lilac, and the bracelets on my wrists jangled a little as I repositioned myself, but even those didn’t bother me now. The trial was over. I was safe. I was free. And Lilac was still with me.

Behind me, he mumbled something I couldn’t quiet decipher. I twisted to look over my shoulder. Was he still asleep?

Before I could see for certain, his arms tightened around me and he was rolling on top of me, squashing me into the mattress.

I yelped and tried to push him off, but he was awake and tickling me, his fingers finding all my most sensitive spots. I tried not to laugh too loudly, because I didn’t know what time it was or if anyone else was awake, but I had to clap my hand over my mouth to keep from screaming.

“Lilac!” I hissed through my fingers.

Grinning, he pulled the sheet over us both, then dropped down and kissed my neck.

“Marta,” he whispered, his breath tickling my ear, “you have been found guilty of being cute. You are hereby sentenced to kissing me.”

My giggle was smothered by his kiss, and my mouth opened as he pushed his tongue against my lips. I wrapped my arms around his neck and let him press me into the mattress. I had more than earned this moment of pure, blissful, mindless happiness. Still sleepy, everything felt a little fuzzy around the edges, and my thoughts were a blurry haze. Lilac felt so close, and his weight on top of me felt so real and so safe. I slipped my hands beneath his shirt and slid them upward, feeling his warm skin and the defined muscles of his back moving beneath my palms.

He sucked in a breath and deepened the kiss further, grasping a handful of my hair. He moved his kisses down, along my jaw and then to my ear, nipping at my earlobe hard enough it made me gasp in surprise.

I thought back to the first, clumsy kisses we’d shared. Lilac had definitely grown in confidence and in skill, and I was glad to let him take the lead.

His lips moved down to my neck, and his free hand moved to my hip, where he slipped his finger into the lace at the top of my panties.

Heat was throbbing through me, but just as he started to pull them down, there was a knock at the door, and we both jumped. We scrambled to untangle from each other, and I yanked the sheet up.

“Yes?” I called, trying to sound normal as I pushed my tousled hair from my eyes. “Come in.”

Kira opened the door. “Hey. Big Mac says we’ve got to check out soon, so if either of you were wanting to get a shower, you should do it now.”

“Don’t use any of the fancy shampoos in the bathroom!” Big Mac shouted from the other room. “I’m not getting charged a fortune because you opened some soap that has gold flecks in it! *Water only*. We’ve got soap at home!”

Kira grinned at us and shook her head.

Mrs. Smith stepped into the doorway. “Good morning, you two,” she said pleasantly.

“Good morning,” I murmured, pulling the sheet even higher.

“We’ll need to stop by the witch council again this morning before we leave.”

“Why?” I asked.

“We got a call this morning that there’s some paperwork we need to fill out,” Mrs. Smith said.

Lilac frowned. “Paperwork? Isn’t it just boom-bang-bing, Marta’s not guilty now we’re good here?”

“I guess not,” I muttered.

Lilac heaved a sigh. “Well, at least I can get some more kombucha. I loved that stuff.”

“No!” Big Mac yelled from the other room. Her head appeared in the doorway, glaring at us. “No more of those fancy drinks from the witch council. I don’t want to get a bill from them either.”

“Okay,” Kira said, trying to usher Big Mac and Mrs. Smith away. “Why don’t we let Marta and Lilac get ready to go? They probably don’t need an audience for that,” she added, and, as she closed the door, gave me a knowing wink that made me blush.

The door shut, I looked over at Lilac. He looked back at me. For a moment, neither of us said anything. Then, with a hungry look in his eyes, Lilac tackled me, and we picked up where he’d left off.

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Two hours later, showered, dressed, and back at the witch council, I looked around, confused. I wasn’t sure what they needed me to do, or why they couldn’t have had me do whatever it was yesterday, but I was feeling a lot more secure this time. It was a different experience, rolling up holding Lilac’s hand and knowing I was backed up by two witches and a werewolf.

“Hola!” Red-bearded Kyle waved as he walked toward us.

“Hey,” Lilac called, waving. “Listen, I wanted to ask if you had any more of those artisanal kombuchas I had yesterday. I really liked the GingerFusion one—”

“Marta Zhao?” A small guy with dark-rimmed glasses walked over and looked around curiously.

“That’s me,” I said, raising my hand.

“Right this way,” he said, gesturing toward a small waiting area, off the main entrance. “They’ll call you in when it’s time.”

“Time for what?” I asked as the glasses guy turned to go. “I’m still not sure what I’m doing here.”

“There are a few things to sign off on, and I believe they want to clarify all the terms of your probation.” He pointed again to the waiting area. “Just over there. They’ll call you.”

I shot a glance at Lilac.

“We’ll wait here,” he said.

I nodded and, letting go of his hand, stepped into the waiting area. It was small and spare, with a large fish tank built against one wall. There just one other girl sitting in a chair. She looked over at me when I sat down, then away again.

There was a moment of awkward silence. And then another one. We were the only people waiting, and it felt ridiculous to pretend we didn’t see each other, so finally I made myself speak.

“Hi, I’m Marta,” I said. No sense in not being friendly. Besides, she looked about as nervous as I was. Was she on trial, too?

The girl looked over. “I’m Dani. What are you in for?”

“Oh, well, they brought me in for necromancy, but I’m being let go.”

Dani’s eyes went wide. “Really? Wow, that’s great. Good for you.”

“Thanks,” I said, feeling slightly awkward. “What about you?”

“Oh.” Dani’s gaze skittered away from mine. “Um, I was in a pretty bad situation, but I’m out of it now.”

“Oh. I’m sorry,” I said, unsure what else I could say. Her answer was a little on the vague side, considering she’d just come out and asked me what I was in for. “Well,” I said, giving her a smile, “it’s nice that we’ll both be able to go home now.”

My words surprised me. Because they were a slip, but—as I thought about them—I realized that they felt true. The pack house really was home now. Because Lilac was there, but that wasn’t all. There was Big Mac, and Kira, and Mrs. Smith, too. Along with the rest of the pack.

But Dani’s gaze dropped to the floor. “Well, I actually have no idea how I’m supposed to get back home.”

My heart gave a throb. I knew how that felt. I remembered when I’d finally gotten free of Bert and had absolutely nowhere to go, nor did I know how to get anywhere. I’d basically just hitched a ride with Charlie and Violet to the pack house because I’d had no other options.

Before I could really think about what I was saying, I turned to Dani. “Do you want to come with us?”

**Episode 2210**

I looked back at Lucian, wary of the sudden hungry look in his eyes. He usually looked hungry when he looked at me, but this was different. This felt deeper, more feral. It was less lust-filled, but somehow it scared me even more.

I wanted to take a step back, but the intensity of his gaze held me in place. “I don’t understand. Why is it such a big deal that I saw Seluna in my dreams?” I asked. “It was just a dream.”

Lucian shook his head. “Some dreams, yes of course, they are nothing. Mere fantasy. The mind filtering out excess thought. But when *Seluna* speaks to you in a dream, it is so much more than that. It is a prophecy!” His eyes were bright and unguarded.

He looked uplifted and exuberant, and it felt like one of the only times I’d ever seen beneath his carefully crafted façade to the real person beneath.

He turned toward a uniformed servant, who’d been standing at a door on the far side of the room. “Go! Go at once, and bring Princess Aysel here immediately. She must hear this!”

I watched the servant hurry out with a sinking feeling in my stomach. As nervous as I’d been to see Lucian, I had really, really hoped to avoid seeing Aysel. I didn’t want to see her. Not after she’d tried to seduce Greyson and convinced Lucian to drug me with a truth serum.

Maybe Greyson had been right. Maybe this whole trip had been a bad idea.

“Tell me, how many times have you seen Seluna in dreams? How did she appear to you?” Lucian pressed. “Did she speak to you? What did she say? Did she mention me?” But before I could answer, he held up his hands. “No! Don’t tell me anything. You must wait until Aysel arrives. I hate to hear things repeated. But then again”—he looked desperately at the door, where the servant had disappeared—“I am not a patient man!”

I shook my head, frustration building within me. I hadn’t come here to talk about my stupid dreams. I’d come to talk about the note he’d sent me. I tried to get the conversation back on track.

“How did you deliver that note to me?” I asked. “No one at the pack house saw anyone from the Vanguard pack deliver it. Or the one you sent to Greyson—”

“Greyson? Is he here? Where is he?”

I looked over to see Aysel standing at the door, looking around avidly.

“Aysel, come in,” Lucian said, waving her into the room. “What you are about to hear is far more important than one of your silly infatuations.”

I curled my hands into fists. So now it was common knowledge: Aysel had set her sights on Greyson. I had hoped it was a one-time thing—maybe fueled by the weird, intoxicating vibe of the Vanguard party. But clearly this viper princess had other ideas.

It just sucked that the viper was so damn beautiful.

Aysel’s crystalline blue eyes looked at me curiously as she walked into the room, but Lucian was looking more and more impatient.

“Pay attention,” he snapped at her. “This is news of Seluna.”

Now Aysel’s energy shifted, just as her brother’s had. She looked at me with a new, deep interest, bordering on reverence.

What the hell was with these two weirdos?  
 Lucian turned to me, his eyes practically sparking with energy. “Now,” he commanded, “tell us about the dream.”

I felt my face flush with embarrassment. I got flustered even thinking about the dreams—especially the one that had taken place in the bathtub with Lucian. But they were staring at me so intently, I knew I had to say something. “Seluna appeared in my dreams three times—”

The royals exchanged an excited glance.

“There is great promise in the power of three!” Lucian said. He looked back at me. “What else?”

“You were in the first two,” I said, and Lucian smiled, some of his usual smugness returning.

“And what about me?” Aysel asked eagerly.

This part pleased me. I smiled and shook my head. “Sorry, Aysel, you were shut out.”

Aysel looked devastated, which made it all worth it.

“What happened in the dreams?” Lucian pushed.

“Um.” I stalled, thinking hard. The last thing I wanted to do was reveal any embarrassing details. I shook my head. “Like I said, I don’t really remember much.”

“Try!” Lucian demanded.

I swallowed hard. His desperation for information was making me nervous. “Okay, okay, let me think. The first time, Seluna appeared in the fountain as a statue—”

“A statue?” Aysel asked, looking confused. “I don’t think that counts.”

I nodded. “Yeah, but then she came alive,” I said.

Lucian and Aysel exchanged another meaningful look.

“Wow,” Aysel breathed. “*Wow*.”

“And?” Lucian pushed.

I sighed. “In the second one, Seluna appeared in a…” I thought hard. “It was, like, a small body of water. A pond, maybe?”

“Oh my word,” Lucian said, his golden face going pale. “This is incredible. Go on!”

“And then, in the third dream, she appeared in the woods, under the full moon,” I finished.

Aysel’s gaze went hazy, and when she spoke, her voice was soft and dreamy. “She was beautiful, wasn’t she?”

I wasn’t sure if Aysel was actually asking me a question, or if she was even speaking to me. I shot a look at Lucian, but if I was hoping for a clue, I was disappointed. They were both acting so weird.

“What did Seluna speak of in these dreams?” Lucian asked.

His eyes were so wide and so frantic, I glanced toward the door where Xavier had disappeared. I wondered if he was still waiting outside, though I also had to wonder if the Vanguard pack members had even given him that option.

“Um,” I started, swallowing nervously, “she spoke about you, actually.”

Lucian’s wide eyes grew even bigger. “She spoke of me?” he asked quietly. “The *moon goddess* spoke of me, Prince Lucian of the Vanguard pack?” He put his hand to his heart, looking truly moved. “It must be a sign!”

“What did she say?” Aysel demanded.

“Every time she appeared, she just kept saying that I should talk to Lucian, because Lucian is the key.”

It was as if my words had sucked all the air out of the room. Lucian and Aysel drew back, away from me. They looked shocked, though they didn’t gasp. They didn’t do anything. They only looked at each other, staring in total silence. The moment stretched, and the silence grew heavy as they kept looking at each other, clearly communicating something through their eyes. It was almost as though they’d completely forgotten I was in the room with them.

“So, um, hello? What does that mean? Do you know? Because it seems like you do,” I said, waving my hands, trying to get their attention back.

Lucian looked over at me, his expression almost shell-shocked. When he spoke, his voice was low. “It means that now that Seluna has spoken, I must pursue her demands.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Okay. And about this key? What’s that about?”

He nodded. “Seluna has presented you as a challenge, Caliana. One that I must now accept—”

“Hang on,” I said quickly, cutting him off. “Let’s back up a little. All this talk about prophecies and the moon goddess—I just want you to tell me about the key. Keys are something I get. So let’s start with that.”

Lucian surprised me by taking my hand. “I must remind you, Caliana, that you are the rarest of the rare. You are a myth come to life! A *due destini* mate!”

“Yeah,” I said slowly, pulling my hand back. “You told me you might be able to help me with that. Is that what this is all about?”

“There is only one way to decipher our goddess’s wishes,” he said loftily.

“And what way is that?” I asked.

He didn’t answer, just clapped his hands. The servant who’d gone to fetch Aysel walked back in.

“Your Majesty?”

“Prepare the dais,” Lucian said. “Our guest is going to submit to the Seluna ritual.”

“Excuse me?” I asked incredulously, but Lucian wasn’t listening to me.

He had turned to Aysel, and his face was lit with excitement. “This is our moment, sister! Can you feel it?”

Aysel nodded, looking thrilled, but I was starting to panic. I wasn’t about to *submit* to anything—especially not if Lucian wanted me to. My heart thumped hard in my chest, and I could feel the back of my neck getting hot. I had to get out of here. I couldn’t get trapped here again. I just couldn’t.

*Xavier! Are you there? Can you hear me? Get me out of here—*

Before I could finish the sentence, the door burst open and Xavier’s wolf sprinted into the room. He was across the room in two strides, lunging straight at Lucian.

**Episode 2211**

I screamed and jumped back as Xavier charged into the room, teeth bared. I had expected him to come for me when I called, but I hadn’t expected him to immediately attack!

Before I could even think about what I was doing, I leapt in between him and the royals, just as he prepared to lunge. “Xavier! *Wait!*”

Xavier pulled up short, stopping just inches from my face. His was breathing hard, and his wolf eyes were on me, laser sharp and filled with pure, sparking anger.

My heart pounded painfully hard in my chest, and I shot a look over my shoulder. Aysel was looking at Xavier. She didn’t look even remotely scared, and her mouth was curled up in a slight smile.

“He’s very protective, isn’t he?” she asked, her voice almost a singsong. Her smile grew. “Seems to be a family trait.”

My eyes went to Lucian—he was looking at Xavier, too, but he wasn’t smiling.

*Cali. What the hell is going on?* Xavier growled in my head.

*It’s okay*, I said quickly. *It’s okay. I swear. Maybe you should shift back.*

Xavier growled, his eyes still flashing with anger, but he shifted back to his human form.

At once, Aysel took in his naked form with hungry eyes, and I instantly regretted the suggestion. But Xavier put his arm protectively around me and turned to glare at the brother and sister.

“Someone had better explain to me what the hell is going on,” he snarled.

Aysel wasn’t even pretending to hide her interest in Xavier, and I shifted my body to block him from her view. *Get a grip, sister! Paws off* my *mates.*

*I don’t suppose you brought any spare clothes*, I asked him tersely. *A pair of jeans? Basketball shorts? A full sweatsuit?*

“There’s nothing to be concerned about,” Lucian said, answering Xavier’s question in a light tone. “Caliana has been blessed with the goddess’s words. We only seek to understand them.”

Xavier shot a wary glance at me, then looked back at Lucian. “What the hell does that mean? What goddess? What are you talking about? Because all it sounds like to me is another excuse for you to keep Cali here under lock and key.”

“Well, that would be up to Caliana, of course. But if she does choose to stay here, that could be very easily arranged,” Lucian said smoothly. He looked at me with a knowing sparkle in his eye that unnerved me. Though maybe he saw the unsettled look on my face, because he shook his head. “No, no, nothing like that, Caliana. We have a ceremony, of course.”

“A ceremony? What kind of a ceremony?” I asked.

Lucian stared at me like I was missing something patently obvious. “A ceremony to help us understand the meaning behind Seluna’s words.”

“So?” Xavier looked confused. “What the hell does any of that have to do with Cali?”

Lucian looked between us for a moment as realization dawned in his eyes, and then a satisfied smile broke over his features. “Caliana didn’t tell you about her dreams?” He clicked his tongue. “And here I was, thinking mates shared everything.”

Xavier looked at me, and deep in his eyes I saw his questions and his fear. But when he turned back to Lucian, he looked perfectly confident.

“Of course she told me about the dreams,” he said smoothly, surprising me with his quick lie. “But as far as I could tell, they were just dreams. Meaningless, like all dreams. I thought you were supposed to be really intelligent and well-read and shit.”

Lucian drew himself up loftily. “I am, of course.”

Xavier raised his eyebrows. “So why are you so concerned about the meaning of some stupid dreams?”

Lucian’s golden face flushed slightly. “Dreams can be more than just debris. They can be a glimpse into a dimension we can only gain access to when our consciousness lowers its guard. A breaching of the gates, so to speak.” His eyes glittered with a dangerous fervor. “And when a goddess speaks to you, you have an obligation to listen.”

Xavier opened his mouth to respond to this, but I spoke first.

“Tell me about this ceremony,” I said. “What would you have to do? What would *I* have to do?”

Aysel rolled her eyes. “Ugh, don’t you people know anything? The ceremony is an all-day ritual—”

“Okay,” I said, putting up a hand to stop her. “I get it, and I can tell you right now that that’s not going to be possible. We’re kinda busy right now. We’ve got our own stuff going on.”

Lucian looked at me, genuinely baffled. “Perhaps I didn’t explain myself clearly enough. This is *Seluna*. The moon goddess. She is revealing a secret to you, Caliana. You must learn what it is she wishes you to know—”

“That’s all fine, or whatever,” Xavier interrupted, his tone clipped, “but Cali and I have to be somewhere. We don’t have time for any all-day rituals.”

Lucian looked offended. “I do not know what it is you have to do, but I can tell you that there is nothing more important than seeking to understand the will of the moon goddess. She is the reason we exist as werewolves.”

I looked at the “prince,” taking in his high cheekbones, his golden skin, his perfect aristocratic nose, his lifted chin. I couldn’t figure him out. Did he really believe all this stuff about Seluna, or was it all just an act? And if it *was* an act, what was his goal? I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. Part of me wanted to believe this goddess worship was just a part of his façade, but he seemed so sincere about it.

But before I could decide one way or the other, I glanced over to see Aysel checking out Xavier again, scanning him like he was a prime cut of beef, and it made my blood heat to boiling.

As if it wasn’t enough that this crazy girl had gone after Greyson, now she was going to go after Xavier, too? What the hell was wrong with this woman?

My hands twitched, and I let myself imagine blasting her with my powers—sending her slamming into the far wall—just for the fun of it.

Xavier put his hand on my arm. “We really do have to go,” he said, and he pulled me toward the door.

“Of course, of course,” Lucian said. “I understand that the threat of the rebel hunters is pressing. And my offer of help still stands.”

“Great,” Xavier muttered as we walked toward the door. “I’ll be sure to keep that in mind.”

“But no matter what you believe or disbelieve,” Lucian called after us, “you will likely continue to dream of Seluna, Caliana, and this connection between you and the moon goddess will remain a mystery.”

I didn’t look back. I had an idea that he was right, and I worried at the thought like a hangnail, but I didn’t want to let on. Not to Lucian.

“If she does come to you again,” he went on, “don’t hesitate to contact me. You can reach me anytime.”

“Yeah, she isn’t going to be doing that,” Xavier grunted, and we stepped out of the room and into the hallway. “This way,” he said, striding forward purposefully.

I looked over my shoulder.

“Are they really going to just let us leave?” I whispered. But it seemed so—no one was coming after us, at any rate. I looked up at Xavier. “I’m so glad you were there. I don’t know how else I was going to get out. I don’t know what I was thinking. Any mention of Seluna makes Lucian and Aysel and the rest of the Vanguard pack all go bonkers.”

I put my arm around Xavier’s waist and hugged him close. “Thank you,” I murmured as we turned down another hallway.

“Don’t thank me yet,” he said shortly, scanning the doorways as we passed.

I looked up, confused. Shit, was he mad at me? I wanted to ask, but he was focused on navigating out of the mansion, so I kept my mouth shut.

Neither of us said a word until we were outside and at the car.

My stomach was twisted into a knot. I felt horrible. Everywhere I turned, someone was mad at me. Greyson was mad at me back at home, and now Xavier, too?

Xavier popped the trunk and pulled on a pair of dark jeans and a blue T-shirt. When he turned to look at me, I could see that the T-shirt made his eyes look almost unbearably blue, and my breath caught in my throat.

I opened my mouth to say something—anything—but he slammed the trunk shut and got into the car.

As soon as I got into the passenger seat, he snapped, “So, when were you going to tell me that you were having dreams about some other guy?”

**Episode 2212**

XAVIER

I tried to keep my eyes on the road, but I also didn’t want to miss Cali’s reaction. I wanted to see the look on her face as she reacted to my asking about this secret she was keeping. That she’d apparently been dreaming about the fucking Vanguard “prince.” The Seluna stuff didn’t bother me half as much as Lucian taking up space in her mind.

I glanced away from the road to see a crease appearing between her brows. She paused for a minute, clearly crafting her response.

“Do you tell me about every single dream you have?” she finally asked, her voice maddeningly calm. It was such a reasonable question that a jolt of guilt tightened my stomach.

*Shit. Did I just open a can of worms?*

“That’s not the point.” *Nice deflection, Xavier.* I cleared my throat. “You shared your dreams with moon boy and his crazy lunar sister before you shared them with me. These dreams are important enough to be worth a discussion with Lucian, but not important enough to mention to your mate?”

“I could have been contacted by a deity! And that’s not exactly in your wheelhouse, is it? Lucian was the right person to ask. It’s not personal. It doesn’t have anything to do with you.”

“A deity?” I scoffed. “Nice try, but no.”

“You can believe what you want, but you can’t lecture me about something you know nothing about.”

My grip tightened on the wheel. “I do know this: the prince is full of it, and I don’t want you to get pulled into his orbit. There’s no such thing as a moon goddess—it’s all some creepy cult that the Vanguards probably invented themselves in a bid for power—and I don’t like seeing you caught up in their bullshit. Jesus, Cali, I thought you were smarter than that.”

Silence filled the car, and then, “Are you calling me stupid?” Her voice was low, a red flag, a warning that I’d just put my foot in my mouth—and a dare to shove it in a little deeper since I was already doing so well.

*Fuck. This is getting out of hand.*

“*No*. You’re not stupid. I just… I don’t want any of this to spiral out of control.” I pulled in a breath, trying to calm myself, to keep myself from making this situation any more of a goddamn mess than it already was. “Is it possible that you’re spellbound by all of this royal nonsense? Lucian is doing his best to seduce you into believing your dream means something. But if you step back and think about it, can you honestly say you believe that this is anything more than a run-of-the-mill dream?”

“How can you be so close-minded? Do I need to remind you that everyone, including you, used to think that *due destini* was just a myth? Now we know better. Who’s to say that it’s not the exact same thing with Seluna?”

“You know, I really wish the *due destini* was just a myth, but at least people had heard of it before it derailed our lives. Who the hell has ever heard of Seluna and all this moon worship? Nobody except Lucian and his followers. I’m telling you—it’s a cult.”

Cali didn’t answer, and when I glanced away from the road, her arms were crossed over her chest and she was staring out the passenger-side window. Her body language gave off one message, and one message alone: fuck you.

I sighed. “I don’t want to argue with you—especially over a jackass like Lucian.” Still, she didn’t say anything, so I added, “The point is, I don’t want Lucian to get in your head. We can’t trust him—not even for something as small as a dream. I need you to promise me that if you have any more of those weird dreams, you’ll let me know. Okay?”

“Okay. Do you think Lucian’s going to do something?”

I frowned. “About what?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her shrug. “I don’t know. I just get the impression that Lucian’s not used to being told no, and I can’t see him behaving well after I refused to stick around for that ceremony.”

“He’s a spoiled ass.” I snorted. “If he wants to retaliate, let him try. We can handle him.”

We pulled up to the pack house to find the pack hustling about, gathering supplies and forming up in the yard.

Cali stepped out of the car. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out.”

I was barely out of the car when I felt a pair of eyes on me. I found Greyson standing on the porch, glaring at me. Just like I’d expected, he was pissed. I didn’t mind—if anything, I actually got a kick out of seeing his Underoos in a wad.

Cali rushed up to the house. “What’s going on?”

As I approached much more slowly, I overheard Zainab say, “We’re going after Shania Twain!”

Next to her, Sage frowned. “I thought it was Champagne?”

“Do you mean Shanna Paiyn?” Cali asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Greyson growled. “Just get ready.”

He turned away from Cali and headed toward the house as she tried to explain our short trip to the Vanguard palace.

He waved her off. “I said get ready.”

Cali paused on the steps to the porch, looking like he’d just slapped her.

I squeezed her arm gently. “Don’t worry. I’ll deal with him.”

I followed my brother into the house and found him brooding in the living room that overlooked the yard.

“I’m surprised you decided to come back,” he drawled.

Okay, so he was determined to be pissy about it. “I get that you’re angry, but you and I both know that Cali would have gone to see Lucian with or without us. I figured it was better for me to go along—and it was a good thing I did. Cali was in over her head.”

His eyes narrowed. “And what the hell does that mean?”

“Lucian’s up to the same old bullshit.”

“I don’t care about Lucian right now,” Greyson snarled through gritted teeth. “We’re about to fight a group of rogue hunters, and you decide to take Cali on a road trip? Without my permission?”

My brows lifted. “Let’s get one thing straight: you may be the Alpha right now, but you’re not about to tell me when I can or can’t be with my mate. That is not your call.”

He scoffed. “Just get ready. We’re leaving soon.”

I rolled my eyes. Greyson might’ve been mad at us for leaving, but it was pretty clear he was getting off on playing general. “Whatever.”

I left him alone in the living room and headed toward the kitchen to find Violet sitting at the kitchen island with Cali.

“I’m under house arrest,” Violet complained. “Greyson told me I have to stay in the house. He’s not letting me fight. It’s so unfair! The only reason the pack is fighting this war is because Zachery singled me out. This is *my* fight.”

Cali patted her shoulder. “I could try to talk to Greyson and see if he’ll change his mind, but he’s a little upset with me right now.”

“Greyson’s right,” I said, making them both turn to face me. “Violet, you need to stay here.”

“But she wants to fight,” Cali said.

“And I get that, but letting her out there would be like sending her into battle with a bullseye on her forehead. Every one of those rebels out there will be trying to impress Shanna by getting Violet—it’s too risky.”

Violet scoffed. “So, what? I’m just supposed to stay here in the pack house alone? Like a sitting duck? That makes sense. You know Charlie’s going to be out there too, right? The last thing I want is for him to be fighting for me when I’m not even lifting a finger. Come on, Xavier. You know why I have to be out there with you. I can do this. I have to do this.”

She looked at me pleadingly, her shoulders thrown back and her chin lifted in defiance. For a moment, I didn’t know what to do. For the longest time, and especially after Lilac had died, Violet had been the baby of the pack. The one we all fought to protect. But being in the Redwood pack meant you didn’t get to be a kid for long. She’d grown into a strong fighter—she definitely wasn’t a kid anymore.

But she *was* still the little sister I’d never had. And the hunters wanted her more than anyone else here. If we were pieces on a chessboard, she’d be our king.

I groaned and shook my head. “I’m sorry, but no. You’re not going anywhere. In fact, I’m going to make sure you stay here and stay safe.”

“How?” Cali asked. “Violet’s right. She can’t just be left alone here.”

“She won’t be alone,” I said. “Because you’re going to stay here with her.”

**Episode 2213**

My eyes narrowed at Xavier. “I beg your what?”

“I think the best solution is for you to stay back here at the pack house with Violet. That way she stays out of the fray, but we also don’t have to worry about leaving her alone.”

My mouth opened and closed. A thousand pissed-off responses swirled through my mind, and for a moment, I was too angry to speak. Then, “What the *hell*? What am I supposed to be, Violet’s babysitter?”

Violet looked just as pissed off by Xavier’s suggestion as I felt. “*Excuse me?*” She glared at me and then at Xavier. “I’m not a baby, and I don’t need a watchdog, either.”

“Please, Xavier. You can’t just leave us out of this. The hunters are a threat to the pack—the whole pack. You guys will need every available fighter out there.”

“Yeah, you can’t just bench us!” Violet added.

Xavier held his hands up in front of him. “Greyson’s in charge—for the moment, at least,” he added. “And he wants Violet to stay here.” He leaned in and brushed a kiss against my forehead. I stiffened under his touch, still too pissed off to take any comfort from it. “Just think of yourself as a bodyguard, Cali.”

“I don’t need a bodyguard!” Violet insisted. “I fought in the battle against Silas. I’ve fought a Rogue werewolf. Hell, I faced down a small army of vampire-revenants! I’m not a liability here, and you and Greyson are both idiots to think otherwise.”

I expected Xavier to snap at Violet after that, but his gaze softened as he looked at the girl who was like a little sister to him. “You’re *both* important to me. And I know this isn’t an ideal situation, but the hunters *are* targeting you, Violet. This isn’t about you being a badass or not. Let the pack take care of this for you. The most important thing you can do now is stay out of danger. Stay here with Cali, and the two of you can focus on protecting each other.”

I paused. I hadn’t thought about it like that. *Maybe Xavier’s right.* My resolve softened, hearing him talking to Violet like that.

Violet groaned. “This sucks!”

“I know.” Xavier patted her shoulder. “But it’ll be over before you know it.”

He squeezed my hand before heading upstairs to get ready. As he left the room, Greyson came in, and Violet rushed up to him.

“Greyson, you have to let me fight! Don’t bench me! I can defend myself!”

“I don’t want to hear it,” he growled. “You’re staying here. End of discussion.”

She growled right back at him and stomped out of the room. I swallowed roughly as Greyson turned to face me. He looked upset—beyond upset.

“Xavier wants me to stay here with Violet,” I blurted out.

He nodded. “That’s a good idea.”

“I disagree, but he refused to listen to me.”

His brows rose. “Like you listened to me?”

I winced. “You can be angry because I went to Lucian’s, but you can’t punish me by keeping me out of the battle. I mean, Artemis hasn’t even remastered her magic yet, and she gets to go out there and fight for the pack! And Lola too!”

*Except, Artemis knows how to use a lot of weapons that you don’t*, a mean little buzzkill of a voice in the back of my head reminded me. *And Lola is a werewolf* and *a vampire…*

*Ugh!*

Greyson frowned, but his gaze softened. “This isn’t a punishment. Where you’re concerned, I’m always going to try to protect you—that’s just the way it is. It’s not a comment on whether or not you’re capable of fighting.”

“I’m sorry I went off without you, but I was trying to help the pack too, and I asked Xavier to come, so you shouldn’t blame him.”

“I understand where you were coming from, and I’m sorry I got upset.” He sighed. “I just wish I could’ve gone with you. But I’m needed here. I have to serve the pack. Believe me, if I could be in two places at once, I would be.”

“And I get that. Really, I do. I might have acted a little impulsively, but I only did it because I knew you couldn’t go talk to Lucian right away.”

Greyson watched my face for a moment. “Are you sure you didn’t leave for another reason?”

This felt like a test—one I didn’t have the answers for. I frowned. “What other reason could there be?”

He shook his head. “Never mind.”

Then he pulled me into a kiss, his lips firm and warm and coaxing me into relaxing into his arms. When he pulled away, he stared down at me tenderly, and I got a glimpse of all the emotions he was holding back for the sake of doing his duty as Alpha. “I’m just glad you’re back—safe and sound. I want it to stay that way.”

“About that staying here thing… You do know I can use my powers in the fight, right?”

“I know, but that doesn’t change anything. As pissed off as I am at my brother, he’s right about Violet. Everyone will be distracted trying to keep her safe, and all that will do is cause more problems for us. These hunters are the real deal. We can’t afford to be distracted in battle.”

I bit my lip. “And Violet’s the only one you’re worried about creating a distraction? Tell me the truth, Greyson. Are you worried about being distracted with me out there?”

He sighed. “I might be.”

“But I can fight! You’ve seen me in action.”

“Which is exactly why you need to stay with Violet.” His tone invited no argument. The decision was made, and there would be no changing his mind. And even if I tried, all I would be doing was wasting Greyson’s time right before a big battle.

I forced a smile. “I’ll do everything I can to protect Violet.”

He kissed me once more before turning to leave, and I reached out and grabbed his arm. “Just… be careful, okay?”

“There’s nothing I want more than to come back to you, love.”

As Greyson headed out to get the pack ready, Xavier came back into the kitchen. *Are these two playing musical chairs or something?*

“Hey. I’m heading out,” Xavier said.

I hugged him tightly. “Be careful, okay?”

“I will. I promise.”

Xavier went out the door, and I watched from the window as my two mates led the pack into the woods. It took every ounce of self-control I possessed to not tear out of the kitchen and race after them.

Violet joined me at the window, watching the pack go with a scowl. “They’re really doing it. This is my fight, and they’re really going off to fight it without me.”

I forced some brightness into my voice. “Are you hungry? Why don’t we ask Torin to cook something?”

She crossed her arms over her chest, never looking away from the window. “I’m not hungry.”

“Okay… Do you want to watch something?”

“No.”

Now it really was starting to feel like babysitting. Violet was refusing to be distracted. Clearly, all she wanted to do was sit and mope.

“Well, do you want to just sit and wait then?” I gestured to the window. “You’ve got a front-row seat. You’ll know the minute they make it back.”

“I don’t want to sit and wait. I want to fight! I should be out there with them. I’m a werewolf. I’m part of the pack too. It’s not fair.”

She was right. It *wasn’t* fair, but Greyson and Xavier weren’t wrong, either. All the rebels would be after Violet. She’d have a target on her back the moment she stepped outside the pack house.

As the last of the pack disappeared into the tree line, Violet finally peeled herself away from the window with a sigh. “Maybe they’re right. Maybe this is for the best.”

I patted her shoulder. “I know how hard it must be to stay here. Are you sure you don’t want a snack?”

“Actually, that sounds good.”

I headed upstairs to see if Torin was around and in the mood to cook. I was halfway down the hall when I heard the creak of the front door opening and closing.

“Mom?” I called out, thinking of the few people who were still in the house with us. “Torin?”

My mom called from down the hallway. “Be down in a minute!”

A chill rushed through me. *Did a hunter just sneak in? Was this their plan—to lure the pack away and then come in and take Violet?*

I knew they’d been watching the house… Could they be watching us right now?

I crept down the stairs as quickly and quietly as possible. When I reached the landing, I caught a flash of movement on the front porch, but it wasn’t a hunter. It was Violet. Outside. Racing toward the woods.

“Oh shit.”

**Episode 2214**

GREYSON

I couldn’t stop thinking about Cali.

I stalked through the woods, almost the entirety of the Redwood pack behind me as I followed Ava, who was acting as our guide to the hunter encampment. I knew I had to stay focused. I was trusting the guidance of one of the sketchiest werewolves I knew, walking into rebel hunter territory that was probably riddled with traps, to say nothing of the bloodthirsty group that was likely on the lookout for us.

Despite all of those demands on my attention, my mind kept snapping back to the woman I’d left back at the pack house.

*Cali’s right. She is a good fighter—and I should lean on her more. Especially when she becomes my Luna.*

If she did become my Luna, I’d have to lean on her, depend on her, trust her to hold her own, to make her own decisions and see them through. The whole pack would have to.

What I didn’t know was how the hell I was going to be able to handle that. I respected Cali—I wanted her to be the best Luna possible, and I knew without a doubt that she had it in her to do just that. She was fierce and strong and kind and empathetic and she could definitely hold her own when she needed to. She already had all the qualities of a great Luna.

But if I made her a Luna, if I had her stand beside me rather than behind me, I wouldn’t be able to keep shielding her from every possible threat. If she were my Luna, she’d be with me right now, fighting alongside the pack.

How could I allow that? How could I even function with that situation? I couldn’t imagine a scenario in which I wouldn’t worry about her constantly, which was kind of the problem. If the pack doubted my ability to stick around and lead, to give them the focus they needed, then how the hell would that problem not get a thousand times worse with Cali as my Luna?

I wished I had an answer, but for all the time I’d wrestled with the question, I didn’t know anything more than I had before I’d started. The only thing I really knew for sure was that I loved Cali, that I’d do anything to protect her, to keep her safe and happy and healthy.

Artemis rushed up to my side. “I think we should stop.”

I raised a hand to call the pack to a halt, and they slowed to a stop.

“I’ve picked up a trail,” Artemis said, pointing ahead. “I think it might belong to the rebel hunters.”

Carefully stepping forward, she showed me the signs of the trail—a few still-damp footprints in the mud, a couple broken twigs beyond that, and places where the moss and undergrowth were worn down.

She looked up at me. “What do you want to do?”

I checked the time. “We’re supposed to be meeting Iris and her crew soon.” We didn’t have an unlimited amount of time to go wandering through the woods. Plus, this seemed to veer away from the path Ava had been leading us on. But if I had to choose between Ava’s word and Artemis’s tracking abilities, the choice was easy.

I doubled back to where the pack waited. “Stay here. Artemis and I are going to check out the trail.” I gave Xavier a meaningful look. “Don’t do *anything*.”

My brother didn’t say anything, and I turned on my heel, following Artemis as she led me down the trail.

I couldn’t help being impressed by the Fae’s skills. Her tracking skills clearly hadn’t lost their edge since she’d left the Fae world, and it was a mystery how she was able to creep so silently with a bow and arrow and what looked like at least ten knives strapped to her body.

Suddenly she stopped and held a finger to her lips. I paused and listened, scenting the air around us. The rebels used something to mask their scent from us, but they hadn’t yet figured out how to move soundlessly through the forest.

And the forest was too quiet, like it was holding its breath. No leaves rustling in the wind. No birds. No insects. Nothing.

Artemis readied her bow, and I crouched down behind her. I was ready to shift at the drop of a hat, but I didn’t want the sound of it to give away our position. Artemis would have to make the first move, while we still had an advantage.

Leaves crunched nearby, and Artemis swung her bow around just as Charlie popped up from behind a log.

“Greyson?”

Relief rushed through me, and I stood, reaching out to tip Artemis’s loaded bow down.

From out of the shadows and behind the trees, Charlie, Iris, Pepperdine, and the other hunters on our side emerged.

Iris’s eyes narrowed at me. “You’re late.”

“As always, I appreciate your attention to detail.” I tilted my head back the way we’d come. “The rest of the pack is back that way.”

“What are you waiting for?” Iris asked. “Let’s regroup.”

We headed back toward the pack. Pepperdine let out a low whistle. At first, I thought he was checking out Artemis’s ass, but then he said, “That’s a really handsome bow you’ve got there.”

“Thank you. It was crafted in the Kollector’s armory.” She shrugged. “He was a monster, but he hired the most skilled weaponsmiths west of the Pit of Evercross.”

The sergeant blinked. “All right, then.”

I slowed to fall into step beside Iris, and her brows rose. “May I help you?”

“I just want to make something clear,” I said, my voice low. “When the shit hits the fan, there can only be one person giving orders—and that’s me. The rebels have threatened my pack, and I am the one responsible for each and every member of the Redwood pack. I’m their Alpha. If there’s any objection to this, you might as well turn around now and save yourself some grief.”

She gave me a condescending smile and patted my arm. “Whatever you say, Alpha.”

My teeth ground together. This bizarre alliance couldn’t end soon enough.”

I knew the moment we’d gotten close to the pack, because I could hear Xavier and Ava bickering through the trees.

*Big surprise.*

I stalked forward. “What’s the problem? And before you respond,” I added, holding up a hand to cut Ava off, “it had better be good enough to justify the risk of alerting every rebel hunter in a mile radius with your goddamn bickering.”

Xavier’s growled. “We don’t need Ava here. I already know where the rebel camp is.”

“The pack needs me!” she insisted hotly.

He laughed. “Nobody needs you, Ava. And we sure as shit don’t want you. Beat it.”

“If it’ll feed your gigantic ego, then go ahead and lead the way, but I’m not going anywhere.”

“Enough!” I snarled. “We can’t afford to have this kind of distraction. Do your fucking jobs—and keep your mouths shut while you’re at it. Do you understand?”

I glanced over at our hunter allies, with Iris standing at the head. It looked like she was trying very hard not to laugh.

Fucking great.

Xavier took the lead, and the pack moved forward. I hoped he and Ava were finished with their petty arguing. I’d taken a calculated risk by allowing Ava to join us in the fight against the hunters. Sure, she was a pain in the ass, but she was also a skilled fighter, and if my hunch was right, this fight wasn’t going to be a walk in the park.

Suddenly, Ava tackled Xavier, and they both crashed to the ground.

“What the hell?” he huffed, shoving her off.

“Jesus, you two.” I hurried over to defuse the situation as Ava hopped up, grabbed a fallen branch off the ground, and slammed it down in front of them. A loud, metallic *snap* rent the air, and the branch snapped in half under the force of a silver claw trap.

I froze, my brows rising with understanding.

Ava turned back to Xavier. “Consider yourself saved.”

She met my gaze, and I gave her a nod of approval.

“Everyone, be on the lookout for more traps,” I called to the rest of the pack.

“You sure have things under control,” Iris drawled. If she hadn’t been our ally and Charlie’s mother, I would have been sorely tempted to snap her in half like the trap had just done to that branch.

Xavier climbed to his feet and continued to lead the way, slower now as we all watched for silver traps.

Not for the first time, I was glad Cali wasn’t here. That could just as easily have been her stepping into the trap—and I seriously doubted Ava would have tried to save her.

I sighed. As much as she probably hated it, leaving her back at the house was definitely the right call. I was already thinking about her way too much, considering she wasn’t even here. If she’d actually been alongside us now, I didn’t think I’d have been able to think straight.

Xavier stopped and crouched down before turning back. “The rebel camp is just ahead.”

I crept forward and peeked through the brush. A campfire smoldered up ahead.

I turned back to the pack. “Let’s end this.”

**Episode 2215**

VIOLET

I slinked through the woods, trying my best to follow behind the trail left by the pack without actually catching up to them.

Tracking them was easy enough—their scents practically beckoned me through the forest, and the prints and crushed foliage alone would have been enough to mark the way, even if I hadn’t been able to smell them. The trickier part was making sure that I was far back enough to avoid being detected by my pack without being so far back that I’d be useless to them when the fighting started.

If I literally ran into them too soon, I had no doubt that Greyson and Xavier would both have some choice words for me. But if I joined in when the fighting started, I had a feeling that everyone would be too busy to worry about sending me back home. After all, who was going to notice yet another werewolf kicking some rogue hunter ass?

I just had to time it right. Because one thing was for certain—there was no way in hell I was going to let the people I loved fight my battles for me, especially not Charlie. He could handle himself, sure. The combination of his werewolf abilities and his hunter training and talent made him a formidable fighter. But the mere thought of him fighting Zachery without me had me speeding up.

*No one is going tell me to stay put when my mate’s out there. Not Greyson, not Xavier, and definitely not Cali.*

My temper sparked at the thought, and an angry flush slid across my skin. I’d thought I could rely on Cali for support, that she saw me as more than just the Redwood pack’s little sister. With all the times Cali had been told to stay back for her own protection—and all the times she’d ultimately done whatever the hell she wanted, regardless of the consequences—I’d thought for sure that I could count on her to advocate for me. I’d thought that she of all people would understand not wanting to be separated from your mate, not wanting to leave them alone to fight a dangerous enemy.

I’d thought she would be on my side, and I hated to be so wrong.

I was ready to shift and put on the real burst of speed that would bring me closer to Charlie—hopefully just in time to jump into battle—when Cali’s voice squawked through the air behind me.

“Ugh! Violet!” She was panting. “*Stop!*”

I turned to see my babysitter about fifteen feet back, bent over and panting. She looked ready to heave up her guts. It was such a pathetic sight that I did stop, if only to give her a short break.

It would be nothing to outrun her now. She wasn’t exactly in warrior shape, and beyond that, she was only half Fae. She had no chance of keeping up with me, especially once I shifted.

But I knew better than to think I could escape by outrunning her. This was *Cali.* Yes, I could outrun her, but her stubbornness knew no bounds. She’d just keep chugging along.

It was better to try to break her off my trail now. “What are you doing out here?”

She hauled herself upright, still panting, her cheeks a violent shade of pink. “Don’t—make me—use—my—magic—against you,” she puffed.

*Yeah, right.* I snorted. “I’m shaking in my boots. I can’t believe you’d even suggest that. Go home, Cali.”

She pulled in a deep breath and wiped at her face with the back of her hand. “Greyson asked me to stay with you. So that’s what I’m trying to do, but you’re making it really hard.”

“I’m not going back to the pack house. I’m going to fight, and you’re not going to be able to convince me otherwise. So don’t even bother trying.”

“I get why you want to be out here. Believe me, I do. But Greyson is the Alpha, and—”

“Charlie is my *mate*.” I squared my shoulders. “I honestly can’t understand what you don’t get about that. Why you’re not on my side with this. You let both of your mates go into battle without you. Why aren’t *you* champing at the bit to get out there with them?”

“You’re right. Xavier and Greyson are out there risking their lives, and it sucks.”

“Then why are you letting this happen?” I demanded.

“Because I’ve learned that sometimes you have to compromise, especially when it comes to having two mates. I’m pulled in so many directions all the time, and this situation is no exception. They asked me to do this, so I’m trying to honor that.” Her brows furrowed. “But let me make one thing clear: if you think I don’t want to be out there with them, you’re wrong.”

“Then you should understand why I’m not turning back. No matter what you say, I’m going to be with Charlie. I refuse to compromise on that.” I turned to continue after the pack.

“What if it were Charlie?” Cali called after me, and I froze. “If the tables were turned, and the rebel hunters had put a target on Charlie’s back, wouldn’t you want him to stay and be protected?”

“Yes.” I didn’t turn back to face her. “But I know Charlie too, and he wouldn’t stay back either. I’m going. End of story.”

I started walking forward again.

“Okay, fine. But can you at least go a little slower?”

I frowned but didn’t stop. “That makes no sense. We’ve already wasted too much time arguing!”

“I’m coming with you, and I can’t move as quickly!”

I sighed. I couldn’t let Cali slow me down. If we kept going at her pace, we wouldn’t reach the pack until the fighting was over. I stopped and turned to her. “You can ride.”

Cali blinked and looked around. “Ride what?”

“Me.” I shifted and trotted over to her side, snickering as Cali scrambled onto my back.

*And here I thought she had a lot of experience with this kind of thing.*

I didn’t wait for Cali to settle onto my back. I immediately lunged forward, and my rider nearly tumbled off. A sharp tug at the fur near my shoulder blade told me she’d finally grabbed on. Moments later, I picked up the trail again and raced through the woods.

The entire time, Cali wriggled on my back, clearly trying to settle into a comfortable, secure position. It felt like some kind of large pest crawling up my back, and more than once I considered darting under some low-hanging branches.

*It sure would be a shame if Cali got knocked off.*

I snickered at the thought. Truly, I didn’t bear any ill will toward Cali—only the situation we were in. I didn’t need her to play my warden, and I didn’t want her slowing me down any more than she already had. I knew she was a magnet for trouble, and I had a feeling that whatever she might get into out here, I’d be pulled into it too.

It didn’t take long to catch back up. We weren’t far behind the pack now—the trail was fresher, the scents stronger. I could only hope I wasn’t too late. The thought of Charlie fighting without me made my chest tighten.

I hoped that when Iris saw, once again, just how good a fighter and a mate I was, it could chip away at her obvious distrust toward me. I loved her son. I wanted him to be happy and healthy—I just wished she could see beyond my supernatural abilities and recognize that I was the best match for her son. Because it would really suck to have a true monster-in-law as my mother-in-law when Charlie and I got married one day. Hopefully this battle could put an end to a lot of unsavory things—Zachery and Shanna Paiyn hunting me, and Iris hating me.

A girl could dream.

My ears perked up at a faint buzzing sound nearby. What could it be? Or was I just imagining it?

I slowed to a stop. The sound was only getting louder now.

“Do you hear that?” Cali asked.

I sure did. It was coming from above us. Cali slid off my back, and we crouched down in the brush. A shadow was passing along the ground, heading in our direction.

Then the realization hit—it was a drone. Greyson and Xavier had found one too, hadn’t they? When they’d found evidence that the rebel hunters had used drones to spy on the pack house. Were the hunters using drones to surveil the woods now? To get the upper hand before the battle?

I shifted back to my human form. “Stay low so the drone doesn’t spot you,” I whispered.

Cali pointed directly upward. “The drone is just overhead.”

Before I could stop her, she jumped up and blasted the drone with her Fae power. It sputtered and tumbled down in a plume of smoke, making a loud crunching noise when it hit the ground.

My brows rose. “Nice shot.”

We rushed over to the fallen drone, and Cali crouched down next to it. “Do you think it saw us?”

“I hope not.”

“Maybe we should head back to the pack house. This has to belong to the rebel hunters.”

“Quiet,” I shushed her. “It could still be recording us!”

I picked it up. It was pretty damaged from the blast, and there weren’t any identifying marks on it. No *Property of Shanna Paiyn* printed on the side. I was about to drop it when a red light started flashing and the drone started beeping faster and faster.

Cali’s eyes went wide. “Oh my god. Is it a *bomb*?”

**Episode 2216**

XAVIER

I crouched down in the brush, scanning the campsite. The campfire still smoldered, a sure sign that the hunters hadn’t been gone long. I couldn’t detect anyone nearby, but that didn’t mean much, seeing as how we were up against experienced hunters who knew how to mask their scents.

Greyson had turned back to the pack, signaling them to shift. The air filled with the sound of cracking bones as the entire pack shifted. I followed suit, glancing over at Iris and her hunters. The expressions on her hunters’ faces ranged from morbidly curious to horrified. Iris’s face, of course, showed no emotion. By now she had to be used to seeing us shift, but I was pretty sure she still hated the mere concept of allying with us. If her son hadn’t been in danger, I had a feeling that she would’ve be more than content to leave us to our own devices.

*Hopefully the alliance with Iris and her hunters will hold through the fighting.* If not, we’d have to face down assailants on both sides. My biggest hope was that we’d be able to make quick work of the band of rebel hunters and send Iris and her crew packing. Then things could go back to normal—them killing werewolves or whatever the hell they did in Minnesota, and the Redwood pack finally putting this Alpha question to bed when I faced Greyson in an inevitable Lupo Finale.

I pulled in a deep breath and turned back to face the campsite. But first, Paiyn and her hunters needed to be dealt with. Permanently. There would probably be a little confusion for some of the pack members during the fight—tunnel vision was common and, after all, hunters were hunters. But the wolves knew the scents of the ally hunters well enough by now that even in the heat of battle, they should be able to tell the difference.

It would be easy for Iris’s crew, in theory. The only werewolves showing up to fight were from the Redwood pack. As long as they could suppress their ingrained urge to kill us all, we’d be fine. Probably.

*We’re just asking for this whole thing to blow up in our faces.*

We advanced toward the camp. The ally hunters spread out around the edges of the pack formation, and the wolves crouched low as we slinked through the forest, ready to pounce at the first sign of trouble.

Greyson’s voice slipped through my mind. *Something’s wrong.*

I looked around. He was right. Something definitely seemed… off. The place was empty. Where the hell were the rebel hunters?

Pepperdine pointed to a set of boot treads leading away from the camp. “Maybe they heard us approaching and retreated?”

Greyson shifted back to human so he could speak with the hunters. “It’s possible…” He turned to me. “You and Ava scouted out the place last night, right? Are you sure you weren’t spotted?”

I shifted back as well. “I can’t see how. We were pretty careful.” I noticed Ava’s wolf watching me, and a shadow of doubt pressed onto my mind. *Had* we scared them away?

My mind flashed back to last night, to Ava and myself after we’d spotted the camp. The sensation of her lips moving against mine, her body, warm and soft and willing, pressed against mine. I fought the urge to grimace. I hated the idea that anyone might have seen that—especially a bunch of bloodthirsty rebel hunters. I wished I could purge it from my own mind.

*But… if we were spotted, wouldn’t the rebel hunters have attacked us? It was just the two of us—two werewolves up against the whole rebel hunter crew? They could have taken us. We weren’t exactly paying attention to our surroundings either.*

Greyson blew out a breath. “Whatever happened, it’s clear the rebels aren’t here.”

The rest of the pack shifted back, and another rainbow of expressions passed over the hunters’ faces. Clearly, they were just as unaccustomed to nudity as they were to watching human bodies shift into wolves.

Pepperdine, in particular, seemed to be looking anywhere but at the pack. The young guy—Chad, I think his name was—stared at Lola in obvious appreciation, but then the young girl, Sophie, smacked his shoulder hard enough to make him stumble forward. I couldn’t help but notice her gaze drifting to Charlie.

*Hypocrite.* I shook my head. *She’d better not cross Violet.*

There was nothing more volatile than a wolf protecting their claim to their mate. I knew that better than anyone.

Iris, of course, didn’t so much as blink at the nudity. She was all business. Again, I lamented the fact that she’d been indoctrinated into hunter society. She would have made some Alpha werewolf one hell of a Luna were she a wolf.

“If the rebel hunters have moved on,” she said, “we should pick up the trail and pursue them, don’t you think? Or would you prefer to stand around and hope that they find their way back to camp?”

*Maybe our peace with the ally hunters isn’t going to last very long after all.* It was clear that Iris didn’t want to be here, wouldn’t have been here at all if she hadn’t felt that her son’s life depended on it. We’d gone into this alliance knowing there were certain differences that could never be sorted out—namely the fact that Iris considered werewolves to be evil monsters, and we could never be buddy-buddy with someone who made a lifestyle out of hunting us.

Still, we’d tried for civility. We’d reminded Iris that she had no authority over the werewolves. That she didn’t have to like us, but that she needed to respect the hierarchy when it came to fighting the rebel hunters.

Apparently even that was going to be a harder task than we’d thought.

Greyson ignored the dig. “Let’s follow their trail.”

Ava sidled up to me. “You can thank me whenever you want, by the way.”

I scoffed. “Don’t get ahead of yourself. I saw the trap too.”

“Sure you did.” She chuckled, and I only just resisted the urge to throttle her. It was a damn shame the tables hadn’t been turned. I would have loved to watch Ava get snapped up in a silver trap. My wolf might fight to save her, but I sure as shit wouldn’t hesitate to let her die.

“Everyone, quiet down,” Rishika snapped.

The pack went silent as a figure stepped out from behind a tree.

Iris’s gaze locked on the figure, and her brows knitted together. “Shanna?”

I watched as Shanna Paiyn approached us alone, her hands up in the air. She was sorely outnumbered, outgunned, and… she was surrendering?

My hackles rose. *Something’s not right about this.*

I looked around wildly. This was Shanna Paiyn, the infamous big bad of hunter lore. The pain in our ass who’d outsmarted us, who’d moved into our territory and taken surveillance of us for days before we’d even realized she was here. Her hunters were skilled, heartless killing machines, and they clearly had the scratch to afford an untold number of state-of-the-art silver traps, drones, all the supplies they’d need to put up a fight against a werewolf pack on its own turf.

Why the hell was she just giving up before the battle had even begun? It didn’t make any sense.

Greyson held up a hand, signaling for everyone to hold their ground. He and Iris continued forward, stopping a safe distance away from Shanna.

My brother’s eyes narrowed on the woman with enough malice that a lesser human would have pissed themselves.

“If it was up to me, I’d kill you right now,” he growled. “But I believe this is a hunter problem, and it’s up to the hunters to resolve it.” He gestured to Iris.

“Of course, if the hunters need *any* assistance, we’re glad to help out,” I supplied.

Shanna smiled, seeming totally at ease despite facing down a full werewolf pack and band of skilled hunters. “I have to admit, I was about to give up on this endeavor. I thought for sure that you’d all be here hours ago.”

I tensed. So she *was* expecting us.

To Greyson’s credit, he didn’t seem bothered by this news. “I wanted to make you sweat it out. It’s part of the fun, you know?” He shrugged. “Too bad you’re so heavily outnumbered. It would have been fun to see how you and your misfits fared against us.”

“Outnumbered?” That shit-eating smile on her face grew. “Hmm… I guess I never realized that werewolves and their sellout hunter friends are so bad at math.”

Something was wrong. Shanna was way too cocky right now. This wasn’t the behavior of someone staring down a surrender. This was the way someone acted when they were sure they were going to win.

“Why do you say that?” Greyson asked. “There’s one of you, and all of us.”

“Try again.” Shanna pressed her fingers to her lips and let out an ear-splitting whistle. From all over the forest, rebel hunters dropped down from the trees, weapons trained on us.

**Episode 2217**

Violet gaped at me. “Oh my god! Can I put this down or is it going to explode? What do I do?”

I had no freaking clue. “Do I look like a member of the bomb squad?”

“You’re the one who said it was a bomb!”

I gestured wildly at the rapidly beeping drone in Violet’s hands. “Excuse me for being wary of the crazy-ass drone that just fell out of the sky!”

“The drone *you* shot down!”

*Ugh*. This was the very last thing I’d expected to be my problem today. Wrangling Violet? Yes. Maybe even fighting rebel hunters if necessary. But dealing with a maybe-bomb-slash-drone? NO. No way in hell.

I was seriously regretting shooting that thing down. I didn’t know what I’d expected to happen when I blasted it—maybe just watching it smash to pieces on the forest floor and then continuing on to the battle?—but *this* was not it. Obviously, this drone didn’t belong to the pack. Werewolves didn’t use drones when they had their own arsenal of superior senses.

*Maybe it belongs to some kid somewhere. Out here. In the middle of nowhere.* That thought rang false. “Some kid” probably didn’t have an exploding drone. *Trust the rebel hunters to turn a kid’s toy into a weapon!*

I swallowed audibly. “Just… don’t move, okay?”

She looked down at the drone. “Then what exactly am I supposed to *do*?”

I racked my brain for a solution. Literally everything I knew about bombs came from watching TV. “Should we, like, cut the wires or something?”

“Uh, no offense, but I don’t want you to cut anything off of this. You’re literally the last person I’d want cutting any wires.”

“Hey! I’m trying to help.”

“Try harder!” she snapped.

I looked down at the beeping drone. *Maybe we can just toss it and run?* My mind was racing so fast, it almost kept up with the rapid beeping. Panic was tugging away at any bit of logic I could muster up. If anything happened to Violet, I would never, ever forgive myself. Greyson and Xavier had trusted me to watch her. To keep her safe at the pack house while they fought the psychopath hunters who wanted Violet dead.

And now we were miles from the pack house, in the middle of the forest, clutching a maybe-explosive that could blow us sky high any minute—pretty much the exact opposite of my job here.

*I’ve really fucked this one up, haven’t I?*

“How far do you think you can throw that thing?” I asked.

She scowled. “What am I, a quarterback?”

Suddenly, the beeping stopped.

We both looked down at the smashed-up drone, bracing for an explosion.

Then a robotic voice said, “*Low battery. Please charge*.”

Violet’s gaze snapped to mine, and we stared at each other, relief flashing across our faces. I collapsed to my hands and knees and let out a shuddering breath. “Oh, thank *god*. Oh god. Oh… We’re alive.”

Violet didn’t seem to go as weak in the knees as I did. She threw the drone to the ground and stomped on it until it was an unrecognizable pile of plastic and metal.

I had to hand it to her, the girl could keep her cool. My body was still shaking and felt like jelly after the adrenaline that had been dumped into my veins. Violet just looked like she wanted to murder something—or, more likely, someone. Maybe a few someones.

I might not have spent quite as much time with Violet as I wanted to, but it was clear that she was gritty. She wasn’t the helpless little sister of the pack, as so many pack members were prone to believing. She’d grown into her herself. She wasn’t the same teenager I’d first met when Lola and Xavier had brought me into this pack.

I offered her a shaky smile. “You’re a good person to have around in a pinch, you know that?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. That’s literally what I’ve been telling Xavier and Greyson and everyone else all along.”

My smile faded. As much as I believed that Greyson and Xavier had been wise to try to keep her off the battlefield—if only to keep the target off her back so the pack could focus on the fight—I had a new empathy for what Violet had to be going through. All she wanted to do was fight her own battle on her own terms—a battle she was clearly very capable of fighting. And instead, she’d gotten stuck with me. This drone incident suddenly felt less like a near-death experience and more like a huge waste of our time.

“We need to hurry,” she said, as if she’d read my thoughts. “What if the battle has already started?”

I climbed to my feet on still-shaking limbs. “Maybe this is a sign that we should just go back to the house?” Violet pinned me with a glare, and I held up my hands. “It was worth a try, okay?”

Instead of answering, she shifted, and I scrambled to get on her back before she could take off without me. It took me even longer this time to get situated, what with my shaking limbs. My body was still shell-shocked from the drone.

Violet clearly wasn’t about to give me the time to settled, and she ducked her head low while I tried to scramble on, all but throwing me on her back. I practically belly-flopped onto her wolf’s spine.

“Careful!” I huffed. “I get that you’re in a rush, but don’t break me in the process, okay?”

Completely ignoring me, Violet burst into a sprint. All I could do was grab onto her fur, my body slipping and sliding in the process, and pray to god that she didn’t hit any low-lying branches on the way. At this point, I wasn’t sure I could put it past her.

*What are the odds that I manage to not get blown up by that drone only to break my neck by falling off Violet? I guess that’d teach Greyson and Xavier to tell her to stay home…*

But I wasn’t super thrilled with the idea of paying the price for it. I’d hoped that I’d be able to talk Violet into turning back, especially after the drone scare, but it only seemed to have spurred her on even more. I saw now just how furious she was—at me, at Xavier and Greyson, at the prospect of Charlie fighting out there without her, but most importantly, at the hunters who had invaded her home and had put her family at risk.

And really, I couldn’t blame her. If the tables were turned, I’d probably do the exact same thing.

Suddenly Violet skidded to a halt, and I nearly flipped over her head and onto the ground. I thought I heard her yelp at the sharp tug on her fur as my body jerked forward, but I couldn’t bring myself to feel too bad. Maybe if she’d actually allowed me to get situated, we wouldn’t be in this situation.

“What’s wrong?” I whispered.

Then I remembered she couldn’t answer me, because she was in her wolf form. I wished I could learn to mind link with other wolves besides Xavier and Greyson, or maybe just learn wolf language—surely there was a way that wolves communicated beyond the mind link? There had to be some meaning in all those growls and barks…

*Wait, do wolves bark? I should probably know this by now.*

*FOCUS, CALIANA.*

*You can learn about speaking wolf later. When you’re* not *about to face down a team of homicidal hunters!*

I shook my thoughts away and realized Violet was focused on the woods just ahead of us. I looked around, but all I could see were the trees closing us in.

“If you see something,” I whispered, “just nod.”

She nodded.

I tensed. “Do you see something, or are you nodding to say that you’re going to nod when you see something?”

She turned to glare at me, or at least, that was the energy her wolf expression was putting out.

“Okay, okay. Just nod if you see something.”

She turned back to face the woods. Whatever was out there, I still couldn’t make it out. I wished Fae could see as well as werewolves.

Suddenly, Violet nodded again.

I peered around the forest again—and this time, I saw something. At least, I thought I did.

Violet tensed like she was going to leap forward. I held up my hand to stop her, waiting.

Something moved again, and I blasted it with my magic. A tree shook, and a few pine cones tumbled down to the forest floor.

Was I just imagining something there?

“Hello, *Daisy.*”

We turned as Zachery stepped out from behind a tree, holding a crossbow that was aimed straight at us.

He smirked at us. “You’ll have to do better than that.”

**Episode 2218**

GREYSON

A boom echoed somewhere in the distance. What the hell was that? Hunters? Not the ones who killed supernaturals, but the ones who wore camo and shot deer?

I shook myself. That wasn’t my problem right now. I had far bigger fish to fry at the moment.

I spun around, doing a quick head count. Not only were we surrounded by Shanna’s team of rebel hunters, we were also outnumbered. *Fuck! I thought the rebels were a ragtag group of sadists, not a well-organized small army.* The tower, campsites, and tunnel systems we’d managed to find hadn’t prepared us for a force this size. I’d figured there were five, maybe ten of them, tops. Including Paiyn and that little shit Zachery.

Fury tightened in my gut. All this time, I’d thought we were gaining the upper hand after being forced to play catch-up. I’d thought that, even though they’d been spying on us, even though they had an entire silver mine’s worth of traps scattered around the forest and a team of highly trained sociopaths, we at least outnumbered them. That our combined strength would be no match for her forces.

But the truth was, Shanna Paiyn had played us, and she’d done it well. This definitely evened out the odds a hell of a lot more than I liked.

Shanna smirked. “I hope you didn’t think I was stupid enough to fail to prepare for this. I knew you werewolves wouldn’t be able to wait.” Her smile faded and twisted into a scowl. “Though I am disappointed to see my own fellow hunters have sold out to join a pack of monsters.”

Rather than focusing on Paiyn’s monologuing, I watched the circle of hunters tighten around us and mind linked with Xavier. *When I shift, do the same and take out the hunters closest to you.*

Paiyn continued her speech. It was reaching a length that made me wonder whether or not she’d prepared it ahead of time. Suddenly, Sergeant Pepperdine stepped forward.

“Hello, Paiyn.”

A look of surprise crossed Shanna’s face, followed by something else. A memory, maybe? Something emotional and human and so very strange to see on the face of the woman who wanted to make this forest run red with werewolf blood.

She recovered after a beat and cleared her throat. “It’s been a while, Pep.”

My brother crossed his arms over his chest. “Looks like this fight is a reunion. How sweet.”

Suddenly, I recalled what Pepperdine had told me. That he and Paiyn went way back.

Seeing her reaction to finding him on the opposite side of an impending battle, it was clear that Paiyn and Pepperdine weren’t just casual acquaintances. They meant something to each other, and even now, Paiyn still respected the memory of him enough that the idea of facing him was painful.

Whatever they’d been before, now they were facing off as enemies.

Pepperdine took a tentative step forward. “Shanna, you don’t have to do this. You can make all of this easier for everyone. Instead of causing unnecessary bloodshed, you can surrender now, before anyone gets hurt. It’s not too late.”

Shanna just laughed. “Come on, Pep. You know me better than that.” Her teeth flashed in a feral grin. “For me, it’s all about the bloodshed. The collateral damage. It always has been.”

“No.” He shook his head. “You’ve changed.”

“I’m the same person I’ve always been. Can you say the same? You weren’t always so squeamish about a little spilled supernatural blood. I thought you got paid to teach kids how to exterminate beasts like these.” She nodded at the werewolves locked in her ever-tightening circle.

Pepperdine’s face was solemn, maybe even a little sad. “Not like this.”

Shanna scowled. “Since when are you a wolf-lover, anyway?”

She reached for her knife, and in the span of three seconds, all hell broke loose. I immediately shifted as the army of hunters moved in.

Dodging a silver-tipped arrow that whizzed by fast enough for me to feel the heat of it against my fur, I lunged for the closest rebel, tackling him to the ground. He abandoned his bow and pulled out a jagged-looking silver knife. My teeth sank into his wrist, and he dropped the blade with a grunt. His fist plowed into my gut, and the air rushed out of my lungs.

“Greyson, get back!” a feminine voice called.

I darted out of the way as a crossbow bolt sank into the hunter’s chest. His head slumped back against the forest floor, and he let out a gurgle, blood slipping from his mouth as he died.

I turned to see Sophie wielding the crossbow that had taken down the hunter. She nodded at me, I nodded back, and then we threw ourselves into the fight again. These rebel hunters were beefy, well-trained bastards—it took more than the standard set of werewolf moves to bring them down. As such, the pack wasn’t burning through them at the rate I’d hoped we would. But as I glanced around when I had half a second to assess the battle, it seemed the ally hunters were certainly stepping up to help.

Nearby, an ally hunter, Sage, and Zainab were triple-teaming a huge, mean-looking rebel. Beyond them, Rishika had teamed up with Chad and Sophie to take down a duo of rebel hunters. Artemis was holding her own against three rebels, her body a blur of movement and flashing metal. Off on the other side of the battlefield, a vampiric Lola sank her teeth into the throat of a rebel Jay had pinned to the ground, while another ally hunter defended them.

Despite all the weird shit I’d done in my life and all the crazy enemies I’d managed to rack up, I never would have imagined fighting alongside a group of hunters, but right now it was almost going well. If we kept this up for a while longer, we’d actually stand a shot at mowing down Shanna’s army and defeating the rebel hunters. Still, I wished I’d thought to ask one of the other packs for help, like we had when the Blue Bloods had joined us to take down Letifer. It wouldn’t have hurt to have some extra fighting power on our side.

But this wasn’t anything like the fight with Letifer. For one thing, the revenants had gone down easier than these hunters, and for another, the revenants hadn’t used crossbows.

I slammed into a rebel hunter, but she was ready for me, and instead of hitting the ground, her body absorbed the impact and rolled with the momentum, flipping me onto my back so I was at her mercy. Her silver sword flashed as she raised it over her head—

Iris appeared behind her and slammed the butt of her weapon into the rebel hunter’s head. The woman’s eyes lost focus, and Iris grabbed the silver sword before it could fall to the ground and skewer me.

I scrambled to my feet and met Iris’s gaze. I wasn’t surprised that she hadn’t killed the rebel, but I couldn’t promise to offer the same mercy. I nodded in thanks, and she nodded back.

Then Shanna came barreling toward us with what looked like a goddamn silver-bladed machete.

“It’s such a horrible sight to see hunters fighting alongside supernatural creatures,” she drawled as she swung the weapon. “It’s despicable!”

Iris and I dodged out of the way and backed up. Who the hell brought a machete to a battle? *Way to cement your reputation as a fucking psychopath, Shanna.*

“Your disregard for other lives is the truly despicable thing,” Iris said, now parrying Shanna’s blows with the sword she’d taken from the other rebel. “We fight supernaturals that hurt the innocent, that cause havoc. Right now, the only ones creating havoc are you and your hunters.”

Shanna’s face twisted into a deranged smile. “Intoxicating, isn’t it?”

An arrow whizzed past, and I turned to see Pepperdine wince as it sank into his shoulder. He grimaced and ripped it out as he turned to Shanna. “It’s go time!”

He lunged for Shanna, and a wall of rebel hunters came down between them.

Charlie, who hadn’t shifted, but had been single-handedly fighting off a hunter on the other side of his mother, joined the fray. I had to hand it to him—he was young, but he sure knew his way around a fight. And even though he was fighting as a hunter, I knew he was still part of the pack.

Iris, Pepperdine, Charlie, and I threw ourselves into the fight to reach Shanna. We moved like a well-oiled machine, pushing the line back, fighting with all our might and stepping in to help each other when we lost the upper hand.

“Die, wolf!”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Xavier taking on two hunters at once. My brother sent one crashing against a tree, then turned his full attention to his remaining opponent. Then my blood ran cold as the hunter Xavier had thrown rose to his feet and loaded a silver-tipped crossbow bolt, taking aim at Xavier.

I had a flash of memory from the witches’ spell—the moment I’d jumped in front of a Rogue and stopped the silver bullet meant for my brother. That had been a vision, or maybe a dream. But this wasn’t.

Still, there was no way in hell I was going to let my brother die.

Breaking away from the fight, I raced toward Xavier and lunged into the line of fire.

**Episode 2219**

MARTA

I froze, shocked at the words that had poured out of my mouth.

*Did I just invite this girl to come live with us? Sure, she seems nice, but I don’t know anything about her.* She was a total and complete stranger I’d happened to feel bad for. I didn’t even know if her name really was Dani, and she’d been pretty vague about why she was here at the witch council to begin with.

Dani—if that really was her name—smiled. She looked hesitant, too, but there was no missing the way her eyes lit up at my offer. “You can’t really mean that? Can you?”

My stomach clenched. I wished I’d kept my mouth shut. Half a century locked in Bert’s mansion had taught me the hard way that looks could be deceiving. After all, Bert used to be all smiles too. Just like Dani. And look where that had gotten me.

Dani had said she’d ended up here after being “in a pretty bad situation.” What the hell did that even mean? Like, could she have been any vaguer? For all I knew, she’d *caused* that bad situation. Maybe she was into dark magic.

*Darker than necromancy? Come on, Marta. You’re a pot calling the kettle black right now. Maybe she doesn’t want to go with you—for all she knows, you could be worse than whatever her situation was before.*

Her smile faltered, like she could read my hesitation and all my not so nice thoughts about her in the lines of my face.

“Oh, I see. Never mind. I understand. We don’t…” She cleared her throat and seemed to force some brightness into her voice. “We don’t know each other, right? I’m sure I’ll find my way, but I appreciate your offer.”

And just like that, I was flattened under a mountain of guilt.

She *did* seem nice. And harmless. Plus she’d said she didn’t have anywhere to go. This seemingly very nice and mostly normal girl was homeless. Exactly like I’d been before Violet and Charlie had saved me and the Redwood pack had taken me in. Who was I to decide that this Dani girl didn’t deserve the same lifeline I’d been given?

Just because Bert had hurt me and used me for so long didn’t mean that Dani was a bad person. It was wrong of me to automatically assume she was some kind of manipulative liar. She seemed like a lost young woman in need of some kindness. I’d been eternally grateful to Violet and Charlie when they showed me a shred of sympathy in bringing me into their lives. Shouldn’t I be doing the same for someone in a similar position?

I couldn’t leave her here to her own devices.

I blew out a breath and smiled. “Actually…”

I paused suddenly, realizing that, even though I was ready to tell her the offer stood, it wasn’t exactly my call to make. I wasn’t the Alpha, or even a werewolf.

A loud *ding* pulled me out of my thoughts. We both looked around the room before a door opened and another witch council aide stepped out. “Marta Zhao? Dani Silverstein?”

We looked at the attendant and then back at each other. “Yes?”

The attendant smiled and beckoned us forward. “Please follow me.”

We got up and followed the attendant out of the room. I frowned as we turned down another hallway. *What could the council want with both of us? I thought I just had to sign some paperwork and then I’d be free to go?*

We followed her down another hallway and then through a maze of cubicles. Each cubicle featured a person working at a desk, many of them sitting on what looked like giant, uncomfortable, inflatable balls, a few walking on tiny treadmills that fit beneath their desks, and several simply standing while they worked, their computers raised to keep the screens at eye-level. Every other cubicle seemed to feature at least one picture of a cat. I didn’t know if that was a witch thing, or just a modern-day person thing.

*Man, office culture sure has changed in the last fifty years.* I glanced around, surprised to see that not a single person was smoking at their desk.

Finally, the attendant left us at a cubicle on the far side of the floor. I had no idea how we’d find our way back without help.

“Here you are, ladies.” The attendant turned on her heel and made her way back through the labyrinth.

This cubicle boasted a Newton’s Cradle, clacking back and forth on the desk. A name plate on the desk read *Clarissa Noon.* Clarissa, I noticed, was sitting in a bright orange chair. No inflatable ball for her.

“Why don’t you both sit down?” she said with a smile.

As we each took a seat on the other side of her desk, unease nagged at me. We were so far from Big Mac, Kira, and Lilac. How would they find us?

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Is everything all right? I thought I just had to sign some paperwork and then I’d get to leave today?

Clarissa nodded. “Yes, of course. You’ll be able to leave with your family in a few minutes.”

The word *family* made my belly twitch like I was racing down a rollercoaster—discomfort and surprise threaded through with joy and excitement. I’d never really had a family, even before Bert had ruined my life. Lilac, the witches, and even the pack had welcomed me as one of their own. There were a lot of words I could’ve used to describe them, to describe exactly what they meant to me. Funnily enough, though, *family* was the best word that came to mind. My nose tingled as tears pricked my eyes, though I wasn’t sad. Not one bit.

“Is there any way you can help me find my family?” Dani asked. “I have a sister—”

Clarissa held up a hand. “I’m so sorry. Unfortunately, beyond assigning your mentor, our involvement with you is finished. If you would like to find your sister, we can’t help with this matter. But there might be others who can.”

“That’s not fair,” I said. “She’s got nowhere to go. Why won’t you—”

Clarissa snapped her fingers, and two clipboards with forms appeared in our laps, along with two fountain pens.

“These are your release papers,” Clarissa said. “By signing them, you’re declaring your commitment to your probation with a mentor.”

I skimmed over the paperwork, but it might as well have been in Italian. All the legalese and witchy jargon meant nothing to me. If anything, it just created even more questions. I wished Big Mac or Kira were here to help me decipher it.

Then I glanced over at Dani. She looked small and overwhelmed, clutching her pen in a white-knuckled grip. She didn’t even have a Big Mac or a Kira to help her through this.

I flipped through the paperwork, signing my name at each flagged line. Hopefully I wasn’t signing away anything I wouldn’t be willing to give. It didn’t escape me for even a second that the council could have snuck in any number of awful terms and I’d have had no clue.

“You will be assigned a mentor together as soon as we’re able to locate one appropriate for both of your needs.”

My head snapped up as I finished the last page. “Wait. We’re going to have the same mentor?”

Clarissa’s smile was thin. “Budget issues. But yes, the two of you will be together. Sort of fun, isn’t it? You’ll be like classmates.”

When we finished signing, Clarissa led us back to the waiting room, thank god. She smiled as she ducked back into the hallway. “It was very nice to meet the two of you. I hope I don’t have to see you back here one day.”

The door snapped shut.

*Wow. What a cheery goodbye.*

Alone in the waiting room again, silence settled between us. Suddenly, I couldn’t stop thinking about how I’d blurted out that offer for Dani to come live with me, and how badly I’d handled things after. How she didn’t have anywhere to go.

I cleared my throat. “I’m sorry they were so unhelpful about finding your sister. It seems like the least they could do is help find her.”

Dani shrugged, but I could tell from the tension in her face that she cared more than she let on. “It’s okay. I don’t want to be a burden to anyone.”

My brows rose. “Well, the offer still stands for you to come with us. No pressure, but you might as well, since we’ll have the same mentor, you know? Plus, I live with a couple of witches. Maybe they can help you?”

I conveniently left out the part about my living in a werewolf pack house. Call me crazy, but it didn’t seem like a selling point.

Dani bit her lip. “I’m not sure.”

“How about you come with me to meet them? And then you can decide from there if you want to come with us?”

“Okay.”

We left the waiting room and tried to find our way through the building. On the way, we encountered a group of twenty-somethings locked in an intense game of ping-pong.

One of the players backed way up to hit the ball, almost colliding into me. Fortunately, Dani grabbed my arm and pulled me out of his path.

The second Dani’s skin made contact with mine, chaos broke out. Suddenly, all those voices inside my head were deafening, ghosts started popping up around the room, calling out my name, and the plants in the room—far out of my reach—began to wither and die.

I looked down at the bracelets, still locked securely around my wrists. They were supposed to stop my magic!

*What’s happening to me?*

**Episode 2220**

XAVIER

A blur of silver that smelled distinctly like Greyson slammed into me, and we crashed into the ground. Fury almost blinded me. Was he *trying* to get me killed?

I knocked him away with a snarl and mind linked to him. *What the fuck, Greyson?*

Still in his wolf form, he nodded at the rebel hunter I’d just sent flying into a tree. *He was going to shoot you in the back. I saved your life. You’re welcome, by the way.*

I glanced at the soldier. And what do you know, it looked like the bastard had rallied after all. After sending him flying into that tree, I’d been sure he’d suffer a concussion at the very least. Clearly, he was made of tougher stuff than I’d given him credit for. I looked around for his crossbow bolt and found it sticking out of the chest of the hunter I’d been about to tackle. My opponent lay on the forest floor, staring up at the sky with unseeing eyes.

*Guess he wasn’t so good at keeping an eye out for friendly fire.*

“You… You bastards!” the scrappy hunter snarled at us, clearly pissed off that he’d just shishkebabed a fellow rebel instead of one of the werewolves he was here to hunt. He scrambled to load another silver-tipped bolt into his crossbow, and Greyson and I tensed, ready to burst into action. I didn’t know if I’d be able to make it to him before he released the bolt, or if it would be better to try to dart out of sight and hope I’d screwed up his aim when I’d knocked his skull into a tree trunk.

A wet *thunk* sounded, and the hunter’s eyes snapped wide open. He let out a shuddering breath and fell to the ground, a thick arrow sticking out of his back.

Artemis stood behind him, lowering her bow. “You guys gotta do better than that! Cali will be on the warpath if anything happens to you two.”

She jumped back into the fray, a blur of lethal movement. If only we had a few more Artemises… We wouldn’t even have needed the ally hunters.

I turned back to Greyson. *Did you really need to do that?*

He huffed. *I’m sorry, which part of “that hunter was going to shoot you” did you not understand?*

I tensed. Wait… so Greyson really had risked his own life to try to save me?

Shit, was I dead? Was this hell?The part where I was stuck fighting hunters and watching my brother steal Alpha from me definitely *felt* hellish.

*Thanks*, I managed. *I guess I owe you one.*

I darted off after another hunter before the situation could get any more awkward. It probably said a lot about me that I was much more comfortable with the thought of Greyson being a threat than protecting me from them, but now didn’t seem like the appropriate time to get into that.

Nearby, I watched Artemis slay another hunter with another arrow, then yank it out of the dead man’s body and use it as a sword to fight another rebel.

*Damn, she’s good.* I would never admit it, but in hand-to-hand combat, she might even be better than me.

A pained howl broke through the forest, and a chill ripped down my spine.

*Ava.*

A hunter must’ve wounded her. My hackles rose, and my wolf stirred inside me, practically forcing my feet in the direction of the howl. Snarling at me to protect her.

I dug my feet into the ground, trying to stay put. I didn’t like my wolf calling the shots, and I didn’t want to do Ava any favors. Seriously, how many times *today* had I wished she was dead? Now it looked like my dream might be coming true.

My wolf raged inside me, teeth and claws at the ready. It seemed to be daring me to leave Ava for dead. The wolf my own wolf viewed as his mate.

No, I couldn’t leave her. She was on our side, after all, and she’d come to support the pack. I lunged into the fight, sprinting over to where Ava was limping away from a hunter with a dagger. Fortunately, he was one of the few hunters on the battlefield who wasn’t packing silver.

I plowed into the guy, sinking my teeth in as I went. I practically ripped him in half as we crashed into Ava. Blood sprayed everywhere, but in the end the hunter was dead, and Ava was rising to her feet, her body already healing the wound the hunter had inflicted.

Her voice slipped through my mind like the gentlest caress. *Thank you.*

*Don’t read into it too much*.

I turned back to the battle and threw myself into it with abandon. I couldn’t think of Ava, not now. Now wasn’t even remotely the time to try to untangle that mindfuck. After dispatching another hunter, I looked around the battlefield.

Where the fuck was that kid who’d threatened Violet?

If I was being honest, that little fucker was public enemy number one in my book. Iris and Greyson could deal with Paiyn, but I wanted that creepy little asshole all to myself. Then I thought of the photo of Cali that Greyson and I had found in the tower, and my blood boiled hotter. They’d targeted my mate. *All of these rebel hunters need to pay for that. I wonder which one of them circled her picture…*

Whoever it was, I was gonna take great pleasure in chewing their hands off before I ripped them limb from limb.

Thank god Cali wasn’t here. Even though it looked like the pack was gaining the upper hand pretty quickly, it still would’ve been too dangerous for her to fight.

The ally hunters had turned out to be a bigger asset than I’d ever thought possible. Even I had to admit that Iris and her ragtag crew were up to the task, especially that Pepperdine guy. Violet had told me he was their drill sergeant back at the hunter camp, and watching him fight, I believed it. The dude was like some kind of hunter death machine.

And his target? Shanna Paiyn. It seemed like something personal lay between them. Fine. I had no objection to Pepperdine settling an old score. That was part of what being a mercenary was all about.

Rishika bumped into me, blood dripping from her jaws as she tossed a severed arm aside. She and Artemis really made quite the pair.

I gave her a nod of support before springing toward a hunter wielding a silver axe. As I tore the guy’s guts out of his body, I couldn’t help imagining just how sweet a moment it would be when I returned to the pack as their Alpha. When everything was finally made right. I’d do everything I could to make it happen.

The Redwood pack was destined to make a name for itself. I’d make damn sure of it.

One of the rebel hunters made a break for the woods. This had to be a good sign—the mighty Shanna might not have the support she thought she did, and if that were the case, the battle could be wrapping up sooner rather than later. That was for the best—we didn’t want any casualties on our side.

I zeroed in on the deserter. I could let him escape, but where was the fun in that? They’d attacked us and observed us, and I didn’t want anyone to think I would ever run away from a fight. I wasn’t like this coward. I mind linked with Greyson, who was neck deep in the bloody mess of another rebel.

*I’m going after a straggler.*

Then I shot after the rebel. I didn’t need to rely on my nose—I had him in my sights. Plus, he was making such a huge mess of the forest in his retreat that even Lola would’ve been able to track him.

I nearly tripped over a silver trap on my way through the forest. Maybe this hunter was smarter than I thought. Had he lured me out here?I slowed my pursuit, careful to avoid any other traps.

The hunter had paused up ahead, probably waiting to see if he’d caught me in a trap, and I crouched down low to make an arc around the bastard to surprise him from behind. The hunter was looking around the forest, moving his weapon from side to side—he’d obviously lost track of me.

*Amateur. This should be quick.*

I crept up behind him and crouched down. I inched forward carefully, waiting for the perfect moment to strike and get one more hunter off the field.

A breeze blew past, carrying Cali’s scent with it. I froze. *What the hell is she doing out here?*

My mind went to two places: either she’d come out here of her own accord, or she’d been taken.

Either way, I had to find her. Right now.

**Episode 2221**

I’d never seen a teenager as terrifying as Zachery. There was something about him—some deranged quality to how he held that crossbow, pointed right at us. He looked like some slasher movie villain. The bolt glinted in the light, surely silver-tipped. The fact that I didn’t have to worry about silver poisoning wasn’t much of a comfort to me right now.

Not that Zachery was even looking at me. I had a feeling he’d sort of forgotten I was there. He was looking directly at Violet with nothing but malice in his eyes. It was… beyond unsettling. I’d never seen that much hate inside a person. Even Silas, even Letifer or the Kollector or Xavier and Greyson at their worst—none of them had come close to the dark violence that was written across Zachery’s young face. The part of me that still felt empathy for this guy—this guy who’d tried to kill Violet multiple times, who even now was pointing a crossbow at her—wondered how such a young, innocent-looking boy could become this way.

But again, he *was* aiming a crossbow at us, so my empathy didn’t go very far.

I was ready to throw up my hand to send another blast of magic in Zachery’s direction, hopefully knocking the psychopath out in the process, when suddenly rebel hunters spilled out from behind the trees and swarmed in on us.

Most of the hunters went straight for Violet, clearly viewing her as the greater threat here. *Or the greater prize*, I realized with horror. Three of them jumped on her at once, trying to pin her to the ground.

“Leave her alone!” I shouted. A single hunter grabbed my arm, yanking me away from Violet with a strength I hadn’t realized a human could possess. Damn, these hunters did not mess around!

“The wolf is mine.” Zachery sneered as he took aim at Violet, who was still in her wolf form, trying to shake off the group of hunters fighting to subdue her.

No! I couldn’t let this happen. I was supposed to protect Violet—not let her get killed on my watch.

The hunter pulling me backward never saw the blast coming. He went flying into the nearest tree with a *crunch*, and I raced forward, throwing up both my hands and blasting the hunters who were swarming Violet. They were all thrown back, and Violet lunged to her feet.

“Yes!” I fist pumped. “Violet, let’s—”

“GET THE WITCH!”

*Oh shit.* All those hunters I’d blasted back came barreling after me, and a few more dropped down from the trees.

*Where the heck are these guys coming from? Have they just been hanging out in the trees all this time?*

We were beyond outnumbered, but beyond our circle of trees, I could make out other wolves fighting as well. Had backup arrived? Or had we gotten closer to the battle than we’d thought?

Violet growled and snapped and clawed at the hunters surrounding her. One moved forward with a large net that sparkled in the sunlight—a silver net—and Violet dodged it and caught the hunter in her powerful jaws. The hunter didn’t so much as scream before she ripped him in half.

I gagged. *Pull it together, Caliana!* It wasn’t like this was the first time I’d seen a wolf go to town on one of our enemies.

Across the clearing, Zachery rose up, aiming his crossbow at Violet. She was still busy fighting off the hunters trying to pin her down, so I knew it was up to me to act. Greyson and Xavier had given me one job: protect Violet at all costs.

I pointed my palms toward Zachery, took a deep breath, and let my magic fly. It him dead-on, and the crossbow misfired, sending a bolt into the leg of a nearby rebel hunter. I didn’t give them a chance to recover. Blast after blast threw the hunters back.

“Run, Violet!” I screamed.

Stubborn and noncompliant as ever, Violet shook her head as another wave of hunters bore down on us. I blasted back every hunter that got close enough to reach me, and over by the tree line, Zachery climbed to his feet again.

His face was swollen and bruised—he must have slammed into something when I’d blasted him the last time—and he looked at me with enough malice that chills slipped down my spine.

“You bitch!” he snarled.

I forced a triumphant smile onto my lips. I wasn’t about to show him just how much he frightened me. “Sucks to suck, doesn’t it, crybaby?”

This only served to enrage him more. His face went a violent shade of red, and he fumbled as he loaded another bolt into his crossbow, his fury making him clumsy.

An idea popped into my head. Could I lure him away from Violet? I might not have a crossbow, but I’d already redirected an arrow once. And if he was going to be this sloppy, I could probably keep him busy without getting into too much danger.

“What’s the matter, Zachery?” I taunted. “I thought you were a big bad hunter!”

He snarled again and lunged toward me. He wasn’t even aiming the crossbow at me anymore, though it was still clutched in his hands. I glanced over at Violet, who was tearing through a group of hunters. Hopefully she would realize what I was doing.

“Why don’t you show me who the big man is here?” I hollered at the angry teen before darting into the woods.

I hoped to hell this worked. If not, I’d have ditched Violet and left her to fight those hunters and Zachery all by herself.

Loud footsteps crunched through the forest behind me. “I’ll kill you, you fucking witch!”

Okay, so the plan had worked. *Great.* A crossbow bolt embedded itself in a tree not far away from my head. *Yup, this is definitely not going to end in my untimely death. It’s definitely not one of my most stupid and impulsive ideas ever.*

“First you have to catch me, slowpoke!” I called back.

His growl was so angry, so wild, I almost mistook him for a wolf.

How the hell was it that no matter what happened in my life, the one constant was that the pack and I were always being hunted by a bunch of dangerous psychopaths who hated us? Silas’s wolves, vampires, revenants, Letifer… When were we gonna catch a break?

I leapt over a fallen log. My legs and lungs burned, but stopping was pretty much not an option right now.

“What is this, amateur hour?” I called over my shoulder.

I really hoped Violet was able to escape. Zachery and I were far away from that clearing now. So far I could barely hear the fighting.

A new realization took hold: I was alone out here. With the guy who very well could be the most unhinged rebel hunter of them all.

My foot caught on a raised tree root, and I went flying, then tumbling, then skidding across the forest floor, the breath knocked clean out of my lungs. On my back, I could barely lift myself to my bruised and throbbing elbows. Zachery had stopped running and was approaching me at a leisurely pace that set my teeth on edge. He’d stowed the crossbow and instead held out a wicked-looking dagger.

He wasn’t in a hurry to end me, I realized. He wanted to draw this out.

Zachery’s lips pulled up into a feral smile. “I haven’t killed a witch yet, you know. But I think I’m ready to add one to my list.”

I swallowed roughly. He was only a few feet away now.

*Help!* I called out through the mind link. *Can anyone hear me? I need some backup over here!*

Xavier’s voice slipped through my mind. *Where are you?*

Adrenaline, relief, and guilt poured in all at once. He’d told me to keep Violet safe at the pack house, and now look where I’d ended up.

Zachery crept closer, the dagger raised.

*I’m in… Uh…* I looked around frantically. *The woods? And I need help!*

*The woods?* He replied. *You gotta be more specific.*

*There are trees! Lots of tall trees.*

*That’s not helpful!* Panic laced his voice.

Zachery paused in front of me, a frown tugging at his lips. “What’s the matter, witch? Have you given up?”

I swallowed. *Just follow the noise.*

Then I threw a hand up and sent Zachery flying back. He recovered quickly, but I scrambled to my feet too, running again, and throwing my magic in every random direction I could to signal my position.

A heavy weight landed on my legs, and Zachery and I tumbled to the ground. He pinned me to the forest floor, his dagger raised. “Your witchcraft can’t save you now.”

“Yes, it can,” I snapped. “And by the way, I’m not a witch, I’m Fae. Get it right, asshole!”

I opened my hand and blasted him square in the chest. He sailed backward and slammed into a copse of trees.

I burst into a sprint again, throwing out as much magic as possible. A relieved sob tore out of my throat when I made out Xavier’s wolf up ahead—and that relief dried up when I saw a group of hunters chasing after him, their crossbows raised.

I blasted them back, their crossbow bolts flying in every direction but none of them hitting the mark. While they were down, Xavier made quick work of them, and in a matter of seconds, all that was left of the group was a mess of blood, bones, and entrails.

Xavier rushed over to me. *Where’s Violet?*

I spun around to face the direction I’d come from, and a chill slipped down my spine. “Where’s Zachery?”

Somewhere nearby, a wolf howled in pain.

**Episode 2222**

VIOLET

I heard the crossbow bolt whistling through the air just seconds before blinding pain ripped through my leg.

I crashed to the ground with a howl and shifted back to human as my body skidded across the forest floor. The shift wasn’t conscious, but somewhere in the back of my mind I dimly realized what the arrow had to be made of to force a shift.

I knew I was in big trouble.

Curled on my side, my wounded leg stretched out, I braced myself on one elbow to survey the damage. The bolt was embedded in my calf. It went straight through flesh and muscle, and a silver-tipped head peeked out on the other side. Blood poured from both the entrance and exit wounds. I was no doctor, but I sure seemed to be bleeding fast. Too fast.

My vision hazy with pain, I reached for the bolt with shaking fingers. My fingertips barely brushed against the end of the arrow, and pure agony ripped through my leg, jolting my body with the force of a lightning bolt.

I collapsed back down with a whimper, my chest heaving. *Okay… Not taking it out. Got it.*

Tears slipped down the sides of my face as I stared up at the forest canopy. The world threatened to spin on its side, and I pulled in a deep, shuddering breath. I wished Charlie were here. But I didn’t know where he was in all of this mess. I hadn’t gotten a single glimpse of him since he’d left the pack house before the battle had started.

*Maybe Cali will find me*. If she was able to get away. If Zachery or one of the hunters hadn’t captured her, or worse. Dread unfurled down my spine. Cali had tried so hard to keep me safe, and in the end, I’d been the one to put *her* in danger.

Footsteps crunched nearby, and I tensed, lifting my head to look around. I couldn’t see Zachery, but I knew he was out there, slowly approaching his prey. He was a hunter, after all, and a skilled one—no matter how much Charlie denied it.

I was pretty sure he was the one who’d shot me, that it was *his* crossbow bolt piercing my leg. I stayed still for a moment, trying to think through my options while pain roared through my body. It wasn’t going to get better—only worse. Adrenaline didn’t kick in where silver poisoning was concerned. Every bit of strength I still possessed would wane with each passing second.

There was a fallen tree up ahead, no more than a few paces away. Maybe I could drag myself to it and hide. Hiding was my best chance now. I couldn’t shift. I could barely move.

I dragged myself by my arms, slowly pulling myself toward the tree as the footsteps drew closer.

Suddenly, something heavy pressed down on my arm. I bit back a cry and followed the foot planted on my arm all the way up to a face. Zachery.

“Going somewhere without me?” He looked like hell. He was bleeding and bruised and covered in dirt. Cali had given him a fight. But clearly it wasn’t enough to stop him. He sneered. “How rude of you. You’ve already left me once. Remember?”

I yanked my hand free. “I never left you because we were never together, remember?”

“Daisy, you never gave me a chance.”

“My name is Violet!” I snarled.

Pain crawled up my leg and across my back. The poison was taking root. Still, I forced myself to stay focused, to not make it easy for him. This asshole had put me and Charlie through hell. He was the reason my pack was out there fighting for their lives against all these rebel hunters. I wasn’t going to go quietly.

Zachery didn’t seem to hear me, or if he had, he was choosing to ignore me. Just like always. Anything that didn’t fit his vision, his narrative, was tossed aside. Could I shift? Even just partially? Just enough to rip his throat out or run away?

The hatred in his eyes sent chills down my spine.

“You won’t get away this time.” He said it softly, reverently, and if we’d been in any other situation, if he hadn’t been on the verge of murdering me here in the woods, I would almost have mistaken his words for something sweet. Something gentle and playful, from one lover to another.

He pulled another silver-tipped crossbow bolt from his quiver. “I’ve been saving this one just for you,” he said, in that same feverish tone. “I even had it monogrammed.”

He held out the silver tip, where the initials “DB” had been etched into the metal. I was going to be sick.

“I met you as Daisy, and years from now, when I think about this moment, I want to remember you as Daisy, the werewolf girl who lied to me.”

“Zachery, you don’t want to do this.” I swallowed. “You’re better than this. You don’t really want to k-kill me, do you? You’re not a murderer. You don’t want to cross that line into killing someone in cold blood.”

His dead eyes stared back at me. “You’re right. I’m not a murderer. Because you’re not a person. You’re a beast.”

Despite myself, tears slipped down my cheeks. “I’m sorry I lied to you, but I had no choice.”

“We all have choices, Daisy,” he said, the gentleness of his tone belying the bolt he was now loading into his crossbow.

I hated the way he was speaking to me. How he kept calling me by my fake name. How he refused to see the real person behind the lie. I had to find a way to get through to him. My life depended on it.

“You may have known me as Daisy, but that’s not who I am. I am a person, Zachery. My name is Violet. I have a brother. His name is Lilac. I have a mate. Charlie. I had parents. I have people who love me. I have my whole life ahead of me, but you won’t see that, will you? You look at me, and all you see is a thing you wanted to possess, to own. You never really took the time to get to know me. You didn’t want me for me. You wanted me for *you*.”

“I wanted you the moment I first saw you—and I knew Charlie wasn’t good enough for you. But you never gave me a chance. *You* wouldn’t listen. *You* refused to see.”

I looked around the clearing. Where the hell was Cali? Was there anyone nearby who could help?

“Do you truly know who Shanna Paiyn is?” I asked.

“Of course I do! She’s the only one who understands what werewolves are really like. The other hunters at camp didn’t understand. They thought you and Charlie were so great. But Shanna gets it.”

“She’s a murderer!”

He shook his head, watching my face with something like pity. “She’s an avenging angel, and I’m going to be just like her.”

He cocked the bow.

Nobody was coming to save me. I had to do something before it was too late. The pain in my leg pulsed with every rapid beat of my heart. It might already be too late. But Zachery still had that bolt trained on me, and he was so close, there would no missing the target. If I tried to shift, he’d just shoot me before I even got halfway.

“If you kill me, the pack will hunt you down. They’ll kill you. Just stop this, okay? Stop before it’s too late.”

“I could. But the truth is, I don’t care. Your pack can tear me to shreds, and I won’t even mind—as long as I go down knowing that I killed you first.”

He raised the crossbow. And I knew what I had to do. It was going to hurt like hell. If it saved my life, if it bought me more time for someone to rush in and help, great. But if, in the end, I still ended up with Zachery’s special arrow in my heart, at least I could take comfort in the fact that I’d gone down fighting, that I’d made that bastard hurt just like he’d hurt me.

I reared my back leg, the arrow still embedded in my flesh, and slammed my foot into Zachery’s knee. A wet *crunch* echoed through the clearing, and he let out a shriek as he crumpled to the ground. The crossbow engaged, and the arrow whizzed past my head.

I was about to try to shift when Zachery’s foot kicked out and made contact with the arrow in my leg. The world narrowed to a pinpoint. My vocal cords shredded on my scream.

He reached for the arrow—and a huge wolf slammed into him. Both crossbow and arrow went flying.

I blinked, trying to focus my darkening vision. *Charlie!*

**Episode 2223**

GREYSON

The tide was turning in our favor.

Despite the sheer number of rebel hunters, the extent to which they’d outnumbered us at the beginning, now we nearly outnumbered them. Many had died during the battle, and even more had been gravely wounded or had deserted, choosing to save their own sorry lives instead of standing alongside Paiyn against the Redwood pack and our hunter allies.

I surveyed the battlefield with satisfaction. *This* was more like it. Closer to the odds I’d thought we’d be going into this fight with. Not that I’d had any doubts about my pack, even when that horde of rebels had descended on us. One well-trained werewolf was worth at least four hunters. To say nothing of the lethal power that Artemis alone had brought to our side.

It was clear now that between the Redwood pack and Iris’s hunters, Shanna and her remaining rebels had little chance of walking away from this fight. Though that certainly didn’t stop them from fighting *or* fleeing.

Rishika, Pepperdine, and Iris moved in on Shanna. A handful of rebels stood between her and the deadly trio, but their force paled in comparison to the protective layer Paiyn had been surrounded by when the fight had begun. We’d pick off these last stragglers, just like we’d eliminated the score that had come before them.

Shanna wasn’t walking away from this. That was for fucking sure.

As I glanced around the battlefield, doing a headcount of the pack, I realized that one very important wolf was missing.

*Where’s Xavier?*

Last I’d seen him, he’d been helping Ava. And I had a vague recollection of him mentioning he was clearing up some stragglers, but I could have misheard him. I’d been pretty busy when he’d last mind linked.

Ava, I noticed, seemed to be doing fine. A few yards away, she was ripping into a hunter with abandon. Xavier had clearly been successful in helping her. I still couldn’t understand what the hell was going on between them, if anything. Xavier certainly seemed even more drawn to her than he’d been when she’d first come back to life. Their mate bond seemed to be more intact than ever—despite all the effort I knew he’d gone to to destroy it.

Ava, for whatever reason, still carried a torch for Xavier, still believed he was her true mate. Why she’d chase after the guy who had murdered her in cold blood, I had no clue. The mate bond was powerful—I knew that to be true—but I would’ve thought she’d avoid a lot of pain by leaving Xavier and the Redwood pack behind. By creating something new instead of holding on to old baggage.

Cali was my mate, but even if we didn’t have that bond, I would still *like* her. Respect her. Enjoy her company. I didn’t think Xavier and Ava could say the same.

But it wasn’t my business, and as long as it didn’t interfere with the fight, it wasn’t my problem either.

I was still reeling a bit from my own protective instincts—the ones that had almost had me taking a silver-tipped crossbow bolt for my brother. It was one thing to take bullet for him in the dream, or whatever the hell that had been. It was another thing altogether to throw myself in front of a very real, very lethal threat to protect the guy I could barely stand on a good day.

*Would Xavier save me if the tables were turned?* I didn’t know the answer, wasn’t sure I even *wanted* to know. At least my asshole of a brother had thanked me for almost sacrificing my life for him. *But where the fuck did he run off to now?*

Xavier wasn’t skittish. He wasn’t a coward. And while he didn’t love seeing me take the lead, his loyalty to the Redwood pack was above question. Which meant that something must have caught his attention to lead him away from the main fight.

*Greyson! A little help here?* Rishika called through the mind link.

I darted past Artemis and Jay, who were taking care of some stragglers, and dodged another hunter’s silver dagger before I catapulted on top of him and ripped out his throat. By the time I made it to Rishika’s side, my fur was warm with the blood of the hunter I’d just killed.

She glanced at me, and I thought I saw her wolf roll its eyes. *Showoff.*

The few rebels protecting Shanna were growing desperate, their fighting becoming less controlled and more of a last-ditch effort to push us back. A rebel lunged toward Iris, axe held high, and Rishika slammed into her. She tore the woman’s throat out, but the attack had pushed her past the enemy line and left her exposed.

I moved toward her, but it was too late.

Shanna leapt at Rishika, grabbed her by her fur, and pressed a silver bladed dagger to her throat.

“Shift back,” Shanna hissed. “Now. Before I turn you into my personal pincushion.”

Rishika growled but shifted back to human.

Shanna pressed the blade harder against her bare neck, just short of breaking skin. “Everyone, back off!”

I stopped. Artemis aimed her bow at Shanna. “Let her go.”

“I don’t think so.” The blade didn’t move a single millimeter away from Rishika’s throat. “Here’s how it’s going to work: the filthy mongrels and their enablers are going to back away. Once you’re far enough back, my rebels and I are going to leave. I’ll let this bitch free when I know my hunters and I are safe.”

Artemis didn’t lower her bow. “If you hurt her, I’m going to hunt you down and skin you alive,” the Fae promised, her tone dark in a way I hadn’t heard since Letifer had possessed her. But her reaction, her protectiveness—that was all Artemis.

As much as I admired her ferocity, as much as I understood where she was coming from, if she didn’t calm the fuck down, this was going to turn into a massacre.

I shifted, to the shock of the others frozen nearby, and casually stepped in front of Artemis’s bow, my hands raised.

“Take me instead,” I told Shanna. “I’m the Alpha. I’m a much better prize.”

“What are you doing?” Artemis whispered. “I can take her out.”

“I’ve got this.”

Artemis lowered her bow, and as I took a step toward Shanna, she discreetly pressed a knife into my palm. I slowly approached Shanna, who watched me with a predator’s gaze, then stopped right in front of her, the knife hand held behind my back. “Take me, and let Rishika go.”

Shanna shoved Rishika forward, and, faster than I would have thought possible for a human, her silver blade was pressed against my throat.

“He’s got a knife!” one of the rebels shouted.

Shanna leaned back, and I knocked the knife away from my throat, my own knife slicing her arm as she jumped back. Then all hell broke loose—again. Artemis and the others jumped into an all-out battle against the remaining rebels, and three hunters tackled me down to the ground when I tried to pursue Shanna. She raced into the woods, clutching her arm.

I shifted, disposing of the rebels trying to pin me in a matter of seconds before I lunged after Shanna. This bitch had already gone too far. She wasn’t getting away.

Iris and Pepperdine were hot on Shanna’s trail, but I was faster. I could reach her in a matter of seconds.

*Help!* Cali’s voice echoed through my mind. *Can anyone hear me? I need some backup over here!*

I almost stumbled. Was I imagining things? Cali was supposed to be safe, back at the house. What could she even be doing out here? Then I remembered exactly who I was dealing with. Cali *was* out here, and she’d disobeyed me again.

I froze, and Pepperdine and Iris moved past me in pursuit of Shanna. They’d get her. I had to find Cali.

I mind linked back to her. *Where are you?*

Silence. Fuck. I changed course, heading toward the pack house. If she was anywhere in this forest, it had to be between here and the house. I doubled back through the fighting, which was dying down now. There were only a few rebels still fighting, and the pack had more than enough power to take them out.

Artemis and Rishika were caught in a sweet embrace, even as hunters were being ripped to pieces around them.

Not far from the battlefield, I picked up Cali’s scent. It was still fairly fresh. I was getting closer. I had to find her. I didn’t even care that she’d disobeyed me. Not as long as I found her. Not as long as I could keep her safe.

I put on a burst of speed, following the scent and trying desperately to mind link, but then I suddenly slammed into another wolf, and we tumbled to the ground.

**Episode 2224**

I caught a blur of silver out of the corner of my eye before something slammed into us, and I lost my grip on Xavier’s wolf, tumbling head over heels and hitting the ground hard enough to knock the breath out of my lungs.

*What the hell just happened?*

Snarls and growls sounded nearby, and I pushed myself up with a wheeze. My lungs wrenched open and air rushed in. My shoulder and hip throbbed in pain, but I pushed it aside as I climbed to my feet.

A couple of yards away, Xavier was wrestling with another wolf. A wolf I recognized all too well. My jaw dropped. “Greyson?”

As if speaking Greyson’s name had broken the spell forcing them to fight, they stopped suddenly and shifted back to human. Still, Xavier shoved Greyson back. “Watch where you’re going! You could’ve hurt Cali!”

Greyson ignored the blow. Clearly, he had bigger things on his mind right now than wrestling with his brother. He rushed over to me. “Are you okay? I heard your voice. I heard you calling for help.”

He pulled me into his arms before I could respond. He smelled like sweat and dirt and blood and Greyson, and I found that, in that moment, I didn’t mind the combination. The sheer relief in his voice warmed me from the inside out. I’d been sure he’d be pissed at me again for disobeying him, that the next time I saw him, we’d be fighting and I’d have to explain exactly how I’d gone from keeping Violet safe at the house to facing down rebel hunters all on my own.

*That part is probably still on the table*, I realized. But the thought of talking with Greyson about it didn’t scare me anymore. Not when he was holding me like I was the most important person in the world. Like nothing mattered to him as much as my safety.

Which probably wasn’t far from the truth.

I eased myself out of Greyson’s arms. “I’m okay, but we have to find Violet. She…” I swallowed thickly, trying to keep my fear and guilt at bay. “She wouldn’t stay at the house, so I followed her out here. We fought some hunters, but then we were separated.” Tears pricked my eyes. “We heard a wolf cry out somewhere around here. I think she’s in trouble.”

Xavier gestured to the forest ahead—the direction we’d been heading in before Greyson had plowed into us. “Let’s go.”

There was a tightness to Xavier’s shoulders that hadn’t been there before Greyson had arrived. Even in the midst of all this chaos, this fight for our lives and the lives of the people we loved, Xavier still didn’t want me to be with Greyson. In any way. Even for a second.

I shouldn’t have expected otherwise, but somehow, I’d still hoped for a peace that never seemed to come. Despite the curse *maybe* being broken, my situation—this tangled web between me and Greyson and Xavier—was still as fraught as ever. I hoped it truly *was* broken, but there was no way to be sure and no way I would test it.

Greyson and Xavier shifted, and I hesitated at the choice in front of me. *Which wolf should I ride? Shit, I hate these small decisions.* No matter how inconsequential they seemed at first, they always ended up having a big impact.

In the end, Xavier made the choice for me when his wolf grabbed me by the back of my shirt and tossed me onto his back. *Okay then.*

We raced toward the wolf cry. I really hoped Violet was okay. I should have done a better job watching over her. But what was I supposed to do? Restrain her? Guilt still nagged at me.

I’d thought I was making the right choice by leading Zachery away from Violet, but what if I’d just left her alone when she needed me the most?

*If anything happens to her…* I couldn’t even finish that thought. I didn’t *want* to finish that thought. When this was said and done, both of my mates were going to give me the third degree, and I would deserve whatever criticism they threw my way.

We knew we’d come to the right place when a whistle sounded and an arrow whizzed past my head, missing me by a few inches. A small ground of hunters was clustered around a wolf, and lying on the ground behind the wolf was…

“Violet!” I cried. I moved on autopilot then, jumping off of Xavier’s back and racing toward the hunters. I threw my palms up and blasted them, not stopping, even after they were down. I was only dimly aware of Greyson and Xavier leaping into battle as well, and soon the gruesome sound of bodies being ripped apart echoed through the clearing. The wolf protecting Violet had to be Charlie, but why wasn’t Violet in her wolf form too? Why was she just lying there?

*I’m the world’s worst bodyguard!*

Charlie kept fighting, despite Xavier and Greyson jumping in, and I realized he was locked in a one-on-one battle with Zachery.

I rushed past the fight and knelt down next to Violet, gasping when I saw the crossbow bolt embedded in her leg. “Oh my god.”

She was deathly pale, lying in a puddle of her own blood. The head of the bolt had come clean through the other side of her leg, and the silver tip gleamed with her blood. The breath rushed out of my lungs like I’d just been slammed into the ground all over again.

Violet was hurt, terribly. And by a silver bolt, no less. I knew exactly how poisonous that was. How dangerous. I took her hand. It was cold and clammy. The silver poisoning was already at work, and the blood loss wasn’t doing her any favors either.

Black veins climbed up Violet’s leg, spreading from the wound.

“Violet?” I stroked her hair away from her face with my free hand. “Can you hear me?”

She whimpered, and my heart snapped in two.

“It’s going to be okay,” I said. “You’re going to be just fine.” The words tasted like a lie.

The sounds of battle continued behind me.

“Charlie!” I called out, turning to see him still locked in battle with Zachery. He couldn’t get away right now, and I wasn’t going to leave Violet’s side even for a second.

A rebel broke free from Greyson and Xavier, racing toward me. I let go of Violet’s hand and blasted the rebel back, into Xavier, who dispatched him with ease. Both of my mates were so cool under pressure, so capable. I hoped I’d be able to learn that skill someday.

I looked down at Violet. *Should I try to remove the arrow?* Violet’s hand lay on her leg near the arrow, like she’d tried to pull it or… or maybe stop the flow of blood? My heart skipped up into double time. My blood could heal Violet’s silver poisoning, but that arrow was probably the only thing keeping her from bleeding out entirely.

If I pulled it out, would Violet’s werewolf healing kickstart in time? I couldn’t give her a blood transfusion, and I didn’t want to risk her bleeding out, but we couldn’t leave that arrow in there indefinitely. The silver poisoning would kill her even faster than the blood loss.

*What do I do?*

A crossbow bolt whizzed past me, narrowly missing both me and Violet.

“Hey!” I snarled, turning toward the source.

*Zachery*. Charlie slammed him into the dirt seconds later, snapping the crossbow in half. Charlie’s wolf pinned the young man to the ground, and Xavier and Greyson shifted before racing over to me.

“Jesus,” Greyson breathed as he took in Violet’s condition. Xavier didn’t say anything at all, but the complete devastation on his face was enough.

“I don’t know what to do.” Tears poured down my cheeks. “If I pull out the arrow, she could bleed to death. If I leave it in, she’ll die of silver poisoning.”

The black veins crept even further up Violet’s leg, and I made a decision. “I need something to cut myself. She needs Fae bloodright now.”

Charlie, still in his wolf form, dragged Zachery over and dropped him at Greyson and Xavier’s feet. Xavier was on him in an instant, flipping him facedown in the dirt and pulling the young man’s arms up at an angle that had to hurt.

“Let go, you filthy wolf!” Zachery snarled.

Xavier yanked upward even harder, and I swore I heard Zachery’s bones creak. “Give me an excuse to snap you like a twig. *Please*.”

Zachery shut right up.

Charlie shifted back and gently took Violet in his arms. “I’m so sorry. I should never have let this happen to you. I should have protected you better.” His breaths shuddered out of his chest. “You’re going to be okay.” He lifted his tearstained face to meet my eyes. “She will be, won’t she?”

I swallowed. I didn’t know what to do. And judging from the horror and pain that twisted Charlie’s face, my silence said it all.

Footsteps crunched nearby, and Iris and the others approached, with Shanna Paiyn in tow. She was bloodied but alive, held tight by Pepperdine and a human Rishika.

Artemis rushed over to me. “What are you doing here? Are you okay?”

I held out a hand. “Give me a knife. Now.”

She did, and I wasted no time dragging the blade across my palm. Grasping the arrow with my unbloodied hand, I ripped it out of Violet’s leg. She arched up with a desperate cry, a sound so pained it was neither human nor animal.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Then I squeezed my bleeding hand over Violet’s wound and watched my blood drip onto it before pressing my palm to her leg. My other hand pressed against the exit wound. We had to stop the bleeding, had to get the silver poisoning under control.

And if we were too late on even one of those accounts, there would be no saving Violet.

Charlie’s chest rose and fell, faster and faster. He grabbed the arrow—still slick with his mate’s blood—and surged upward, spinning to where Xavier had Zachery pinned.

He shoved the silver-tipped bolt against Zachery’s throat, digging into his skin. “This is all your fault!”

My jaw dropped. *What’s Charlie going to do to him?*

**Episode 2225**

CHARLIE

Red.

It was all I could see. The blood oozing out of my mate’s leg, slipping beneath and around Cali’s fingers, slowly adding to the pool that Violet lay in. Violet, who had been shot with a silver-tipped arrow. Violet, who had been alone in the woods, wounded, fighting for her life against this psychopath I’d tried so hard to protect her from.

Violet… who was dying.

Anger. Fury. Rage. None of them even began to describe the sheer violence rising up inside me. It didn’t burn hot. It was cold. As cold as Violet’s skin when I’d pulled her into my arms. As cold as the silver-tipped bolt I was pressing against Zachery’s throat.

Just beneath the bolt lay a precious, pulsing artery. The bastard wasn’t vulnerable to silver, but right now it made no difference. A bit more pressure applied, and his life would be over. He’d bleed out right in front of me, and there would be no saving him.

Some primal force inside me screamed to make that cut. To end this motherfucker’s life once and for all. It was what he deserved, after all. This bastard had been living on borrowed time from the moment he’d first tried to hurt my mate. Killing him would be setting all of those wrongs to right. It would be putting the world back into balance. It would be one less monster stalking the earth.

“Greyson, Xavier,” I heard Cali beg. “Do something!”

I never once looked away from Zachery’s face, and neither of Cali’s mates stepped in to stop me. They knew, just as I knew, deep in my bones, that this was my responsibility. *My* mate who had been hurt. *My* kill.

“Do it,” Zachery spat, blood pouring from his mouth. I’d managed to get a few hits in while we fought, but they hadn’t even come close to what this monster deserved. “Kill me. Get it over with.”

I tightened my grip on the bolt. My chest rose and fell like I’d just run a marathon.

“Do it!”

*Stop.*

Violet’s voice was weak, barely more than a whisper as it slipped through my mind. I snapped my gaze over to where she lay at Cali’s side, pale as a corpse. Her lips were nearly blue from blood loss. There was so much blood. She probably didn’t have the strength to actually speak.

A sob hitched in my chest. “He deserves to die for what he did to you!” My voice broke, and tears blurred my eyes. I couldn’t stand to see her like this. To know that everything I’d done, all the promises I’d made to keep her safe—none of it had been enough.

I’d failed her, and now she was paying the price for all my mistakes. I turned back to Zachery with a snarl. “It’s over, you sick son of a bitch.”

I reared back, the bolt clutched in a white-knuckled grip.

*Please, don’t!* Violet begged.

I hesitated, the bolt mere centimeters from Zachery’s throat.

Cali took my hand, the one that wasn’t caked with Violet’s blood. “Charlie, give me the arrow,” she said softly. “Violet needs you. Go, be with her.”

The urgency in her voice told me the one thing she wasn’t saying.

*Be with her while you still can.*

Something inside my chest snapped, and I shoved the shaft into Cali’s hand with a sob. I left Zachery on the ground and scooped Violet up into my arms. She was so pale, so small and weak. Nothing like the fierce girl I knew her to be.

Zachery had taken that from her. And I’d let him.

Fingers shaking and stained with her blood, I brushed her hair away from her face, leaving a red smear on her ashen cheekbone. “You have to hold on, okay? We’ll get you some help.”

Almost immediately, I remembered that Big Mac and Kira were gone. They couldn’t save her.

“I gave her some of my blood. I hope it’ll work. The bleeding has slowed, at least.” Cali swallowed nervously. “But… I honestly don’t know if we caught her in time.” She gave Greyson the arrow and knelt down next to me. “We can bring her back to the pack house. Torin can help heal the rest of the wound, but we have to hurry. I’ll give her as much blood as she needs to fight the poison, and hopefully Torin can take care of the rest.”

I knew we had to hurry, but I didn’t want to move Violet. Not while she was so weak. I understood that Torin could help, but…

“I’m afraid moving her will just make things worse,” I confessed. “C-Can someone get Torin and bring him here?”

“That’s a trip to the house and back. It’ll take even more time,” Greyson said softly. I’d never heard his voice like this before, so gentle. “I think getting her back to the house is her best chance.”

I didn’t know what to do. Why were they asking me? I was the one who’d failed to protect her in the first place. Why the hell did anyone think I was equipped to save her now?

“Charlie.” A warm hand rested on my shoulder, and I looked up to see my mother. For once, she wasn’t the cruel huntress I’d come to know over the past months. Right now, she was my mom again. Love and understanding and comfort. The person who’d taught me what safety felt like.

She rubbed my back, her voice soothing in the way I so desperately needed. “I know you’re afraid, but you need to get her back to the house. You know this. So go. We’ll deal with Shanna and Zachery. You need to take care of your mate.”

*My mate.* This was the first time my mother had said the words without her usual disdain. I hated that it had taken this for her to understand, but I supposed it was better than nothing.

There was just one thing I needed to do before I left.

I carefully eased Violet onto the ground and turned to Zachery. Xavier stepped away from him, and I hauled the bastard up with all of my considerable strength. With one hand on the back of his neck, strong enough to crush his spine if I wanted to, I shoved his face toward Violet’s prone body.

“Is this what you wanted? *Look at her.* Look at what you’ve done. Whatever happens to you, I never want you to forget who the real monster is here.” I hauled him back up so we were nose to nose. He looked pale, worn down. But not nearly remorseful enough to placate me. “And know this—I will *never* forget what you’ve done. I will *never* forgive you.”

I shoved Zachery back into Xavier’s arms, scooped up Violet, and kissed her forehead. “We’re going to get you some help now. Just hold on, okay?”

As I started my journey back to the pack house, Cali called out, “I’ll come with you.”

“Fine. Just don’t slow me down.” It was for the best, I reminded myself. Violet probably needed more Fae blood, but I wasn’t going to allow anything to stand in the way of saving my mate.

I broke into a brisk walk—any faster and I would have risked hurting her further. Cali fell into step beside me. The journey back felt like it took years, and I knew I would never forget that terrifying walk, with Cali by my side and my mate’s limp, cold form in my arms. It took everything I had to keep my eyes on the path ahead, or on Violet’s face, but never on the arrow wound that was slowly killing her.

When the pack house came into view, I had to restrain myself from breaking into a run. Cali didn’t hold back, though, and she sprinted to the house to get Torin.

Violet stirred in my arms. Her eyes fluttered open, and she smiled. “I love you.”

Those three little words, and all the desperation wrapped up in them, were too heavy for me to speak.

“Don’t,” I finally managed. “Don’t you dare say goodbye. You’re not going anywhere.”

I held her tighter, tears running down my cheeks.

I carried her up to the porch as Torin burst through the door, followed by Orla and Tom. The grave look on Torin’s face said it all.

“You can help her, right?” I demanded. “You have to help her!”

He swallowed. “I’ll try my best. It looks like the wound is having trouble healing. Let’s bring her into the living room.”

As we stepped into the house, Greyson, Xavier, and the ally hunters emerged from the forest with Shanna and Zachery. Xavier passed Zachery over to Greyson and raced into the house.

“How is—” He stopped when he saw Violet’s pale form stretched out on the couch. Torin was crouched down next to her, blue light glowing from his hands while Cali stood nearby.

Xavier’s expression went from concerned to the kind of rage that would have terrified me under different circumstances.

Cali moved away from the couch and approached Xavier. “What are you going to do with Zachery and Shanna?”

He glanced over at me and then back toward Zachery, who was being hauled into the house. “We’re going to execute them.”

**Episode 2226**

XAVIER

I looked back at Zachery as Greyson hauled him into the house.

*Fuck this little punk hunter boy.*

Violet was the little sister I’d never had, and knowing this piece of shit had hurt her, practically dumped her on death’s doorstep, made my blood boil. To say nothing of the previous attempts to murder Violet, the fear and anxiety he’d seeded in her with all those calls and texts and threats.

I couldn’t even wrap my head around the sheer amount of entitlement and ego required to start a war between the rebel hunters and the Redwood pack all because Violet wouldn’t go out with him. Because he couldn’t take no for an answer.

Zachery clearly hated werewolves, but he was a monster in his own right. The kind of monster that couldn’t be saved or rehabilitated. And I couldn’t wait to tear him apart. Slowly. Put him through a worse hell than he’d put Violet through until the lights went out.

Zachery scowled as he was brought into the house. I could tell he was trying to look defiant, trying to play it tough, but I could smell the fear on him, and god if it wasn’t the sweetest thing I’d ever smelled.

I met his eyes and gave him a feral grin. “We’re gonna have a lot of fun, you and I.”

Zachery paled. I knew that look. I’d been in enough of these situations during my work with Gabriel to know what that look meant.

This little homicidal bastard was scared shitless.

As he should be.

Greyson, Rishika, and the ally hunters brought Zachery and Shanna down to the basement, and Cali pulled me aside.

“You can’t be serious,” she said. “He’s barely legal, and you want to *execute* that kid?”

I frowned. “That ‘kid’ tried to kill Violet and Charlie. I hope to hell you’re not about to ask me to give mercy to the guy who played target practice with her.” I pointed over her shoulder to where Torin was working on Violet in the living room. “She’s fighting for her life in there. For all we know, Zachery’s gonna succeed in killing her.”

Cali’s face paled, and she shook her head. “She’s going to be okay. She has to be.”

I wished I could believe her words, but I’d seen plenty of people die from wounds not half as severe as Violet’s. “Zachery made his choice when he threatened Violet, and he only dug that hole deeper when he tried to kill her with live ammunition. He’s beyond saving. You do that, you threaten the pack, and it’s over. There’s no mercy for someone like that.”

Cali just shook her head. I could tell she was torn. I couldn’t blame her—she was good and kind and believed in second chances. She had a human moral compass, not a werewolf one, and werewolf justice was in a league of its own.

I hoped she’d understand eventually. We would execute Zachery, just like we’d killed Tony when he’d threatened Cali. Sometimes the world was a complicated place, and sometimes it was just black and white.

This? Getting justice for Violet? It was the simplest choice I’d had to make in a long, long time.

I put a hand on Cali’s shoulder. “We should focus on Violet right now.”

Cali didn’t argue. We headed back into the living room.

Charlie held Violet’s hand as Torin took a look at the arrow wound on Violet. He had a cloth poised just above it. “We have to put pressure on this. Her werewolf healing isn’t working on it. On the count of three. One, two, three!”

He pressed the cloth to the wound, and Violet let out a cry. The pain on her face didn’t break my heart nearly as much as the weak whimper that slipped through her throat. She was exhausted, depleted. I didn’t know how Torin would be able to save her.

Cali dive-bombed into my chest, and my arms wrapped around her, holding her close as her tears wet my skin.

Torin waited a beat, but Violet’s werewolf healing didn’t kick in. Blood poured out of the wound slower than it probably should have, but fast enough that I knew the speed probably had more to do with all the blood she’d already lost than her abilities stopping the flow.

Torin went to work, his hands glowing blue as they focused on the arrow wound. The bleeding slowed under his healing magic.

“The wound should heal,” he mused. “We just—”

He stopped as the black veins spread further up Violet’s leg. It was the silver poisoning. We had to counter it immediately.

“She needs Fae blood.”

My mate peeled herself away from my chest and rushed over.

Torin glanced at me. “Xavier, come keep her leg steady.”

Cali passed Torin a knife, and he didn’t even wince as he cut his palm open and dripped blood into Violet’s wound.

“Is it working?” Charlie asked.

I sighed. “It might take a little time, but I don’t see a reason why it shouldn’t.”

I didn’t say that it wouldn’t work if she was too far gone. Since we had no way of knowing that for sure, going above and beyond to save Violet seemed like the simplest thing to do.

Torin let his blood drip into the wound until it closed up completely. Thank god. Now, we’d done everything we could to help Violet. It wasn’t up to us anymore whether or not she’d pull through, but I needed to make sure my mate was okay. I pulled her into the hallway.

“How are you doing?” I asked.

“Um… I’m shaken up, but considering how bad things could have been, I’m okay. I’m not the one fighting for my life.” She glanced back at the living room, and I caught her chin, redirecting her gaze to mine.

“I wish you’d never left this house,” I admitted.

“It wasn’t my idea. Violet just left. She wouldn’t come back, so I went after her. I tried to protect her.” Her eyes filled with tears. “I’m sorry I didn’t do a better job.”

I kissed her forehead. “I know you did the best you could. You looked out for her; that’s what matters. I’m proud of you.”

Greyson appeared at the top of the basement stairs. “How are you feeling, love?”

Cali opened her mouth to respond, but I cut her off. “How do you think she feels?”

My brother’s eyes narrowed. “Exactly why I’m asking her, not you.”

“I’m okay,” Cali said, and I put an arm around her as she faced Greyson. “Do you really have to…” She stopped, clearly struggling to say the words out loud.

Before Greyson could answer, Iris appeared at the top of the basement stairs as well. “I want to talk to you about Shanna and Zachery.”

I scowled. “What is there to talk about? Those hunters attacked us, so we should decide their fate.”

“I understand,” Iris said slowly. “I’m sure I’d feel the same way if a Rogue werewolf went after my hunters. But feelings shouldn’t factor into this. Jurisdiction matters. Zachery and Shanna are hunters. They violated hunter rules and are therefore a hunter problem. We will deal with it.”

“That’s bullshit,” I said.

“It became a werewolf problem when they attacked us,” Greyson added.

“Again, I understand where you’re both coming from, but killing a young hunter like Zachery and an infamous rebel like Shanna will only incite more rebels. More fighting. More deaths. You kill them, and you’ll make them martyrs. The friction between hunters and werewolves will only worsen.”

I scoffed. “We can handle the hunters.”

Iris looked ready to dig her heels in for the long haul, but then Cali spoke up.

“Is that what we want?” she asked. “More fighting? Haven’t we had enough fighting? Do we really want more bloodshed?”

“That’s the last thing I want.” Greyson sighed. “But the Redwood pack has to send a message. This is a werewolf problem, and we will deal with it.”

Here I was, agreeing with my brother again. This was becoming a nasty habit.

“Please,” Iris began, “just listen—”

“Xavier.”

Violet’s voice, weak and warbly, filtered out from the living room. I glanced inside. Her color was starting to come back.

*Oh, thank god.*

I moved into the living room so she wouldn’t have to strain herself to speak. “What is it, Vi?”

“I heard what you were talking about,” she said faintly. “I don’t want Zachery or Shanna to be executed.”

*Has the silver gone to her brain? What kind of werewolf shows this much mercy?*

“I want them to suffer with what they did. I agree with Iris,” she continued. “I think the hunters should deal with it.”

Greyson strode forward. “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

She squeezed Charlie’s hand. “It is.”

My brother seemed to think this over for a moment before he nodded. “Okay. I can see both sides of this, and since I’m the Alpha, the decision rests with me.”

I clenched my jaw. I would never get used to Greyson referring to himself as Alpha. *Just bide your time*, I told myself. *Then claim it.*

“I’ll turn the rebels over to the hunters on one condition.” Greyson approached Iris. “Take them out of here. They’re in your hands now. But if they ever return, I will hold you personally responsible.”

**Episode 2227**

The tension in the air was a living, crackling thing. Between Greyson and Xavier. Between both my mates and Iris. Between all the Redwood wolves—who’d seen what Zachery had done to Violet, who’d fought against Shanna Paiyn and her hunters—and the two surviving rebels locked up in the basement.

Now Charlie joined the fray as well. He’d been focused solely on Violet since they’d gotten back to the house, but now he stood up and turned to face Greyson. “Are you threatening my mother?”

Greyson’s eyes narrowed. “Are you questioning your Alpha?”

Iris held her hands up. “Charlie, focus on your mate. I don’t need you fighting my battles for me.” Her gaze shifted to Greyson. “Of course I will assume all responsibility if Shanna or Zachery ever become a problem for this pack again. You have my word.” She turned to Pepperdine, who’d come upstairs sometime during Iris’s discussion with Greyson about the appropriate way to deal with the hunters. “Assemble the rebel prisoners. We’ll be leaving shortly.”

If the sergeant was surprised to be told to gather up the prisoners he’d just finished locking in the basement, he didn’t show it. He just turned on his heel and headed back down the stairs.

Sophie and Chad stepped into the room, looking around cautiously.

“Did you just say we’re leaving?” Chad asked.

Iris nodded curtly. “Back to the lake house.”

“Can we say goodbye to Charlie and Violet?” Sophie asked.

“Come on in,” Charlie called from his place next to Violet in the living room.

The two young hunters shuffled in and said their goodbyes to Violet and Charlie. Neither of the hunters hugged either of the werewolves—clearly, they still weren’t accustomed to all the nudity that came with befriending werewolves—but I could tell Charlie and Violet both meant a lot to them, and the relief on both Chad’s and Sophie’s faces when they saw that Violet was still alive was palpable.

*It’s gotta be so strange for Xavier and Greyson—and for all the werewolves, really—to see this budding friendship between hunters and werewolves.* I loved to see it. The pack needed peace to recover from everything we’d been through, to see examples of friendship and unity, and Iris’s hunters, the good-guy hunters, were excellent allies to have in a pinch.

I watched Charlie leave Violet’s side to say goodbye to his mother. I thought it was bad being torn between two werewolf mates, but Charlie was torn between two opposing worlds. Two sides of himself that, until recently, hadn’t seemed possible to integrate.

“Okay, everyone,” Torin said as he stepped back from his patient, “you need to all take it easy with Violet, okay? Silver wounds are no joke, and she’s not out of the woods yet. While the surface wound might look better, everyone needs to give Violet time to rest and regain her strength. We don’t want her relapsing.”

I snuck into the living room and squeezed Violet’s hand. “I’m glad you’re on the mend. You really had me scared back there.”

She smiled softly. “Guess you’re never gonna volunteer to babysit me again, huh?”

“Ha. No. Probably not.” The last few hours had been, hands down, some of the most terrifying and awful of my entire life. Still, a smile tugged at my lips. “But if we’ve all learned one thing, it’s that you don’t need a babysitter. You’re a badass. I’ll check back in on you later, okay?”

“Thanks, Cali. For everything.”

I stepped out of the living room and patted Torin’s arm. “Amazing work, Torin, as always.”

“I could say the same to you. I heard what you did in the forest.” He caught my hand and, with a gentle wave of blue light, the cut on my palm from earlier healed. “Anything for my friends.”

I squeezed his hands and headed upstairs. I was filthy, covered in dirt and sweat and more of Violet’s blood than I was comfortable thinking about. I stopped short when I ran into Lola in the hallway. I hadn’t seen her since she’d left for the battle with the rest of the pack.

“How did you—” I began.

She cut me off by throwing her arms around me. “I’m so glad you and Violet are okay. I heard about everything secondhand. I was so busy fighting rebels I didn’t even know you two were out there.” She stepped back. “Are you okay?”

“Tired,” I admitted. “Did you and Jay make it through okay?”

“Somehow we made it through unscathed. I think I blew a few hunters’ minds when they saw me go from vamp to wolf, though.” She smiled. “I’m glad you’re okay. Get some rest. We’ll catch up later, okay?”

I’d already showered and changed into a pair of sweats by the time Artemis knocked on my door.

She poked her head in. “How are you holding up?”

*I’m fine*, was right on the tip of my tongue, but I stopped. I might have survived, and Torin had healed my hand, but I sure didn’t *feel* fine.

“I was so scared for Violet,” I admitted. “For Xavier and Greyson. I used so much power out there… I’m just so tired now. From all of it.”

Artemis sat down on the edge of my bed. “I could have lost Rishika today. Believe me, I understand the exhaustion.” Her expression brightened. “But I saw you use your powers, when you got close enough to the main fight. You really are improving. Hopefully we can squeeze in some more practice so I can get my powers up to your level.”

I smiled. “That sounds fantastic, though from what I hear, you out-fought almost every wolf in the pack—and that was without your powers. I wish I could fight as well as you.”

“Spend almost a decade as a bounty hunter—you’ll learn to fight like that too.” Her smile didn’t reach her eyes, but her expression relaxed as she added, “Maybe you and I should start a side business: the bounty hunter sisters.”

We were still laughing when Xavier knocked on the door.

“Hey, can I talk to you?” he asked me.

Artemis stood up. “I’m gonna go find Rishika.”

Xavier closed the door behind her and approached the bed. “Violet seems to be on the mend, still. She’s definitely out of the woods.”

My shoulders slumped with relief. “You have no idea how happy I am to hear that.”

“I know you were pretty shaken up by the idea of executing Zachery and Shanna. I just wanted to check on you. Are you really okay?”

I shrugged. “I’m just glad you and Greyson listened to reason and we found a solution that doesn’t involve more death. It’s all over now. Hopefully for good.”

He nodded as he sank down on the edge of my bed. “I feel like I need to apologize.”

“For what? I’m the one who let Violet run off. I was supposed to protect her, and instead I nearly got her killed.”

Xavier’s brows knitted together. “Cali, none of this is your fault. I told you—I’m proud of you. You did everything you could to protect her, even risking your own life. If anything, I’m at fault here. I never should have allowed either of you to be in that position.”

He pulled me into a hug before I could argue.

“I was so scared when I picked up your scent in the woods,” he confessed. “All I wanted to do was find you, make sure you were okay. Keep you safe.”

I tilted my head up and kissed him. “I’m sorry that I made you worry like that.”

“Mmm.” His lips brushed over mine in return. “Maybe we should stop apologizing?”

I laughed, and that laughter turned into a huge yawn. “Sorry. I’m just so tired. It must be from using my magic.”

“Why don’t you lie down?” He lay back on my bed and pulled me into him. It was the easiest thing in the world to sink into the heat of his body and the comfort of my own bed. I could barely keep my eyes open.

After the day I’d had, this was exactly what I needed.

I opened my eyes a few minutes later and found the room bathed in darkness. Xavier was gone, and running water sounded somewhere nearby.

I sat up. A narrow beam of moonlight shone in through the window. Something about that moonlight called to me, but when I moved to get out of my bed, my feet didn’t touch my bedroom floor. Instead, I was walking on soft grass, just a few feet away from the Seluna fountain on the Vanguard estate.

“Xavier?” I called out.

There was no response, and I approached the fountain. My reflection looked back at me from the surface of the water.

“*Caliana*,” a soft, soothing voice whispered. It sounded close, too close, as if the speaker was right behind me. But there was no one else in the fountain’s reflection—just me and the full moon.

A hand grasped my shoulder, and I jolted, spinning around and losing my balance. I fell into the fountain with a lurch—

My eyes snapped open and I sat up, my heart racing. Xavier lay in bed right next to me, still sleeping.

*It was just another dream.* But it didn’t feel like a dream. For one, my shoulder still burned from where that phantom hand had touched me.

I slid out of bed and padded over to the bathroom, turning to look at my bare shoulder in the mirror.

My gasp echoed off the tile. There was a red handprint on my shoulder.

**Episode 2228**

MARTA

My magic was going absolutely haywire.

With the bracelets on, I wasn’t supposed to have access to my medium powers, but even without the bracelets, my magic was nothing like this. The voices were always in my head, but they weren’t normally deafening, and there weren’t normally quite so many of them. Ghost sightings were normal, but right now, there had to be at least three dozen ghosts popping up right in front of me. And the withering plants? I hadn’t even touched them to make them die like that.

I didn’t know what was causing it, but somehow my magic had been dialed up to eleven.

I looked down at the bracelets, still locked around my wrists. What the heck was going on? This shouldn’t even be possible with the bracelets on, much less at this level. I hadn’t even harnessed this much power when I’d fought Letifer. Now, my magic was simmering in my veins, tangible and urgent and begging to be put to use. I had so much power that it was leaking out of me.

It was exhilarating.

And absolutely, completely terrifying.

I glanced around the room. How long would it take the necromancy to level up from killing the plants? There were so many people here, so many potential victims. Was someone going to see what was happening and drag me into court again?

The witches had told me in no uncertain terms that if I used my magic without permission again, they’d send Lilac back to the spirit world. I couldn’t let that happen to him! It wasn’t his fault, and this moment—right here, right now, when my magic felt ready to explode and take me with it—wasn’t my fault either.

Dani tensed. “Oh my god! I’m so sorry!” She stumbled away from me, her eyes wide.

Just like that, the magic stopped. No ghosts. No voices. No more murdering people’s office plants. I swayed a little on my feet. *What the hell just happened?*

“Are you okay?” Dani asked.

“I, um…” I blinked slowly, looking down at my hands and then back up at her. “I don’t know? I should be asking you that. Something really weird just happened.”

I explained the magic surge.

“Are you okay? Did my power hurt you?” I looked her up and down. I’d been able to slay three Ficus plants from across the room, but somehow Dani had escaped unscathed even though she’d been holding onto my arm when my power had surged. How was she still alive?

She grimaced. “That was my fault. Well, my magic’s fault, anyway. It’s the reason I’m here and getting a mentor, I guess.”

“What do you mean?” I glanced around again. Somehow, none of the people crowding the office seemed to have noticed my magic going haywire.

“I’m an amplifier. I amplify people’s magic. I don’t mean to, of course, but sometimes it just happens. That’s what got me in trouble in the first place.” She glanced down at my bracelets. “I thought they’d keep you safe from me, but I guess not.”

“Yeah…” I huffed out a laugh, relieved now that I wasn’t about to be dragged away and thrown into witch prison. “Guess I’ll have to avoid the overeager ping-pong players on my own now.”

“Agreed.”

A familiar voice sounded from farther down the hallway. “Where are you holding Marta Zhao?”

Lilac.

“Sir, you’re not allowed back there,” another voice said.

“We’re here to bring her home! You can’t keep her from us!” my boyfriend argued.

“Sir, it’s just that you’re not allowed beyond this point. Miss Zhao is on her way now, if you can please wait—”

“Excuse me.” Big Mac jumped in. “We need to collect Marta and leave. The sooner she’s with us, the sooner we’re out of your hair. Got it?”

Moments later, the door opened and Lilac and Big Mac rushed in. Lilac captured me in a tight hug. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I just want to go home.” Then shower, then eat something delicious and greasy that I probably wasn’t gonna find in this hippie food desert.

“That’s exactly why we’re here,” Big Mac said. “We’ve come to collect you and be on our way. Sabine and Kira are already waiting in the car. Let’s go.”

Big Mac started to lead us back down the hallway, and Lilac followed after her. I didn’t move.

“What about Dani?” I asked.

The witch turned, her brows furrowed. “Who?”

I gestured to the girl standing next to me. “This is Dani. Dani, this is Lilac and Big Mac. Dani and I are being assigned the same mentor to help us control our magic.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Big Mac said automatically, “but I’m double parked, and—”

“I *may* have invited Dani to come live with us,” I blurted out.

The witch froze. “Excuse me? You did what?”

“It made sense,” I added. “Since she and I are going to be sharing a mentor anyway, and did I mention Dani has nowhere to go? She doesn’t know where her family is, and she needs help. You guys took me in when I was in a similar situation, so doesn’t it make sense for her to come back with us?”

Dani seemed to read Big Mac’s shock and reluctance—though with the expression on the witch’s face, it wasn’t hard to do. Dani turned to me with a weak smile. “Marta, it was so nice of you to offer to let me live with you, but don’t worry about me. I’ll figure something out. I won’t intrude on your hospitality.” Then she turned to face Big Mac and Lilac. “It was good to meet you both—”

“Hold on.” Big Mac held up a hand. “What does Marta mean, you don’t have anywhere to go? Don’t you have someone you can contact?”

“I’ve tried to reach my sister, but for whatever reason, I can’t get a hold of her. I don’t know how to get back to my parents on my own, and even if I did, my home life isn’t exactly great without Tabitha.”

Lilac seemed to mull this over. “Great, it’s settled then. You’re coming with us. I know exactly what it’s like to miss your sister. We’ll help you find your family, and you can stay at our house in the meantime.”

Dani’s eyes widened. “Do you mean it? You’ll help me?” I noticed she looked to Big Mac for confirmation.

“Fine.” Big Mac sighed. “But let’s go. Now.”

We headed to the car with Dani in tow, and on the way, Lilac peppered Dani with questions about her sister. I tuned it out and sidled up to Big Mac.

“Thank you for allowing Dani to come back with us,” I said. “I know we don’t know her, but I have a good feeling about her. She seems like a sweet person who’s fallen on some hard times.”

I knew what that was like.

“It’s fine.” Big Mac waved off my thanks. “I’ve seen too many magical young people lose their way to say no—but remember, it’s not just the five of us who’ll be living in that house. The whole Redwood pack is there, along with some strays, and not everyone is prepared to live in a house filled to the gills with werewolves. Have you even told Dani about the pack?”

I froze. “Oh, crap.”

“There’s no time like the present. At least do her the favor of telling her before we get all the way up to Oregon. And while you’re thinking about how to break the news to Dani, you might want to craft a good pitch to Greyson about why he should take in another stray.”

We reached the car and introduced Dani to Kira and Mrs. Smith. The former was nice, if confused to find out we were bringing a new person back to the pack house with us. Mrs. Smith was warm and maternal as ever, and Dani seemed to immediately take to the older werewolf.

As we settled into the car, Dani asked, “I guess I should’ve asked this before, but where are we going?”

I caught Big Mac’s gaze in the rearview mirror. “Um… we’re not far from Portland.”

“Oh, okay. I’ve heard Portland is a really cool place.”

I cleared my throat. “And there’s one more thing. We live in a pack house.”

Dani blinked. “A pack… house? A pack of what?”

“Werewolves?” I didn’t know why I phrased it like a question. Maybe to soften the blow.

All the color drained out of Dani’s face. “Stop the car!”

“No, it’s okay!” I said. “They’re good werewolves. They would never hurt you. They’re not like you’ve seen in the movies!”

She shook her head. “I can’t do it. I can’t go back to more werewolves.”

I hadn’t been expecting that. “Wait, you’ve lived with werewolves before?”

Dani nodded, tears shining in her eyes. “I can’t go back. If I do, Silas will find me.”

**Episode 2229**

GREYSON

“I think we deserve to treat ourselves tonight,” I told Tom and Torin as I followed them into the kitchen. I was a bit tired from the fight and would’ve given anything to head to my bedroom to relax, preferably with Cali, but I had to take care of my responsibilities first.

“I hear you loud and clear, Greyson. We’ll go all out. I’m thinking lots of comfort food, hearty dishes—ooh, and something classic like warm apple pie for dessert,” Torin said. He looked tired, but his excitement about the prospect of cooking something good for the pack was palpable.

“Yes, and a good, hearty salad to start things off—it’ll be a real feast,” Tom said, already paging through one of his recipe books.

“Does five courses sound okay?” Torin asked.

Did this man ever slow down? Five courses? “That sounds amazing, Torin.” I clapped him on the back. He’d already gone above and beyond, working to heal Violet, and now he was eager to jump in to help Tom feed the pack. “Thank you both. Give me a shout if you need anything.”

I left them in the kitchen and continued checking in with the rest of the pack. I wanted to make sure everyone was holding up okay after the stress of the last few hours. I was still pretty upset about Violet being injured, but given who we’d been up against, I was thankful that there hadn’t been any other serious casualties. Shanna and her rebel hunters had meant business, and I was proud of how well we’d fought against them. It felt damn good to have one huge threat off the pack’s plate.

I finally allowed myself to take a deep breath. I was Alpha now—no question. I’d led the pack through a tough battle and showed everyone that I was more than capable of being a wartime leader, especially since I’d been forced to give up that mantle to Xavier during our fight with Letifer. Luckily, that was behind us, and I was ready to keep the pack safe from any and all new threats. I nodded at Sage and Zainab as I passed them. Whatever beef they’d had about the strawberries seemed to have been resolved. If the two of them being at each other’s throats had really been a result of the co-Alpha thing, like Cali had suggested, then there was nothing to worry about anymore. I only hoped that our victory over the rebel hunters would cement my status in the minds of any pack members still skeptical about my position. Xavier excluded. I know I had saved his life, but at this point I was fully resigned to the fact we may never see eye to eye about who should be sole Alpha of the pack. *I don’t want to think about that—not today.*

As I continued making my rounds, I realized that I hadn’t seen Cali in a while, probably not since right after the battle. Maybe she’d gone to help clean up?I wanted to talk to her about my decision to release Zachery and Shanna to Iris. *Where’s Xavier?* A sour feeling crept up in my stomach. I supposed it was no coincidence that they were both missing.

*Fine. I know where Cali’s heart lies—and I’m not worried about Xavier changing that.* I took a deep breath and let it go. *Maybe I’ll check in with her tonight.*

Rishika gave me a big smile when I found her in the living room. “Congrats, Greyson. And congrats to me, too. After all, I knew that you’d lead us to victory once you became Alpha.”

“Thanks—but it was a genuine team effort. Couldn’t have done it without you.”

“And so modest, too,” Rishika said with a wink. Then her expression grew serious. “I wonder if we should be concerned about Iris and the other hunters.”

I knew exactly where Rishika was coming from. We’d managed to secure a victory with their help, but it was still an uneasy alliance at best. There was no question in my mind that as soon as they were gone, I’d be able to breathe a bit easier.

“I’m pretty sure that they’re not going to hang around,” I said. “There’s no reason for them to stay, really. It would only rile things up.”

Now wasn’t the time for us to let our guard down when it came to the hunters. We’d managed to collaborate without coming to blows, but who knew when that might change? They might not be extremists like Shanna and her group, but they were still hunters.

I gestured to Charlie, who was sitting with Violet, just out of earshot. “Iris is his mother. That has to count for something. At least that’s what I’ve been telling myself.”

“I agree, though you know as well as I do that blood ties don’t always count for much. Look at you and Xavier.”

“Yeah, but Xavier took the pledge, didn’t he?”

Rishika gave me a look. “He did—if you call what he did taking the pledge.” She rolled her eyes. “Everyone knows that Xavier still wants to be Alpha.”

“I get your point, Rishika. Don’t worry, I’ll deal with it. I promise.” I definitely had plans to sit down with Xavier and figure out exactly where were we stood, but I wasn’t looking forward to that, so I hadn’t put it at the top of my list. I’d saved Xavier’s life, and though I had no plans to hold that over his head, I hoped that it might make him a bit more amenable to the way things were now.

“I hope that you do, Greyson,” Rishika said. “You know, I think it would be harder for Xavier—for anyone—to question your spot if you were to take a Luna. Everyone knows that a pack is stronger with a Luna, and I think putting one in place will only boost the morale around here. Have you thought about it at all?”

I wanted to scream “of course I’ve thought about it!”More than anything, I wanted Cali as my Luna, but to admit that openly would only make things worse between me and Xavier—and potentially Cali. It might be too soon, and then there was the *due destini* to think about. Until we had proof that the curse was broken, it would be unfair to put Cali in a position where she would have to choose.

“With all the recent chaos, I haven’t had time,” I lied. The truth was, it was *all* I’d been thinking about lately, but there was no point in telling Rishika that when I wasn’t even close to making a decision.

Rishika stared at me for a long moment. “I understand. It’s an important decision; you don’t want to rush it. I need to go find Artemis. See you later.”

I watched her walk away. I had a feeling that Rishika knew exactly what I was thinking. I knew that the Luna question was going to be coming up more and more now that the Alpha thing was settled. People were ready for a bit of normalcy and were craving strong leadership to look to—especially at moments like this—so it made sense that they would want to see a Luna in place sooner rather than later. Right then, I saw Cali coming down the stairs, and I wondered if it was a sign. *Here I am thinking about Lunas, and then here she comes.*

I met her at the bottom of the stairs. “You look troubled. What’s wrong?”

She gave my hand a quick squeeze. “I don’t want to talk here,” she said. “Come on.”

She led the way to one of the studies, then shut and locked the door behind us.

“Is this about my initial decision regarding the rebel hunters? Me wanting to execute them?” Even though I’d agreed to release them to Iris, a part of me still believed that they deserved to die for what they’d done. It made me mad all over again, thinking about Violet suffering because of that asshole Zachery and his bruised ego.

Cali sighed. “No, I understand where you were coming from. I’m just glad that you listened to reason. I knew you would.”

I pulled her into a hug. “I vow to always listen to you, Cali. Even if I disagree, I’ll listen.” Cali relaxed against my chest and let me hold her for a long while. I sighed. “You know, I could stay like this forever.”

“Mm, me too.”

“Are you okay?” I still sensed that there was something wrong.

“I don’t know… I had a really strange dream just now. Seluna… did something.”

I pulled away to look down at her. “Oh, is that what’s bothering you? Don’t worry about that, it was just a dream—”

Cali pulled down her shirt to expose a faint red handprint—it looked like someone had grabbed her by the shoulder.

I looked at it, confused. “Wait, who did this to you?”

“That’s why I wanted to talk… I think it was Seluna.”

“That fake goddess? I don’t understand how that’s possible.”

Cali pulled her shirt back up and shrugged. “I don’t know, but I suspect that it has something to do with Lucian.”

“Lucian? What did he do to you? How did that handprint get on your shoulder?”

I hadn’t had a free moment to think about Lucian since the fight, and now I was back to considering whether or not he and the Vanguards were going to be yet another problem for the pack.

“I don’t know if he had anything to do with this,” Cali said, “but I intend to find out. I need to go back to the Vanguard palace, Greyson. Lucian eats, drinks, and breathes Seluna. I think he might be the only one who can help me.”

**Episode 2230**

XAVIER

I rolled over, expecting to pull Cali into my arms, but her side of the bed was cold and empty. I sat up. How long had I been sleeping? And where could she have gone? It was dark outside now, so I must have been out for at least an hour.

I swung my feet to the floor and got up, stretching my arms toward the ceiling and rolling my neck, trying to get the kinks out. I was still stiff from the fight, and all I really wanted to do was sleep with Cali in my arms. *Where the hell is she?*

I stopped in my room, took a quick shower, then went downstairs. Almost immediately, I spotted her coming out of one of the studies, and she wasn’t alone. *Of course. She’s with Greyson.* The jealousy rose in me like a tidal wave. No matter how many times I told myself that I wouldn’t let seeing them together get to me, it didn’t matter. It was like a punch to the gut each and every time. What was it going to take for me to get used to this? We’d been in this arrangement for a while now, and it still felt just as shitty as it had at the very beginning. I couldn’t keep going like this.

I took a moment to collect myself. I didn’t know how I was going to do it, but I absolutely had to get over the knee-jerk reaction I had every time I saw them together. Now that Greyson was Alpha, I knew that I’d be seeing even more of this—and Greyson definitely didn’t mind rubbing it in my face. I had to accept this was how things were going to be. For now. But later, once I’d challenged Greyson and taken over as Alpha, things would be different. I was itching to challenge Greyson to a Lupo Finale, but I knew I had to do it at the right moment, and right now wasn’t it.

Not for the first time, it occurred to me that now that Greyson was Alpha, he was going to want Cali as his Luna. I knew it because I would’ve wanted the same thing. *Thank you very much,* due destini*. Just one more thing that’ll have to be resolved.* On the plus side, it looked like Greyson and Cali were arguing. *No point in interrupting that.* I smiled to myself.

Violet had had a rough day, so I decided to go check in on her. Luckily, I hadn’t seen grave looks of despair on anyone’s faces, so I assumed that she was doing okay. I looked around a bit on the first floor before I found her lying on the couch in the living room with Charlie glued to her side. *That’s what mate bonds are all about.* I had to admit, they made a really cute couple. Charlie doted on Violet, and they always looked so happy when they were together. I was happy for them. Violet looked better—not one hundred percent, but a hell of a lot better than she had an hour or so ago. I thought back to those tense moments right after the fight, when the silver poisoning had been ravaging Violet’s body. It had been pretty touch and go there for a minute.

“Hey, Xavier. Violet was just asking about you! Stay here with her for a minute? I’m going to grab her some water,” Charlie said before bounding off to the kitchen.

“Hey, Violet, how are you doing? You get some rest? Are you in any pain?” I took a seat on the arm of the couch, and Violet looked up at me.

“I’m feeling a lot better. Thank you.” She paused. “I’m really sorry, Xavier. I know I was supposed to stay home during the fight, but the thought of my mate fighting my battles… It was too much.” She looked like she might be on the verge of tears.

“Don’t apologize, Violet. I get it. The things we feel for our mates can make us do all sorts of things. I’m just glad that you came out of it okay. Maybe next time, you’ll think twice, though?” I cared for Violet like family, and if Zachery had killed her, he would have been dead long before Iris had had the chance to intervene. I gave Violet’s hand a squeeze. “Get some rest,” I said as Charlie returned with her water.

Satisfied that Violet was indeed on the mend, I finally decided to make my way over to Cali and Greyson. They were lingering outside the study and still locked in tense conversation. Greyson looked almost relieved to see me as I approached, which made me instantly wary.

“Hey, I was looking for you,” he said. “I think we have a Lucian problem.”

“What? What did he do now?” It looked like I wasn’t going to get the calm, chill night with Cali that I’d been fantasizing about ever since I’d woken up to find that she wasn’t next to me.

“We think he might be responsible for this,” Cali said, pulling down the shoulder of her shirt. I was shocked to see a red handprint on her shoulder.

“What the fuck is that?” I was already seething. “Lucian did that?”

“We don’t really know. I had a dream where I was visited by Seluna, and when I woke up the handprint was there.”

“Seluna?” I said blankly. “That fake goddess that Lucian and his weird sister are obsessed with? I don’t get it—how did a dream cause that mark?”

The ceremony we’d seen at the Vanguard palace had been a snore, and I hadn’t thought for a second that Seluna was real, but now she was appearing in Cali’s dreams and clawing at her shoulder? What was really going on here?

“That’s what we’re trying to find out,” Greyson said.

“Well, I’m up for going back to pay Lucian a little visit.” I was already imagining all the things I could do to him to get him to talk. I wasn’t going to let him charm his way out of it this time. He was going to pay for the way he kept overstepping with my mate.

“That’s not going to help,” Cali said. “Besides, like I said, we don’t know for sure if he even has anything to do with it. Maybe I got hurt during the battle. It was pure chaos—a bunch of rebel hunters did pile on top of me at one point. Maybe I just didn’t notice that I had a bruise, or whatever this is, until I woke up. That could even be why I had that strange dream in the first place.”

“I don’t know, Cali,” I said. “I don’t like this. And I hate that you’re having these dreams, especially if they have anything to do with the moon prince.”

It was easy to go up against Lucian and his army of Vanguards in the flesh, but if he were infiltrating Cali’s dreams, how was I supposed to protect her then?

“Let’s remember, though, they’re just dreams,” Greyson said.

“Yes, but what if the dreams get worse? What if I’m under the influence of some kind of… moon magic? What if the next time I have one of those dreams, Seluna does more than leave handprints?”

“I’ll be damned if I’m going to let anyone lay a hand on you, Cali.” My anger was rising once again. I was tired of everyone trying to fuck with the Redwood pack. It seemed like every time we turned around, there was some asshole trying to encroach on our peace. It was getting tiring. *If I were Alpha, I’d put a stop to all this right now and make it so NO ONE would even think of testing the pack.* Of course, I didn’t dare say any of that. I knew it would just stress Cali out, anyway.

“I wish that we could go one fucking hour without a new crisis popping up,” I said instead.

“I wish the same thing,” Cali said. “But this is a big deal to me. If we nip this in the bud right now, we might be able to prevent something worse from happening down the line.”

I nodded slowly. “What do you mean by nipping it in the bud?”

“Cali wants to go back to the palace,” Greyson said. “By herself.”

“No fucking way!” Why was she always trying to go visit that guy by herself? How many close calls and awkward situations did she need to endure before she realized that Lucian was bad news and she needed to stay as far away from him as possible? “The Vanguards are not to be trusted. You’re not going back there, Cali. Period.”

“So you suggest I sit here and do nothing while this creepy goddess tries to attack me in my sleep?”

Greyson’s eyes trailed to the mark on Cali’s shoulder again. “I have to admit, she has a point.”

Greyson might’ve been the Alpha right now, but if he wasn’t going to offer any solutions, I would. “Fine. We loop in Lucian. But we’re not going to him,” I said, giving Cali a pointed look. “We invite him here. See how he likes playing by our rules on our own turf.”

**Episode 2231**

Xavier’s suggestion was the perfect compromise, but Greyson wasn’t quite sold on the idea.

“I don’t want any contact with Lucian unless it’s absolutely necessary,” he said. “I still can’t quite figure the guy out, and I don’t like how unpredictable he is. I think we should hold off on meeting with him until we’re a little clearer on his intentions.”

“I know that you’re being cautious, Greyson,” I said. “But don’t you see? Inviting him here makes perfect sense. We can set the rules, and we won’t have to worry about being kidnapped or drugged.” *And* I *won’t have to worry about Aysel throwing herself at Greyson.* “If we want to really know what he’s about, we need to get him in a situation where we’re in control.”

Greyson stood silently for a moment, mulling it over before he let out a huge sigh. “Fine. Let’s do it, but I need to discuss it with the pack first.”

I was pleased by his decision. He’d vowed that he would always listen to me, and he’d just proven it. I definitely took some pride in being able to talk an Alpha around to my point of view—especially since it showed how much Greyson respected my opinions.

“Perfect!” I said. “Once we get Lucian here on our terms, we’ll be able to find out exactly what he knows about Seluna and any magic she might have at her disposal.”

“We need to make it clear to Lucian that he’s to come alone. No guards—especially not that Andrei guy,” Xavier said.

“And definitely not his sister,” Greyson added. “She’s the last person I want to see, and to be honest, she makes me more uneasy than Lucian does—which is saying a lot.”

I certainly wasn’t about to argue that point. I was starting to get excited. “Maybe, under the right conditions, we’ll finally figure out what Lucian is really up to. Maybe he’ll apologize for being weird before, or maybe he really believes in this Seluna stuff and is just trying to spread the word, or… maybe since he’s the key, we’ll be able to figure everything out about Seluna and the dreams just by sitting down and having a normal conversation with him.”

As soon as the words tumbled out, I wished that I could take them back. Xavier and Greyson both pinned me to the spot with sharp stares.

“Wait, why is Lucian a key? Key to what?” Greyson asked.

“Oh… It’s nothing. Not a big deal, just something I’ve been toying with.”

“I’m not buying it.” Xavier arched his eyebrow at me and crossed his arms. “Out with it. What’s with the key stuff?”

It was clear that they weren’t going to let me off the hook, so I decided to come clean about what Seluna had said in my dream. “Well, there were a few details from my dreams that I failed to mention.”

“Like?” They both said in near unison.

“Like that Seluna came to me and said that Lucian was the key to finally figuring out more about the *due destini*—don’t look at me like that, I think it’s a good thing! If Lucian could bring the three of us some relief from this constant push and pull, wouldn’t it all be worth it?”

There were still so many unknowns about the *due destini*—and Greyson’s theory that the curse was broken had only served to confuse the entire thing even more. In my opinion, we needed all the additional info we could get, or who knew when this whole thing might get figured out?

“Maybe, but why didn’t you tell us that before?” Xavier asked.

“Well, dreams are complicated.” That wasn’t exactly the truth, but it wasn’t exactly a lie, either. “With everything going on—the rogue hunters and all that—I haven’t had a chance to sit down and tell you about it. That’s why I’m doing it now.” I felt more than a little guilty. Why hadn’t I just told them sooner? Actually, I knew why. Because they would worry—or worse yet, they’d overreact and complicate things. The last thing I wanted was for things to escalate. I’d just wanted some time to figure things out on my own. After all, they were *my* dreams. But now that those dreams were leaving physical marks on me, everything had changed, and the stakes were higher than before. I knew that I might be in over my head, and I was happy to have my mates by my side while I tried to get to the bottom of things with Lucian and this whole Seluna thing.

“So, he’s the key, huh?” Greyson said. He looked tired suddenly, like he was drained from trying to digest this newest bit of news.

“According to Seluna, and that’s if she’s even real to begin with,” Xavier said with an eyeroll. “What did she even mean by that? In my opinion, the only thing this guy’s the key to is more bullshit.” He snorted. “And even if Lucian *is* the key or whatever, do we really think he would even help us? Do we even *want* his help? What if this is all some elaborate scheme? We know what he’s capable of, and it’s not good.”

“That’s for sure. We can’t rule out the possibility that Lucian’s somehow managed to get into your head, Cali. Especially since I’m still not sold on the idea that Seluna’s even real,” Greyson said. “Maybe all these dreams are the lingering result of something he put in the food at the party, or maybe he has a witch on staff.”

I shuddered. “I sure the hell hope not. I don’t like the idea of Lucian doing any of those things, but somehow a witch being involved seems so much worse.”

“I wouldn’t put it past the guy,” Xavier said. “He’s a certified creeper.”

“Agreed. But let’s put it to rest for now. We can discuss our plan in the morning.” Greyson turned to look at me. “In the meantime, if you have any more of those dreams, if you get any more marks—anything—let me know.”

Torin popped his head in. “Dinner’s almost ready! Tom and I have prepared a feast worthy of a king!”

Torin winked at Greyson, and Xavier looked like he was about to pop a vein at the mere suggestion that Greyson was anything near a monarch.

“Torin, I can’t wait to dig in!” I said, breaking the tension. I was starving. I’d worked up an appetite from all that fighting. Greyson turned and headed toward the dining room, and I started to follow, but Xavier grabbed my arm and gently pulled me close.

“Cali, promise me that the next time you have one of those dreams, you’ll wake me? Don’t go running off.”

I could hear the hurt in his voice, and I wasn’t surprised that he was miffed about my leaving his side earlier. I’d just needed to clear my head.

“Aw, Xavier,” I said, “I didn’t want to wake you. You looked so peaceful, all snuggled under the covers.”

“I mean it, Cali. Next time, I don’t care how peaceful I look—wake me up.”

“Okay, I will.” I gave him a peck on the lips, and we both made our way to the dining room.

True to Torin’s word, a feast awaited us. My dad was standing beside my mother, beaming proudly at the spread he and Torin had thrown together so quickly. I could hardly believe how much food they’d cooked in such a short amount of time, but if anyone could work a miracle in the kitchen, it was my dad and Torin.

Everyone filed in with lots of *oohs* and *ahhs*, clearly upbeat and still running on adrenaline from the battle. I was happy to see Artemis and Rishika together, looking more in love than ever. I took a seat across from Lola, and Xavier and Greyson took seats on either side of me. For the first time in a while, I felt calm, even though we had the Lucian issue to deal with. It felt good to be here with everyone, preparing to break bread. I let out a deep breath as I took a look around the table. The pack had never looked more united, more together.

*Wait, where’s Charlie?*

I started to worry for a minute before I realized that he probably hadn’t wanted to leave Violet’s side until she was back on her feet.

Just as Torin stepped forward to announce all the dishes we would have the pleasure of eating tonight, Charlie came in.

“Sorry to interrupt, Torin, but I have a surprise for everyone.” Charlie stepped aside, and Violet entered. Everyone got to their feet and cheered as Charlie helped Violet to her seat.

“Looking good, Violet!” I called out over the clamor of similar statements being thrown Violet’s way. I couldn’t believe it. She looked so much better, and she was clearly feeling well enough to eat. Everyone quieted down and returned to their seats, except Greyson, who held up a glass.

“I propose a toast,” he began. “To the Redwood pack!”

Everyone raised their glasses—right as a thunderous boom shook the pack house.

**Episode 2232**

XAVIER

The blast shook everything in the house, knocking plates and glasses from the table and sending most of the pack crashing to the floor. I was the first on my feet. I glanced at Cali to make sure that she was okay.

“You good?” I asked her as she stood up and sat her chair upright. She had a dazed look on her face—like everyone else—but otherwise she looked fine.

“Yeah, I’m good. What the hell was that?” she asked, her eyes wide with fear.

“I don’t know, but we’re going to find out.”

Greyson and I immediately moved toward the source of the blast. It had come from the front of the house. *Has Shanna come back? Is this some kind of attack?* Everyone streamed out onto the porch. Artemis already had her crossbow at the ready, and Rishika was right by her side, ready to pounce at a moment’s notice.

“What the hell?” I muttered to myself. A whirlwind of smoke had cleared, revealing one of my cars rocking back and forth on its tires, as if it had just come to a sudden stop. The driver’s side door flew open, and out stepped Big Mac.

“You really need to get those brakes checked,” she grumbled at me. Kira, Marta, Lilac, Mrs. Smith, and a young woman I’d never seen before stepped out of the car.

“I can’t believe you’re back!” Cali said as she ran down off the porch to greet them.

“If you can just whoosh us like that, why did we drive to San Francisco in the first place?” Lilac asked.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Because I actually *like* driving, and we were going to have to get around San Francisco somehow. But this couldn’t wait—we had to get back here fast.” She trained her gaze on me and Greyson.

I took a deep breath and held it, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Greyson and I exchanged a look. *What couldn’t wait? What the hell is this about?*

Cali rushed up to Marta and pulled her into a quick hug. “So, I’m guessing that everything went well?”

“It did. It was scary as hell, and the judges were real hard-asses—lots of gavel banging and interrupting me to hurl questions. Typical judgey stuff. But then you should have seen it! I called them out and—”

“Enough about that, Marta—we have bigger fish to fry,” Big Mac interrupted. She pointed at the strange young woman. “Everyone meet Dani. Dani, meet the perpetually-in-deep-shit Redwood pack. Dani here was kidnapped by Silas,” Big Mac said.

*Well, what do you know, Silas is rearing his ugly head from beyond the grave once again.* I didn’t even know what to say to that. It was starting to feel like I was in a recurring nightmare. Silas? Really? *What the hell?* *Why can’t we be done with my stupid father, already?*

I shot a quick glance at Greyson. He looked as over it as I felt. We’d thought the saga of Silas had ended with the Letifer fight—and I didn’t even want to consider the possibility that he was back to fuck with us once again.

Dani gave a shy wave when the awkward silence stretched on for too long.

“Nice to meet you all,” she said in a small voice. She was standing by the car, clearly reluctant to move.

Deciding to break the ice, I went up to her. “Who are you exactly, and how the hell do you know our father?” When it came to Silas-related matters, it was best to get down to business as quickly as possible.

Marta appeared at Dani’s side. “It’s okay, Dani. Xavier just wants to know what happened.”

I could see that Dani was incredibly nervous, and since I knew Cali was watching, I decided that I needed to soften my approach.

“Take your time,” I added, giving her what I hoped was a kind smile for good measure.

“You’re Xavier Evers?” Dani asked, surprised. She looked me up in down and gave a look like she was impressed by what she was seeing.

Greyson came over. “And I’m his older brother, Greyson. So, how do you know our father?” At least Greyson and I were on the same page here. We wanted to know what ties this woman had to our father—immediately.

“Wow, I can’t believe this,” Dani said. “I thought Silas was making it all up. He was always ranting about you two—and another brother, Colton?”

“Yes, that sounds like Silas—always ranting about something or another. But you still haven’t answered us. How do you know our father?” I was getting impatient. Anyone who was associated with Silas was either a victim or an accomplice, and I needed to know which side this Dani person was on.

“Cut it out,” Big Mac said sharply. “You’re just going to freak her out, crowding her like a bunch of animals! I know it’s hard for you two to show your human side, but how about you give it a try for once?”

I stepped forward, my attention on Big Mac. It wasn’t her place to tell me how to act, especially when it came to anything concerning Silas. Sure, Dani looked all innocent and shy, but I didn’t know her. She could be putting it on for all I knew, so a big part of me didn’t give a shit if we freaked her out or not. Hearing anyone utter Silas’s name freaked *me* out, and the sooner we got to the bottom of this, the better.

Cali took my hand. “Go easy, Xavier. You’re scaring her.”

Greyson stepped forward, adjusting his posture so that he appeared a little less threatening. “I know all of this might be overwhelming, but if you have information about our father, we need to know it.”

I could hear the edge in Greyson’s voice, even if no one else could.

“See, that’s the way to do it,” Cali said to me. “She’s already scared out of her wits; what’s the use in scaring her further? Haven’t you ever heard the saying that you catch more flies with honey?”

I gritted my teeth and gave Cali a tight nod. *It’s just like Greyson to step up and act like the great savior Alpha. And of course Cali’s eating it up.* I wanted to mention how Greyson was better at faking than I was, but I decided against it. Now wasn’t the time to throw barbs—it would probably only win Greyson more sensitivity points in Cali’s eyes.

“I’m guessing I don’t have to tell you that Silas is a dangerous man.” Greyson paused to correct himself. “*Was* a dangerous man.”

Dani looked stunned. “What? Is Silas *dead*?”

Greyson arched an eyebrow as his look of astonishment gave way to relief. “Yes, he’s dead.”

Tears sprang into Dani’s eyes, and she turned away from us all. If she started crying right now, I was only going to get even more suspicious. No one in their right mind would cry over Silas’s death. His demise was something to be celebrated.

“How did you come to know our father?” Greyson pressed.

“I… I wish I hadn’t known him at all. I definitely didn’t *want* to know him, but I had no choice in the matter. He kidnapped me one night while I was out with some friends. That was the scariest night of my life, hands down. He was saying all this stuff—that he needed me for his big plans. I had no intention of being part of anything to do with him, and I managed to escape. But I got lost and ended up with the witch council for using unsanctioned magic that I didn’t even know I had.”

“Magic?” I said to no one in particular. “Great. She’s a witch.”

Cali glared at me, and Big Mac didn’t look too pleased with me either.

“What, you have a problem with witches? Because you didn’t seem to have a problem all those times you came crying to me for help,” Big Mac hissed.

“No one’s saying that witches don’t have their uses,” I replied. “Sometimes.”

Big Mac narrowed her eyes at me and balled her hands into fists, just before Greyson wedged himself between us. “No one has a problem with anyone. We’re just trying to sort out the facts,” he said.

I pulled Greyson to the side. “What the hell?” I whispered. “Can we even trust this sob story?”

“Stop it, Xavier,” Cali said. “She looks really freaked out. I believe her, and why would she bother lying? Silas is dead, anyway, so what could she stand to gain?” She looked to Marta. “Can you vouch for her?”

Marta shrugged. “I mean I only just met her myself, but we’re going to be mentored together anyway—so yes, I’ll vouch for her.”

“Well then, you’re responsible for her,” I told Marta.

“Sorry, brother, but I think that’s my call to make, seeing as I’m the Alpha around here,” Greyson said.

*Power hungry bastard.* “Fine then, ‘Alpha around here’—does the witch stay, or does she go?”

**Episode 2233**

GREYSON

I looked at Dani, taking in how afraid—and broken—she looked. I knew all too well what it was like to be traumatized by my father. There was no one better than Silas at breaking a person into a million little pieces. I could see it all as clear as day on Dani’s face. There was no doubt in my mind that she was scarred for life from whatever Silas had done to her.

I couldn’t bring myself to look at Cali. I knew what she was thinking. I gave Xavier a look, noting that he still looked suspicious of the woman. I hated that he was already pushing back on the Alpha thing. I’d foolishly thought that we’d be able to get through one night without conflict. That had been naïve, to say the least. It was clear that no matter what I did for my brother, and no matter how many times I proved myself, he would always think that he was the better fit for Alpha. It didn’t seem like I’d ever be able to convince him otherwise, but it really didn’t matter what he thought. I was the Alpha, and that was that—and I planned to prove how much of an Alpha I was when he decided to challenge me. When, not if.

*You can’t just send her away*, Cali mind linked suddenly, snapping me back to the matter at hand.

*I know that—I’ve been in her shoes. I escaped from Silas, too*, I replied.

Even now, knowing that my father was dead, I was still haunted by awful memories of him that only grew more vivid as the years passed. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn’t forget them. I could only imagine what Dani was going through right now, and how it had to feel, being face-to-face with the sons of the man who’d hurt her. I felt like we needed to do our part to help her cope with her own memories of what my father had done to her.

“Dani, you’re welcome to stay,” I said. There was an audible sigh of relief from Marta. “Marta, you’ll have to look after her, help her adjust, teach her the house rules—all of that.”

Marta nodded quickly. “You got it, Greyson.”

“Yes, and you must be hungry from your long… whoosh?” Cali wrapped an arm around Dani’s shoulders and led her inside.

I couldn’t help but smile. Cali was such a caring, loving mate. If it hadn’t been for her, Xavier and I might have frightened the poor girl to death. I was sorry that we’d been so hard on her, but when it came to Silas, we all tended to get a little intense.

The other pack members turned and went back inside, muttering amongst themselves. I watched them go, trying to pick up on the general consensus about my decision to let Dani stay. It didn’t seem to be overwhelmingly negative from the vibe I was getting.

“We need more seats at the table!” I heard Cali call out from inside the house.

“Coming right up!” Torin replied cheerfully.

Violet was waiting for Lilac on the porch, leaning on Charlie for support. She and Lilac hugged, and then they went inside, too. I felt a pang in my chest as I thought about what Violet had just gone through, and I made a promise to myself that I would do whatever it took to keep anything like that from happening again. It was up to me to make sure that the pack was safe, and I would do anything to protect them.

I was about to head back inside myself when Xavier stopped me.

“You know absolutely nothing about that witch, and yet you welcome her into the pack house like a long-lost friend? You’re going soft, brother.” Xavier shook his head and pinned me to the spot as his judgement washed over me in waves.

I shook it off and laughed. I wasn’t going to let Xavier get to me. Not tonight. I swung an arm around my brother’s shoulders. “Tell you what—how about we bury the hatchet long enough to get through dinner?”

Xavier wasn’t swayed, unwilling to take the high road, as usual. “I don’t get you, Greyson. You’re always going on and on about doing what’s best for the pack, but is inviting yet another witch—a witch we know nothing about—into the pack house what’s best for us?”

I shrugged. “It could be. Think about it—we could be the first pack in history to have our own coven of witches. Who’d want to take us on if that were the case?”

Redwood werewolves were formidable on our own, for sure, but with the assistance of witches, we would be unstoppable. I thought back to how useful Big Mac and Kira had been during our battle with Letifer. They were an asset, no matter what Xavier thought. I doubted that he even had a strong opinion about Dani being a witch, either way. He just wanted to give me a hard time, wanted me to second guess myself. But I wasn’t going to do that. I’d made the right decision, and I was confident in that.

Xavier nodded slightly, his gaze a mix of aggressive and appraising. “Okay. Well, I hope you’re right. If you’re not, this could backfire spectacularly.”

“I’m sure you’d love that,” I said. “Anything that’ll make you look better. Right, little brother?”

Xavier’s eyes flashed, and he shoved my arm away. “Wrong. I only want what’s best for the pack, too.”

He turned and went inside, letting the screen door slam behind him.

I watched him go, deciding to hang back a moment to take in the quiet. I was troubled. Not by Xavier, but by memories of a father who, even in death, maintained a hold on me. Silas’s name was the last thing I’d expected to hear from such an innocent-looking young woman—a stranger, someone I hadn’t even known existed until a few moments ago. I could only imagine the horrors that she’d endured at Silas’s hand.

The door opened, drawing my attention. It was Sabine.

“How are you holding up?” she asked.

“I’m starving—how about that feast?” I managed a small smile.

“I know that even the mention of Silas upsets me—and I imagine that it’s no different for you.”

“I admit it was a shock, but I’ll deal with it. I’ve been dealing with it for years.”

She put a hand on my shoulder. “It’s okay to talk about it. You don’t have to be so strong all the time, especially not with me. I’ll always listen—whenever you’re ready.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that. Now go inside and eat while the food’s hot. You know Torin hates it when we let his food get cold. I’ll be in shortly.”

She kissed me on the cheek and went inside. I was a little stunned. I knew that we’d both been trying to close the gap between us—a gap created by Silas. He’d not only damaged us both, but also our relationship. I brought my fingers up to the spot where she’d kissed me. I wondered if this was the part of the destiny alluded to by the three witches. Not only being able to be with Cali, but accepting who I was and embracing a mother I’d never known I had—or wanted.

I took a deep breath of the crisp night air. It felt good, and for the first time since Dani had arrived, I relaxed a little. Feeling wistful, I walked behind the house just as the moon slid out from behind a cloud.

*What’s that?* I saw something fluttering in the wind a few paces ahead of me. *Is that a butterfly? A bird? At this time of night?*

I approached it and grabbed the thing out of thin air.

“A playing card?” I murmured.

No, not quite. The card was pale white and glinting. It had a dark orb on it that read *NEW MOON*.

*Okay, this is weird.* It only got weirder when I realized that there was another card a few yards away from me, floating in the air. I plucked it out of the air and turned it over in my hand. It was a crescent moon card. I saw another and chased after it. *This one’s got a full moon on it. Who the hell dropped these here?* I turned when I heard a sound—a deck of cards shuffling. I squinted ahead of me into the night and spotted Aysel, standing right where the woods began. Her long, graceful fingers danced as she shuffled the deck of cards over and over, her eyes on me.

“Looks like the Redwood pack has had a few fateful run-ins recently.” She gave me a slight smile and cocked her head to the side. “Want me to read your fortune?” she asked as she fanned the cards out in her hands.

**Episode 2234**

VIOLET

“I’m never letting you go!” Lilac said. He hugged me even tighter as we made our way back to the dining room.

“I’m so happy you’re back safe and sound, Lilac,” I said. “You’ll have to tell me all about the trial! Was it as intense as I imagined?”

Lilac sighed. “Yeah, for sure. It was stressful. The whole time I was so worried that the witch council might send me back to the spirit world, and that I’d never see you again.”

I shuddered at the thought. Being sent back to the spirit world sounded way more soothing than what it really meant—a death sentence. I couldn’t imagine losing him again. “Well you’re back now. That’s all that matters. Let’s go eat!”

“Hold on,” Lilac said, stopping. “Why are you limping?”

I hesitated, but I knew I couldn’t keep the truth from my twin. “I may have been injured during a fight with the rebel hunters.”

“Either you *were* injured or you weren’t. Which is it?”

“I was injured, okay? But don’t worry—I’m on the mend, I’m all good!” I hustled toward the dining room and tried pulling Lilac along with me, but he wouldn’t budge.

“I don’t understand. Shouldn’t you have healed by now? How long ago was the fight?”

I stopped and looked away from him. “It was a silver wound.”

Lilac’s eyes went wide. “Oh my god, Violet! Way to bury the lede!” Lilac’s voice was rising more and more with every word. He was beside himself. “Did they treat it properly? Have you been staying off it? Oh my gosh, why are you even up walking around right now? You should be in bed! Should we have Big Mac take a look at it?”

“Lilac, please,” I said. I put my hands on his shoulders and looked him in the eyes. “I appreciate your concern, but between Torin’s healing power and his and Cali’s Fae blood in my system, I’ll be fine.”

I started toward the dining room again, but Lilac held fast.

“Who did it?” His expression had grown dark and turbulent.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s taken care of.”

“No, it does matter. Who did this to you?”

I was unnerved by Lilac’s reaction. I’d never seen him quite like this before. He was hardly like the two Alphas—he veered more toward the sweet but annoying side of the spectrum. I understood his concern, his anger, but I didn’t want him going out and trying to get some sort of revenge. He watched too many action movies and might have gotten some ideas.

“I promise, it’s fine. The culprit is already being dealt with.” I looked toward the dining room. “So, how about some food?”

I hurried away from Lilac before he could push any further and found Charlie lingering near the dinner table, probably waiting for me.

“Hey, you good? Can I get you anything?” he asked as soon as he saw me.

“I’ll let you know. I just want to enjoy this moment and forget about Zachery and Shanna.” I turned to see that Lilac had finally made his way into the dining room and had taken a seat next to Marta. Hopefully, being back with her and the pack would keep him from pursuing anything even resembling revenge against Zachery.

As everyone took their seats, Torin moved to stand at the head of the table. “Everyone get settled. We’ve got some really good food for you today,” he said. “I propose that we celebrate today’s victory, and I’m hoping that we won’t have to celebrate any more for a long, long time!”

“Here, here!” Ravi called out, lifting his glass.

“May peace fall upon the Redwood pack!” Torin finished, raising his glass.

“Cheers!” everyone said, clinking their glasses together.

Xavier came up to me as forks started clanking against plates, everyone excited to dig in after the long day we’d all had. “You doing okay?”

“*Yes*,” I said, throwing my head back and rolling my eyes. “I’ll be even better once everyone stops checking on me! I’m a werewolf, for fuck’s sake. I’m strong.”

Xavier laughed and held up his hands. “Got it, got it, no prob.”

“Really, thank you, I’m fine,” I said as Xavier returned to his seat. I didn’t want to hurt his feelings, though when it came to Xavier, I wasn’t really sure if that was possible. I just hated being the center of attention—though I didn’t mind having Charlie attending to my every need. He was a sexy caretaker.

“So, what do you think of the new girl, Dani?” Charlie asked between bites.

“I feel sorry for her,” I said. I snuck at a glance at her where she sat next to Marta. She looked majorly shaken up and was barely touching her food. “Maybe we should go talk to her, make her feel more welcome?”

“That’s a good idea,” Charlie said. He shoveled another huge mouthful of food into his mouth and then gave me a sheepish look. “I’m sorry, this is all so good.”

We got up and made our way over to Dani. “Hi, Dani. I’m Violet, and this is Charlie.”

Dani looked up at us, but didn’t say anything.

“Is the food okay?”

“Yes.”

“Can I get you anything else?”

“No.”

“Um… Do you like the pack house?” I asked lamely.

“Yes.”

*Maybe we should give her some space?* Charlie mind linked.

*Yeah, maybe that’s a good idea. This is like pulling teeth*, I replied.

“Well, Dani,” I said, “I’m glad that you’re here with us. Feel free to ask me anything if you have any questions.”

“Thanks,” Dani said before training her attention back on her plate of untouched food.

Charlie and I scurried back to our seats.

“Talk about a fish out of water,” I whispered to him.

Dinner continued in a joyous, slightly rambunctious fashion. Before long, people began to relay their heroics on the battlefield.

“… and when I knocked their heads together, they both just fell on the ground like two sacks of lame potatoes,” Jay said before shoving a mound of potatoes in his mouth. A chorus of cheers and whoops rang out across the table. “Then I shifted and tore into them while they were rolling around on the ground. Game over. Then I shifted back *again* and caught another pair of them by surprise and knocked *their* heads together.”

“That’s his go-to move—he calls it the head smasher,” Lola added as she cast a dreamy look at Jay.

“Do you mind if I head upstairs?” I asked Charlie.

I was feeling tired, and I really wasn’t in the mood to hear about the glories of battle. Without a moment’s hesitation, Charlie was on his feet. He took my hand and helped me up from my chair.

“Do you want me to carry you?”

“No, don’t overdo it,” I said, playfully swatting his hand away. “I can walk, though I do like the idea.”

“Thank you, guys, the food was amazing, but I think I’m going to get my girl here up to bed,” Charlie said to Torin and Tom.

“Yeah, thanks, you two. It was delicious,” I added.

“Our pleasure. Leave the dishes—no champion of the Redwood pack busses their own plates today!” Torin said with a big smile.

“You’re the best, Torin,” I called over my shoulder as Charlie led me away from the raucous dinner.

Once we were upstairs in my room, Charlie pulled me close, surprising me. “I was really worried I was going to lose you today. You looked so sick…” He trailed off and looked away.

I placed a finger on his chin and turned him back to face me. “I understand. I would’ve felt the same way if you’d gotten injured. But we don’t have to worry about that anymore.” I closed my eyes as we drifted into a kiss, but I pulled away before it deepened. “I hate to bring this up, Charlie, but it’s something I’ve been thinking about.”

“What?”

“Do you think I was right? About sparing Zachery’s life?”

Charlie hesitated and dropped his gaze. When he looked back up at me, his eyes were on fire. “I wanted to kill him, right then and there.” He sighed, his gaze cooling off a bit. “But yes, I think you were right. Zachery was, once upon a time, a good friend. That has to count for something.”

“I agree,” I said.

I leaned in and pressed my lips to his. It was so easy to get lost in the warm softness of his lips, and being so close to Charlie made everything feel like it was going to be okay. I winced a little as I put pressure on my leg.

“Hey, are you okay?” Charlie pulled away, his face a mask of concern. He scooped me up and carried me to the bed. “Never you mind. Consider me your personal Uber ride until you’re back on your feet.”

Charlie crawled on top of me, running a cool hand up my shirt as he peppered kisses all over my face and neck. I arched against him when his lips found mine again, and I sighed as he slid his tongue into my mouth, urging me closer to what I knew we were both anticipating.

I wrapped my good leg around his waist and let him take the lead. I was so happy to be back with Charlie. I felt so safe in his arms, like nothing in the world could come near me. Every time he kissed me, a bolt of electricity raced through my body, making me feel like I could take on anything—even another wave of rebel hunters.

Charlie reached up to push a tendril of hair out of my face and gazed into my eyes.

“Let me help you forget about today,” Charlie said, his eyelids heavy. He kissed me harder this time as his hands slid down to cup my bottom.

I kissed him back, matching his intensity and losing myself in the feel of his fingers sliding across the heat of my skin.

“I think that sounds like an amazing idea,” I said, lying back and closing my eyes.

**Episode 2235**

All throughout dinner, I kept checking on Dani. She was a bag of nerves, and she hadn’t touched her food except to push it around on her plate with her fork. I really felt for her, and I was glad when several pack members—Violet, Charlie, and even Xavier—went out of their way to talk to her. I couldn’t help but notice that she’d shrunk away a little when Xavier had approached, but that was to be expected after the way he’d treated her when she first arrived. Luckily, Xavier had spoken to her nicely, and though she’d barely said a word to him, she’d looked a little less afraid of him by the time he’d left her side.

“Would you mind helping me make Dani more comfortable?” Marta asked as dinner wrapped up. “I just want to help her settle in. Since you know the pack house, and you’re a girl, it might make things a little easier for her. I’d do it myself, but honestly, after that trial and being magicked across the country by Big Mac, I want nothing more than to crawl into bed.”

“Marta, of course! I’m happy to. Don’t worry, I’ll roll out the red carpet.” I leaned around Marta to look at Dani. “Are you ready to see your room?”

“Sure,” Dani replied, pushing her plate away. She seemed relieved to be leaving the dinner, which had grown more and more rowdy as the night wore on. Lola and Jay were making out, Sage and Zainab were wrestling and kept bumping into the table, and Ravi and Artemis were comparing weapons. It was a lot.

“Cool, follow me,” I said, getting up from the table and leading the way toward the stairs.

As we went, I gave Dani a quick tour. I showed her the best places to hide if she needed a moment to herself, pointed out all the bathrooms, and showed her the places she should avoid if she didn’t want to annoy Xavier. “You know some people, they like having spaces that they don’t want to share with anyone else—and Xavier is definitely that guy.”

“Noted. Wow, I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a big house,” Dani said, taking it all in.

I laughed. “Well, the pack is always growing, and we need lots of room.” I paused for a moment, trying to make sure I chose my next words carefully. Dani was more relaxed than she’d been earlier, and I didn’t want to scare her back into her proverbial shell. “I know that this must be quite a shock for you, and it must be hard being away from your family.”

Dani sighed. “Yes, I miss my sister most of all.”

I thought about how she had to be feeling right now. I thought about Artemis, and how she’d been taken away by Letifer. Being separated from your family was one thing, but there was a special bond between sisters, and I’d learned to appreciate that. My connection with Lola was similar. She was like a sister to me, and I couldn’t imagine being apart from her for very long.

I led Dani upstairs to one of the spare rooms and opened the door. I clicked on the light.

“I hope this’ll be comfortable for you.” I could see the answer in Dani’s eyes. I figured she hadn’t had a chance to stay in too many comfortable places, if she’d been on the run from Silas. “So, you mentioned your sister before. Would you like for me to try to get in touch with her?”

Dani shook her head and looked at the floor. “I’m not sure if it’s worth it. Every time I try, there’s always some kind of interference.”

I looked at her, confused. “You mean like a bad connection or something?”

“I’m not really sure,” Dani replied.

I wasn’t certain, but I thought I sensed something like fear in Dani, as if she were afraid to call. “Well, I could try to give her a call. Maybe the bad connection has something to do with your phone? I get pretty good reception here on my cell.”

“Okay,” Dani said, before giving me the number.

I dialed it and put the phone on speaker. The phone rang a few times before a voice sparked to life on the other end. “Hello?”

“Hi, is this Tabitha?” I said. Dani broke into a smile, the first I’d seen on her face since meeting her.

“Who is this?” asked the voice on the other end.

“It’s me, Dani!”

It sounded like there was a response, but whatever it was crackled out into white noise. *Weird.* I ended the call and tried again. This time, the phone rang only once before a loud blast of white noise forced me to hang up. I couldn’t figure it out. My phone had never done that before.

“See? That’s what always happens.” Dani was clearly dejected, and I felt kind of bad for urging her to call in the first place. “Even the text messages I send come back as unread or undelivered.”

“That’s so strange. There has to be some sort of explanation… Maybe we can go to the phone store tomorrow and see if they can help us get to the bottom of it.”

Dani looked down at her feet. “Do you think it could be magic?” she whispered.

“I hadn’t thought of that—I mean I’ve seen my share of weird magic since I joined the pack, so anything’s possible. But don’t worry, we’ll figure it out. We’ve got some witches here who are pretty handy with spells and stuff. But in the meantime, you should get some rest.”

“Thanks a lot—for everything.”

“Don’t mention it,” I said as I left the room, closing the door behind me.

Xavier was standing in the hallway, waiting for me.

“So, I suppose you were helping our new guest settle in?”

I couldn’t ignore the hint of sarcasm in his voice, though I doubted he was trying to hide it. “What do you expect me to do, Xavier?”

“Look, I understand that you want to help, but you need to be careful. That girl is a stranger. We know absolutely nothing about her.”

“Oh, come on. What, you afraid of her or something? She’s like a hundred pounds soaking wet and looks like she wouldn’t hurt a fly. She’s just a scared girl—and clearly lonely, too.”

“Give me a break. For all we know, her mousy demeanor is an act. She was with my father after all—that’s enough to give me pause right there.”

“Yes, but he held her against her will.”

Xavier snorted. “We only have her word on that. Look, Cali, you know I love how nurturing you are. Your empathy and your desire to always see the best in people—those are a few of my favorite things about you. But I just want you to be careful. When it comes to my father—and anyone he associates with—you can just never be too sure. I heard her story and all, but the whole thing could be a trick. You saw what Silas was capable of, right? He was always up to something. He would appear in the most unexpected places, and align himself with the last people you’d think.”

I looked at him, deciding how best to answer. I knew that he was just being protective, but sometimes it just rubbed me the wrong way. I didn’t believe in living life suspicious of everyone and everything. I liked to think that it was better to give people the benefit of the doubt—until they proved you wrong. No matter how many warnings Xavier gave, I just couldn’t picture Dani as some wolf in sheep’s clothing. It just didn’t seem possible.

“Xavier, I’ve seen you be caring before—you’ve certainly been that with me. Why can’t you extend that to a girl like Dani? She’s out here all alone and defenseless, and she needs our help. Why can’t you just take it at face value and give her a break?”

Xavier shook his head. “Sorry, but I’m just more selective—definitely a hell of a lot more so than Greyson. The things I’ve seen, the types of people I’ve met in my life… There is some dark shit out there, and even darker people. Even people you think you can trust can turn on you at the drop of a hat, and people aren’t always who they appear to be. I know you don’t want to believe that, but that’s just the way I view the world, and honestly, it hasn’t steered me wrong yet.”

“I get it, but Marta vouched for her, and I really think she is who she says she is. Don’t you trust *my* judgement?”

Xavier just looked at me. “Listen, this isn’t about your judgement, this is about us needing to watch our backs more than ever before. I’m sorry, but I just think that Greyson believed her story a little too quickly. Hasn’t he ever heard of checking someone out before bringing them into the fold? He’s the Alpha now—he needs to use his head.”

I shot him a look. I wasn’t touching that. He was trying to bash Greyson, and I was in no mood to hear it. Then, I suddenly realized something.

“Greyson—where is he? He never came back to dinner! Did something happen?”

**Episode 2236**

GREYSON

My hackles were way up. I should’ve known that the floating cards had something to do with Aysel. They’d had Vanguard hijinks written all over them, with all that moon-related imagery. These people were obsessed.

“What the hell are you doing here, Aysel?” I did a quick scan of the woods behind her, looking for any other surprises that might have come with her. As far as I could see, we were alone, though that didn’t make me feel any better.

Aysel simply looked at me, playing it cool and coy as she shuffled her cards. “Didn’t your little human come to the Vanguard pack for help recently? You know, the one who pretended to be a Luna?” She flashed a sly smile.

“I’m not discussing Cali with you. Why are you here?”

“I did what any *real* wolf would do when she hears her future mate’s pack is in trouble—I raced over to see what the fuss was about.” She glided over to me, her skin shining in the moonlight.

“Future mate? Are you really still going on about that? I thought I made it clear that I wasn’t interested. I’m taken, no matter how hard you try to ignore that fact.” She was starting to remind me of Ava—never taking a hint and going to great lengths to express her attraction to me. Like Ava, she just wouldn’t take no for an answer. It was almost like she liked being rejected over and over again. I felt sorry for Xavier, now that I knew exactly how it felt to be chased and damn near stalked by someone you didn’t want to give the time of day.

Well, I *almost* felt sorry for him.

“A girl can hope, can’t she? We did share a kiss under Seluna.” Aysel glanced toward the pack house as a cheer rose up from inside. I followed her gaze and could just make out the swell of people still gathered in the dining room. “Hmm. It looks like you and your pack handled the hunter problem just fine. Better than fine. But I’m not surprised.” She was circling me now, a seductive glint in her eye. “I knew that you were a capable Alpha the moment I laid eyes on you.” She stopped and stepped close, so that her lips were nearly touching my ear. “You’re the kind of Alpha who needs a capable Luna. A strong, beautiful, confident woman who knows what it means to be a force to be reckoned with at her Alpha’s side.”

I grabbed her by the shoulders and held her at arm’s length. “What the hell do you want?”

She looked down at my hands and smiled. “Such nice, strong hands.” She ran a finger lightly along my knuckles, and I flinched away. “I’m sure they know how to do a lot of things.”

“Get to the point.”

“I already told you—do you want your fortune told?” She held the deck of cards out in front of her, and a few cards slid from the top of the deck, rose up into the air, and spun around in front of my face before drifting back down to rejoin her deck.

“I’ve had enough of your games. You’re on Redwood property, and your brother isn’t here for you to hide behind. You should take whatever game you’re playing and go.”

She smiled and glanced toward the sky, as if drawing power from the moon as it appeared again from behind the clouds. “I think you misunderstand, Greyson. I have no need to play games. I simply get what I want. And I want you. It’s in the cards.” She drew a card and held it up. It was the Lovers card. She smiled. “And it seems that I’ll have you.”

I glowered at her, my patience gone. It was taking everything I had not to grab her and toss her back into the woods where she’d come from. I wanted to be inside with my pack, celebrating our victory and solidifying our bond, not out here fighting a battle of wits with a woman who gave the word persistent a new meaning.

“I’ve had enough of your bullshit, Aysel,” I said.

Between Aysel and her tarot cards and Cali’s strange dreams, this Vanguard moon crap had to stop. It had turned from a peculiar annoyance to an aggressive nuisance, and I was ready for it to be over. A part of me would’ve preferred an all-out battle with the Vanguard pack to whatever the hell this was.

“Listen. I’m going to give you five seconds to get the hell out of my territory.” I purposely left out what I would do to her after that five seconds was up, not wanting to stoke the fire, but also unsure of what I actually planned to do if she didn’t leave.

Aysel’s eyes darkened. “My brother won’t take kindly to this.”

“I doubt Lucian would be pleased to hear that his sister was here trampling over his own attempts at diplomacy with other packs, either.”

Aysel held out the card, but I didn’t even bother looking at it. “I wonder what happened to *your* so-called diplomacy, Greyson, because I’m certainly not feeling it.”

She pouted just as the moon slid back behind the clouds, shrouding her face in shadows.

“I don’t care what you do or don’t feel, Aysel. How many times do I need to make that clear before you get it?”

“Fine, I’ll go. For now. But we will see each other again, Greyson. Fate is funny that way. I think you understand more than most the lengths one is willing to go to, in order to change fate to suit one’s own desires.”

I was thrown. *How the hell does she know anything about that?* I couldn’t see her expression in the darkness, and a shred of unease slipped into my stomach.

Aysel kissed the card and tore it half before slipping one half into my pocket.

I caught her hand and flung it away. “Get out of here! I mean it!”

Without another word, Aysel turned away and headed into the woods. I watched her bound off, my head spinning and my throat dry. Even as I made my way back to the pack house, I could smell her scent. It was so strong that I felt like it was going to choke me. It brought back memories of when we’d kissed at the Vanguard palace. I shivered.

*Big mistake.*

It was clear that Aysel wasn’t going away, and she was turning into a problem that I was going to have to deal with, one way or another. Why did everything have to be so hard? Why couldn’t she just listen to me? I didn’t get it. I would never pursue a person who’d made it clear that they wanted nothing to do with me. *What more do I have to do to get her to back the fuck off?* The obvious way would only bring the entire wrath of the Vanguard pack crashing down on us, and after everything we’d been through, I wasn’t interested in bringing that sort of trouble to our doorstep if it could be avoided.

*But can it be avoided?* *And what the hell did she mean by that last comment, about changing fate?*

I turned back and peered into the woods to make sure that she was really gone. She’d unnerved me, and I hated that. Despite my displeasure at seeing her, she’d gotten to me. Something about the Vanguard pack always managed to get under my skin—it was worse than naked aggression.

I heard my name being called, and I turned to see Cali coming out onto the porch. After that weird encounter with Aysel, seeing Cali was like a breath of fresh air. I jogged over to her as she bounded down the porch steps to meet me.

“I was so worried,” she said. “Why didn’t you come in for dinner?”

I wanted to pick her up and squeeze her tight, as if that would erase the sour memory of Aysel, but my fresh air turned stale as Xavier appeared right behind her. It wasn’t like I could pick her up and spin her around in my arms now—not while Xavier was lurking in the background, staring daggers at me. I’d had enough awkwardness for one night.

Cali continued. “Why are you out here all by yourself?”

I paused. I didn’t want to worry Cali, but I also didn’t want to lie. “I was out here chasing Aysel away.”

Xavier sneered. “Aysel?”

“What the hell was she doing here?” Cali asked. “Sniffing around you, as usual?”

“More or less, though I’m not entirely sure what she wanted. She was probably just trying to stir up trouble, as usual,” I said, deciding not to go into detail just yet. I was going to tell them everything, but I was still processing it all myself. “She and her brother have a penchant for kicking up dust. I’m sure they get off on it.”

Even as I spoke, I was busy replaying in my mind what Aysel had said about fate.

*Does she somehow know about the deal I made with the witches? And if she does, just what is her endgame?*

**Episode 2237**

I looked around in alarm. Suddenly, the woods seemed darker and the night seemed a little creepier. I didn’t like the thought of Asyel lurking around out there, especially when I knew she wasn’t my biggest fan. “Are you sure she’s actually gone?”

“I am—I double-checked. Believe me, I don’t trust her any more than you do.”

“Good.” I was relieved, but I sensed that Greyson was a bit more worried than he was letting on. “Did she say anything about why she was here?”

“No, it was just the usual.” Greyson pinched the bridge of his nose. “Rambling on about getting what she wants.” He turned away from me and gazed out at the woods, as if lost in thought.

*Him.* I couldn’t forget how I’d felt when Greyson had told me that he’d kissed her. Well, when *she’d* kissed *him*. Since the party Aysel had probably developed more than a crush on him, and I didn’t like it. At all. A woman like Aysel was used to getting what she wanted, and I knew that for someone like her, not being able to get the object of her desire only increased her longing.

“I wonder if we should pay the moon prince another visit and set some rules. Aysel can’t just be popping up here unannounced, and neither should he. I haven’t forgotten about the little love note he delivered,” Xavier said.

“I’m not sure about that,” Greyson said, “but I do want to make it clear that I don’t want anyone from our pack going off to the Vanguard pack without my explicit permission.”

Greyson gave me a pointed look, and I nodded and looked away. I could tell that he was still upset that Xavier and I had gone to visit the Vanguards the other day without him knowing. I started to remind him that I was an adult and could go wherever I wanted, whenever I pleased, but I knew that it wasn’t the right time.

Besides, Greyson was right. The Vanguard pack was unpredictable, and any interactions we had with them going forward needed to be calculated and strategic—especially when it came to Aysel. She was definitely playing a game that we weren’t used to, and we needed to be smart about how we dealt with her going forward.

Xavier snorted. “It’s obvious that the Vanguard pack thinks we’re weak.” He had that look in his eye, the same one that had been there earlier when he’d tried to insult Greyson over not being more vigilant about allowing Dani in the house.

“I don’t see why. We just defeated the hunters, and we put an end to the whole co-Alpha thing,” I said. Xavier’s jaw tightened, and I instantly wished that I hadn’t spoken, but it needed to be said. It was the truth, and it had been a strategic decision that we’d made for the good of the pack. “As far as I’m concerned, we’re as strong as ever. I felt it when we were in there having dinner. The pack is on the same page, we’re united, and we’re still riding high on our victory against the hunters. And don’t even get me started on how we kicked Letifer’s ass. What more does the Vanguard pack expect from us?”

“Aysel said something else actually,” Greyson began. “She made a comment about you being a fake Luna, Cali, so it’s obvious that the Redwoods haven’t checked all the boxes quite yet in the Vanguard’s eyes.”

“So, what do you want to do about that?” Xavier asked.

It was a loaded question, and I could feel the tension between the brothers rise. Xavier had shifted his stance, and his jaw was set.

Greyson matched his brother’s posture and crossed his arms. “I’m not suggesting anything just yet, just pointing out that the Redwood pack doesn’t have a Luna.” He sent a sly glance my way.

I knew exactly what wasn’t being said—Greyson needed a Luna, and I was the obvious choice. I remembered what it had felt like when Kira had cast her spell on us, making me a temporary Luna. The fake mark had *felt* real, and it had filled me with a sense of power that I’d never known before. It was something I wanted. It had allowed me to feel what my mates were feeling, and it had made the others respect me—not just as an Alpha’s mate, but as a pack’s Luna.

It was definitely tempting. Beyond tempting. But it was too dangerous, no matter how much that taste had made me want it even more.

“I can’t be the Luna,” I said. “It could kill Xavier.”

Both Xavier and Greyson were staring hard at me, as if waiting for me to say more. But I had nothing else to add. To say that this was a touchy subject was an understatement, and I needed to tread lightly.

“I never said that you were going to be the Luna,” Greyson said.

“But we all know that’s what you meant,” Xavier shot back. “You’ve probably been fantasizing about it ever since you snatched the Alpha title. Don’t try to act like it’s not true.”

“Don’t pretend that you know what’s going on in my head, Xavier. You barely know what’s going on in your own.”

“Oh, you want to bet? Because if you like, I can tell you right now exactly what’s on my mind,” Xavier said, stepping forward.

“Go ahead, shoot. What, am I supposed to be afraid or something?”

I looked back and forth between them, knowing that I needed to stop this before it escalated any further. “Stop it, both of you. I don’t want any more talk about me being Luna. We still don’t know if the curse is truly broken, so forget it.”

I looked at Xavier, then Greyson, in the eye.

“I couldn’t agree more.” Greyson cleared his throat and looked back at the pack house. “I’m hungry. I’m going to go grab whatever’s left of dinner.”

With that, Greyson disappeared inside without giving either of us a second look.

Xavier lingered, and we stood in silence for a bit before he finally spoke. “Don’t let Greyson fool you. Our Luna problem is going to have to be dealt with—one way or another.”

I knew that he was right, and it was unnerving to say the least. No matter what we did, there was always a barrier to bringing the pack the stability it deserved, and right now me and the damned *due destini* were the main things standing in the way of making the Redwood pack whole.

Not knowing what else there was to say, I moved past Xavier and went inside. Dinner was over, but the dining room was still brimming with pack members. I avoided it like the plague, instead heading into the den and plopping down on the couch. I covered my face with a throw pillow, resisting the urge to scream into it.

*Why can’t I have a moment’s peace? Just one moment to relax and enjoy life without worrying about how my situation could destroy the pack or put us all in danger?*

Torin’s hope for us not to have to celebrate any more victories had been a great sentiment, but it was short-sighted. There might not be any more battles between werewolves and hunters, but I could see things between Xavier and Greyson speeding toward a showdown that would shake the foundations of the pack more than the battle with the hunters ever could have.

*And once again, I’m stuck right in the middle.*

I threw the pillow off my face just as Lola and Jacqueline came in. They were dressed like they were about to go out.

“Jacs and I are going on a little blood hunt. You want to come?” Lola asked.

“Ugh, no. How can you two still be hungry after that feast? I ate so much that I can barely move.”

“That’s an easy one. We’re vampires,” Jacqueline said irritably. “We need blood.”

“Yeah,” Lola said. “The food was great, but I’ve had a pretty extreme blood craving for the last few days. I almost took a bite out of Jay last night.”

Lola and Jacqueline looked at each other and giggled. I cringed at the thought. I couldn’t imagine drinking my mate’s blood and enjoying it.

“Come on, Lola, let’s go! I’m starving!” Jacqueline said impatiently. She was already heading out the door.

Lola started to follow, but then she turned back to look at me. “Hey, you okay? You look a little stressed out.”

“Yeah,” I said, waving it away. “The usual drama between the guys, but I’m okay.”

“All right… You know I’m happy to talk about it, when I get back.”

“Thanks. You two just be safe, and happy hunting… Or whatever it is you’re going to do. I’m not sure I want to know the details.”

Lola laughed. “Fair.”

I gave Lola a small wave as she left, and then I got up and went upstairs.

My phone rang, and I hurriedly pulled it out of my pocket. My heart started to beat fast—could it be Dani’s sister Tabitha, trying to call back?

I looked at the screen, shocked by what I saw on the caller ID.

*Mikah?*

**Episode 2238**

XAVIER

It was clear that I hadn’t handled the Luna thing well. I wasn’t sorry in the least about butting heads with Greyson about it, but I shouldn’t have dragged Cali into our fight. It clearly wasn’t her fault that my brother was a dick who didn’t know his ass from a hole in the wall.

*Nope, that was all Greyson’s fault.*

It was maddening seeing Greyson walking around like he was the be-all and end-all, taking every opportunity to assert his position over me. Meanwhile, every decision Greyson made, every word he said, every strategic or tactical move he made or failed to make only cemented in my mind the fact that he wasn’t fit to be Alpha of the Redwood pack. He was even less equipped to be Cali’s mate.

The mere thought of him taking Cali as his Luna burned me up inside. A part of me was happy that Cali was so adamant about not being Luna for either of us. At least that way, Greyson wouldn’t be able to move forward to make it official anytime soon, which would give me time to challenge him and take my rightful place as Alpha. I had no doubt that once that happened, I would be able to make Cali see the light, and she would end up standing by my side and bearing the Luna mark.

*And what an amazing Luna she’ll be.*

I went inside and saw Cali on the stairs staring at her phone, but she wasn’t answering it.

“Hey,” I said. “You gonna get that? Who is it?”

Cali looked up at me, eyes wide. “It’s Mikah.”

“Mikah? Why the hell is he calling?”

“I have no idea!”

I raised an eyebrow. “Answer it then?”

Cali fumbled with her phone and answered. “Hello?” She immediately pulled the phone away from her ear. “Ah! It’s all staticky!”

She passed the phone to me, and sure enough, it was like radio static.

“Weird,” I said, giving it back. “Hang up and try calling him back.”

“Okay,” she said, nodding. She was so cute when she was on a mission. “But let’s go to my room.”

My pleasure.

I followed her to her room, and we both sat down on her bed. Cali pulled her phone back out and was just about to call Mikah back when it rang again. She answered on the first ring, and I leaned in close so that I could hear. It was funny how being so close to her still managed to make my heart beat fast. I inhaled her scent, being sly about it so that I didn’t distract her. I hoped that once she was done with her call, we’d be able to get back into bed and end the night the right way.

“Cali?” This time I heard Mikah’s voice come through on the other end.

“It’s me!” A burst of static crackled from the phone soon after Cali spoke.

“Cali—” Mikah’s voice was going in and out. He was breaking up. “I saw that you called—” More static. “Tabitha—” More static.

“Mikah! Mikah! You’re breaking up! Can you hear me?” Cali pulled the phone away from her ear and looked at it before pressing it to her ear again, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“We can’t—” And then the line went dead.

“I’m confused. Why is Mikah calling you?”

“That’s the weird thing. Earlier, I was trying to reach Dani’s sister Tabitha.” Cali went quiet as she scrolled through her phone to double-check the number. “This isn’t Mikah’s… This makes no sense. How did Mikah know that I was looking for Tabitha?”

“I don’t know… Mikah’s a vampire detective guy—maybe he found her?”

Cali arched her eyebrows and gave me a hopeful look. “That would be perfect!”

She tried to call Mikah back, but this time his voice didn’t come through at all—there was only static. Cali immediately ended the call.

“So strange,” she murmured. “Dani mentioned that she’d been trying to get in contact with her sister but that she wasn’t able to get through—there was always static or some other kind of disturbance—and she said that her text messages wouldn’t go through, either. She also mentioned that she thought it might be some sort of magic issue. Maybe Dani knows Mikah from somewhere?”

“Maybe.”

She glanced up at me and gave me a small smile. She looked back down at her phone. “Do you think it’s too late to talk to her right now?”

“Maybe.”

She mulled this over. “Maybe I’ll see if she’s up?”

Cali started to get up, but I grabbed her hand, stopping her. “Hey, before you rush off, I wanted to talk about earlier with my brother.”

“Oh.” She slowly sank back down to the bed. “Yeah?”

I tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I wanted to apologize about what I said about the Luna thing. That wasn’t cool of me.”

“Thanks. I know how hard all of this is for the three of us,” she said. “But honestly, I don’t want to talk about being either of your Lunas. It’s too stressful to think about right now, especially with everything else that’s going on. I’d hoped that having the *due destini* curse broken would make things easier, but it hasn’t. Especially since we don’t even know if it’s really gone.”

“Right.” I didn’t know how that made me feel. Was that just an excuse?

Cali sighed. “Even if we discover that it *is* broken, you need to understand that my deciding to be Luna for you or for Greyson still boils down to a choice that I can’t even begin to imagine making. Not yet.”

I nodded, letting her words sink in. I wanted to be understanding, to support what she was going through, but it was hard for me to do that when all I wanted was to claim Alpha and have her at my side. I’d teased Greyson about fantasizing about having Cali as his Luna, but I had to admit that I understood where he was coming from, since it was my fantasy, too. But to hear her say she wasn’t sure still hurt.

“I get it, Cali,” I said. “I know this is hard, and that making a decision like that would tear you apart—not to mention what it would do to whoever you didn’t choose.”

Ultimately, I didn’t care what it would do to Greyson, but I knew that Cali did. And how Cali felt mattered to me. More than anything else.

I looked her directly in the eye. “I still know that in the end, once all this curse shit is over and done with, you’ll choose me. We belong together, Cali. I’ve never doubted for one second where our future lies.”

Cali leaned forward to plant a kiss on my lips. “Will you come with me to see if Dani’s still awake?”

“Sure, baby. Whatever you want.”

Cali headed to Dani’s room, and I followed. We didn’t really know Dani very well, and even if Greyson said it was fine to have her here, I’d keep an eye on things. Cali knocked softly on Dani’s door, then opened the door a crack to peek inside. Dani was asleep.

“Leave her be,” I whispered.

Asleep, Dani looked much younger and more innocent. Still, my suspicions lingered. She wasn’t a wolf; she was some kind of witch from who knows where.

Cali closed Dani’s door, and we returned to her room. “I’ll talk to Dani about Mikah in the morning. I guess there’s no rush since it was all gargled garbage anyway. She’s here and safe. That’s all that matters.”

I chuckled. “You’re always so worried about everyone else. Maybe you need to spend a little time taking care of yourself.” I sat down and patted the bed beside me. “How about a massage?” Cali hesitated, and a flash of uncertainty crossed her face. I reached up and pulled her toward me playfully. “Come on, I promise you’ll love it. It’ll take away all the tension of the day, and I owe you.”

“Okay, okay,” she said, laughing. “What person in their right mind refuses a massage, right?”

“Especially from someone with magic hands,” I said.

She laughed again as I started rubbing her shoulders. *This is what our lives should be. She shouldn’t be worried about a damn thing. When I’m Alpha, she’ll be my mate, my Luna, and all mine, once and for all.* I kissed her neck and slid her shirt partially off her shoulders.

“Mmm, Xavier, this doesn’t feel like a massage.” She turned back, giving me a dubious look. “Seems to me like you’re up to something else.”

“You caught me. It’s not,” I said, turning her to face me and trailing kisses down her neck and chest, until I reached the spot just above the swell of her breasts. I reached up and ran my hands through her hair, loosening her ponytail and massaging her scalp. “*This* is a massage, though,” I said with a grin.

She closed her eyes and dropped her head back. “And it feels amazing. You should open your own spa. Everspa. Spa Evers. Spavers?”

“Mm hm,” I said, not quite paying attention. The sight of her exposed neck was driving me wild. Something about how smooth and delicate it looked tonight was doing something to me.

“Your neck looks so delicious. You think that’s how Lola feels?” I joked.

“Stop it.” She gave me a playful swat on the chest, and her hand lingered there before she brushed it across my chest. There was no mistaking the sound of her breath quickening in her throat as she continued her exploration of my chest, and then my back.

Her touch ignited a fire in me, and I launched forward, pressing my lips against her neck, nibbling at the warm skin there every so often, but taking care not to leave any marks.

Cali arched toward me and draped her arms around my neck.

“Come here.” I pulled her onto my lap and slid her shirt up over her head.

**Episode 2239**

Xavier’s touch felt too good to resist. I hadn’t realized how stressed I’d been until it all melted away under the sensual strength of his hands. I was straddling his lap, and he had his face buried between my breasts. He pulled aside the black lace of my bra and took one nipple into his mouth before he migrated over to the other, his eyes on mine as he suckled it while his hands worked to unclasp my bra. He groaned when the clasp released, and then he took both breasts in his hands.

“God, you’re so perfect, Cali.”

“Thank you, you’re not so bad yourself.”

I held on tight as Xavier lifted me up and placed me gently on my back across the bed. He stood up, and I watched him take off his shirt and then his pants. He slid his boxers off last, a smirk playing on his lips as he revealed his already considerable erection.

“Someone’s excited,” I breathed.

“You have no idea.” He reached down to slide off my jeans, first one leg, then the other, massaging the arches of my feet as he did so. “I promised my baby a massage, and she’ll have one,” he said, then tossed my jeans onto my dresser and dropped to his knees between my legs.

I sighed as he spread my thighs wide and rested my legs on his shoulders. He paused, and I waited, my own arousal sending shocks of expectation radiating up from between my legs to every part of my body. His strong hands kneaded the tense flesh of my calves before he worked his way up to my thighs. He massaged my tight muscles for a bit, and then his large, warm hands continued their journey up to the slick fluttering channel between my legs. Without preamble, he slid one finger inside me. “You’re pretty excited yourself.”

“Yes, I am.” I breathed. I gasped as he slid another finger inside me before pressing his thumb against my clit. He moved it up and down as his fingers pumped in and out of me.

“How’s that for a massage?” He teased, still thrusting his fingers.

“It’s perfect,” I said.

“Well, how about I kick it up a notch?”

He leaned down between my legs and pressed his mouth against me, using his tongue to spread me apart as he slid his fingers out of me so that both hands could reach up to play with my nipples. I clasped my thighs tight around his head.

“I’d ask you how you this feels, but I think I know,” he said, his warm breath and deep voice vibrating against the sopping wet, pulsating flesh between my legs.

I squeezed my eyes shut as climax threatened. I didn’t want to come yet, but he was making it hard.

Suddenly, his lips left me. “On your knees,” he grunted.

“Like this?” I asked as I shakily got into position.

“Just like that,” he said.

He stood up and grabbed my ass, squeezing it gently and running his index finger down along my slit until he found my clit again. He massaged it, and then his delicious shaft was nudging against my opening, gentle at first and then, once he was nearly halfway in, he slammed into me, my whole body vibrating with the force of it. He nudged my legs further apart with his knees and pushed my face down into the mattress as he kept thrusting in and out, his speed gradually increasing until I was slamming back against him at a mind-blowing pace. I was right on the verge of climax, and I didn’t think I’d be able to stop it this time.

Just before I came, he picked me up and pulled me onto his lap.

“We’re not done yet,” he said. He lifted me up and slowly slid me down onto his cock.

“Oh, Xavier,” I gasped. He took control, holding my hips and moving me up and down as I held on for dear life. “I’m about to come,” I shrieked, before slapping a hand over my mouth.

He flashed a wicked smile and pulled my hand away.

“Let them hear,” he growled. A second later, we were both coming, his thighs jerking against me as I linked my arms around his neck and held tight, my orgasm rocketing through my body and sending a spray of stars dancing across my vision.

When we were finished, we collapsed in a tangle on the bed, and we were both sound asleep in seconds.

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The next morning, I maneuvered out of Xavier’s arms, took a quick shower, and went down to breakfast. I checked my phone as I took a seat at the kitchen table. It was a little strange to me that I had no more missed calls or texts from Mikah. Like Dani had said was happening with her messages to her sister, all of the texts that I’d sent after our static-laden call hadn’t been delivered. I sat there trying to make sense of the randomness. What was the connection between Mikah and Tabitha? How could there even be one? I reminded myself to talk to Xavier about it again later. Maybe he could help me uncover what was going on, since he knew Mikah pretty well.

I was eager to talk to Dani, and I was considering going up to “accidentally” wake her when she appeared in the doorway, as shy as ever. I stood up to welcome her, but Torin beat me to the punch. He rushed over to her with a mug of Mrs. Smith’s delicious white chocolate mocha.

“Good morning! Take this and have a seat. Do you want some breakfast?” he asked.

Dani looked at me. She seemed a little overwhelmed, and I realized that as friendly as Torin was, he could be a little much for Dani on her first morning here.

She came to sit beside me at the table.

“How are you doing?” I asked once she was settled.

“A little better after some sleep,” she said shyly. “I’m hoping to find out more about my sister today.”

Attempting to sound as casual as possible, so that I didn’t upset her, I asked, “Dani, have you ever heard of a vampire detective named Mikah Navarro?”

Dani gave me a blank stare. “Wait… that’s not some kind of joke, is it? A vampire detective? Oh wow… you’re serious.” Her eyes went wide.

*Oh no, she’s starting to panic!* I realized then that maybe Dani didn’t know anything about all the other supernaturals that existed in the world. “Oh, don’t worry about the vampire part, we can get to that later.”

“Oh—okay. No, I’ve never heard of him. Why?”

“Well, he called me last night—I couldn’t hear him because it was all staticky, like what happened with your sister—but he mentioned Tabitha’s name. I just thought I’d ask you to see if you knew of any connection between Mikah and your sister. But don’t worry, I’m on top of it, and I promise I’ll get some answers.”

Torin brought over breakfast for Dani, and I gave her a reassuring smile before excusing myself. I hoped she’d be okay—Torin was going over all the different syrup options, and she already looked like she was drowning.

I was still hoping to talk to Greyson more about Aysel’s strange appearance at the pack house last night. I knew that Greyson had been honest with me, but I couldn’t help but feel that there was more to Aysel’s story than he was letting on. I also had my own questions about the Vanguards, and Lucian’s moon ritual. If I didn’t deal with that, I knew that the dreams would come back. I hadn’t had any last night, thankfully.

I flashed back to my night with Xavier, and a wave of heat crashed over my body. After a night like that, it was no wonder I hadn’t had any Seluna dreams. Still, it was probably only a matter of time before the dreams returned. *Ugh.* I didn’t want to deal with that creepy prince, *or* the strange goddess.

I slipped into the bathroom and took a peek at the handprint on my shoulder. *Is it starting to fade, or is that just wishful thinking?* I wasn’t sure. I just wanted to know what it meant. I couldn’t stop thinking about Seluna’s cryptic dream message. *Lucian is the key.* And then there was Lucian’s reaction. He’d seemed so pleased that he’d been in my dreams without appearing to care about what it all meant. As for Aysel, I didn’t understand why she was coming for Greyson so hard when she knew that I was his mate. I could certainly understand why she was attracted to him, but was that the only reason why she was so interested in him?

Lucian was still such a mystery. I couldn’t figure out his game. He knew that I had two mates—why was he so taken with me? And why, of all people, was *he* the key? I had so many questions, and so few answers.

I returned to the kitchen, where more of the pack had gathered for coffee. Marta was sitting with Dani, probably showing her the ropes like Greyson had asked her to do, since she was responsible for her.

Lola came in, yawning as she went to the cabinet for her favorite coffee cup. “Hey, Cali.”

“Hey, Lola. How’d the blood hunt go?”

Lola made a face. “Had to settle for possum. It was like drinking from a giant rat. I’m going to have to up my game, or Jay’s going to have to deal with fang marks on his neck.”

Torin clapped his hands to get everyone’s attention. “I’m so glad that everyone’s here—or at least, almost everyone. I think last night’s feast proved that we need more cheer around here, and since Christmas is fast approaching, I suggest we spread some Christmas cheer by decorating the house! Tom told me about these cool little gifts called stocking stuffers, and I’m eager to go shopping! I have some great ideas!”

“Great idea, Torin,” I said. “That’ll be a great way to remind the pack that not everything’s doom and gloom.” I needed that reminder more than anyone, these days.

“So, I think a trip to the mall would be just the thing. Who’s in?” Torin asked.

As a chorus of people chimed in, I drifted over to Dani. “Hey, would you like to come along? Do a little Christmas shopping, get a chance to see the area?”

Dani hesitated. “Um… I don’t know. I’m Jewish, and I don’t exactly do Christmas.”

“Sweet, we can stock up on some gelt,” Lola said. “Haven’t had an excuse to eat that since I was in high school when my classmates would bring some in.”

“Gelt?” Torin said.

“Chocolate coins!” Lola explained. “I loved to eat them, at least before I became a vampire.”

Torin nearly did a flip. “I. Am. *In!*”

“So, Dani, how’s that sound? You want to go?” I asked her.

Dani gave a small smile. “Sure, sounds like fun.”

“Great!” Lola said with a little clap. “Any excuse is a good one to go to the mall.”

I laughed, remembering when I’d gone clothes shopping with Xavier. What a crazy time that had been.

Lola suddenly lit up. “I just had a great idea! Can we set up a Secret Santa?”

**Episode 2240**

XAVIER

“So, what I’m hearing is that all of us are down for a Secret Santa shop-a-thon!” Torin shouted, just as I walked into the kitchen. A cheer rang out amongst the pack members.

“Shop till we drop!” Lola called out, clanging her coffee cup against Cali’s.

I immediately began to back out slowly, hoping that no one had noticed me and that I could pretend I hadn’t heard any of it. This was the type of holiday cheer that I avoided like the plague.

“Xavier! Hey!” It was Torin, and he was heading straight for me. His eyes were shining, and he looked like he was about to pop with excitement.

“Oh, Torin! What’s up?”

I was trying to play it off as best I could, but it was obvious that my escape hadn’t been successful. I combed through my arsenal for a suitable reason to excuse myself, but I came up empty. I sighed and braced myself for whatever was coming next.

“Could you drive us to the mall?” The pack had moved out into the hallway to crowd around Torin, and they all watched me, waiting for my answer.

“No, we’re not going anywhere right now,” I answered. I looked away from Torin to stare longingly at the coffee pot warming in the kitchen. I was so close, yet so far away.

Torin grabbed my hand and tugged on it. “Come on, Xavier. I have it all figured out. We can split everyone between two cars, and you and Greyson can drive. It’ll be amazing, you’ll see. Shopping, then maybe we’ll grab a bite to eat at the mall food court. We’ll make a whole day of it.”

“I see you have it all planned out—but has anyone actually even mentioned this to Greyson?” At the moment, I wanted to be anywhere but here. Going on a shopping trip with a bunch of Christmas-crazed pack members was that last thing I wanted to do right now.

“No, not yet, but I can’t see why he’d object. It’s a perfect chance to bring the pack together and have some fun.”

A smattering of agreements rose up from the rest of the pack, and Torin beamed up at me, his eyes imploring me to say yes. It almost felt like he was using some sort of Fae hypnosis on me.

“I don’t want to be the bad guy here—”

“Then don’t be,” Torin said with a pouty face.

“Fine. I’ll do it if Greyson does.”

“Yes!” Torin squealed. He grabbed Lola, and they raced off to go find Greyson.

“Good luck,” I grumbled. I had a feeling that I’d just gotten out of Torin’s latest scheme. I couldn’t see Greyson agreeing, which would let me off the hook. *Finally.* That cup of coffee was so close that I could taste it. I wove through the remaining pack members and finally made it into the kitchen, where I poured myself a steaming mug of coffee just as Torin came running back in.

“Greyson agreed! We can go!”

I nearly spilled my coffee. *Didn’t see that coming. Fuck.*

“Great,” I deadpanned.

A short while later, I piled into the car with Cali, Dani, Lola, Jay, and a few others, and we pulled off toward the mall. I’d brought out one of my larger SUVs for the occasion, but it was still a tight squeeze—though everyone was way too excited to mind. Greyson and the others were similarly packed into an SUV behind me, and though Greyson and I hadn’t had a chance to talk during all the fanfare, I had to imagine that he wasn’t too keen on this little field trip, either. Still, I understood why Torin wanted to do it, and I appreciated that it would be a great morale booster for the pack.

“Have you thought any more about Mikah?” Cali asked.

“I was thinking that if Tabitha is with Mikah, she’s probably safe. For a vampire, he’s a pretty decent guy,” I said, but then I caught Dani’s expression in the rearview mirror. She didn’t look convinced.

“I don’t know… I’m not used to vampires,” Dani said softly. “I can’t imagine that Tabitha is, either.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll have a talk with Big Mac and Kira when we get back to the pack house. I’m sure they’ll be able to shed some light on things.” I was impressed with my own capacity to be reassuring. Cali had asked why I couldn’t be gentle with Dani, and now I was doing just that.

A song come on the radio, and I winced. It literally sounded like nails on a chalkboard. I was about to change it when Dani piped up.

“That’s the song Tabby and I used to sing when we took baths together when we were little.”

Artemis reached across from the shotgun seat and stayed my hand. I nodded at her. She was right. I slowly returned my hand to the steering wheel, hoping that Dani hadn’t noticed my distaste for the song. I definitely didn’t want to spoil a good memory for her. I had to admit, I was actually thawing toward Dani, and I was starting to wonder if my skeptical attitude toward her had been justified. Cali was right—she did seem like a sweet kid.

“I love this song, too,” Cali called out. She and Lola were dancing in their seats, and within seconds, the entire car was singing the chorus together—at the top of their lungs.

By the time we reached the mall, my head was pounding. *This is too much cheer for one man to take.* I parked and hopped out of the car, thankful for the crisp air and the near silence.

“All right troops, fall in line!” Torin said as he led the way into the shopping center.

Greyson fell into step beside me. “Torin would’ve made a good tour guide.”

“I can’t argue that one,” I replied. “I can definitely picture the guy with a bunch of little flags, getting people to follow him. He’d probably have bandolier of zany pins, too.”

Everything that happened after we entered the mall was a complete blur. We went to store after store.

“Oh my gosh, another clearance sale,” Torin said, literally every time we entered a new shop.

“There are always clearance sales,” I grumbled under my breath.

“Holy heck! These sweaters come in fifteen colors! That’s it, I’m getting one in each and every hue, but no one’s going to know which color they’re going to get! Stocking stuffers!” Torin sang as he piled the rainbow of sweaters into his already brimming cart. After only an hour of shopping, he had more bags than I’d ever seen in my life.

“She’s starting to come out of her shell a little,” I said to Cali as we watched Dani and Lola trying on identical wool scarves.

“Yeah, she is. Thanks to both of you for agreeing to do this,” Cali said to Greyson and me. “I think it’ll help keep everyone’s spirits up.”

Torin came bounding over, interrupting Dani and Lola. “I think I’ve found a… what did you call it, earlier? The thing with all the candlestick holders? A menorah?” He grabbed Dani’s hand and pulled her into another store, and within minutes, they returned with one. Torin had also bought a bunch of miniature dreidels for the pack. “And these look like so much fun! You haveto teach me how to play, Dani.”

Dani smiled at him and ducked her head. “I will.”

Cali and I broke away to make a quick trip to the food court. We passed Madame Maxine’s lingerie store on the way. My heartbeat quickened, and I pulled Cali inside.

“I think you should get something for yourself,” I said.

Cali shook her head. “Nah, I don’t really need anything.”

“I insist. Let me treat you,” I said. I plucked a tiny lacy teddy from the rack and ushered Cali toward the dressing rooms.

“You want me to try something on right now?”

I steered her into one of the rooms, then shut and locked the door behind us. “No. I want you to try something *off*.”Cali’s cheeks reddened, and I could tell that she was flustered. “Do you remember coming here with me?”

Cali smiled. “Of course I do. How could I ever forget?”

She was blushing like crazy, and I couldn’t resist pulling her in for a kiss.

“Maybe we can give each other a little advance Christmas gift?” I gently slid my tongue into her mouth. Cali relaxed against me, and I pressed her back against the wall.

“Wait, Xavier,” she said pushing me away. “We can’t do this here, not now.”

“I don’t see why not. Everybody’s doing their own thing, nobody’s going to miss us.”

“Yes, but what if someone comes looking for us and they can’t find us? Or, heaven forbid, what if one of them comes in here and—”

I pressed my lips to Cali’s again, silencing her. I ran my hands down her back to her ass and cupped it in my hands, squeezing gently. Cali moaned against my lips and did some exploring of her own. She splayed one hand on my chest, then slid the other hand lower and lower until she was dangerously close to my fly… But then she stopped and pulled away.

“Did you hear that?” she said. “Is someone coming?”

I shrugged. “Who cares?”

I leaned forward and kissed her again, just as the door flew open.

**Episode 2241**

MARTA

I liked how open and airy the mall was. There were bubbling fountains and cool modern sculptures and high ceilings with skylights. There was a palpable air of excitement as everyone rushed around buying trinkets and gifts for their loved ones. After years of being holed up in Bert’s dreary house, the myriad of colors, sounds, and sights of the mall were the perfect way to usher in the holiday season. I’d never dreamed that I’d celebrate the holidays again, but my world had changed so much in such a short time. I was almost starting to feel normal again, after everything that had happened.

I reached up to tuck a few strands of hair behind my ear, and my bracelets rattled on my wrists.

*Well, things aren’t quite back to normal just yet.*

“I want to show you something,” Lilac said, breaking into my thoughts. He pulled me into a flower shop.

“Are you buying me flowers?”

“No, I want you to touch these rose petals,” Lilac said as he tugged me over to a wall covered in beautiful, blood-red roses.

I snuck a look at the clerk, who was hard at work putting together a floral arrangement. I imagined the look on her face when she looked up to see a bunch of crumbling brown dead roses where her beautiful display used to be.

“No, Lilac, I can’t. What if they all wither and die?”

A vision of row after row of wilting cabbages flashed through my mind. It seemed like a lifetime ago that Lilac and I had been running out of the grocery store after I’d accidentally massacred an entire aisle of vegetables with just one touch. I shuddered. The memory was so fresh, it was like it had happened yesterday.

“Marta, do you trust me?”

I nodded. Lilac took my hand in his and then gently extended it to brush one of the roses. I flinched and squeezed my eyes shut, not wanting to witness the carnage I was about to wreak on that unsuspecting rose wall.

“Look!” Lilac said excitedly.

I opened my eyes. The roses were as beautiful and vibrant as ever.

“Oh wow—they didn’t die!” I felt like I was going to cry. It felt good to know that my hands weren’t agents of death anymore.

Lilac smiled. “Nope, they didn’t die. They’re still just as beautiful as you.”

I blushed. “You’re too sweet, Lilac.”

“No, you’re the sweet one. I just wanted you to see that you weren’t a danger to anyone, or anything, anymore. You have the bracelets, you’re going to get a mentor—everything’s okay.”

He gave me a sweet kiss on the lips, and then we made our way back to some of the others who were now just window shopping.

I realized then that I should probably get a Christmas gift for Lilac. *Do I even know what he’d like?* I was surprised at the surge of panic that rose in my stomach. This was our first Christmas as a couple, and I wanted to make it memorable, but I wasn’t sure if I could. As much as we cared for each other, our relationship was still so new, and the truth was, we still didn’t know all that much about each other—especially all those little things that you learned about each other over time.

*What if I pick out something and he hates it? What would that say about me?*

Before I did any shopping for Lilac, I needed to talk to Violet. He was so special to me, and I wanted to impress him with my gift, not make him question whether I even knew him.

“Oh, I have to go. I promised Violet that I’d help her pick out a sweater,” Lilac said suddenly. He gave me a peck on the lips and then rushed off.

Still enjoying the overall vibe of the mall, I decided to take a few laps by myself before I rejoined the others. I was admiring an elaborate Christmas display in a store window when I spotted Xavier and Cali hurrying out of Madame Maxine’s. They were heading straight for me with an angry sales associate shaking her fist after them. I couldn’t help but notice how flushed and disheveled Cali looked.

*Hmm, what’s going on there?*

Cali straightened her hair and came over to join me. “Hey, Marta. So, how’s Dani doing?”

“Really good, as far as I can tell. She’s actually talking now, and answering people’s questions without looking like a deer in headlights. So that’s progress,” I said. “I think this whole shop-a-thon thing was a good idea. She definitely seems more at ease now.”

Xavier came over with a scowl on his face. “What’s up with Torin? Why the hell would we need sixteen additional stockings or fifteen more boxes of Christmas lights? The house is big and all, but where would we even put all this shit? There’s only so much space!”

“You might be right,” I agreed, looking at the piles of bags and boxes that Torin and the others were carting around. At the rate we were going, we were going to drown in holiday cheer.

I was surprised to see that Violet had come up to stand beside me during Xavier’s rant.

“Hey, Violet,” I said. “How are you feeling?”

“Good. I’ve still got a slight limp, but it takes more than a silver-tipped arrow to keep me away from the mall.”

“That’s what I like to hear!” I said as I threw a playful punch at Violet’s arm. I loved that I could do something like that now without fear. I looked around. “Where’s Lilac?”

“Oh, I have no idea.”

“Really? He rushed off to help you find a sweater—at least I think that’s where he said he was going.”

Violet scoffed. “Help me pick out clothes? No. My brother’s taste in fashion doesn’t mesh with mine at all. I would never ask Lilac for fashion advice.”

*What? Then why would he say that?*

“Oh, I must have misheard him,” I said. I looked around and spotted him browsing the jewelry cases. “Oh, there he is,” I said to Violet before rushing off to join him. “Hey!”

Lilac turned around startled like I’d scared the hell out of him. “Marta! Oh, hey! I um, got lost looking for my sister, but I should go look for that sweater after all,” he said before rushing off.

I stood there looking after him, completely confused. Why the hell was he acting so weird? Well, weirder than usual?

“I hate to break up the fun, everyone!” Xavier said, clapping his hands to get everyone’s attention. I snickered to myself. He looked like a teacher rounding up a rowdy class at the end of a field trip. “But we should probably wrap it up and get back to the house.”

“No!” Torin wailed. “I was just getting started!”

Greyson shot Torin a withering look, but he was unfazed.

“I still need to visit the sporting goods store,” he said. “Oh, and the home goods store, and if we had time, I wanted to go back to the food court for ice cream! They have so many flavors!”

“Come on, Torin,” Cali said as she took his arm and dragged him—and his tons of shopping bags—toward the exit.

We all headed back out to the cars and piled in. I made sure to get a seat next to Dani so that I could check in with her and see how she was doing. She looked much better, and a lot more relaxed than she had yesterday, but I wanted to be sure that she wasn’t overwhelmed after a shopping extravaganza like this one. Hell, I’d even been a little overwhelmed at first.

“Hanukkah was always a lot of fun. My family went all out,” Dani was saying to Lola, her eyes wide with excitement. “Tabby and I would play dreidel with the family, and eat latkes, and the dinners were top notch. Last night’s meal kind of reminded me of how it was, except there weren’t any werewolves,” she added with a nervous laugh.

I listened in, relieved. If we could just track Tabitha down, I knew that it would be the best Hanukkah present ever for Dani.

We finally made it back to the pack house, and Torin immediately took charge, telling everyone what to carry and where to put it and reminding them not to peek. Dani was going around to everyone and thanking them for bringing her along.

“Especially you, Cali,” Dani said. “Thank you for offering. I didn’t know that I needed this, I guess.”

Dani hugged Cali, and everyone gasped as a blinding flash of light erupted from Cali’s fingertips. Cali’s Fae magic was going absolutely haywire. It sizzled through the air at alarming speeds while everyone ducked for cover. Orbs of glowing light—which pretty much amounted to magical bullets—tore into the ground, shot into the sky, and blazed into the woods, leaving smoking char marks on some of the trees.

A crescendo of piercing screams lit up the air as one of Cali’s beams tore into one of the empty SUVs, blowing it into a million pieces of flaming metal that came showering down all around us.

**Episode 2242**

Everyone screamed as the charred metal frame—all that was left of Xavier’s car—collapsed in a fiery heap. A moment later, Rishika and Greyson came barreling out of the pack house, clearly ready to shift at any moment and wage a holy war.

I was shocked to the core and trying to make sense of the last few seconds. *What the hell was that? Is someone trying to kill us? Again?*

Greyson rushed over with Xavier right on his heels. “Are you okay, Cali?”

“Why are you worried about me? Get everyone into the pack house now! We’re under attack! Are the rebel hunters back?” I asked, looking around, half-expecting to see a gaggle of them running out of the woods.

“There aren’t any rebel hunters. It was you, Cali,” Artemis said. “You blasted the car with your magic.”

“Yeah, you totally barbecued it,” Lola added. She was looking at me like I had three heads.

“What?” I stared down at my hands in disbelief. “I definitely felt something, but I didn’t intentionally use my magic to blast Xavier’s car. Why would I do that?”

I looked around at the small fires burning all over the yard. Thankfully, they were already dying down, but there was smoke everywhere and the air smelled like burning metal, rubber, and scorched earth.

“I was wondering the same thing,” Xavier said. “Couldn’t you have nailed Greyson’s car instead?”

“It wasn’t Cali’s fault. It was mine,” Dani said sheepishly. She had her hands clasped in front of her and was wringing them as she finally looked up at me.

I looked at Xavier. I could tell from the pulse at the side of his jaw that he was gritting his teeth. I wasn’t sure if he was more pissed about his car or the fact that Dani was responsible. It was a real “I told you so” moment for him, I was sure.

“I don’t get it. How did you cause this, Dani?” I asked. Feeling a little gun-shy now that I knew I was responsible for the destruction, I kept my fingers aimed at the ground, just in case they decided to go off again.

Clearly embarrassed, and maybe a little scared again, Dani said, “I’m a magic amplifier. That’s why I was in trouble with the witch council. Sometimes, when I touch people with magic of their own… it makes things go a little crazy. And it’s a little unpredictable. It doesn’t happen all the time. But I didn’t realize that you had any magic, Cali, or I wouldn’t have done that.” She ducked her head. “I’m sorry.” She was tearing up, and without another word, she raced into the pack house.

“Damn. All that progress we’d made getting her to open up might have just been ruined,” I said to Xavier.

“Yeah, well, if I had the power to make people shoot seismic blasts out of their hands without meaning to, I’d be a little nervous about making new friends, too,” Xavier said.

“Be nice, Xavier!”

He shrugged. “I’m just saying.”

Greyson let out a low whistle as he paced around, surveying the damage. He’d even pulled out his cell phone and was snapping pictures. I was certain that he was more than a little amused that it was Xavier’s car that had gotten hit. All I could think was that the last thing we needed was anything else to happen that would increase the friction between my mates—and blowing up one of Xavier’s cars definitely wasn’t helping matters.

Greyson came over and clapped a hand on Xavier’s shoulder. “Well, it looks like you’ll be needing yet another new car.”

“Shut it. You’re just lucky that bolt didn’t hit you. They were flying around like crazy,” Xavier said as he plucked Greyson’s hand off of his shoulder and flung it away.

I was definitely a little shaken up, still. “It would have been horrible if my magic had injured someone. What if someone had been killed?”

Xavier was joking about Dani being a danger, but what about me? If someone had gotten badly hurt, I wouldn’t have felt any better about my role in it just because it was Dani who’d brought it on. My magic still would’ve been responsible.

“We’re all lucky,” Marta agreed. “I get why Dani and I were assigned a mentor. Maybe you should get one too, Cali.”

She gave one final look at the charred remains of Xavier’s car before she hustled after Dani.

“Now it all makes sense,” Greyson said. “Silas always had an uncanny ability to spot the best and brightest people to help him with his schemes, so it’s no wonder he wanted Dani. With a talent like that, even the simplest spell could be turned into a magical bomb.”

I shuddered at the thought. My magic was pretty powerful and did the job in a pinch, but I’d never seen it erupt like that. It was almost ten times more powerful than usual, and that scared me.

“Can’t help but think that we wouldn’t have been able to defeat Silas if he’d had Dani’s power at his disposal,” I said. “Thank god she managed to escape, or we might not be standing here right now watching Xavier’s car melt.”

Xavier shot me a look before he finally went to survey the wreckage.

“Just great,” he said, then kicked a burning tire and sent it rolling across the lawn.

I watched him, thinking that it would probably be best for me to leave him alone for a while so that he could calm down. Xavier had many cars, but he cherished each and every one of them like they were his one and only.

I went back into the house to check on Dani. She’d been so frightened, and now with this latest mishap, I was sure that she felt like she was back to square one with everyone in the pack house. It was one thing to have something embarrassing happen to you, but it was quite another to have it happen in front of a bunch of people who were pretty much strangers. I didn’t want her to do something impulsive, like run away without telling anyone. I had a feeling that she already had one foot out the door, and I liked her and wanted her to stick around.

I made my way up to her room where I found her with Marta, who was doing her best to comfort her while making sure to keep her distance.

“Don’t worry, everyone knows it was an accident,” Marta was saying.

“I know, but I just got here, and some of you were already suspicious, and now look what I did! It’s all my fault. If I hadn’t touched Cali, none of this would’ve happened. I’m so stupid! I know what I’m capable of! I should’ve used my head!”

“Hey, Dani, stop it. Don’t blame yourself! Look at it this way—nobody got hurt. I’m not going to lie, Xavier’s a little ticked off right now, but the truth is, he can always get another car.”

*Does insurance cover Fae damage? Probably not.*

“Do you all want me to leave? Because I’d understand if you did. I’m pretty much a danger to everyone around me.” Dani put her face in her hands and sobbed quietly. I really felt for her. This was definitely the worst thing that could have happened, and the timing of it was horrendous.

Marta and I looked at each other.

“No, Dani, we wouldn’t allow it,” I said. “Believe me, this pack has seen a lot worse than an occasional errant blast of magic. Nobody’s going to kick you out. Look on the bright side—now that we all know what the risk is, we can make sure that it doesn’t happen again.”

I wanted so much to pull her into a hug and comfort her, but that was off the table. I had so many questions about her strange power, but I knew that right now wasn’t the time to ask them. I was sure I’d learn all that I needed to know in due time.

Dani wiped her tears and managed a weak smile. “Thank you both for being so kind to me. So understanding. It’s almost like having my sister back. I miss her so much.”

“Of course, Dani. We just want to make sure you know that no one is mad at you. Shit happens,” I said. “Once the pack settles down—and we clear away the wreckage and all that—we’ll go talk to Big Mac and Kira about the whole phone magic problem. In fact, why wait? I’m going to find them right now.”

I started heading for the door when I heard my name.

I turned around. “What?”

Both Marta and Dani gave me a perplexed look.

“Wait,” I said. “Didn’t one of you just say my name?”

“Uh, no…” Marta said.

“I didn’t,” Dani added.

“Oh, okay.”

Maybe it was my ears? They were still ringing a little from the blast. Then I heard it again.

“*Cali. Get the key, before it’s too late!*”

**Episode 2243**

GREYSON

After a blast like that, I had my work cut out for me, calming the pack’s collective jitters. After everything the pack had been through, we were all a little sensitive to unexpected explosions.

As usual, I’d been impressed with Rishika. As soon as we’d heard the explosion, she’d been right there beside me, reacting like lightning. She was always ready to kick ass. No fear, no hesitation, and a fierce loyalty to the pack. She’d make someone a great Luna—hell, she’d make a great Alpha. Not that I wanted to add any more contenders to the list.

After helping to clean up as much of the ash and debris that had blown all over the yard as we could, I directed some of the more shaken-up pack members to gather in the living room for a little casual pack house meeting. Since they were on edge, I thought it was best to keep the tone as light as possible.

“I know that was all a bit shocking, but everyone’s safe, no one got hurt, and on the upside, this gives Xavier a chance to go shopping for a new car.” A few people laughed, but Xavier definitely wasn’t one of them. “Let’s try to enjoy the rest of the day. After all, we just spent the day—”

“And a lot of money,” Xavier added.

“—trying to boost all of our holiday spirits, so I’d like to keep up the cheerful atmosphere. So go, be merry and all that, and I’ll keep all of you posted with any updates.”

With that, everyone started to file out of the living room, talking amongst themselves as they went. Everyone seemed to be taking things in stride for the most part, but understandably, watching Dani discharge Cali like a weapon was a lot to swallow. It wasn’t ideal that I’d just invited Dani to stay and then the very next day she’d caused an explosion, but I didn’t get the sense that anyone was blaming Dani for what happened—or Cali, for that matter.

Xavier lingered behind, scrolling through his phone and not talking to anyone. He was in a foul mood, which was understandable. I probably shouldn’t have made light of the whole exploded car thing. It wasn’t the best idea to taunt Xavier—there was no point, and definitely no upside. Things were still fairly tense between us, and maybe they always would be, but I knew that it would only make things worse for the two of us and Cali to strain our relationship any further.

I went to join Xavier where he stood leaning against the wall.

He looked up when he saw me coming. “Nice speech.”

“Thanks.” I couldn’t quite tell if he was being sarcastic or not, and I was too tired to try to figure it out. At this moment, I preferred his sarcasm to him pointing fingers at me about how this whole thing was somehow my fault, and just another example of my failings as Alpha.

Xavier shook his head. “I still can’t believe that something so powerful happened because of someone as reserved as Dani.”

“Yeah, that was definitely unexpected.” I waited a beat. “I hope that you aren’t going to push Dani to leave.” I didn’t bother mentioning that it wasn’t actually his decision in the end.

Xavier cocked his head to the side, as if considering it. “I have to admit, I’m tempted, but I’m not going to be that guy. As long as all the Fae, witches, medium bridges, and any other person with even a drop of magic keeps a wide berth from her, and as long as she stays away from my cars, I’m cool with her.”

“Fair enough,” I said.

I left Xavier and went up to my room to take a moment to myself. I wasn’t planning to admit it to anyone, but that blast had rattled me. Not because of Cali’s magic, but because I’d been worried that we were under attack. More than that, my first thought had been how to get Cali out of there, not how to protect the pack.

After I’d taken a bit of time to collect my thoughts, I went back downstairs. The place was buzzing with activity. I was happy to see that the pack had managed to shake off the shock of the day’s events and was focused on other things. Torin had taken charge of the decorations, of course, and he was going to town. He was running in and out of the house to look at Pinterest for inspiration as he and Tom worked to string the lights along the eaves, around the porch pillars, and everywhere in between. He’d organized subcommittees, who were working on decorating the interior. They were busy hanging up tinsel, nailing stockings to the fireplace, clearing a place for the menorah, and adding ornaments to the Christmas tree.

Xavier came in from outside, took one look around, and told everyone to stop. “I can’t believe all of this! It’s too much. It’s starting to look like we’re in Santa’s village or something. Let me remind all of you that this is the Redwood pack house, not a toy-making workshop.”

Xavier was the picture of annoyance, and I guessed that he’d just been outside looking at his burning former car before he’d come in to see the transformation that was underway.

“Xavier, don’t be such a scrooge! I don’t see why it can’t be *both* the Redwood pack house *and* a holiday extravaganza! And I wouldn’t call it Santa’s village, it’s more… holiday-chic,” Torin said with a smile.

Xavier wasn’t swayed. “This isn’t a discussion. I’m the one who writes the checks to keep this place up and running, so if I say I don’t want it looking like a reindeer threw up in here, I mean it!”

Sabine came over to me. “You’re going to have to do something, or this is going to turn into an all-out war.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Xavier continued, “I have nothing against a little holiday cheer, but I draw the line at having an army of inflatable snowmen and reindeer on my lawn. It’s ridiculous, and, quite frankly, it looks gaudy.”

“Hey, man, calm down.” I was trying to take Sabine’s advice, but Xavier was a live wire today, and I wasn’t sure how well he was going to take my trying to reason with him. When Xavier was in a bad mood—hell, even when he was in a good mood—I was the last person he wanted to see. *And the feeling is mutual, but that’s beside the point.* “Maybe this is exactly what we need, Xavier. We want to boost the pack’s morale and bring everyone together, and that’s what this is achieving. Let me ask you a question—what do you think when you see a house decorated like this?”

“I don’t know… That I walked into a Hallmark Christmas movie?”

“Okay… Well, *I* think about how families come together during the holidays to celebrate and enjoy each other’s company. If we can do that—if we can show everyone how we’ve come together—then all that talk about the Redwood pack being weak will be put to rest. I know you don’t want to hear it, but I really think the decorations should stay.”

“Fine,” Xavier grunted, rolling his eyes. “But as soon as Christmas is over, I want my house back to normal.” With that he stormed off.

Sabine smiled at me. “Well said.”

“Thanks, though I’ve definitely said enough for the day.”

I thought about how the holidays never used to mean much to me. I’d had no family. I’d been a Rogue. I’d lived a life of complete solitude. *Crazy how things change.*

I wanted to go check on Cali and make sure that she was okay, but as I started off to look for her, Artemis pulled me aside.

“Hey, Greyson.”

“Hey, Artemis. Nice fighting yesterday, by the way.”

“Thanks. It would have been nice if I’d had my magic back fully, but I’m still working on that.”

“Well, I think we’ve seen enough magic for one day.”

“You can say that again.” Artemis shook her head. “Hey, have you ever been to New Orleans?”

“Yeah, I’ve been there a few times—and a few more times that I don’t remember.”

Artemis squinted. “I don’t understand… Did you have amnesia or something when you went?”

“Uh, no. New Orleans is known for partying and drinking… Never mind. What’s up?”

“Oh, well now that the hunter threat is over, I was thinking that I might like to go there.”

“Really, why? Mardi Gras isn’t until February.”

“I’m trying to find my uncle. Orla’s heard that he might be there.”

“I don’t see any reason why you can’t go, though you probably shouldn’t go alone. Not that I don’t think you can take care of yourself—you’ve proven time and time again that you can—but New Orleans is… well… New Orleans.”

“I wasn’t planning on going alone. I actually talked to Cali about coming along, and I was hoping that you might come too.”

**Episode 2244**

Stunned, I turned to Dani. “What did you just say?”

I was tempted to start looking around her room to see if there was someone hiding out and playing tricks on me. We definitely had some pranksters in the pack house.

Dani shook her head, confused. “I—I didn’t say anything, Cali, I swear.”

I looked at Marta. “You sure you didn’t say anything?”

“Nope, nothing. Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not, actually. I’m creeped out. That voice—it sounded so real. I couldn’t have imagined it.” I didn’t even want to think about what the voice had said to me—yet another mention of “the key.”

*What is happening? Why is everything so out of whack right now?*

“What was it that you heard?” Dani asked. She’d crossed her arms over her chest and was looking around the room like she was afraid there was a ghost haunting her new digs. She’d had a rough day already, and here I was, making it worse.

Not wanting to get into any of the Seluna stuff with Dani, since it would only scare her, I shrugged it off. “I don’t know—forget it. I’m probably just hearing things. Maybe it was one of my mates mind linking.”

I quickly slipped out before they could ask any more questions.

I went out into the hallway and lingered there, trying to get my bearings. Downstairs, I could hear Torin going on and on about decorations.

“No, no, no! I said to alternate between gold and silver bulbs on the garland, not silver and blue! That’s not on theme!”

I held my breath and closed my eyes, trying to conjure up the voice again. I squeezed my eyes shut and held my breath, but nothing came to me. The only thing I knew was that it had sounded like a female voice—and I could’ve sworn that it belonged to the Seluna of my dreams. *But how could that be? I wasn’t sleeping, I was awake.* Was it possible that the dreams were becoming part of my waking life? I hated that idea.

Then another thought hit me—what if this was all part of the *due destini* curse? What if I was starting to go mad? I hadn’t even considered that possibility for a long while, but everyone knew that hearing voices was a telltale sign that things might not be right upstairs.

Butterflies fluttered to life in my stomach as I started to panic. Whatever the cause, I was determined to get to the bottom of it. It was obvious that ignoring all this Seluna and Lucian stuff wasn’t going to make it go away.

I went downstairs and overheard Artemis and my mother talking about New Orleans. Artemis spotted me and waved me over.

“Hey, Cali. We’re looking into flights to New Orleans. Too bad it’s not February—I read up about Mardi Gras, and it sounds amazing. But then, I’m not going there to party. Did you know that it’s a party town?”

“Yup, I know,” I said distractedly. *Shoot, I was supposed to maybe go with her, and I haven’t even had time to think about it.* And now that I was being haunted by a disembodied voice, I knew that I wasn’t going to be able to give the idea the attention that it deserved right now, either.

“We could leave really, really soon! I’m so excited,” Artemis said. “Doesn’t that sound great? Then I’ll find my uncle and he’ll tell me what I need to know to find Kadmos.”

“Artemis, honey, I’m glad you’re going, and I totally support it, but I want you to lower your expectations about finding your uncle. It’s a big place, and it’s been a long time since I last heard about him. Who knows if he’s still there? Or if he was there at all,” my mother said.

“Well, if he’s not in New Orleans then I’ll try Vegas, and if he’s not there then I’ll go back to the drawing board. I have to start somewhere, right? I can’t just sit around wondering about my father and not doing anything about it. If there’s a chance that I could find my uncle in New Orleans—or wherever—and that he could give me any information, I have to take it.”

I wanted to be hopeful too, for Artemis’s sake, but what my mom was saying made a lot of sense. New Orleans was an unfamiliar place, and we didn’t even know anything about this uncle guy. For all we knew, he had no information about Kadmos, either. And what if he was a shady character? The unknowns about this entire thing were endless, but I didn’t want to tell Artemis that. I had no interest in dashing her hopes.

“I talked to Greyson,” Artemis said. “He’s on board with it as long as someone comes with us. I asked him to come, but he said that he doesn’t want to leave the pack.”

“Yeah, I get that. He’s the Alpha, so he can’t leave the pack for long,” I said. Though now that I really thought about it, it occurred to me that it would be kind of nice to go on a vacation of sorts with Greyson. We hadn’t had an opportunity to travel much, but now that he was Alpha, we’d probably never get that chance. *Do Alphas get vacation time?*

“I get it too,” Artemis said. “He has a lot of responsibilities. And he just took over again… So that’s why I was hoping that you might ask Xavier.”

“Sure, I’ll ask him.” I was already thinking that I needed to talk to Xavier and Greyson about the voice that I’d heard, and saying that I’d talk to them about Artemis’s trip was the perfect excuse to get out of this conversation so that I could go find them. “I’ll see you two later—I’m going to go find him right now.”

I slipped out into the foyer, making sure to stay out of Torin’s line of sight so that I didn’t get roped into decorating.

My mother followed me out. “Are you okay, Cali? You seem a little… preoccupied.”

“Yes, I’m fine. Still a little rattled about the whole blowing up a car thing, but I’m good otherwise.” I gave her what I hoped was a reassuring smile. “I’ll see you later, Mom. I need to go find Greyson and Xavier.”

I bounded away to find Greyson. I hadn’t been looking for long when I found him holed up in one of the studies, probably hiding from Torin.

“I need to talk to you and Xavier about something,” I said.

“Of course. What’s up?”

“It’s about Lucian.”

“In that case, you should probably talk to me about it first. Xavier’s not in the best mood.”

“No, we should find him. I want to talk to both of you about it.”

We looked around for Xavier and finally found him outside on the porch, staring at one of the inflatable snowmen planted near the walkway.

“Hey, I’m glad we found you. I need to talk to you both about something.” Deciding not to leave them in too much suspense, I dove right in. “I was upstairs just now, talking to Dani and Marta, and… I think I heard Seluna’s voice.”

“Seluna? Really? When?” Xavier asked.

“Just a few minutes ago.”

They exchanged a concerned look but surprisingly didn’t say anything, apparently waiting for me to go on.

“It was super weird, and I have to find out why all of this is happening. I’m worried that it could be a symptom of the *due destini*—that I could be losing my mind.”

Xavier pulled me into a hug. “You’re not going mad, Cali. You’re the sanest person I know.”

“I agree. Too much strange stuff has happened since the party at the Vanguard palace—it’s not just in your head.”

I took a second to think about everything that had been happening lately; how the mate bond was pulling Xavier to Ava, how Greyson had kissed Aysel that night at the palace, and then all the weird conversations I’d been having with Lucian… And of course, the strange Seluna dreams.

“Maybe you’re right,” I said. “Maybe I’m not going mad, but somehow that seems even worse, because it means that something else is going on. I have to figure this out.”

“What do you want to do, Cali?” Greyson asked.

“Well, remember how we’d discussed inviting Lucian to come to the pack house? I think that the time is now. I can’t go on like this for much longer. I didn’t want to contact him without your permission—this is the Redwood pack house after all, and you’ve both made it clear how you feel about Lucian, and I didn’t want to get you two all riled up. But now I don’t feel like I have a choice—I need to talk to him to see if he knows anything about why Seluna has been appearing to me, and now talking to me while I’m wide awake.” I took a deep breath. “But the thing is, I don’t have any way of contacting him, so one of us has to go back to the Vanguard palace to invite him directly. The question is, which one of us should go?”

Greyson and Xavier pointed at each other. “You’re going!”

**Episode 2245**

XAVIER

I scowled at Greyson. What the fuck did he mean, saying *I* was going to extend the invite for Lucian to come visit the pack house? There was not a single cell in my body that wanted that delusional wolf in my home—no matter what Cali said about her dreams. We could figure it out without inviting the enemy in.

“If you want Lucian to visit so badly, *you* can be the one to extend the invitation,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

“I’m the Alpha,” he said, like I didn’t already know this. Like he didn’t spout those three little words every goddamn day. “I can’t leave the pack for every little thing that comes along.”

“So you’re admitting that this is a little thing, then?” I pressed. “Because I’m not your errand boy.”

Cali huffed. “Stop it, *both* of you.”

“Look, if Lucian does agree to come back with you,” Greyson said, looking at me, “I’ll make sure the pack is ready to receive him.”

He might have been the Alpha, but that didn’t mean I was ready to just bow to whatever the hell he wanted me to do. I hated the idea of being Greyson’s little messenger to the Vanguard pack, especially because my going over to that nuthouse would be one more opportunity for my brother to have Cali all to himself.

“Why can’t you send someone else?” I asked. “Like Rishika, maybe?”

Greyson shook his head. He was probably loving this. Holding his power over me, making it one hundred percent clear exactly who was in charge here. I was surprised he could contain his joy.

“I’d prefer to send someone Lucian’s familiar with,” he explained. “Someone who’s well-versed in his bullshit—and who’s familiar with the dangers involved with entering Vanguard territory, who can handle themselves if things go sideways. Nobody fits that bill quite like you do, Xavier.”

I blinked. Okay, that was somewhat complimentary—practically gushing, considering mine and Greyson’s relationship—but it didn’t make me any happier about the prospect of venturing out to Vanguard territory and begging their crazy prince to grace the Redwoods with his presence.

“You’re right. It is dangerous,” Cali mused. “Someone should go along with Xavier to watch his back. I’ll do it.”

“Absolutely not,” Greyson said. “It’s too dangerous.”

“He’s right,” I said.

I hated to agree with him, hated even more to turn down the opportunity to spend time alone with Cali, but Greyson was right. The Vanguards were as unpredictable as they were powerful—for all we knew, this could be some kind of trap. Or a way to lure Cali back to them. Lucian seemed to have some kind of fixation on her, and I wasn’t about to make it any easier for him to try something shady with my mate.

“You’re not coming with me,” I said firmly.

“Rishika is a good suggestion,” Greyson said. “You’re more familiar with Lucian and the Vanguards, which makes you the most qualified for this task, but she’d be good backup. She’s reliable and can handle pretty much anything that comes her way.”

Rishika had also pushed pretty damn hard for Greyson to be Alpha. It was clear where her allegiance lay. She wasn’t my first choice for backup on this.

“What do you think, Xavier?” Cali asked.

I glanced over at her, who was watching me with hope shimmering in her eyes. I didn’t relish the thought of returning to the Vanguard pack, of having to deal with Lucian for even one single second. And no, I didn’t think we needed his help to sort out Cali’s dreams—but *she* did. This was what she wanted, what she thought she needed, and I wanted to help her.

Plus, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that this could be a great opportunity to show the pack exactly which one of the Evers brothers actually dealt with problems around here rather than relying on other people.

*If I play this right, it could be another notch in my belt for my becoming Alpha.*

I nodded. “Rishika would be fine.”

“Great. I’ll go speak with her and make sure she’s on board.” Greyson headed toward the kitchen.

“I guess I’ll go get ready then.” I headed toward the stairs and, after a beat, I heard Cali’s footsteps behind me.

“Are you okay?” she asked as we ascended the stairs.

“Peachy.” I pushed open the door to my bedroom and headed inside.

Cali sat on the edge of my mattress, watching me move around the room. “Xavier, I know you. I know you’re… mad.”

I paused long enough to turn and look at her. “Honestly? There are about a hundred other things—painful, terrible things—that I’d rather do than meet with Lucian. Are you sure there’s not some other way we can deal with your dreams?”

“Lucian knows about all this stuff.” She shrugged. “I don’t know who else I could even go to.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that you might be playing right into Lucian’s hands? He’s making himself seem indispensable.”

“I don’t see how. The whole point of this task is to bring Lucian here where he can’t try anything. He won’t have Andrei and the others at his beck and call, he won’t have that giant maze of a house or any of his magical resources. This seems like the safest solution. But if you’re not comfortable going, I’m more than happy to go in your place,” she said.

I scowled. “Yeah, right.”

“What? You think I can’t handle myself? I’ve got Fae powers, and I’m sure Rishika would still come along with me.”

I pulled her into a hug. “I know you’re a badass. But none of us know for sure what Lucian is truly capable of. And until he’s a known quantity, there’s no situation in which I’ll allow you to waltz back into that stupid moon palace.”

“I mean I definitely don’t love the idea of *you* going back there,” she admitted.

“Keep that attitude up, and I may just stay here like this and never let you go.”

Her arms tightened around me. “Just be careful, okay?”

I kissed her forehead. “It’ll be fine. All I’m doing is inviting Lucian to come visit. What could possibly go wrong?”

“Why would you even *ask* that?”

I kissed her, gently at first and then deeper. It took every ounce of my self-control to break away.

*The faster you get this glorified messenger bullshit over with, the faster you can come back to Cali and pick up right where you left off.*

I forced a smile. “Let’s go downstairs and see if Rishika’s feeling up to a field trip.”

True to form, Rishika was waiting for us at the bottom of the stairs, ready to go.

Greyson was there too. He looked from me to Rishika. “At the first sign of trouble, get the hell out of there. Understand?”

I rolled my eyes. “We can handle ourselves.” Then I turned to Cali. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

Rishika and I headed out of the house and onto the front porch, and she tensed, clearly ready to shift. I held a hand out.

“Wait. I can’t believe I’m suggesting this, but should we drive? Showing up as wolves could be seen as a sign of aggression.”

She paused for a moment to mull my words over, then nodded. “Good idea. But if there’s any trouble, I won’t hesitate to shift—regardless of how *aggressive* it might seem.”

“I wouldn’t dream of asking you not to.”

We headed toward the cars, and I grimaced at the still-charred remains of one of my cars, courtesy of Cali and Dani’s errant Fae blast.

Rishika smirked. “Maybe we should take Greyson’s?”

“Excellent idea.” *Why should my cars always bear the brunt of the pack’s chaos?*

As we got inside, Cali came running out.

“Wait!”

I rolled down the window, and she passed me an envelope. “I thought a formal invitation might be more appropriate.”

“Thanks.” I doubted it would be necessary.

We’d barely made it out of the driveway before Rishika was peppering me with questions about the Vanguard pack, Lucian, and the palace.

“Okay, I’ve heard these people are a little crazy, so what should I be on the lookout for? What’s the difference between their usual brand of crazy and something that might spell danger for us?”

“Honestly, I wish I knew the answer to that myself. They’re unpredictable. Just be careful and stay on your guard. Whatever happens, we can’t get separated,” I said, never looking away from the road ahead. “We go into this together, and we leave together.”

“Fair enough.”

It was silent for a moment before she asked, “Are you upset with me, that I pushed for Greyson to be Alpha?”

There was no point in lying. “I’m not thrilled about it.”

“I was just doing what I thought was best for the pack.”

The question was on the tip of my tongue: *why the hell am* I *not the best option for the pack?*

But I stopped myself. What was the point of hashing that out? Rishika was with me now, and I could make a much better argument for myself through my actions than I could trying to win her over with logic.

“I want you to know that I didn’t hesitate when Greyson asked me to go with you,” she added. “You’re a Redwood. I’ll always defend a fellow Redwood.”

I nodded and added dryly, “Your loyalty to the pack is admirable.”

As we approached the palace, a guard stepped out onto the road to stop the car. He gestured for me to roll the window down. “What can I do for you?”

“We’re here to see Lucian,” I said. No way in hell would I ever call him “Prince Lucian.”

“All visitors must approach on foot,” the guard explained.

“Fine.” I parked the car on the side of the road and turned to Rishika. “Just stay alert. This pack is crazy.”

We exited the car and headed toward the entrance. It didn’t take long for me to notice that we were being followed by a group of Vanguard wolves.

*They sure take security seriously.*

Rishika’s eyes were wide as we headed up the steps to the palace entrance. “Holy shit.”

Before I could respond, Andrei stepped out through the entrance with another group of guards. “Going somewhere?”

**Episode 2246**

I had watched Xavier and Rishika drive off until the car had disappeared behind the trees. My stomach tightened with unease as the distance between us grew. I knew all the logical reasons why Xavier had to be the one to go to Lucian, but knowing it was the right call didn’t make me feel even a little bit better—not when it meant Xavier was risking himself to deliver that invite to Lucian for my benefit.

When he’d kissed me, everything had just felt so right. I’d never wanted it to stop—and I kind of wished he’d put the car in reverse and come back. That we could pick up right where we’d left off. Maybe it was some kind of irrational fear, lurking beneath the surface—like I was afraid of never seeing him again, so I was trying to drag out every moment I could with him.

At least Rishika was with him. He wasn’t going in there to face Lucian alone.

*How will Lucian react to the invitation? Will he even accept it? Or will this just be another opportunity for him to play mind games with us?*

My stomach clenched as I was hit with a fresh wave of anxiety.

*What if Xavier’s right? What if this is exactly what Lucian wants—a way to separate the Alpha brothers, to make the pack more vulnerable to… whatever he’s planning?*

I pulled in a deep breath and shook myself. *Think about this clearly, Cali.* Xavier was being overprotective—no surprise there—but I’d have to be flat-out paranoid to listen to it. There was no possible way for us to be playing into Lucian’s hands, because he had no idea we were even coming. And despite everything I was sure the Vanguard prince *wanted* us to believe about him, he wasn’t omniscient. I just hoped that he knew enough about Seluna and my dreams to be of some use, but even that was no guarantee.

Lucian was the Alpha of a powerful pack with some pretty mystical traditions, but at the end of the day, he was still just an Alpha werewolf like Greyson and Xavier.

*Get a grip, Cali. Xavier will be fine. He always is. He’s Xavier.*

I headed back inside and made it three steps past the door before I turned and looked over my shoulder. How long would it be before Xavier contacted us? Obviously, he and Rishika were still on the way there. But once they arrived and met with Lucian, how long would it be *then*? Maybe thirty minutes? An hour? Longer?

A new troubling thought—seriously, where were these coming from, and why couldn’t I channel all this nervous energy into something useful?—made my stomach clench again. Greyson had been so quick to push Xavier to be our messenger to the Vanguard pack. Greyson’s logic had made sense at the time: the Vanguards were unpredictable, and it would be best to send someone who had some history with them, who knew exactly what they were dealing with. But… what if there was more to Greyson’s suggestion than simple logic? What if his reasons were more personal?

*Like, I don’t know, shoving the other Alpha vying for my attention into danger?*

I grimaced and shook myself again.

“Come on, Cali,” I muttered to myself. “Xavier will be back soon. There’s nothing to worry about. Just chill out.”

I’d have my answers soon—about the dream, and about the strange goings on at the palace.

*Assuming, of course, that Lucian agrees to come.*

I was pulled out of my thoughts by Artemis, who came racing up to me.

“We booked the plane tickets for New Orleans!” she blurted out, grinning like a madwoman. “We leave in January in the new year or whatever it’s called.”

My brows raised. “Wow, really?”

“What?” Her smile slipped. “I should’ve met him more than two decades ago. As far as I’m concerned, I’ve got a lot of catching up to do. If I can find him at least.”

“Right. Sorry.” This was the tie to the other side of her family she’d never met—to her uncle Adair and, hopefully, through him, to her father Kadmos. Who might or might not be alive. We were still a little unclear on that part. I forced a smile. “I’m happy for you, Artemis. Just… Don’t get your hopes up too high, okay? There’s a real chance that your uncle won’t be in New Orleans. And even if he is, that’s not exactly a small town. It won’t be easy to find him.”

“I know that—but at least I’ll be doing something. I’ll be closer to finding him than if I just stay here. I mean, if the tables were turned and you were the one looking for your father, for an entire side of your family, wouldn’t you try just about anything? Leave no stone unturned?”

When she put it that way… The thought of being without my father was unbearable. He’d been a steady presence throughout my entire life. He’d held me together while Mom was sick. He’d held all of us together. I couldn’t fathom what my life would have been like without him.

Poor Artemis. She’d lived most of her life without either of her parents, but recent months and pure luck had reunited her with me and Mom. And I knew my dad loved her like she was his own, but I couldn’t fault her for wanting to seek out the man who’d given her half of everything she was.

“Obviously, I would do the exact same thing,” I said. “I’m sorry. I’m not trying to take the wind out of your sails. I guess I just… I want to protect you. In case this doesn’t go how you’re hoping it will. Like, what if you find Adair and he tells you Kadmos is dead?”

“Then I’ll know the truth. That’s all I’m after.” My sister’s lips curved up into a small but genuine smile. “But… I understand where you’re coming from. I guess I’m not used to people being protective of me.”

“Well, you’d better get used to it. You have family now. And a pack. Lots of people here care about you and want to make sure you stay safe.”

“Speaking of…” Her eyes brightened. “Have you talked to Xavier about coming with us?”

I shook my head. “Sorry, I haven’t had a chance yet. I will, though.”

*As soon as he gets back.*

It’d be the perfect time to ask him to help. He hadn’t been thrilled about going to the palace to invite Lucian over. But asking him to come with Artemis and me to New Orleans? A chance for him and me to spend some time together? There was no way he’d say no.

“I’m going to have to do some research,” I added. “Map out the sights, find the best places to eat some authentic food.”

“It’s not a vacation, Cali.”

“I know that. Still, we might as well enjoy ourselves while we search.” I smiled. “I’ll talk to Xavier about it and let you know, okay?”

She nodded. “I need to talk to Mom, too. See if she’s remembered anything about Adair that might help us track him down.”

Artemis headed off to the kitchen in search of our mother, and I watched her go with a sigh. Though New Orleans *would* be a little bit like a vacation, I was still worried Artemis was setting herself up for a big, epic letdown. I understood the urgency in finding her father, but the hope that he was alive was based on rumors my mom had gotten from a Fae tree. Not exactly a reliable source.

*Whatever happens in New Orleans, I need to be as supportive to Artemis as possible. No if, ands, or buts.*

“Hey.” I turned to see Greyson approaching. “I’ve talked to some of the other pack members—Jay, Sage, Zainab, and Ravi—about being ready for Lucian. I’ve warned them I’m expecting them to be on their best behavior, but also to be ready for a worst-case scenario.”

My brows rose. “Polite but ready to brawl? Well, we’ve got the second part of that in the bag. You don’t think he’d hurt Xavier or Rishika if worst came to worst, do you?”

He shook his head. “If Lucian truly is a prince—and that’s a big *if*—he wouldn’t dare cause harm to the messengers. It’s not how diplomacy is supposed to work.”

*Right. Because Lucian is so big on diplomacy.* My arm still ached from where he’d injected that truth serum, not so long ago.

“Do you think he really is royalty?” I asked. “Or is this some elaborate delusion that his pack just keeps enabling? I should probably check in with Steinar about the Vanguard pack. There should be some record of werewolf royalty in the Obalatarion—if it even exists.”

“Honestly? I have no idea. I’d never heard of the Vanguard pack or their so-called prince until recently.” His gaze softened. “I just hope you’re able to find the answers you need. I hate that those Seluna dreams are still bothering you.” He pulled me into a hug. “Whatever happens with Lucian, we’ll get to the bottom of this. I’m sure Xavier and Rishika will be just fine, and in the meantime, I’ll keep you safe.”

I stiffened, suddenly remembering the concern I’d had earlier. I eased myself out of Greyson’s arms so I could look him in the eye. “Did you knowingly send Xavier into danger?”

**Episode 2247**

XAVIER

Andrei sauntered forward, a smirk twisting his lips, and I ground my molars together to keep from swearing. This was exactly what I’d been worried about. Or, at least, it was one of the many scenarios I’d been worried about.

Rishika turned to me. “What was that about not shifting?” she muttered.

“Take it easy,” I said. But I didn’t take my eyes off Andrei or the guards clustered behind him for a single second.

This felt like a trap—being ordered to leave the relative safety of the car and continuing on foot, only to run into a welcoming committee. And I was sure the werewolves that had followed us in were still at our backs, in case we decided to turn around and leave. It was as aggressive a move as could be without *actually* attempting to harm Rishika or myself, which spoke volumes.

What I didn’t know was whether this was just a big show that Andrei was putting on to show Lucian just how tough he could be, or if this was a message from Lucian himself—a show of force to the Redwood pack, and all the other packs in the area, that we couldn’t just call on them whenever we wanted.

“Xavier Evers.” Andrei puffed out his chest. “I didn’t expect to see you here again so soon. What business do you have here?”

My eyes narrowed. “Cut the crap. You think they would’ve let us through your stupid gate if we were coming to attack you? We’re delivering an invitation to Lucian.” I held up the envelope Cali had given us as proof. “There’s no need for all of this,” I said, gesturing to the dozen or so guards that had surrounded us. “Unless you think you need this much help to deliver some mail? Or to take on Rishika and me?”

Andrei laughed, but the new tension in his face told me I’d struck a nerve. He extended his hand. “I’ll deliver the invitation.”

I tucked the envelope against my chest and shook my head. “Sorry, no go. We brought it all the way out here, and we’ll deliver it to Lucian personally. I’m sure your prince will appreciate the extra effort and the personal touch.”

I had no idea if that was true, but there was no denying that hand delivering a letter that could easily have been sent in the mail had a certain amount of pomp and circumstance to it. I could only assume it was the kind of thing Lucian got off on.

“That’s not going to happen.”

Rishika squared her shoulders. “Fine. Then we’re going back—and you can be the one to explain to your master why he *didn’t* receive Caliana’s personal, handwritten invitation.”

There was no mistaking the worry that flickered across Andrei’s face. I had to hand it to Rishika—she was good. Really damn good.

Andrei waved a hand, and the pack of guards dispersed, some disappearing back into the house, and others returning to their posts near the entrance to the grounds.

Andrei looked absolutely furious, and suddenly I didn’t mind being the messenger so much. If it meant I got to fuck with the enemy, then it wasn’t such a bad gig after all.

“Follow me,” he said. “Lucian will be expecting you.”

I kept my expression flat, but secretly I was surprised—and on edge. How could Lucian have possibly known we were coming? We hadn’t even decided on this plan until literally ten minutes before Rishika and I had left.

*How the hell is this guy always one step ahead? Does this have something to do with Cali’s crazy Seluna dreams?*

I’d thought for sure that Lucian’s response to her dreams was just a trick—yet another way to lure her in so he could trap her here. But maybe Cali was right—maybe there was something going on, something that went far beyond reason and reality. And maybe Lucian had a unique insight into whatever that was.

I kind of hoped not. I wanted to fix Cali’s dreams, but I’d had enough experience with magic and its messy fallout to last me for the rest of my life.

My surprise must have shown on my face after all, because Andrei added, “Lucian is like a chess master—he often knows his rivals’ moves before they do.”

I frowned, continuing to follow Andrei through the labyrinthine house. “I didn’t realize Lucian and I were rivals.”

Andrei didn’t seem to have a response to that. He did, however, cast an assessing glance at Rishika over his shoulder.

“Are you the Redwood Luna?” he asked. “The *real* Luna?”

“Rishika’s a trusted pack member,” I cut in before she could respond. “Don’t read too much into it.”

How great would it be to deliver Cali’s invitation with Cali herself? By my side as the Luna of the Redwood pack. I’d be Alpha, of course. And she’d be all mine. Finally.

I really liked that thought. The first time I’d been stuck wandering these halls, I’d had to deal with Ava and our maddeningly indestructible mate bond. She was like a bad penny. I just couldn’t seem to shake her, no matter how hard I tried. At least I wouldn’t have to worry about that this time around. Rishika was no Cali, but she was sure as shit a winning alternative to Ava.

I tried to keep track of the path Andrei led us down, just in case Rishika and I needed to find our way out on our own. The palace was as immaculate and cold and fancy as ever—but a creepy energy hung in the air. It set my nerves on edge, had me looking over my shoulder.

As if the chills running down my spine had willed her into being, Aysel stepped out of an adjoining room and watched us walk past. Her cold, bright eyes didn’t seem to miss anything as she scanned over Rishika and me.

Andrei was brought up short, and suddenly, that brooding, haughty air turned sickly sweet.

“Princess.” He bowed. “It’s a pleasure to see you. I’m just escorting our guests to see your brother.”

She looked past him dismissively, and her gaze lingered on Rishika before she turned to me. “Where’s Greyson?”

I snorted. “What, you disappointed?”

“I am. I was hoping to see your brother.”

*It really is a shame Greyson didn’t tag along.*

“Excuse us, Princess,” Andrei said as he led us away, into a large drawing room where the Vanguard prince himself was staring out the window with an air of cultivated disinterest. I wasn’t buying it. Hell, I’d have put money on someone notifying Lucian the moment our car pulled up.

“Your Highness, Xavier and Rishika of the Redwood pack are here to deliver an invitation from Caliana Hart.”

Lucian slowly turned to face us and dismissed Andrei with a wave. “Thank you, Andrei. That will be all. Close the door on your way out.”

Just like his sister had, Lucian stared at Rishika for a beat before turning to me. “I’ve been expecting you.”

“So I’ve been told. Your bodyguard didn’t seem too pleased to see us.”

Lucian laughed. “Andrei takes his responsibilities to heart—something that I’ve come to appreciate. But don’t let his devotion deceive you—he’s one of the fiercest warriors in the Vanguard pack.”

With that unspoken threat humming in the air between us, Lucian turned to Rishika again.

“Welcome. Rishika, was it?”

Rishika nodded at the prince in greeting, and he grinned like he’d just been given a fantastic gift. “Oh, Xavier, I do hope you didn’t feel it was necessary to bring along a bodyguard? Surely we’ve moved past such precautions?”

I frowned. “The dozen or so guards that started tailing us the moment we hit Vanguard territory must not have gotten that memo.”

Lucian’s eyes tightened, and he cleared his throat. “Very well. I understand you have something for me?” He held out his hand, showing off a huge diamond- and ruby-encrusted gold ring that could probably have been fenced for a cool half-mill.

*And I thought the Redwoods were doing well.*

I handed over the envelope, and Lucian seemed to drink in every detail. “Oh, Caliana. Such lovely penmanship, don’t you think?” He opened the envelope with a strange sort of affection and then breathed the paper in. “I can still smell her sweet scent. What a gift this is.”

I ground my teeth together. If he kept huffing that envelope, I was gonna rip his fucking throat out.

Lucian pulled out the note and scanned the letter, his brows raising. “She wants me to come now?”

“Is that a problem?” *It’s not like this asshole ever does anything but stand around preening.*

The prince took a seat on the edge of a chaise, like the question alone had tired him. “Well, it could be. I’ll have to think about it.”

“It’s a simple question. Are you coming back with us or not?”

Lucian leaned forward, a challenge in his eyes. “For Caliana, I will come, of course. But on one condition.”

**Episode 2248**

GREYSON

I didn’t know how to answer Cali’s question. Not because I didn’t have an answer, but because I couldn’t believe she would actually accuse me of purposefully throwing Xavier into harm’s way.

*That can’t be what she means. After everything we’ve already been through?*

I pulled in a breath. “We all know the Vanguards and their moon boys are unpredictable. They’re also a rival pack, and that fact makes them dangerous in and of itself. But that doesn’t mean I would send Xavier over there hoping he’d get hurt.” My brow furrowed. “Why would you even think that?”

Cali’s eyes widened. “What? I didn’t mean… Of course I would never think you would.”

I wasn’t sure I believed her.

“I know you care about Xavier,” she added, “and he knows it too, even though you’d both deny it. Just like I know Xavier cares for you too—though it might not always seem that way.” Her expression softened. “I’m sorry, Greyson. I’ve been so stressed about the Seluna dreams and bringing Lucian here… Sending Xavier and Rishika into the heart of Vanguard territory’s got me all twisted up.”

Any frustration I might have felt disappeared in an instant. I gently placed my hands on her shoulders. “Believe me, if I thought it would be best for the pack—and for you—for me to go to invite Lucian instead of Xavier, I would have gone to the palace myself. But I believe I’m needed here more, and I have to keep my eyes focused on the pack. I need to reassure everyone that I’m their Alpha, and that they can count on me to be here for them.”

I took her hand and threaded our fingers together, looking into her eyes.

“I hope you understand,” I said. “I’m here for you, love. Whatever I can give you, you’ll have. But I need to be here for the rest of the pack, too.”

Her cheeks heated, and she looked away. I knew I had her flustered at that. “Um… Thank you.” She let out a breathy laugh. “Sorry, I kind of forgot what we were talking about.”

My pride practically purred to hear that, and I kissed her cheek. “How are you, love?”

“A little better now.” Her smile was hesitant but genuine. “I just hope things are going okay for Xavier and Rishika. I have to admit, this isn’t exactly how I’d anticipated seeing Lucian again.”

I squeezed her hand gently. “Well, this time, when you come face-to-face with Lucian, it’ll be here at the Redwood pack house. Lucian won’t be able to use any trickery—he won’t have even a single chance to get you alone, or to try to force something on you that you don’t want. I won’t allow it. We’re in control here. And if you decide, at any time, that you don’t want to have this meeting anymore, we’ll send him packing.”

Her smile brightened. “Kicking Prince Lucian out of my house? I have to admit, that does sound like fun.”

“I’ll keep you safe. I promise. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Thank you, Greyson.” She reached up on her tiptoes to brush a short, sweet kiss over my mouth.

I wanted nothing more than to anchor my hands on her hips and lose myself in the taste of her, but I forced myself to back away. I still had plenty to do to prepare for Moon Boy’s arrival. I’d already spoken to most of the pack, suggesting they steer clear of Lucian when he arrived, but also to—subtly, of course—make sure our guest was always aware that they were around and ready, should he try any of his usual bullshit.

There were a few guests whom I wouldn’t explicitly call pack members that had been left out of the loop regarding the royal visit. I had to fix that so that we could all be on the same page regarding our behavior once our guests arrived. Jacqueline was one of these individuals, and I found her in the den, reading a book. I filled her in on her role in Lucian’s visit, expecting her to be as combative as she always was. Instead, she looked impressed.

“Wait, a member of werewolf royalty is visiting here? I didn’t even realize you had a hierarchy, beyond pack Alphas. I’ve always thought royals are so interesting.”

I grimaced. “Honestly, I’m not convinced Lucian is any more royal than our kitchen table, but I’m willing to play along.”

She stood, tucking her book under her arm. “Thanks for the heads-up. I’m going to get ready.”

“You’re supposed to stay out of sight,” I reminded her.

“Sure, sure. But there’s no harm in being prepared if fate has other plans in mind.”

She disappeared up the staircase before I could string together another argument. I didn’t love the idea of having the vampires around during Lucian’s visit, but I could also see how they might make him think twice before trying anything.

Maybe Lucian was a real prince, and maybe his moon cult did have some power. But a pack house filled with wolves, vampires, Fae, witches, a hunter, and a medium wasn’t one to be trifled with—as Lucian would soon see for himself.

Torin came racing in, a Santa hat crammed on his head and his arms full of Christmas lights. “I cannot wait for Sneaky Santa this year!”

“Secret Santa,” I corrected, holding up a hand. “And maybe you can tone down all the holiday stuff by a notch or two?”

Torin looked around the den, which lacked the same Christmas cheer with which he’d bedecked the kitchen and living room. “You don’t like the decorations?”

He looked hurt, which nagged at my stomach more than I’d ever admit. *Did I make a mistake in encouraging all this over-the-top Christmas decorating?* Maybe. After seeing how Lucian lived at the Vanguard palace, I couldn’t imagine he’d be impressed to find the Redwood pack living in Santa’s fucking workshop.

But maybe this wasn’t the worst thing in the world. There was no way Lucian was going to be impressed with the Redwood pack house, no matter what state our home was in. Besides, the decorations and homey quality to what Torin was doing, at minimum, would show Lucian just how unified we were. And a united pack was a strong pack.

“It’s okay,” I finally said to Torin. “Decorate away. But when Lucian arrives, I don’t want to see you running around with a bunch of tinsel. Got it?”

The Fae man’s shoulders slumped in relief. “That’s fine. For a moment, I was worried you were going to cancel Secret Santa.”

“No, we’re all clear for that,” I assured him.

He nodded. “Glad to hear it. Now, if you’ll excuse me, these lights aren’t going to hang themselves—”

“Hold on.” I caught his arm. “I need you to do me a favor. Can you ‘arrange’ things so I’m Cali’s Secret Santa?”

“That’s so romantic!” He beamed at me like I was giving *him* a present. “Of course!”

“Greyson?” Cali’s voice sounded in the hallway, and Torin’s eyes went wide.

“I just need to hang these lights!” he all but shouted as he rushed out of the room.

*Smooth, Torin. Real smooth. How the hell is that guy gonna be able to keep the Secret Santa “scam” a secret, anyway?*

I couldn’t imagine Cali would love the idea of me tampering with the game so I could give her a gift, but the thought of being the one to give her the perfect gift was too good to pass up in the name of playing fair.

Cali passed Torin on her way into the den, her brow furrowing as the Fae man rushed toward the front porch.

“What’s up with him?” she asked.

“Oh, you know, the usual,” I shrugged. “He’s super excited about Christmas.”

Cali looked a little uneasy, and that had alarm bells going off in my mind.

“What’s wrong, love? Are you still worried about Lucian?”

“I am, but I actually wanted to talk to you about New Orleans.”

I held up a hand. “I already explained to Artemis that I can’t go. I can’t leave the pack right now.”

“I know,” she said quickly. “Which is why I’m going to ask Xavier to come.”

Shock and displeasure exploded in my chest, and I fought to keep my expression neutral. “Oh?”

The mere idea of Cali going to a city with a reputation like New Orleans burned me up inside. I’d been there before, and on top of that, I’d heard plenty of stories of what could happen to people like Cali there. I seriously doubted Xavier would put up an argument over going with Cali to New Orleans—not like he had when I’d asked him to go invite Lucian over.

I appreciated Cali giving me a heads-up about her decision, but that didn’t mean I liked it. “If the idea you two to going off to New Orleans together bothered me, would you still ask Xavier to go?”

“I might not,” she conceded. “But if I don’t ask him, I don’t know who else I *could* ask. Either way, I wanted you to know.”

“I trust you. If you want to go to New Orleans to help your sister, then I’m with you one hundred percent. If all things were equal, I’d prefer to go myself. But I’ve got the pack to contend with.”

“I understand.” She reached up and kissed me—

And instantly, I wanted to gag.

I jerked away from Cali in shock. *What the hell?*

But then I saw Cali’s face as she wiped her mouth like she’d just tasted something disgusting.

“Greyson?”

I leaned in and kissed her—only to dry heave.

Cali skittered back, staring at me in disgust, then confusion. “What’s happening?”

**Episode 2249**

XAVIER

I ground my teeth together so hard I nearly cracked a molar.

Of fucking *course* Lucian couldn’t just agree to go with us. People like him always had to feel like they were in control, especially over the people they considered their rivals. Which, according to Andrei’s slip earlier, was how Lucian saw the Redwood pack—or, at least, me.

I pulled in a deep, calming breath. It didn’t work. “I sincerely hope you’re not going to insist that we procure a gold carriage to transport you to the pack house, or some shit like that.”

Lucian’s mouth twitched. That bastard was trying to hide a smile. “That is a very tempting proposition,” he admitted. “After all, someone in my position should never miss an opportunity to give the people around them a reason to think highly of them. Status is everything. But…” He paused for dramatic effect. “That’s not what I have in mind at all.”

Well, he’d better spit out whatever he did have in mind before I lost my patience.

*If Lucian says anything creepy about Cali, the deal’s done. We’ll figure out her Seluna dreams on our own.*

Lucian watched me closely as he settled back in his seat. “It’s Aysel I’m truly concerned with. She is my dearest sister, and she carries authority within the Vanguard pack. However, I do struggle to involve her in the business of the Vanguard court. She is a princess, but she is not a Luna. You understand. I imagine that, in this, at least, she would appreciate the opportunity to visit the Redwood pack house.”

Fucking great. As if Lucian wasn’t bad enough, Aysel was crazier than a bag of cats. I kept my expression neutral. “I don’t suppose this opportunity for her would include seeing Greyson?”

Lucian smiled. “How observant you are, Xavier.”

“Forget it,” I snapped. Setting aside the horrifying and unforgivable fact that Aysel had tried to assault my brother, I’d rather invite a bloodthirsty vampire into the pack house than the Vanguard princess.

Greyson’s and my situation—with Cali, with the Alpha mantle—was tense enough without dumping gasoline on it and throwing a lit match. Which was exactly what allowing Aysel to worm herself into the pack house would accomplish.

“You will not extend your invitation to my sister?” Lucian asked, his expression hardening.

“With the way your sister has been sniffing around my brother? No chance in hell. Greyson is *Cali*’s mate,” I reminded him. “Aysel hasn’t exactly been respectful of that, and I don’t need to see her continued disrespect on our own turf.”

If I was being completely honest about it, I sometimes wished Aysel did have a chance. Not because I wanted to see more of her, but so that I could finally have Cali all to myself. But Greyson was devoted to Cali, and bringing the psychotic she-wolf into Redwood territory was a disaster waiting to happen. I didn’t want Cali getting upset.

“How unfortunate for you,” Lucian mused, like he was aware of all my traitorous thoughts about my brother. “But if Caliana truly wants my help, she may also benefit from Aysel’s experience and knowledge. We are a package deal, Aysel and I. Take it or leave it. Or…” He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I could always extend a private invitation to Caliana to come here.”

I scowled. “Right. Like I’d let her set foot in your territory alone after what happened last time. Do you think I’m an idiot?”

“On the contrary—I think you know what needs to be done.”

Fuck. I’d walked right into that one.

“Fine.” I heaved a sigh. “But I expect Aysel to behave herself.”

Lucian laughed, a real one. “If you can find a way to ensure that, please do share it with the rest of us.”

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Considering how long it had taken to hoof it up to the house and convince the prince to come back to the Redwood pack house with us, I was pleasantly surprised by how quickly the four of us—me, Rishika, Lucian, and Aysel—found ourselves in Greyson’s car and on our way back to the Redwood pack house.

The journey wasn’t a long one—the Vanguard pack was practically our next-door neighbor, out here in the forest. But *my god*, the drive back to the house with Lucian in tow felt like it took a hundred years.

Mostly because His Highness just wouldn’t. Shut. The. Fuck. Up.

“… and that’s how I decided to master equestrian pursuits at only fourteen. I was quite the prodigy, of course, but a prince cannot busy himself with leisure alone.” His laugh echoed through the car, all the louder because he was the only one who found that line funny. “Naturally, I had to keep my studies up—history, literature, art, politics, wartime strategy. Oh, and languages. I know it must be difficult for minds such as yours to imagine, but I am fluent in seven languages.” He began to count them off. “English, of course. French. German. Mandarin. Japanese, Russian, and—”

*Jesus Christ. This guy does not come with an off button.* That was when I realized he was almost certainly yammering on and on to annoy me and throw me off my own game.

I tuned him out, but he required almost no feedback to keep prattling on. In the passenger seat, Rishika was stone-faced in a way I’d never seen before. Her fingers were wrapped around the center console with a white-knuckled grip. This was a wolf who’d faced down Rogues, Silas’s forces, revenants, and skilled hunters, and ten minutes of being locked in a car with Lucian was wearing on her in a way that bloodshed never had. I didn’t blame her. I felt the exact same way.

I glanced back at Aysel in the rearview mirror. Unlike Rishika, she seemed unaffected by her brother’s monologue. She was probably used to it, living in that house with him. She stared down at something in her hand, something I couldn’t quite make out from the driver’s seat. Probably her phone.

*Am I bringing a time bomb into the pack house?* Cali sure as shit wouldn’t be happy to see the Vanguard princess—the same way she didn’t like to cross paths with Ava.

As for Greyson… He’d be able to handle it. I didn’t take pleasure in bringing the woman who had been tormenting my brother along, but that was the price Lucian had demanded. And since Greyson couldn’t be bothered to participate in extending the invitation, he didn’t get to make a fuss about how I handled the negotiations.

Suddenly, Lucian leaned forward, bracing his hands against the back of Rishika’s and my seats. “But enough about my excellence. Tell me about yourself, Xavier. I’ve always wanted to know what it was like to grow up as a commoner.”

My hands tightened on the steering wheel. Maybe if I drove us into a tree, it would stop him from talking forever. I’d probably get hurt, maybe even die. But it would be worth it.

“It was just peachy,” I muttered, turning onto the driveway that led up to the pack house.

Lucian pointed ahead, nearly jolting the rearview mirror out of alignment. “Are those Christmas lights?”

I blinked. The outside of the pack house looked like Santa’s fucking workshop. It was absolutely covered in Christmas decorations. Clearly, nobody had bothered to rein in Torin.

“It’s a Redwood holiday tradition,” Rishika explained.

Aysel smirked. “How quaint.” It was the first thing she’d said since getting into the car.

I parked the car and nearly tripped over myself in my haste to get the fuck away from the Vanguard royals.

Rishika inclined her head. “Please, come inside.”

Lucian’s and Aysel’s heads swiveled around as we brought them into the house, taking everything in. Probably judging it for not matching the grandeur of the Vanguard pack house.

I didn’t care. I’d rather live here than in their gilded madhouse.

“Here’s the living room. You can make yourselves comfortable.”

Lucian and Aysel perched themselves on the very edge of the sofa as Greyson and Cali came downstairs to join us. Together.

I bristled, but then I froze. They looked… awkward? They’d changed their clothes, too. Either they’d opted to dress up for the occasion, or… Had they slept together? No, that wasn’t right. Greyson wouldn’t seduce Cali knowing Lucian could arrive at any moment.

“Caliana!” Lucian jumped to his feet and made a production of bowing to kiss her hand as she entered the room.

Greyson looked calm, and every bit the Alpha in control—until he saw Aysel sitting on the couch. He stiffened and threw me a dirty look.

*What the hell is she doing here?* he asked through the mind link.

*It was either bring her, or no Lucian.* I smiled. *What could I do?*

“Would either of you like something to drink?” Cali asked.

Aysel lounged back on the sofa. “Yes, I’d love a glass of Dom Perignon Rose Gold.”

Cali looked confused.

“White chocolate mocha would be wonderful, Cali. Thank you,” Greyson said smoothly.

Relief flashed across her face, and Cali headed to the kitchen. I hated that she was waiting on them.

Several pack members walked past the living room, clearly pretending to be busy, but I noticed their eyes snapping over to Lucian and Aysel. *God, can we just get this over with?*

Cali returned with the drinks, offering Lucian and Aysel each a mug. Lucian delicately sipped his and pronounced it to be the best coffee he’d had since setting foot in Oregon. Not exactly a glowing review.

Aysel set her mug on the end table and didn’t touch it again.

“Cali,” Greyson said gently, tension humming across his body. “Why don’t you tell Lucian about your dreams?”

She did—and the whole thing made my head spin. I watched Lucian’s face for any sign that he was somehow involved.

“It is curious,” he admitted, when she finished her explanation, “but I’m not sure what I can do about it.”

Aysel stood up and began to circle Cali. “Perhaps the problem isn’t with you, Lucian.” She stopped in front of Cali so they were face-to-face.

“Stop speaking in riddles, Aysel,” Lucian said. “What are you talking about?”

“These dreams involving Seluna and the moon suggest that Caliana is a mystical moon priestess.”

Cali’s eyes widened, and both Greyson and I rushed to her side.

“What?” she asked.

Lucian seemed to mull this over. “There’s only one way to know for sure, and it’s precisely what I had spoken of to you before. We’ll need to do a moon ritual.”

**Episode 2250**

I frowned. “I’m sorry, what?”

It was bad enough having Aysel here at all, no doubt scrutinizing every little thing little about me and outright snubbing Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mocha (the disrespect!).

“What the hell do you mean I’m a… What did you call me? A moon priestess?” My face heated. Applying that title to me felt *ridiculous*.

Aysel looked distinctly unimpressed. “It’s all quite simple. Do you really not know anything about it?” From her tone she thought I was some backwoods country bumpkin, like *everyone* should know exactly what a moon priestess was. Silly me for being ignorant!

“Perhaps you could enlighten me,” I said. “It sounds like something from *Game of Thrones*.”

Lucian brightened. “Oh, did you know that the author based a character on me?”

I didn’t dignify that with a response, and neither did anyone else in the room, though there was no missing Xavier’s eye roll.

Aysel cleared her throat. “A mystical moon priestess is someone who has a spiritual connection to Seluna. That seems to be what’s behind all your dreams and visions.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. “You think I have a spiritual connection to your moon goddess?”

“She’s not *my* moon goddess, Caliana. She’s the benevolent lady of all beings who worship her.”

I didn’t really see the difference between what I’d said and Aysel’s correction, but whatever.

Lucian leaned forward. “I understand why these dreams are so concerning to you, and I assure you that the ritual will provide you with the answers you seek.”

Xavier scoffed. “Um, hell no. I’m not about to hand Cali over to you for some crazy ritual. You’ve already tried that bullshit before, and it’s a non-starter. If you want Cali alone, just say so. Skip all this moon talk and get to the point.”

The prince frowned, but not in anger. It looked more like pity, which for Xavier was probably about a thousand times worse.

“You’re a skeptic,” Lucian said. “I can see how all of this might sound to a nonbeliever, and I would never deny that I’ve grown quite fond of Caliana’s company, but the truth is I am only trying to help. As a follower of Seluna, I know the moon ritual to be the best way to divine her purpose in Cali’s dreams.”

I wished I could believe him. Really, I did. Even with that nightmare of a party we’d endured at the hands of the Vanguard pack, and then essentially being taken captive by Lucian, I still wished I could trust him. That whatever this problem was, all I had to do was believe him and follow his guidance and these recurring dreams would disappear.

But as charming as Lucian was, something in my gut told me I’d be making a monumental mistake to trust him.

“What does this ritual involve?” Greyson asked.

“I hope it’s nothing too scary,” I added. “No small animal sacrifices, nobody losing an eye.” I shivered, thinking of Jay and the cost of Big Mac’s magic. The cost of the Fae magic that had taken Artemis’s powers. How desperate were we that we were even having this conversation?

Aysel laughed. “Do you think we’re a couple of common witches, living in the Dark Ages?”

“I don’t care what the ritual involves,” Xavier growled. “Cali’s not taking part in it.”

Lucian’s brow rose, and he turned his gaze on me. “Perhaps Caliana should be the one to decide. After all, isn’t she the one afflicted by the dreams?”

When Xavier turned his expectant gaze on me, I fought the urge to wince. I really didn’t want a fight to break out. That wasn’t what I’d invited Lucian here for. But I was curious—and hopeful. Xavier might not think we needed Lucian or Aysel, but I didn’t know where we’d be able to turn if they couldn’t help.

I had to at least *try*.

“Where does this ritual take place?” I asked. Next to me, Xavier growled under his breath.

To his credit, Lucian didn’t miss a beat. “It should take place in the presence of Seluna, within the palace courtyard.”

“The Vanguard palace?” Xavier snapped. “You want to bring her back there to perform some spell on her that we barely understand? Why am I not surprised?”

Greyson took a more diplomatic approach. “If Cali has to go back to the palace for this ritual, we’re going too. Full stop.”

I grimaced. The Vanguard palace was pretty low on my list of places to visit. In a lot of ways, I’d just be going back to the place that had started all these problems for me.

But on the other hand, if it’d help me be free of these terrifying dreams, could I really say no?

“Tell us what it would involve,” I said.

Lucian smiled. “The ritual must take place under the new moon, which is scheduled to occur in two days. If we miss it, we’ll have to wait another month. Fortunately, preparations can begin a few hours before sunset. I know this must seem… all rather frightening for those uninitiated.” He turned to my mate. “Perhaps even a tad disturbing. But I assure you this relies on the most ancient of teachings.” He turned back to me, reached into his jacket, and pulled out a thick, silver-looking necklace with a medallion.

“That’s not silver, is it?” I asked.

“White gold,” he said, pressing it into my hand. “Though Seluna is a very powerful goddess, this talisman will help keep the dreams at bay.”

I looked up at Greyson. Did the strange revulsion I’d felt for him earlier have anything to do with this Seluna mess? It was the strangest thing—as soon as I touched him, I wanted to vomit. Once we were apart, everything went back to normal. Until I touched him again and could barely keep myself from dry heaving. I looked down at the talisman. What if it just made things worse? We didn’t know anything about it, or why Lucian would just carry it around.

What if this was some kind of trap?

“Tell us more about this ritual,” Xavier snapped. “What happens?”

“The ritual is designed to meet with Seluna,” Lucian explained. “To ask for her help in answering Caliana’s questions, and hopefully finding confirmation on if she is indeed a priestess.”

“And why does this have to happen under the new moon?” I asked. “Why not, I don’t know, a full moon?”

“Just as the moon transforms through the course of its cycle, so do Seluna’s powers. The new moon symbolizes rebirth, a fresh slate, a new opportunity to prove our devotion to Seluna. It is also the time when her powers are—”

“Weak?” Greyson asked.

Lucian and Aysel burst out laughing.

“No, of course not. She is never weak,” Aysel said. “During the new moon, her powers are more subtle, quieter, and as such, she is better able to hear her subjects. If we tried a ritual like this under the full moon, we might as well be screaming at the heavens for all the good it would do.”

I blinked. *That makes… no sense. Like, at all.*

“So… *will* we be screaming at the sky?” I asked. “During the new moon? When Seluna can… hear us?”

“Not exactly,” Lucian said. “That would be rather rude, don’t you think? What if *your* child came up to you, screaming and demanding that you give her a present? You would be much more willing to listen, to help, if she asked nicely. If she *appeased* you. As her priestess, you are more her child than even Aysel or myself.”

I really wished they’d stop calling me a priestess. I was no more a priestess than Xavier was.

“Enough with the moon crap,” Xavier cut in. “You’re not actually telling us anything. What does Cali have to *do*?”

“Oh. Well, it is a painless process, if that is your concern.” Lucian waved a hand. “We’ll say a few incantations, invoke a few artifacts—nothing too over the top.”

*That sounds pretty over the top to me.*

“And this will help her?” Greyson asked.

Aysel smiled at him, and I wanted to rip her throat out. I hated the way she was looking at my mate, like they were the only two people in the room. Like he wasn’t standing *right next to me.*

“Don’t worry, Greyson,” she said.

“You might actually enjoy it,” Lucian added. “The ritual can be very… sensual.”

Heat rushed into my cheeks. Now Lucian was staring at me like we were the only two people in the room—and I was naked. Which I definitely was not. I’d picked out this dress specifically for this weird meeting.

“I’ve heard enough,” Xavier growled. “Lucian, it’s time for you to hit the road. We get it, we’ll be there in two days for the ritual. All three of us will be there.”

Aysel never tore her eyes away from Greyson. “I look forward to seeing you again.”

Lucian looked absolutely delighted. “I can’t wait to have you back at the palace under less difficult circumstances.”

Never mind that he and his crazy sister were the ones who’d made those circumstances so difficult.

“I’ll show you to the door,” Xavier said.

“Hold on.” Lucian turned to me with a thoughtful expression. “I hate all this back and forth.” He held out his hand. “Why don’t you just come back with us now?”

**Episode 2251**

GREYSON

I immediately lunged between Lucian and Cali. Had he seriously just suggested that he wanted to take Cali away to the Vanguard palace ahead of the new moon?

“*That* is not going to happen,” I said. “I can’t believe you’d even suggest taking Cali with you. You have to know we’d never allow it.”

Cali inched behind me. “No, thank you.”

Lucian laughed. “Do you really think I’m mad enough to spirit away the mate of two Alphas from their own pack house?”

In the silence of his rhetorical question, you could’ve heard a pin drop. If anyone *was* mad enough to try something so stupid, so clearly suicidal, it was Lucian.

He cleared his throat. “Ah, well. Just a bit of royal humor. Aysel and I will return home and prepare for your arrival in a few days.”

Xavier, still standing in the doorway to the living room, gestured toward the front door. “I’d be happy to ask Rishika to drive you both back.”

*I wonder if* Rishika *would be happy about that little task?*

“That’s cute.” Aysel simpered. “But ultimately, it’s not necessary.”

“I have a driver on call,” Lucian explained, because of course he did. He pulled his cell phone out of his jacket. “We’re ready to return home. You’ll find us waiting at the Redwood pack house.”

Then he ended the call. Apparently, this driver was at the prince’s beck and call.

Lucian glanced around, his gaze snagging on Torin, who was literally decking the hallway with a thick length of green and red garland. “You can go back to your holiday plans, or whatever it is you’re doing here. My sister and I will be just fine.”

I was sure they would be. But I didn’t want them inside the pack house for a single second longer than necessary. I hated all of this creepy talk about moon cycles and rituals and Cali somehow being a priestess to a moon goddess none of us had even heard of. Really, though, I hated being connected to Lucian and the Vanguard pack in any way. Being beholden to them the next time they needed a favor, and knowing that in just a few days we’d be together all over again. Lucian drooling over Cali, and Aysel looking at me like I was something delicious she couldn’t wait to sink her teeth into…

Had it really been necessary for her to come along? She’d contributed almost nothing to the conversation. I wouldn’t put it past Xavier to have allowed her to come as a way to punish me for sending him out there to deliver Cali’s invitation. And if that was the case, then… well played.

“I’ll walk you out,” I offered, leading them through the front door and down the walkway from the porch.

We stood together near the driveway, waiting for Lucian’s driver.

“So, how is it?” Aysel asked suddenly.

“How is what?”

“Being forced to share your mate with another. I imagine it must be quite trying.”

My eyes narrowed. “It’s not anything you have to worry about.”

Of course, getting her to let this go wasn’t that easy.

“It does make me wonder how someone can remain bonded under such duress.” She adopted a thoughtful expression. “Having half a mate is not the same as having a dedicated one. If I were in your shoes, I would have drifted away. Mate or not, there are always better options out there.

I couldn’t help the laughter that spilled past my lips. “And I suppose you know the better option for me?”

“You never know where destiny will lead you.”

“Forget it. I’ve found my destiny in Cali. There won’t be any drifting.”

Someone somewhere must have taken pity on me, because the car pulled up before Aysel and I could keep debating.

“Farewell, Greyson, and see you soon.” Lucian disappeared into the car.

Aysel turned back to me. “You’re wrong, you know. The drifting is already happening.”

She got into the car and shut the door, then the car pulled away.

I watched them go, shock rolling through me. Why had Aysel said that? Was she just fucking with my head, as usual, or did she know something? Did she know about what had happened between me and Cali? That strange and horrifying revulsion we’d experienced for each other?

*I’d hardly call that “drifting,” though. It was just… a strange reaction.*

Cali and I still loved each other, and we were both horrified by our grossed-out feelings. Things were just fine—until we touched each other.

“Fuck,” I muttered. There was always something else, wasn’t there? I turned on my heel and headed back toward the house.

When it had first happened, I’d thought for a brief moment that maybe it had to do with the three witches. Maybe they’d gotten bored of the mind games, and now that I’d broken the curse they’d leveled up into playing cruel tricks on Cali and me.

But what if it wasn’t the witches? What if Aysel had something to do with whatever was pushing Cali and me apart?

Almost immediately, I shook my head. No, that wasn’t possible. As far as I knew, Aysel was just a regular werewolf, not a witch. She might’ve been a colossal pain in the ass, and a sociopath who didn’t understand a little thing called consent, but she didn’t have magic.

Besides, regardless of this thing that was stopping Cali and me from being physically near each other, I still longed for her. I still saw her in my future, and I wanted her there with every ounce of my soul. I knew she felt the same way too, so… we just had to sort out whatever was causing this mess. I’d wanted to talk to Cali about it earlier, but Lucian and Aysel’s arrival had put that on hold.

Maybe now, we could finally try to sort things out.

When I made my way back into the living room, Xavier and Cali were arguing. Normally, I didn’t mind this, as it always made me look even better to Cali. But I didn’t like the frustration and confusion on her beautiful face. She’d been through enough already.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I was just telling Xavier I’m willing to give the talisman a try—”

He cut her off. “And I think that’s a terrible idea, and we need to destroy it.”

I frowned. “Destroy it? Why?”

“I think all of this, the dreams—it’s all been part of a scheme to get that talisman into Cali’s hands,” Xavier said.

“Which is beyond paranoid,” Cali added.

“We don’t know what the Vanguard pack is capable of, but we do know they’re batshit crazy, so excuse me for not putting sabotage past them.”

“Why don’t we have Big Mac check it out?” I suggested. “She can tell us definitively if there’s anything amiss, and if there’s not, then it obviously isn’t hurting Cali to hold onto it. Sound good?”

I didn’t share Xavier’s concerns about the talisman, but I did want to get this sorted out ASAP so I could talk to Cali about what had happened between us. And I couldn’t do that while she was arguing with Xavier.

We found Big Mac in the library, poring over some old books. She sighed when she saw us coming. “Great. What do you three want?”

Cali explained her dreams, and the talisman Lucian had given her, along with Xavier’s concerns about it.

“Give it to me.”

Cali handed the talisman over, and the witch chanted a few words I didn’t understand before passing it back. “I can’t detect any strange magic, light or dark. Sometimes a talisman is just a talisman.”

*Thank god.*

Things with Lucian were already hard enough without adding magical sabotage to the mix.

“Do you think it’ll do anything at all?” Cali asked.

Big Mac shrugged. “If you believe it will, then it might help. Sometimes a talisman works more in the mind than it does in the physical world.”

“And you’re sure it won’t hurt Cali?” Xavier asked.

“Unless Cali hits herself in the head with it, she should be okay.”

“Have you heard of something called a moon ritual?” I asked. “It takes place during the new moon.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I’m not a werewolf encyclopedia.”

Of course not.

I thanked her, and Xavier immediately headed to the kitchen, complaining about his hunger. Cali made to follow after him, but I caught her arm.

“Hey, can we talk?” I asked. “Did you feel what happened earlier when we kissed?”

Her cheeks heated. “I was hoping it was just my imagination, but clearly we both felt it. Do you have any idea what might have caused it?”

I hesitated, then shook my head. “I don’t want to speculate. Besides, I still love you. Do you still love me?”

She took my hand. “Of course I do. Why would you even ask me that?”

“Maybe we should… try again? Maybe it was just an aftereffect of the dreams, or the breaking of the curse. Who knows?”

She smiled. “Are you making up excuses to kiss me?”

“I didn’t think I needed one.” I pulled her into my arms and kissed her.

And as soon as our lips touched, we pushed away from each other like we were opposite poles. I had to stifle down the urge to gag. “What the *fuck*?”

“*Yuck!*” Cali groaned, wiping at her mouth. “Sorry.”

How was this even possible?

It was then that I realized Big Mac was staring at us.

“I have a question,” she said. “Who the hell put another curse on you?”

**Episode 2252**

MARTA

“Cali’s not coming, is she?” Dani asked.

We’d been sitting in my room waiting for Cali to come back for what felt like an hour now. Cali had said she was going to go talk to Big Mac about Dani’s strange phone-magic problem, but then she’d started acting all weird. Like maybe she was hearing things. We hadn’t seen her again after that. Maybe something we weren’t privy to had happened with that guy Lucian.

I glanced over at Dani, who was sitting on the edge of my bed. She wasn’t crying anymore, but she still looked pretty down. Lost, even. I couldn’t say I blamed her. She’d been uprooted from her life, taken captive by a crazy werewolf, then ended up at the witch council for using magic no one had ever taught her how to control. Now, even though she was safe and Silas was dead, she still couldn’t even try to contact her sister without that strange interference cropping up.

Dani wanted answers, and so far we hadn’t been able to scrounge up a single one. And Cali… Cali had a lot on her plate, so even though she’d offered to look into things for us, maybe I needed to be the one to step up and help.

*Greyson did put me in charge of Dani.* And even if he hadn’t, I still would’ve felt responsible for her. Like a big sister. After all, I was the one who’d convinced her to come stay with us. The least I could do was make sure she felt at home, make sure she didn’t face all of this change and uncertainty alone.

It would take some time and a little finessing to get the pack to fully accept Dani, but she was kind and relatively harmless—the Fae blast that had exploded Xavier’s car notwithstanding. Sooner or later, Dani would be one of us. Hopefully, she’d be able to reach the point where she’d feel at home here. But in the meantime, it was my job to make sure she had as easy a time here as possible.

“I think you’re right,” I conceded. “Cali must have gotten caught up in something—there’s always a lot going on here, and with Xavier and Greyson being her mates, she stays pretty busy.”

“Oh.” Dani’s expression fell.

“But,” I added quickly, “that doesn’t mean we have to wait around here forever. You and I can go talk to Big Mac together. We don’t need Cali to do it for us.” I bounced off the edge of my bed and gestured for her to follow suit. “Come on!”

Dani’s small, hesitant smile warmed me from the inside out, and we rushed down the stairs looking for Big Mac—until we spotted her in the library with Greyson and Cali. The trio looked like they were discussing something really important. I could have sworn I heard the word “curse” being tossed around.

I turned back to Dani. “Okay, so Big Mac is a little busy right now. Maybe we can talk to another witch—where’s Kira?”

We continued on, passing Torin. He smiled brightly at both of us.

“Dani, I need your help planning a Hannukah brunch!”

She smiled hesitantly. “I’d be happy to help out.”

“And you promised to teach me about the dreidel too,” he reminded her.

“I will! I promise.” She looked closer to happy than I’d seen her since coming to the house, and all from one encounter with Torin. He was just so nice and wholesome and genuine all the time. I didn’t know how he managed it.

We found Kira in the living room with Mrs. Smith.

“I think a Chantilly lace would be lovely,” Mrs. Smith was saying. “But I doubt it’ll go with Big Mac’s look for the wedding.”

Both women turned to us when we stopped in front of them.

“I’m so sorry to interrupt,” I said, “but we need a witch’s opinion.”

Kira raised an eyebrow at that. “You’ve come to the right place then. How can I help?”

Dani stepped forward and described the strange situation she’d found herself in every time she tried to contact Tabitha. “I don’t know what to do,” Dani sighed. “It’s like there’s this wall between us and I just can’t seem to get through.”

The witch frowned. “That doesn’t sound like a problem with the phone company. It’s possible it could be a spell, or maybe there’s some interference between the spirit world and ours.”

Dani’s eyes widened. “Are you saying you think my sister and this Mikah person are *dead*?”

“Not necessarily. Obviously, if he was able to talk to Cali, even for a moment, he’s probably not dead. But your powers do have an effect on magic and spirits, so maybe that’s causing the interference?”

“I’ll show you.” Dani pulled out her phone and dialed Tabitha’s number again before putting the call on speaker. Once again, static filled the line until Dani ended the call.

“Okay…” Kira looked perplexed. “It is strange, I’ll give you that. I don’t know what could be causing it, but I promise I’ll look into it.”

“Thanks,” we said in unison.

“No problem. Have either of you seen Xavier?”

“We haven’t. Sorry,” I said, and we headed back into the hall.

“I’m sorry about that,” I said to Dani, once we were away from everyone else. “I know you really want some answers. Hopefully, someone will be able to figure it out soon.”

Dani forced a smile. “I hope so too.”

“Oh my god, there you are!” Lilac hurried over and pulled me into a close hug. “Torin is driving me crazy. Dani, you have to teach him how to play dreidel before I explode. The guy ricochets from Christmas to Hanukkah in a flash.”

I smiled at my boyfriend. He sure had a knack for cheering someone up. “This seems like a win-win,” I said. “This could be a good diversion for you, Dani, while we wait for Kira to find some answers, *and* it’ll keep Torin from his constant decorating. Really, you’d be doing the whole pack a favor.”

She shrugged. “Sounds good to me.”

We found Torin hunched over the kitchen table with a dreidel in hand. His excitement was palpable. “I understand you can win shekels!”

“You win gelt,” Dani corrected him. “The chocolate coins.”

The Fae’s eyes went wide. “Even better!”

As Dani started to explain how to play, Lilac came up behind me. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure.”

I followed him into the hallway, and he stopped and turned to face me. “I have a very real problem, and only you can fix it.”

I held up a hand. “I’m sorry, Lilac, but I can’t do magic anymore.” I rattled my bracelets for good measure. “Remember?”

“I’m not asking you to do that kind of magic.” He smiled and leaned in to kiss me. But before I could really enjoy it properly, he broke away from my lips. “We still haven’t had a chance to celebrate your acquittal.”

“Well, I wasn’t exactly acquitted. I still have to deal with the mentor thing.”

“I know, but why don’t we at least enjoy our freedom—and the fact that I haven’t been put on an express train back to the spirit world.” His eyes sparkled. “Marta, do you want to go on a date tonight?”

I smiled. “Just the two of us, right?” A double date was pretty much the last thing I ever wanted to do, after the disastrous movie night with Violet and Charlie.

“Yes, just you and me. Maybe we can do dinner and a movie? Like, in a real restaurant and a real movie theater? There’s that new romantic comedy out—”

“No.” I shook my head. “I want to see that new action flick. The special effects these days are amazing. They deserve to be appreciated properly.”

He shrugged. “I’m happy seeing whichever movie you want, as long as I get to add extra butter to the popcorn.”

“I think that’s fair,” I teased.

“Great. I’ll see if I can borrow one of Xavier’s unexploded cars.” He went off, presumably to go beg Xavier for a set of keys.

I couldn’t keep the smile off my face as I wandered back to the kitchen and stopped in the doorway. Dani was sitting with Torin, Rishika, Sage, and Zainab, showing them the dreidel and explaining all the Hebrew letters and what they meant.

She looked happy. Comfortable. Like she belonged here. My smile widened.

*Would it be okay to leave Dani alone here for a few hours? She seems to be doing well, but I’ll check with Cali, just in case.* If I asked, I was sure that Cali would keep an eye on Dani while I was gone.

But first… I had to get ready for my date!

I headed upstairs to figure out what to wear. Something sexy would be good, but not too sexy. This was just dinner and a movie, after all. Though making out with Lilac in the back of a darkened theater was *definitely* on the table.

I looked through my closet with a sigh. I didn’t have a lot of clothes yet, and most of what I had were your basic Oregon wardrobe staples: jeans, sweaters, long-sleeved shirts, a couple jackets, and a few short-sleeved T-shirts. Plus, I wasn’t sure exactly what my version of sexy was just yet.

In the end, I settled on a pair of jeans and my nicest, softest sweater. I was just pulling the sweater over my head when the air in the room began to swirl.

“What the…?

The lights flickered, and the windows flew open, sending in a huge gust of air that knocked me back against the wall.

**Episode 2253**

I bit back a scream. “Did you just say we’re *cursed*? Again? How is that even possible?”

Okay, maybe I wasn’t really holding back the screams all that well. But how was I supposed to respond to that piece of truly rotten news? Hadn’t we just (maybe) gotten rid of a curse? A curse that had ruled my life—mine and Greyson’s and Xavier’s—for far too long already. And even though Greyson said we were free, I still didn’t quite believe it. So it wasn’t exactly a good time to face a *new* curse-related problem.

Big Mac’s brows lifted. “Try again. Quieter this time.”

I cleared my throat. “It’s just… Are you sure? Is it possible you’re mistaken?”

She glared. “Let’s just say I know a curse when I see one, and what I just saw between the two of you has the look and feel of one. Remember the revulsion spell you accidentally put on yourself when you drank that potion?” she pressed.

Why on earth was she even bringing that up right now? What purpose could it possibly serve—beyond her getting to rub my face in my old mistakes, I guess.

“I didn’t take any potions! Accidentally or otherwise. This isn’t my fault!”

“I haven’t taken any potions either,” Greyson added.

He looked at me, hope bright in his eyes, but I turned to focus on Big Mac. I loved him. I wanted him. But I didn’t want to relive that feeling of disgust I’d gotten when I’d kissed him ever again.

“Okay,” said Big Mac, “then this curse must have been caused by something else.”

My mind immediately went to the original curse. The one curse to rule them all. The one that had definitely been ruling my life since I’d met Greyson and Xavier. Could the *due destini* be doing this to us? I knew the three witches had told Greyson the curse was broken. And I knew the veins on Xavier’s and Greyson’s chests were gone. But what if that was just some kind of trick? What if the *due destini* curse wasn’t broken? What if it had just been hiding, and the veins’ vanishing act was just a trick?

*Does this mean Greyson and I are cursed to remain mates only to be completely repulsed by each other?*

I could barely stand that thought, much less the reality.

I loved Greyson. I couldn’t imagine being without him, didn’t want to imagine a future that didn’t have him in it. But I also couldn’t wrap my head around spending the rest of my life repulsed by his touch. It made me feel like I was going to be sick, and I couldn’t exactly just deal with that.

“Do you think this has anything to do with the *due destini*?” I asked.

Big Mac shrugged. “I can’t rule it out, but my gut instinct is that this is being caused by something else. I’m going to have to look into it.”

“Then what are we supposed to do in the meantime?” I demanded. “We can’t just… keep grossing each other out!”

“You’ll have to. At least until we learn more about what’s causing all this.”

I opened my mouth to argue some more, but the witch held up a hand. “I wish I could give you an answer. Or better yet, a cure. But I don’t have any of that yet. The good news is it’s probably not going to get any worse.” She grimaced. “But on the other hand, until we can figure out what’s causing it, it’s not likely to get better either.”

“Wow, how helpful,” I muttered.

Big Mac threw me a look and then grumbled as she walked away, hopefully off to check Witch Google or whatever resources she had to help us out of this mess.

Alone in the library, I looked up at Greyson. He was so handsome, and I loved him so much. Wanting him, touching him, being with him—all of those things were practically encoded into my brain. I couldn’t just turn it off because we had a curse that made us gross each other out. I didn’t *want* to turn it off.

Curse or not, this was *Greyson*. My mate. And just… *Greyson*. The man who had always loved and supported me, even before I’d trusted him or recognized the truth about us.

Whatever this curse was, and wherever it had come from, I wasn’t going to let it keep me from my mate.

*Should we try kissing again?* Part of me wanted to. It would be a way to prove to whatever was wreaking havoc on our lives that no curse could overcome our love.

*Just ask the* due destini*—Greyson and I are unstoppable.*

*…*

*Unless, this* is *the* due destini*. In which case, fuck you,* due destini*.*

So, yes, I did want to kiss him. I always did. But also right now… I *didn’t* want to. Because part of me was afraid of that terrible revulsion happening again. I could wax poetic about my love for Greyson until the sun set and the moon rose, but did it make a difference if I couldn’t even kiss him?

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

He sighed. The pain in his expression was almost as unbearable as the curse that had caused it. He shook his head. “Honestly? I don’t know what to think. I hate this. I hate that this happened to us. I just hope Big Mac can figure it out, because I don’t want to live another day like this.”

“Hey.” Xavier came back from the kitchen, brushing food crumbs from his shirt. “I was looking for you. We need to make a plan for the ritual. I don’t trust anything Lucian says—and the same goes for his sister.”

I tuned him out, thinking about our new curse. Or, at least, what Big Mac thought was a curse.

Xavier paused, frowning. “Is something going on between you two that I should know about?”

“We were just discussing Lucian,” Greyson said quickly. Clearly, he didn’t want to share the curse news with Xavier.

Xavier turned to me. “What’s going on?”

Clearly, he didn’t believe Greyson, and I wasn’t about to lie to my other mate.

I pulled in a deep breath. “I think we’re cursed again.”

I quickly explained about the kiss, and how Big Mac thought it was being caused by a new, non-*due destini* curse. Greyson’s mouth twisted to a thin line. He probably wasn’t happy that I was telling Xavier about this, but what else was I supposed to do? If Greyson and I were cursed, Xavier needed to know about it. He could be cursed too, for all we knew.

“Am I cursed too?” he asked, as if he’d just read my mind. “I guess there’s only one way to find out.”

He pulled me into a deep, sensual kiss. I instinctively pulled away, but not because I found it repulsive. If anything, I wished the kissing wouldn’t stop. But I pushed back anyway, because it hadn’t escaped me for even a moment that Greyson was watching. Greyson, my other mate. Greyson, who I couldn’t kiss without wanting to gag.

It wasn’t fair.

Xavier smirked as I pulled away. “Nope. Felt good to me. How about you, Cali?”

I had no idea what to say to that, so I just nodded. The mere fact that Xavier and I hadn’t flown away from each other the moment our lips touched meant that he wasn’t cursed.

“Maybe the two of you aren’t cursed at all.” He turned to his brother. “Maybe Greyson’s the one who’s cursed.”

Greyson’s eyes narrowed. “We’re going to figure it out.”

“We are,” I agreed. “Big Mac said she’d help.”

A rumble from upstairs brought our awkward talk to a halt, and the two Alphas turned to me in unison.

“Wait here.”

They raced upstairs, and I waited only a beat before following after them. “‘*Wait here*.’ Yeah, right.”

I wasn’t going to wait around for anything. If someone or something was attacking us, I hoped they were ready to get a face full of Fae magic.

Xavier and Greyson checked each door until they came to Marta’s. Lilac was standing in the doorway, looking nervous.

I peeked around both my mates and Lilac and let out a gasp. I couldn’t believe it.

“Vander?” I breathed. “What are they doing here?”

Vander was wearing their park ranger uniform. They glanced at Marta with an affectionate smile before meeting my eyes. “I thought I’d see how my favorite parolee is doing. I didn’t have a chance to congratulate her.”

Dani stepped away from the wall. “I was worried I caused another magic accident.”

“Welcome,” Vander said to her before turning back to Marta. “I’m glad that justice was served, and that balance once again prevails.”

“Vander, this is Dani. Dani, this is Vander. They’re the Keeper of All Nature.”

Greyson pulled me aside. “We need to talk about what Big Mac said—”

“Hey, Greyson,” Lilac cut in. “I was wondering, since Xavier’s had a bit of a car issue recently, whether you’d let me borrow your car so I can take Marta out on a date.”

Greyson frowned. “Can you really drive?”

“I have my license, but Marta can drive if you’re worried about it.”

I smiled up at Greyson and mind linked, *Please say yes! They’ve been through so much lately. It’ll be good for them to have some fun.*

He reached into his pocket and passed Lilac a set of keys. “Be careful,” he warned.

A crumpled piece of paper fell out of Greyson’s pocket and onto the floor. I frowned, reaching down to pick it up. It was a torn tarot card—the Lovers.

Greyson looked… speechless? “I forgot that was there.”

I turned the card over in my hands.

“Greyson,” I said. “Where did you get this?”

**Episode 2254**

Greyson shifted uncomfortably, like he’d been caught doing something wrong, and my stomach clenched.

“Greyson,” I pressed. “Where did you get that card?”

“I got it from Aysel,” he mumbled, avoiding eye contact.

My vision went red, and I swore I could hear a record scratching in my brain. *Oh no he didn’t!*

“What are you talking about? I didn’t see Aysel give you anything—and why is it torn in half?” No, wait. I wasn’t asking the right questions. “Why did she give you the Lovers card in the first place?”

Greyson sighed deeply and turned to Lilac, who had been standing awkwardly nearby, clearly feeling too uneasy to intervene. “Drive safely, and make sure you fill the tank back up when you’re done with it.” Lilac was only too grateful to hustle away.

Then Greyson took my hand and pulled me into my room. For a split second, I almost wished that strange revulsion was still running the show between us—that he wouldn’t have been able to touch me either. But almost as soon as I thought that, I was hit with a wave of guilt. I didn’t actually wish a worse version of this curse on either one of us. And maybe I was overreacting. Maybe there was a totally normal and non-concerning reason for my mate to be walking around with a Lovers card that Aysel had given him in his pocket.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he insisted. “Nothing is going on. When I had the run-in with Aysel last night in the woods, she was, true to form, being creepy and weird. She was holding a bunch of tarot cards, and she tore one in half and slipped it into my pocket.”

I knew green probably wasn’t my best color, but jealousy was a raging beast inside my chest. “Why didn’t you tell me this before? Would you ever have mentioned it if that card hadn’t fallen out of your pocket?”

“I’m sorry, Cali, but I honestly just forgot about it.” He shrugged. “I thought I threw the thing away last night. I was as surprised as you were when it fell out.”

“That doesn’t answer my question. Aysel comes up to you in the woods and slips something in your pocket, and you don’t think that detail is worth sharing with me?”

I honestly couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I didn’t care about some stupid ripped-up tarot card—I cared that my mate was keeping things from me. That he and *Aysel* of all people had a secret from me.

Greyson’s expression softened. “Love, please don’t read too much into this. I made it clear to Aysel that she wasn’t welcome. I hate her just as much as you do.”

That, I couldn’t be sure of. Because I hated that bitch with the fire of a thousand suns.

“It’s a little hard to not read into it,” I said. “I mean, it’s the Lovers card. It’s obvious Aysel has her heart set on you, and nothing we’ve said or done has persuaded her to change her mind. I saw it today in the way she looked at you. She wants you, Greyson, and I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with that.”

He pulled me into a hug. “I don’t care how Aysel looks at me, or talks to me. None of that will ever change how I feel about you.”

I tilted my head up to look into his eyes. “I believe you, but the fact that it’s a Lovers card suggests that Aysel has her mind made up. It’s an obvious message—don’t you see it?”

“It doesn’t matter, and I don’t want you to worry about it. Can you try to do that? Try to *not* worry?”

I forced a weak smile. “I’ll try.”

But as soon as I said the words, my mind kept spinning. Why would Aysel show up like that, handing out torn-up tarot cards? She was weird, but she wasn’t stupid. So what was her goal?

“Can I see the card?” I asked.

“I don’t see the point. I’m just going to tear it up and throw it away again.”

“Fine, but I want to see it first.”

He pulled it out of his pocket and pressed it into my hand, and I flipped the card over to inspect it. There didn’t seem to be anything unusual about it—at least, beyond the fact that it was a ripped-up tarot card given to my mate by another woman.

Greyson was holding his hand out to take it back when I froze.

“Wait. You said Aysel gave this to you last night? In the woods?”

“Yeah, so?”

“And then, the very next day, you and I suddenly can’t stand to kiss each other. Don’t you think that’s a strange coincidence?”

He shrugged again. “Literally everything about Aysel and her pack’s moon cult is strange.”

“Okay, but I’m serious. There could be a connection between the card and what’s happening to us, right? Could this be the source of the curse that Big Mac was talking about?”

“I guess it’s possible…” He shook his head. “But how could Aysel even do that? She doesn’t have magic—unless their moon goddess is real and imbuing them with special abilities.” His eyes sparkled, but I didn’t think any of this was even remotely funny.

It was bad enough that Aysel was chasing after Greyson despite the *numerous* times he’d told the woman he wasn’t interested. Now she might have brought some magical ammunition into her hunt? That just wasn’t okay.

“Maybe she’s not really a werewolf,” I suggested. “Maybe she’s a witch.”

“Aysel is a werewolf. That much is true.”

I blew out a breath. “Can’t you at least see where I’m going with this? How else are we supposed to explain a curse that pushes us apart—when Aysel has made it abundantly clear that she wants you for herself—happening the day after she gives you this card? This has to mean something.”

“I hear you, love. And there’s some sense to this theory, but I’m gonna need more than conjecture.”

“Fine. Then follow me. We’re going to show this to Big Mac.”

I stormed down the stairs, my fingers wrapped tight around the card. I couldn’t believe Greyson was being so nonchalant about this. It couldn’t have been more obvious to me that this card was playing a role in our situation.

We found Big Mac in her bedroom, and she rolled her eyes as we approached.

“What now?”

I held out the tarot card. “What do you make of this?”

The witch glanced at the card before meeting my eyes again. “It’s a worthless tarot card.”

“It came from Aysel. I’m wondering if it has anything to do with the curse you told us about.”

Big Mac reached out to take the card from my hand, and the moment her fingertips brushed against the card, she jerked as if she’d just been zapped. Carefully, her brows knitting together, she took the card from my hand and examined it. “There is some magic surrounding the card.”

My heart raced. “Is it the source of the curse?”

“If it is, I’ll try to put a stop to it.” She muttered a few words under her breath, her eyes locked on the card. Then she pulled a goblet from a shelf and dropped the card inside. She snapped her fingers, and the card burst into flames and crumbled to ash.

I stared at the smoke swirling about the goblet. “Was that it? Is the spell broken?”

She turned back to Greyson and me. “There’s only one way to know for sure. Greyson, kiss your mate.”

He didn’t hesitate, but as soon as our lips touched, a wave of nausea slammed into me, and I stumbled back.

Big Mac sighed. “You don’t have to tell me—clearly the curse isn’t broken. I’m going to have to look into it further. I’ll let you know what I find.”

Dismayed, I walked back out into the hallway, heading for the staircase.

“Cali.” Greyson caught my hand, stopping me in my tracks. “I know this sucks, but I promise we’ll figure it out. I won’t let Aysel or anyone else push us apart. We’ve been through too much. We mean too much to each other to let this curse get the best of us.”

I wanted to believe him, but something about this curse felt unsurmountable. I couldn’t even kiss my mate. How was I supposed to be okay with that while we waited for an answer? “Who knows what else could happen to us? Or, what if this doesn’t have anything to do with Aysel at all? What if it’s the *due destini* again?”

“Look at me.” He tilted my chin up. “We’ll be okay.”

I could tell he wanted to kiss me, and I wanted to kiss him too. But we didn’t. This really did suck.

“Do you believe me?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Good. Now we just have to keep our hands off each other until this is solved.” He frowned suddenly and looked down. “That’s weird.”

He shoved his hand into his pocket and pulled something out.

I gasped. It was the torn-up tarot card.

**Episode 2255**

GREYSON

What the hell?

There was no way the card was back in my possession after I had just seen Big Mac destroy it. But then again, until that half had fallen out of my pocket earlier, I’d been pretty sure I’d tossed it in the garbage. Was the magic bringing it back to me, regardless of whether or not I disposed of it?

*Or maybe there’s a more logical explanation here.*

I flipped it over in my hand. “Maybe Aysel slipped both halves into my pocket and I didn’t notice?”

Cali’s eyes were wide, and her face had gone pale. “Greyson, it’s the same half. How is this possible? We both saw Big Mac burn it!”

“I know, but there’s gotta be an explanation for this.” For some reason, I couldn’t see Aysel as a magic user. She was a werewolf. We didn’t have access to magic—beyond the magic that allowed us to shift and share our lives with our wolves.

And that moon cult she and her brother were in… It was all an elaborate hoax, right? I’d seen real magic before, and whatever weird rituals they were into seemed more like a show put on for the benefit of them looking mysterious and powerful than any real… well… *power*.

“Yes, there is an explanation.” Cali looked up at me. “This is part of the curse.”

“Are you sure—”

She held up a hand. Cali clearly didn’t feel the same way I did about the likelihood of Aysel performing magic. I guessed I didn’t blame her. If the tables were turned and I believed Lucian had planted a cursed object on Cali, I’d want to explore every option too.

“We need to bring it to Big Mac,” she said. “We have to show her what this thing does. Maybe she can try something else to break the curse.”

While I still wasn’t sure I could make the same leaps Cali was, I was willing to try anything to break this new curse. The revulsion I felt for Cali anytime we kissed was already tearing me apart. I was trying to do my best not to show it, to stay calm and be strong for my mate, but not being able to be with her, *really* be with her, was devastating.

The sooner this curse was broken, the better.

We headed back to Big Mac for the third time in less than an hour. Understandably, the witch didn’t look pleased to see us.

“Clearly I need to start charging by the hour,” she muttered as she waved us into her room. “What’s wrong now?”

I wordlessly held out the card.

The witch’s eyes widened, and all her snark dried up. “All right, then. There is strong magic associated with this card.”

“Yeah, we gathered that when it reformed in Greyson’s pocket after you destroyed it,” Cali deadpanned. My mate was so upset by this turn of events, she didn’t even seem to care about the dirty look Big Mac threw her way. “What are we supposed to do about this? I can’t stand not being able to stand Greyson.”

I fought the urge to grimace. I hated hearing Cali say that. “Hey, I can stand you even when we technically can’t stand each other. I love you,” I reminded her. “We’ll find a way to fix this.”

If only I were half as confident about that as I sounded.

Big Mac examined the card again before handing it back to me. “Since the usual tricks aren’t working, one way to break this kind of spell would be to rejoin your half with the other half of the card and have Aysel reverse it—assuming she was the one who placed the curse on you in the first place.”

“Do you think that’s even possible?” I asked. “Aysel’s a werewolf, not a witch.”

Big Mac shrugged. “Just about anything’s possible if you have the right resources.”

*Dammit.*

That had been my one comfort in all of this. That Aysel might be a rich, powerful sociopath who couldn’t take no for an answer, but at least she didn’t have the bandwidth to perform magic. Now that was off the table, and I was reeling from all the implications.

“Fine,” I growled. “We’ll go back to the palace and drag Aysel out here to get her to break this curse.”

Cali glanced at Big Mac, worry etched into the lines of her face. “If we mess up, or force her hand, and Aysel destroys her half of the card, what would happen?”

The witch sighed. “It would make it very difficult to break the spell.”

Cali turned to me. “What if we wait until the moon ritual? We’ll be on their turf as part of our agreement with them. Maybe we can get the card then?”

It was a reasonable suggestion, but I was still so pissed off I could barely see straight. “That’s days away. I don’t want to wait that long.”

“I don’t either, but are you willing to risk making this curse or spell or whatever it is even worse? I wouldn’t put it past Aysel to screw up her end of this if she thought it could tear us apart. If we wait until the moon ritual, she won’t have any reason to be suspicious.”

I hated how right she was. Because all I wanted to do was storm the Vanguard palace, take out my fury on their guards, and force their demented princess to release me from this curse.

And then maybe tear out her throat for good measure.

But Cali was right. If we didn’t play this carefully, there was a good chance we’d only make everything worse.

Xavier popped his head in. “Greyson, we need to talk about how we’re going to prepare for the ritual.”

“We have two days to figure that out!” I snapped. “Don’t you have something else to do?”

“Whatever you do, can you do it somewhere else?” Big Mac crossed her arms over her chest. “Preferably far away from my bedroom?”

Cali and I thanked her and went downstairs into the den, with Xavier following close behind.

“What’s going on?” my brother asked, looking from me to Cali.

I didn’t want to tell him. I was sure he’d be over the moon about this development, but Cali didn’t hesitate.

“Aysel may have put a curse on us, and Big Mac tried to break it, but it didn’t work.”

“That sucks,” Xavier said.

Was it just me, or did I detect amusement in my brother’s voice?

*Prick.*

“We were just discussing what to do about it.” Cali explained the bit about needing to put the two card halves together, and how Aysel had to be the one to reverse the spell. “I think the best time for us to try to reverse it would be when we’re at the Vanguard palace for the moon ritual.”

Xavier nodded. “I agree. If we storm the castle now, all hell will break loose. Using the cover of the ritual makes sense, and it’s only a couple of days away.”

I wanted to point out how pleased Xavier must be with this news—that he’d just gotten two days in which Cali and I would be repulsed by each other. But I bit my tongue.

Artemis poked her head into the den. “Vander is asking for Cali in the upstairs study.”

Cali squeezed my hand. “Please don’t do anything that will make things worse.”

She followed Artemis out of the den and headed upstairs.

Xavier smirked. “This must be really hard on you. I can’t even imagine what you’re going through right now.”

“Cut the shit,” I growled. I didn’t want his pity, and I sure as hell didn’t want his *fake* pity. “I know damn well that you’re over the moon right now.”

“Did it ever occur to you that Cali might need some extra love and affection during this time of stress? And since you’re unable to give her that—and Cali doesn’t want you to—I think it only makes sense that I, out of the goodness of my heart, give Cali all the extra attention she needs.” He waggled his brows at me suggestively.

All the fury I’d been tamping down since Cali and I had found out we were cursed exploded—and I slammed Xavier against the wall, a hand wrapped around his throat in warning. “You can argue with me about anything. You can challenge me for Alpha. But when it comes to Cali, don’t think for even a second that my feelings have changed. If anything, they’re stronger than ever.”

Xavier knocked my hand away from his throat. “Okay, okay. Maybe I pushed a little hard. But can you blame me?”

Yes, I fucking could.

I stepped back, breathing hard. “Maybe I overreacted. But this is bullshit. Aysel’s winning a fight that I didn’t even know I was a part of.”

He nodded. “Not that long ago, I would have left this to you. But since Cali’s a part of this, I feel compelled to help. If I don’t, Cali will just blame me.”

*Not that long ago, Xavier left me to die in the Kollector’s zoo. Now he wants to help me?*

“Do you have a plan?” he asked.

“I think we should do what Cali suggested.”

“What?” Xavier asked

Did I have to spell it out for him? “While the ritual is taking place, you and I are going to deal with Aysel.”

**Episode 2256**

As ever, I was happy to see Vander. I just wished their visit wasn’t happening right now—the timing couldn’t have been worse. I couldn’t believe there was *another* curse on Greyson and me. Could we not catch a break?

*I knew Aysel wasn’t someone I could trust the first second I saw her! Princess, my ass*, I thought, seething.

Meanwhile, Vander was all smiles. “Cali!”

They leaned in for a hug, and how could I refuse? I returned the gesture and smiled back, or at least tried to. I didn’t seem to fool the Keeper of All Nature, though.

“I can sense that something is bothering you,” they said after breaking the embrace.

I sighed. “Is it that obvious?”

“Yes,” Vander deadpanned. “You have a terrible poker face.”

I scoffed. “That’s the least of my problems.”

“What’s going on?” Vander asked.

“Well, I found out that I may have acquired another curse,” I said wryly. “Apparently I’m cursed to be cursed.”

Vander gasped. “Oh dear, what is it this time?”

“How much time do you have?” I asked. “You don’t happen to know anything about moon goddesses, do you? If that’s even a real thing.”

Vander hummed. “I haven’t heard that one in a while. There is a history of moon goddesses, though.”

“What kind of history?”

Vander arched their eyebrows. “Let’s just say that their nature varies. Different cultures assign moon goddesses different abilities and traits. Some good, some bad, some Greek.”

I blinked. “Greek?”

Vander nodded seriously. “Yes. The Greek gods were completely the worst.”

“But could a moon goddess be real, right now? In this day and age?” I pressed.

Vander laughed. “Who’s to say? Despite what you think, I don’t know everything. I still have much to learn.”

I frowned. “But the moon is part of nature. And you’re the Keeper of All Nature!”

Vander rolled their eyes. “I hear that one all the time. The supernatural and the natural can sometimes be two different things.”

“So you’ve never heard of Seluna?” I asked, frustrated.

Vander paused, eyebrows knitted. “Isn’t she a singer?”

I frowned. “What?”

Vander laughed heartily. “Just kidding,” they said. “Never heard of a Seluna. There are parts of the supernatural that I have no idea about. It’s possible that Seluna existed in the past, or still does, and I am simply not aware of her. The universe is quite grand.”

“This isn’t very helpful,” I grumbled.

Vander patted the top of my head. “There, there.”

“Everything good?” Artemis came in, looking between us.

Vander instantly got a flirty look on their face. “Nice to see you again, Artemis.” They winked at my sister. “We should hang out sometime.”

Artemis smirked. “Don’t think my girlfriend would like that.”

“I could try to change her mind with a kiss.”

Artemis snorted, but I gasped at the scandalous nature of it all.

“Anyhow…” Vander turned to me. “Good luck, Caliana. I hope you continue to look out for Marta. I also hope you find whatever it is you’re looking for, and also stop being constantly cursed.”

“But I had more questions about—”

“Apologies!” Vander moved their index finger over my mouth. “Nature calls, gotta run!”

There was a rush of wind and *POOF!* Vander was gone.

“Thanks for nothing,” I huffed.

“Wait, what’s going on?” Artemis asked me. “What are you looking for? And what was all that talk about being cursed?”

I crossed my arms, scowling. “It’s all Aysel’s fault! I want to kick her ass to the moon and back.”

As quickly as possible, I told Artemis about all my problems with Aysel’s tarot card curse, the Greyson disgust situation—which was insane—and of course, the upcoming moon ritual at the Vanguard palace. By the end of my rant, Artemis was staring at me with arched eyebrows.

“That’s… a *lot*.”

“Tell me about it,” I groaned. “And how can Vander know so much about everything except the one thing I need to know about?” I shoved my hand into my pocket. “And then, there’s this!” I thrust it in Artemis’s face. “It’s supposed to be a talisman.”

Artemis scoffed. “Anyone can say that something is a talisman—it’s the oldest trick in the book.”

I paused. “So Aysel might be lying? Because I wouldn’t put it past her.”

Artemis shrugged. “I’m just saying, I’ve seen some things in my time.” She shook her head. “You really shouldn’t fall for any of this Vanguard nonsense.”

I pressed my lips together. “But is it really nonsense? What if the moon ritual helps with my dreams?”

Artemis stared at me. “Cali. Lucian literally trapped you in that palace. We had to rescue you. Why on earth would you go back there?” She gripped my shoulders, her face determined. “If I had my way, we’d burn that place to the ground. I actually have to wonder why your hotheaded boyfriends haven’t done that yet.”

I shook my head. “I know it’s risky, but I have to find out what Lucian is up to—and find a way to break the curse that Aysel set in motion.”

Artemis looked thoughtful, scratching her chin. “I get that. But I think the most important thing of all is for you to figure out why Lucian chose you.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“He knows you’re special in many ways, but he was already interested, even before realizing you were Fae. So what is it that he wants from you, exactly?”

My cheeks heated. “He’s a little flirty with me. Like, a lot actually. In a way that would be more creepy if he weren’t so hot. But he is hot, so the creep factor takes a back seat.”

Artemis wrinkled her nose in distaste. “Well, if he really is a prince, he could probably have his pick of beautiful women.”

I scoffed. “Lucian isn’t obsessed with me just because I’m hot. It’s something else.”

“You’ve got two mates who would say that your attractiveness is, indeed, enough to attract a prince,” Artemis said. “But I get what you mean—this can’t be just about beauty. That would be too superficial.”

I squinted. “Lucian is totally superficial, though. He probably kisses the mirror every morning.”

Artemis snorted. “Either way, be careful.”

“Of course I’ll be careful,” I said indignantly. “What do you think, that I’m some naïve little girl who’d run straight into danger?”

Artemis’s eyebrows twitched. I smacked her arm, and she snickered. I did too, but then when we met each other’s gazes, Artemis’s was serious. “You need to be ready to protect yourself, Cali. If they do anything to you, do what *I* would do, not what *you* would do.”

I paused. “That’s actually solid advice. So I should punch them instead of trying to empathize with them?”

“Basically,” Artemis said dryly. She pulled me in for a hug, mumbling in my ear, “I need you to get back in one piece so we can go to New Orleans.”

That sounded like the least dangerous thing that I was set to do any time soon. And that said a lot about the life I led.

“By the way,” Artemis asked, “did you ask Xavier about coming to New Orleans with us yet?”

“I will, I just—”

“Wait!” Lola popped out of nowhere, startling me. “New Orleans? I’ve been reading *Interview with the Vampire*, so I feel, like, a bond with New Orleans!”

I stared at my friend, snorting. “A bond?”

“Of course!” She sighed, linking her arm through mine. “And Bourbon Street sounds like a blast—when are we going?”

Artemis shot Lola a glare. “*We* are not going. It’s not a vacation.”

Lola waved Artemis off. “Fine. I’ll talk to Jay. We could use a little R and R.” Still holding my arm, Lola turned to face me, her gaze mischievous. “By the way, how are things going with Xavier? Did you take my advice?”

I scowled while Artemis stared at Lola, a heavy dose of skepticism in my sister’s face. “What advice?”

“I haven’t really had a chance to do much about it,” I told Lola.

“Wait,” Artemis said impatiently, staring at me. “Is something happening between you and Xavier that I should know about?”

Lola snorted. “Ava. That’s all you need to know.”

Artemis grunted. “I just don’t understand why Ava is still here. Or still alive, for that matter!”

“Welcome to my world,” Lola declared. “Nobody wants Ava here. She’s like a fungus—she keeps coming back.”

“And what am I supposed to do about it?” I asked, exasperated. “I can’t just murder her!”

“I could,” Artemis said.

I *really* hoped she was joking.

“We’ve already talked about this, Cali,” Lola said, annoyed. “What you need to do is—”

“I’m not going to encourage Xavier to sleep with Ava, so forget it,” I declared.

Artemis gaped. “*What?*” She turned to Lola. “That is the worst advice I’ve ever heard!”

Lola huffed. Leave it to her to be offended. “At least it’s doing something!”

Artemis stared at me. “Cali, it would be better to do nothing than to do what Lola said.”

“I’m only trying to help!” Lola said, flailing in indignation.

I shushed her and turned to my sister. “What would *your* advice be, then, Artemis?”

**Episode 2257**

XAVIER

“Your plan is terrible,” I told my brother. “You can’t possibly be suggesting we leave Cali alone with Lucian, the Prince of Bullshit.”

Greyson scoffed. “I *never* said—”

“Did you forget that the ritual involves a bath?” I cut him off. “That means Cali will be in a tub with the princeling. Just the thought of it makes wanna smash his fat head against a wall, it’s not—”

“First of all, shut up,” Greyson said, interrupting me. “Second, I have no intention of leaving Cali alone for one second with the Little Prince, dumbass. One of us will stay with Cali while the other deals with Aysel.”

I glared at him. “And I suppose that translates to you staying with Cali, and me handling your dirty little problem?”

Greyson cleared his throat. “The thought may have crossed my mind.”

I sneered. “Forget it.”

He scowled. “You said you wanted to help.”

“I did, but this is your mess. And it’s a big one, too, so you should be the one to deal with Aysel,” I declared.

Greyson huffed, rubbing his forehead. “But she might get suspicious.”

“Yeah, but she also might put a curse on me too, just for fucking with her,” I fired back.

Greyson cocked an eyebrow. “What? You scared of her or something?”

I laughed, shoving his shoulder. “She already made Cali gag when you two kiss! I don’t want that to happen to me, thanks!”

Greyson rolled his eyes. “That would make no sense—I’m the one Aysel is after, not you.”

“That doesn’t mean she won’t do something to mess me up,” I said. “The entire family is insane.”

“Yeah, you can say that again. Her brother kidnapped all of us and trapped us in his castle. These royals are all nuts.”

I squinted. “Remind me again why we’re working with them?”

Greyson rubbed his temples. “Cali is the one having these dreams, and she wants this, so—”

“Don’t wanna be a dick about this, but sometimes Cali’s ideas aren’t the best. I love her, and she’s amazing, but sometimes she’s too trusting when she shouldn’t be,” I said.

Greyson looked at me, raising an eyebrow. “If she hadn’t dealt with Lucian, we would’ve been toast.”

“I’m not saying she doesn’t know what she’s doing, just that sometimes she goes off the rails,” I said. I was thinking about Cali suggesting that I should fuck Ava to get over her. Like, what the *fuck*? Though to be fair, that had been Lola’s horrible idea. “Bottom line,” I went on, “Cali getting into a tub with Creepy Prince Charming is a grade A, horrible idea. Will she have to be naked for the ritual? We have no idea!”

Greyson clenched his jaw. “She won’t be naked with him, Xavier.”

“Whatever. I’m not leaving Cali alone with him,” I snapped. “You deal with Aysel, and I—”

“We can solve this by having someone from the pack come along,” Greyson said decidedly.

“Okay, fine,” I said. “While you deal with Aysel, I’ll have backup at the ritual just in case moon boy tries anything.”

Greyson shook his head. “That’s not the plan I have in mind. We’ll get one of our best fighters to guard Cali while she’s with Lucian. She’s got her magic too, anyway—she can blow him off, literally. As for Aysel, both you and I will deal with her, just in case.”

I snorted. “In case of what? Do you need me to be there to hold your hand? Maybe braid your hair? Is the Big Bad Alpha scared of the pretty girl who wants to fuck him?”

Greyson glared at me. “Aysel’s already put a curse on me, Xavier. Who knows what she’d do if she found out what I’m up to? She’s clearly in contact with someone who knows magic.”

“That’s a chance you’re going to have to take. I will not leave Cali with the royal brat for one second,” I said matter-of-factly. “We have a lot of great fighters in the pack, but you know I’m the only one who would rather die than let anything happen to her.”

Greyson pinched the bridge of his nose, taking in my words. He finally said, “Fine. You keep an eye on Cali, and I’ll deal with Aysel.”

I smirked. It was pretty nice when I outmaneuvered my brother. “Glad we had this little talk. Bye now.”

I needed to talk to Cali ASAP—the more Greyson and I talked about the ritual, the less I liked the idea of Cali taking part in it at all. Greyson’s interest in this entire situation was being compromised by his issues with Aysel, whereas I was only thinking of Cali. Putting her in some unknown situation that we couldn’t control made my stomach twist with worry.

I had to talk her out of it.

“Wait,” Greyson said, blocking my way as I made to leave. “We haven’t discussed who should come along.”

“Why not ask Rishika? She’s always been a big fan of yours.”

Greyson shook his head. “But she’s our best. With both of us at the palace, I’ll need Rishika to keep watch here.”

I rolled my eyes. “Look, why are you asking for my opinion? You wanted to be Alpha. Figure it out yourself.” I patted him on the shoulder, he growled, and then I walked out, smirking to myself.

Greyson was such a fussy little baby. If I were Alpha, I’d be much more confident than that. WHEN I became Alpha, I’d be much more confident. Things would be different. But I knew there was no rush. I would challenge Greyson when I was ready.

And actually, there was a chance that all this stuff with Aysel could present a golden opportunity in the future.

Pretty happy with my plan, I walked past the living room, where Torin was getting all enthusiastic about the dreidel game. That wasn’t surprising. The excessive Christmas decorations weren’t a surprise, either. This whole thing was way over the top, though, and with so many days until Christmas, if Torin kept adding to the décor, there wouldn’t be room left for the pack to actually live here.

Nevertheless, I wasn’t that mad at Torin about it. On the one hand, this was my house, and I wanted it to be dark and brooding to match my vibes. But on the other hand, I did like a little holiday cheer, and if this made Torin happy after losing Astrid, then I would suck it up.

I was looking at the over-decorated Christmas tree when I noticed a Santa ornament and remembered something. Torin wanted to do Secret Santa, huh?

“Torin,” I said, tapping him on the shoulder. “Can I talk to you for a moment?”

Torin looked up at me, startled. “I was just—”

Before he could finish his sentence, I pulled him up, away from the group, and dragged him to the corridor.

“Hey, I was winning!”

“Sorry about that,” I told him after we reached the empty hallway. I wasn’t sorry, but it seemed like the thing to say. “I just needed to ask for a small favor.”

Torin looked intrigued. “What is it?”

“Make it so that I’m Cali’s Secret Santa,” I said.

Torin’s bright expression dimmed. He cleared his throat, looking surprisingly shifty. “Ah. Well. Um, are you sure you want to mess with the rules?”

I stared at the dude. Why the hell was he resisting here? “I get that this is all kind of new to you, Christmas and all that, but you need to listen to me on this.”

“But—”

I placed my hand on his shoulder, giving him my best smile. “Rules are made to be broken, Torin. Even Christmas rules. Also, this is my house that I’ve let you decorate, and my credit card that you’ve been using to buy two-hundred-dollar bedazzled hairclips.”

Torin smiled dreamily. “Aren’t they *so* beautiful?”

“You don’t even have long hair.”

“But—”

I squeezed his shoulder—maybe a little harder than necessary. “I need to be Cali’s Secret Santa. You’ll be a pal and do this for me, right?”

Torin sighed and nodded. “Of course.”

I let him go and patted his shoulder. “Now go win that dreidel game.”

Torin dashed away enthusiastically, and I wondered what the perfect gift would be for Cali. Something understated but flashy? Something chic? Was chic even what they called clothes these days? Maybe a necklace? I should ask Lola. Or not. That would probably be a bad idea—that girl was a menace. She’d probably suggest getting Cali a rabies-infested pony or something.

Actually, I would’ve gotten Cali a pony if this place weren’t constantly so full of danger. Minus the rabies. Did ponies get rabies?

Still thinking, I’d turned around to walk down the hall when a hand wrapped around the crook of my elbow. Instead of defending myself or attacking, I felt my whole body go numb, as if it recognized the touch.

My *wolf* recognized the touch.

I was pulled into a side room, and the door slammed behind me.

A second later, Ava wrapped her arms around my neck.

Smirking, she asked, “Isn’t it customary to celebrate after winning a battle?”

**Episode 2258**

Artemis looked thoughtful and threatening at the same time. What a combo.

“Oh,” she said darkly, “there are *so* many ways I could deal with Ava.”

I poked her shoulder. “Calm down there, semi-Dark Fae. I’m just asking for advice. I don’t want you to actually do anything.”

Artemis nodded seriously. “Indeed. Vengeance is always best when you get to serve it up yourself. I wouldn't dream of robbing you of the pleasure.”

I huffed. “I’m not serving anyone anything. I don’t do revenge—I’m too pure for that.”

“She means boring,” Lola told Artemis, sniffing condescendingly.

I gasped, offended. “How dare you—”

“No, the dramatic vampire-wolf girl is right,” Artemis said. “Revenge is extremely pleasurable. Almost orgasmic. You know what ‘orgasmic’ means, right, Cali?”

My blood pressure kept climbing.

“Can both of you stop it?” I demanded. “There will be no plotting *revenge*!”

Lola sighed. “Talk about a best friend. You’re always out there crushing my dreams.”

“It’s not my fault your dreams are always chaotic,” I snapped.

“Stop being boring, Cali. I need some entertainment in my life!”

I shoved Lola and turned to Artemis. “What’s your advice?”

“Apart from sweet, soul-crushing revenge?” Artemis asked.

“Yes, Artemis, apart from that.”

“I’d fight her,” Artemis deadpanned.

I blinked. “What?”

Artemis scoffed. “You’ve tried words, but Ava isn’t someone who’s going to slink off just because you tell her to. You’ve tried that repeatedly, and yet she’s still here, making a fool out of you.”

“Oh my god, I love it!” Lola exclaimed, clearly very excited. “A fight! Like a duel!” She grabbed my arm. “I’ll be your second, Cali!”

Artemis looked pleased, Lola was peeing her pants because she got off on chaos, and I was just horrified. Like, *excuse me*? Would Ava and I face off in a remote field while holding pistols? What in the fucking *Hamilton* hell was this?

“I’m not going to fight my boyfriend’s ex. That would be tacky,” I told my sister.

Artemis shrugged. “You asked for my advice.”

I huffed. “Your advice is absurd. I guess you haven’t been in a lot of relationships either, so maybe taking relationship tips from you probably isn’t the best idea. No offense.”

“This isn’t about relationships,” Artemis told me. “This is about respect. Ava doesn’t respect you, so you need to show her who’s boss.”

“Oh my god, *yes*,” Lola said a little breathily. Was she ENJOYING THIS?

“You should gut her,” Artemis told me.

I blinked. “Excuse me?”

“You should gut Ava,” Artemis repeated.

Lola’s smile was all teeth. “Like a *fish*.”

*What the FUCK?*

I gaped. “You two can’t be serious!”

Artemis looked a little miffed. “You’re making such a fuss, Cali. When I was a bounty hunter, things were dealt with much more efficiently. Gutting someone—”

“I’m not going to *gut* anyone. It’s gross and horrible!”

“Ugh,” Lola grunted, pulling her vibrating phone out of her pocket. “I’m loving this conversation, but I gotta get this—it’s my dads!”

Lola bounded off while Artemis placed her hand on my shoulder. “So. To gut someone, you have to—”

I pushed her hand away. “Oh my god, STOP!”

“Oh, good, I found you,” said Greyson from somewhere behind me.

I jumped and turned around to see him walking toward us, looking like a god. As always. He was so handsome that I actually forgot what Artemis and I had been talking about. It was jarring how sexy he was, really—sometimes it took a second or two for me to process that he wasn’t a fucking GQ cover model just walking around among us.

How the hell had I managed to land THAT?

He smirked at me—he could probably see how I felt, clear as day—and reached out for my hand. Automatically, I went for it, eager to rub my face all over his neck, but then I remembered…

*Shit, the curse.*

And my older sister was right here.

I flinched back. Greyson froze, and hurt flashed through his silver eyes. He was like a massive chocolate cake I couldn’t eat because it would make me sick. Literally.

*This is torture!* I thought, huffing internally.

“Sorry,” I said. I was talking about not touching him, and he got it, bypassing the awkwardness with a nod.

“Just wanted to update you,” he said. “Xavier and I were discussing the plan for the ritual and dealing with Aysel. I want to make sure you’re really willing to do this—if you don’t want to, I’m sure we can figure something else out. After all, we now have two…” He paused, obviously doing some math in his very beautiful head. “Well, sort of four witches, I guess… We have an abundance of magical people who can help us.” He frowned. “Wow, that’s way too many.”

I stared at Greyson, biting my lip. *Damn*. Was not touching him making him even hotter, or was I losing my mind? Probably both. I reached out to him again, but *again*, I stopped myself.

And took a deep, deep breath.

*You can do this, Cali!*

“Even if the witches can figure out a way to break the Aysel curse,” I said, “I still have to deal with Lucian and the moon goddess priestess stuff. I’d hoped Vander might have offered more guidance or insight, but no.”

“I get it,” Greyson said, nodding. “I’ll need someone from the pack to come along, though, just in case we need backup.”

“Count me in,” Artemis said.

Greyson stared. “You sure?”

“I’ve already been to the palace, and I’ll make sure nothing happens to my sister,” Artemis said.

I hated to put Artemis at risk, but there was really no one else I’d rather have looking out for me.

“Hopefully it’ll be fine, though,” I said. “If Lucian’s telling the truth, it should be more of a tradition than a ritual.”

“Prince Asshole can’t be trusted, though,” Greyson told Artemis.

She snorted. “Don’t worry. I’ve handled my fair share of pompous royalty types.” She smirked at me. “And if all else fails, I can just gut them.”

Rolling my eyes, I elbowed her.

“Anyway,” Artemis said. “I gotta go find Rishika to tell her all my news.”

As Artemis walked away, Greyson turned to me. “This is good. We know we can trust her to have your back.”

“She sure loves a good scuffle,” I said wryly. “She literally just told me to fight Ava.”

Greyson was alarmed. “What the hell? No. Absolutely not. Xavier will deal with Ava. She’s his responsibility, not yours. I don’t want you out there playing games with that woman, Cali.”

What if I *did* have to eventually fight Ava, though? What if I had to fight Aysel, too? What if I had to blow them both into a million bloody pieces just so they’d keep their filthy paws off my men?

*Is revenge an option?* I wondered. *How would I even go about it? It’s so hard, and I know nothing!*

“Cali, I don’t like that look on your face…” Greyson trailed off.

I huffed, annoyed. “Don’t worry. Fighting isn’t really my thing. Or revenge.”

Greyson smirked. “I didn’t have you pegged as that type.”

“Yeah. Apparently I’m too boring for that.”

“I think you’re cute,” Greyson said, smiling.

“I don’t want to be cute!” I said. “I want to be a badass.”

Greyson laughed, looking all shiny and charming, and reached out to hold me—

Before dropping his hand.

The silence between us was heavy.

“This is really fucking hard,” Greyson mumbled, looking like he was in pain. “The faster we break this curse, the better. And we *are* going to break it.”

I wanted to feel as confident as he sounded. “How do you know that?”

“We have no choice—there’s no other acceptable outcome,” Greyson said seriously. “Aysel is pathetic. She had to use a curse to try to separate us. But you and I are fated to be together—we don’t need witchcraft. We’ll beat this, like we’ve beaten everything else.”

I wanted to run to him and hug him tight and kiss him. I wanted to feel his arms wrapped around me, his scent, his mouth against my skin. I wanted to feel secure and safe in his embrace.

But I was terrified that if I approached, the curse would make me nauseous again.

“Love,” Greyson said. This time, he did take my hand. “Look at me.”

I looked up at him, sighing.

“I promise we will break the curse,” he said.

I glanced down. He was holding my hand, and instead of feeling repulsed, I felt more connected to him than ever. I just couldn’t deal with this. How could I have him so close and not be able to get even closer? I wanted to kiss him so badly that I could taste it.

“I want to kiss you,” I blurted. “I feel like I’m about to explode.”

Greyson chuckled, all smirky and devilish. “It doesn’t need to come to that…”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

With that same wicked expression that gave me butterflies, Greyson murmured, “I’ve got an idea.”

**Episode 2259**

ARTEMIS

I went downstairs to find Rishika. My conversation with my sister had left me amused, but also puzzled. How could Cali not see the beauty of gutting your enemies? At least Lola agreed with me. But then again, Lola wasn’t exactly the best judge of anything.

I still couldn’t believe she’d told Cali to have Xavier sleep with Ava. I’d never heard anything so stupid. I was so glad I didn’t have to deal with that kind of tangle—it seemed like both of Cali’s mates had other women who were after them.

*I* would definitely fight anyone who was trying to get with Rishika against her will. Of course, it wouldn’t be because Rishika *needed* me to fight her battles—I’d do it for myself. For my honor, and ours as a couple. I would never let any nonsense of that sort go on for so long. How could Cali bear it?

I couldn’t imagine that Rishika would just stand by idly while someone aggressively tried to claim me, either. At the first hint of a threat, she’d just flatten her rival, and she would look *very* beautiful and sexy while she was at it.

That thought put a smile on my face.

I was most certainly very much in love with a werewolf, wasn’t I?

It was hard to believe, and yet I was certain of it.

Now, where was she?

I checked the kitchen first and found Orla, Tom, and Torin cleaning up the dishes—the three of them were chattering, all bubbly and excited about gift-giving. They looked so cute together. I was glad Torin had found a friend in Tom—it had to be helping him deal with Astrid’s death. I didn’t like people easily, but I had to admit that I’d been saddened when we’d lost her.

Shaking the thought away, I spoke up over their conversation. “Have any of you seen Rishika?”

Orla shook her head. “No, but—”

I turned to leave. “Well, okay then—”

“I actually would like to talk to you, though,” Orla said.

I glanced over at Tom and Torin, who were suddenly extremely busy with the dishes. Orla told them she’d be right back, and then she led me out of the kitchen.

“What’s going on?” I asked, clearing my throat.

“I don’t want to keep you from Rishika,” Orla said, “but I do need to talk to you about New Orleans.”

“What is it?”

“I’ve given it some thought, and I think it’s for the best that I don’t join you on the trip.”

I was surprised. “Are you sure? You helped me plan the trip, get the tickets—”

“I know,” Orla said, sighing. “And I’m sorry to disappoint you. But I think your quest to find your father is a journey that you should take without me.”

I wasn’t sure what to say.

Orla went on. “I talked to Tom about it—you know he’s still adjusting to being a werewolf, and the idea of leaving him is a little tricky right now.”

I paused, processing. The old Artemis would’ve thought that she was choosing her husband over me. Always choosing others over me.

Orla squeezed my hand. “Artemis, you know I love and care about you more than my own life, right?”

I blinked. “I guess?”

She shook her head, pulling me into a hug. “I just trust you to do this alone. It feels like my presence would only hinder your focus. I feels like… like I’ve been a little overbearing lately, what with helping you find your magic.”

“You may have a point about that,” I said. “The overbearing part, I mean.”

She snorted. I didn’t tell her that even though I did enjoy my independence, I had been looking forward to spending time with my mother; and maybe learning a few important things about Adair that could come in handy.

“I don’t even know what Adair looks like, though,” I said.

“When I knew him, he looked a lot like your father. But I haven’t seen Adair in quite a long time. He probably looks quite different now.”

I shrugged. “Back when I was working for the Kollector, I managed to find plenty of targets without a picture or a clear description. If Adair is in New Orleans, I’ll find him.”

“I have no doubt,” Orla said. “And if you need me, I’m always only a call away. I’ll hop on the first flight over if you need my help.” She paused. “I never want you to feel that I’m getting in your way. And I fear that that might happen if I’m there, fussing over you.”

“Although fussing over me isn’t all bad, it would annoy me during a mission,” I admitted.

“I thought you’d feel that way.” She smiled fondly, kissing my cheek. “Now go find Rishika.”

I walked down the hall, processing the conversation I’d just had with my mother. I was surprised that she’d decided to take a step back, but I actually felt a bit of relief as well. I intended to treat my hunt for Adair like any bounty hunter would, which meant that there could be a few rules broken along the way—all things that would be better left hidden from my mother.

Not everyone could handle the moral ambiguity bounty hunters dealt with.

“Hey, careful!” Jay said. I realized I’d almost walked into him.

“Sorry.”

Jay smirked. “Mooning over Rishika got you all distracted?”

I snorted. “Do you know where she is?”

“Just went upstairs.”

“But I just came downstairs to find her.”

Jay chuckled. “You two should coordinate better.”

“I wonder how *you* coordinate with Lola. She’s so… theatrical.”

Jay sighed dreamily. “I know.”

Well then. To each their own.

I finally found Rishika in our bedroom, finishing up getting dressed. Her hair was wet from the shower.

“Hey, you,” she said, leaning in to kiss me.

I brushed my lips over hers, stroking her cheek. Her skin felt incredible, and she smelled so good that I felt a flutter in my stomach.

“Are you joining me in bed?” she asked cheekily.

“Definitely, since I missed the shower.”

She smiled. “Hurry up then.”

“Be right back,” I said. Fast as lightning, I went into the bathroom and got ready. When I returned to the bedroom, Rishika was under the covers. I huddled under them with her and smiled when she pulled me into her arms. I loved her warmth.

“Are you tired?” I asked.

She shrugged. “A little. It’s been quite a day.”

“Pretty interesting for me, too,” I said.

She raised her eyebrows. “That’s cryptic.”

I stared at her, biting my lip. “I talked with Cali about how to handle a rival. Would you fight someone for me?”

Rishika’s face was deadpan as she said, “Obviously.”

I liked the sound of that.

“Though a little more context would be helpful,” she teased.

“Like, if someone was obsessed with me and you wanted to get rid of them, what would you do?”

Rishika sat up on the bed, suddenly serious. “Is this a person you’d want to be gone too? Why aren’t you fighting them yourself?”

“Maybe I’ve tried to. Maybe they’re too powerful for me to defeat.”

Rishika gasped. “*No!*”

“Yes.”

“It’s settled, then,” she said briskly. “I’d fight for your honor until my last breath.”

I giggled, surprising myself. Who would’ve thought that *I*—a formerly ethically bankrupt bounty hunter—could make such a sound? Pulling Rishika down onto the mattress, I hovered over her, my mouth a breath away from hers. I brushed her hair away from her forehead. “So you love me, huh?”

Rishika smiled. She was so gorgeous it made my heart ache. “Maybe a little.”

I frowned. “A little?”

She kept smiling, reaching up to brush her fingers over my neck. “A lot.”

My pulse was going wild. I wanted to feel her, to make her feel good. I kissed her forehead, her cheekbones, her nose. I licked her upper lip, then the lower. Her sharp intake of breath made me feel powerful, desired. I loved the way she looked at me, the way she tasted, the way she smelled.

When her mouth parted, I gave her a proper kiss, all pressure and heat. Her tongue brushed up against mine, her hand snaking around to the back of my neck to pull me even closer. She moaned into my mouth, the sound intoxicating, and I wanted more. I always did. Kissing her was like breathing. I broke the kiss and reached down to the hem of her sleep shirt.

“You’re so fucking hot,” she rasped.

I loved the way she looked at me. Pulling her shirt up slightly, I slid my hand down her trembling stomach. Her skin was so soft and smooth that I wanted to lick her all over.

“Let’s get this off,” I said, smirking. She nodded eagerly, her pupils blown wide, and then—

“Tom!” Orla’s loud voice startled both of us. Oh my Fae *gods*, was he right outside our bedroom, or what? “Tom, don’t forget to add blueberries to the shopping list—you know our girls love them! I should grow my own, actually, just to make sure they’re pesticide free. What do you think?”

Tom replied—from downstairs, I noted—and Rishika and I shared a look. She burst out laughing. “Your mom is such a mom.”

I snorted. I didn’t really know what that meant, but I also sort of did. Orla’s voice rang out again, but from further away, so I gathered she had moved on. The heated moment between Rishika and me had been broken, though, and I remembered one of the reasons why I’d wanted to talk to her earlier.

“I have a question for you, actually.”

“What?” she asked, her voice soft.

“I know we sort of talked about the New Orleans trip before, and I know you wanted to stay with the pack. But my mom’s not coming with me.”

“Oh.” She paused. “How do you feel about that?”

“I was a little upset initially, but then I thought about her hovering over me, and that changed into relief.”

Rishika chuckled. “Makes sense.”

“There’s an extra ticket and all, though, so…” I trailed off. “Do you want to come to New Orleans with me?”

**Episode 2260**

GREYSON

I looked at Cali’s and my intertwined hands.

“The revulsion thing only seems to happen when we kiss,” I told her, running my thumb over her knuckles. “We’re able to hold hands without pulling away, which is good.”

“You think so?” she asked. She looked up at me so hopefully that it made me wanna smother her in a hug.

“There must be other things we can do that won’t trigger the curse,” I said.

She nodded, sighing. “That makes sense. But…”

“What?”

She pressed her lips together. The corners of her eyes glistened. “I’m afraid, Greyson. What if we find more things that cause the revulsion? I hate the idea of associating anything negative…” Her breath was shaky as she glanced down at my mouth. “With being with you.”

“I know exploring this is a bit of a risk, but wouldn’t the payoff be worth it?” I asked.

She swallowed, biting her lip. “Of course.”

“If we figure how to outwit the curse, it would probably feel like a small triumph. I want that. I want to be with you,” I said.

She smiled a little. “I like the sound of that.”

I stared into her eyes. “Actually, I want you all the time. Even more now that I know that I can’t have you. Does that make sense?”

Cali swallowed audibly. Her back was against the wall, and I stood in front of her, as close as I could get without touching. Only our fingertips and palms were in contact, nothing more.

“I know what you mean,” she said. “I can’t stop thinking about you. About us… together.”

My whole body felt taut at her proximity. Ready to snap. She was trembling slightly. Her skin was so hot. I wanted to bring it to my mouth, kiss her hand, but I didn’t want to risk it right now.

“No matter what, I need you to remember that my feelings for you haven’t changed—if anything, they’re stronger. And if this curse means that the only thing we can do is to hold hands…” My grip became firmer. “Then I’ll hold your hand.”

Cali exhaled sharply. “Wow. That’s incredibly sweet.”

I shook my head. “It’s the truth. I don’t want to try anything that you’re not comfortable with.”

“It’s not about being uncomfortable, it’s about the risk,” she said. “But…”

I raised an eyebrow. “But?”

“Even with the curse making kissing you impossible, my love for you hasn’t wavered. I… I want you.” Her voice lowered. She looked up at me through her eyelashes. “I want you so badly it makes me ache.”

Hearing Cali, someone who was usually so reserved in public, say stuff like that made my self-control slip. My wolf was howling—the urge to mark its mate, to claim her while she sweetly surrendered, was making it antsy. I wanted to grab Cali and kiss her with everything I had, but I had to hold back.

“Do you want to go to my room?” I asked quietly. Nodding down at our hands, I said, “Maybe we can do more of this. Or other things…”

“What things?” she asked, swallowing audibly.

“Maybe we can touch more,” I said, glancing down at her body. “Maybe it’s just your mouth that I can’t kiss, and everywhere else is fair game.”

Cali made a tiny noise in the back of her throat that made me want to grab and throw her over my shoulder.

“You could touch me too,” I murmured, lowering my face to the same level as hers. “Anywhere you like.”

She swallowed, trembling. “I’d love that.”

“Let’s go,” I said gruffly.

She nodded emphatically, but then I heard a familiar voice behind me.

“Hi, kids!”

I turned and saw Sabine staring at us happily.

My mother had a knack for timing.

Cali, her face beet red, pulled her hand away. “Hi, uh, Mrs. Smith! Bathroom,” she blurted out.

Sabine gave her a funny look. “Excuse me, dear?”

“I’m just heading to the bathroom,” Cali said, clearly flustered as she walked away.

“Cali?” I called after her.

She paused, turning slowly to face me.

I raised an eyebrow. “Don’t forget what we talked about.”

She scoffed. “As if I could!”

I shared her outrage, but I was also pretty happy to see her suffering as well. Misery loved company and all that. No curse was going to stop the chemistry between us.

“Apologies for interrupting,” Sabine told me. She looked amused.

“And yet you still interrupted,” I said, my tone a little sarcastic.

She raised an eyebrow. “Is that the way to speak to your mother?”

I snorted, shaking my head. “Right. Sorry. What did you need?”

“I realized I haven’t had much of a chance to talk to you since you became Alpha and I got back from San Francisco,” she said. “Between that and Xavier’s car, I’ve been distracted.”

I examined her face. “Is something bothering you?”

She looked a little sheepish, and I frowned. “You should feel free to tell me whatever you want, always. Don’t hold back. Honesty is very important to me.”

She sighed. “Of course. I get that.”

Her odd expression made me think that this had something to do with Lucian or Aysel. But when she opened her mouth again, what she said was, “I want you to know how proud I am of you.”

Without another word, she smothered me in a hug.

I stood there, a little dumbstruck at her words. Sabine was squeezing me against her, even though I was basically a foot taller than her and almost twice as wide, and she was sniffling a little too, because she was… proud of me?

This was new.

I knew that she and I had been bridging the gap between us, but to hear my mother say she was proud of me was nothing sort of incredible. I was shocked by how good it felt to have her close like this, to have her admit something so important to me.

All I’d ever heard from my father was how much of a disappointment I was. Being around Silas had meant constant physical and emotional abuse that had left many scars, both on my skin and my heart. I hid them most of the time, but then there were moments like these…

After the initial surprise was over, I returned the hug. Awkwardly, because I wasn’t sure how to show affection to anyone who wasn’t Cali. But still, I was finally hugging Sabine back. The moment I did, she hugged me even tighter, as if she’d wanted to do this for a while. Just embrace me as if there were nothing between us.

She released me after a long moment. The awkwardness had evaporated, thankfully. She just stared at me, her eyes glistening as she stroked my cheek. “You are an amazing leader, Greyson. An honorable, empathetic man. I know you’ll give the pack your very best.”

I swallowed, feeling a little weird. Uncomfortable, probably, but overall, I was filled with something I couldn’t explain. It was a nice change. “Thank you,” I said. “That means a lot, coming from you.”

She smiled. It felt like there was something being left unsaid, though.

“Is there anything else on your mind?” I asked.

“Have you thought about your Luna?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“Would that be Cali?” she asked.

“Of course—who else would I choose?” I said, frowning in confusion.

“Have you… discussed this with Cali?”

“Not recently, but she knows what I want.”

Sabine looked thoughtful. “If you’re serious about being with a Luna, you owe it to Cali to talk to her about it now that you’re the official Alpha.”

My mother was right, but I sighed. “It’s not easy, though. There are so many questions. She’s part Fae—would she even be able to survive a Luna mark? And then there’s the *due destini*. It’s also a lot of responsibility.”

“Those are all reasons that could deter you, but…” My mother paused. “Mostly, you seem to be making up excuses as to why you shouldn’t make her Luna.”

“I really think that Cali would make an amazing Luna,” I said. “She’s smart and caring, and I think she could be a great diplomat if she put her mind to it. But at the same time, I’d be worried for her. The last time I had a Luna…”

I trailed off. There was a pang in my chest.

“You can’t blame yourself for what happened to Joss,” Sabine said quietly.

“I know,” I said. “But is it right for me to put Cali in the same position?”

“I know I don’t have to tell you that having a Luna is an important part of being an Alpha, of showing strength not only within the pack, but to other packs too.”

“You’re talking about the Vanguard pack,” I realized.

“Yes. They’re a threat,” Sabine said. “Which makes me think…”

I frowned. “What?”

“If you’re not willing to commit to making Cali your Luna, then perhaps you need to find an alternative,” she said. “For the good of the pack, would you consider someone else?”

**Episode 2261**

XAVIER

Ava’s hands felt like hot iron against my chest. I had to remain stone cold to get rid of her. Doing my best not to react, I said, “Celebrate what? Is that what you heard?”

Ava shrugged. She looked up at me through her eyelashes and coyly trailed a finger down my chest. “It does seem customary, especially for the Redwood pack.”

Her voice was low. She was close enough that I could breathe in her scent, feel her body’s heat. It didn’t take much for that lusty haze to rise within me, to creep up in my mind and body. She was so close that it was hard not to remember what had happened between us in the forest.

And what I’d thought about in the morning when I’d taken a shower.

Ava couldn’t fucking stop getting under my skin.

But I meant what I’d said to Cali—I wasn’t going to sleep with this woman. My wolf thought otherwise, though.

*Take her*, he said. *Claim your mate.*

His loyalty to Ava was jarring, but it wasn’t that much of a surprise. He’d left me once, because of my decision to kill Ava after she’d murdered my mother.

My wolf didn’t seem to care about that, or anything that wasn’t associated with instinct and lust. My wolf was an animal, and he desired like an animal—mindless and incontrollable.

“You seem a little flustered…” Ava trailed off, her tone playful as she took yet another step closer.

I shifted back uncomfortably, my brain fucking screaming at me to tell Ava to go the hell away. Cali had put her trust in me—I’d told her that I wouldn’t sleep with Ava, but keeping that promise was getting more difficult by the second.

The mate bond vibrated between us, demanding, and I was frozen, almost paralyzed by the idea of touching her. If I was being truly honest with myself, though, I had to admit that the dark part inside me didn’t want her to move. But I had to do something—push Ava, fight her, tell her to get the fuck away.

“Well, aren’t you going to say something?” she asked with a smirk. “And I here I thought we were all in the mood for a celebration?”

She trailed her hand from my chest down to my abs, and that was when I snapped the fuck out of it.

“Stop,” I growled, grabbing her wrist. “Leave me the fuck alone. How many times do I need to tell you the same shit?”

She yanked her hand away, snorting. “You’re in denial, Xavier. If you didn’t want me here, you would’ve kicked me out, so—”

“Shut. *Up*,” I hissed in her face. I didn’t tell her that the only reason why I hadn’t kicked her out was that I had no idea what my wolf would do if I exiled her. I was intimidated by his reaction, since the last time I’d done something he didn’t approve of when it came to Ava, he’d completely abandoned me.

“We can feel each other’s wolves, Xavier,” Ava said in a low, smokey voice that sent a shiver down my spine. “Why are you fighting your natural instinct? Nature always wins.”

I snarled, shoving her hand away when she reached out to me again. “I want to make one thing clear: there’s nothing natural about you and me. My wolf may have certain memories, but they’re nothing more than memories, things from our past. If I could have you erased from my fucking mind, I’d do it.”

Ava tilted her head. “That would be a shame—our memories make up a good portion of who we are. You can’t ignore who you are, Xavier. Or who you want, either.” Her voice lowered as she leaned in close, her lips near my ear. “I remember our time together too. My wolf misses you. So, no matter how much you try to pretend otherwise, I know that deep down, you want me as much as your wolf does. We’re just wasting time here—we both know what’s going to happen.”

I hated Ava’s confidence. I hated her scent, her warmth, how fucking gorgeous she was. I was drawn to her just as much as I hated her. I needed to push her away, yet I couldn’t. I thought of Cali, forced myself to remember who I truly loved, but the nature of the *due destini* kept plaguing my mind.

Cali had always been afraid of going mad because of the *due destini*.

Was what I had with Ava a similar sort of curse?

Because it did feel like a curse. It felt like I was already mad, having my wolf at odds with everything I wanted. My wolf was forcing me to desire Ava, and I felt less than human for it. It felt like I had no free will, no feelings of my own, was just a puppet to my instincts and to Ava’s predatory, fucked-up needs.

If I didn’t end this, I was going to lose myself.

“Don’t keep me and your wolf waiting, Xavier.” Ava’s breath was hot in my ear. “Perhaps the celebration has already begun.”

She grabbed me by the neck, looking up at me and licking her lips. I raised my hands to shove her back—

The door opened, knocking Ava against me. The impact was hard and searing, and before I had the chance to do anything, Ava’s lips locked with mine. There was a flash of a kiss—of me giving into all the dark urges that had been twisting around inside me. Her body was soft against mine, and I needed to mark her all over, to feel her. My wolf wanted this, and right now, I did too.

I *needed* this.

I needed her.

I slammed the door shut, not wanting to be interrupted…

But it was too late.

“I knew it!” Lola screeched.

I was startled back to reality. Sputtering, I pushed away from Ava, turning to face a furious-looking Lola. She glared at us, her face twisted in disgust.

I forced myself not to say, “*It’s not what it looks like!*”

It was totally what it looked like.

“You don’t honestly expect me to buy that tired line, do you?” Lola asked, pointing at me accusingly before stomping out of the room.

Panting, I turned to Ava. “You’re lucky I don’t kill you right now.”

She laughed in my face. “You can’t. The sooner you realize that, the better.”

Growling, I marched out of the room, running to catch up to Lola. “Lola!”

She flipped me off over her shoulder, and I grabbed her by the arm, pulling her into an empty room.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” she snapped, yanking her arm away.

“Lola, please, listen to me—”

“What could you possibly have to say, Xavier?” she demanded, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I assume you’re going to tell Cali about what you think you just saw?” I asked, hands shaking.

She glared at me. “Obviously. And I’m pretty sure of what I saw.”

I sneered. “The only thing you should be sure of is how bad you are at opening doors. And how bad you are at giving advice. Do you really think that my sleeping with Ava is going to solve my mate problem?”

“Oh my god, why is everyone ganging up on me about this? It was just an idea!” Lola exclaimed. “And now that I’ve seen it in practice, I can admit that yeah, maybe it wasn’t such a good one!”

I was seething. Pointing at her accusingly, I snarled, “You only saw what you wanted to see. Ava tried to kiss me—helped along by you, barging in—but there was nothing real there. And nothing was going to happen. I would’ve stopped it, like I always do!”

Lola rolled her eyes. “You expect me to believe that?”

I shook my head bitterly. “I don’t care what you think. I know the truth, and I know Cali will believe me.”

Lola raised an eyebrow. “And what about Ava? What are you going to do next time, if I’m not around to barge in?”

I clenched my jaw. I stared at this girl, my mate’s best friend, the woman who’d brought me and Cali together in the first place with another of her fucking insane ideas. I’d always had mixed feelings about Lola, but I couldn’t deny her role in my relationship with Cali. And I knew that she cared about Cali—that she loved Cali and wanted what was best for her best friend.

I wanted what was best for Cali too. What was best for myself, as well—and that could only involve Cali. My real mate. My real love. The person I needed to spend the rest of my life with.

“There isn’t going to be a next time, Lola,” I declared. “We’re going to get rid of Ava, and you’re going to help me.”

**Episode 2262**

I sank deep into the bath I’d drawn for myself, sighing. I had filled it up with shower gel that smelled like lavender and orange blossom, and I’d also added some eucalyptus salts for good measure.

*I am going to be the bath queen*, I thought. *I will force myself to relax.*

Key word: force. I had to think calming thoughts—not “oh but you might fall asleep and have a confrontation with a goddess” thoughts. I wondered what would happen if I laid on Greyson’s bed later on. Would I dream about things that repulsed me? Things like rotting banana peels and Ava?

The idea of dreaming about Ava had me gagging already.

*Ugh, why won’t these stupid curses just leave us alone?* I thought, frustrated—in both the mental sense and the sexual sense. It was like the old saying said: “You always want what you can’t have.” The fact that I couldn’t have Greyson made me want him even more—I wanted to touch him, kiss him, make him feel good, hear him moan. Just the thought that I wasn’t *allowed* to do that infuriated me. I felt like I was going nuts—I couldn’t stop myself from playing all the intimate moments we’d shared over and over in my head.

I shouldn’t have drawn a bath—a cold shower would’ve fucking helped more.

Could this whole thing just be a side effect of the *due destini*?

*No*, I reminded myself. *Don’t forget that this is just a curse that Aysel created, Cali.*

That horrible woman was fucking obsessed with Greyson. Maybe Artemis had been onto something when she’d mentioned fighting my terrible rivals who wouldn’t take a no for an answer. It was just fucking creepy at this point, and my patience was running thin. Like, these women were just roaming around doing whatever the hell they wanted, and for some reason or another, I was supposed to lie there and take it like a useless fool.

*I fucking hate this!*

I was actually getting better at using my magic, though, and it would give me a great deal of pleasure to blast Aysel into next week. But thinking of fighting only made me tenser—I hadn’t drawn a damn bath to get *more* tense!

*Calm down, Cali*, I told myself.

Taking a deep breath, I sank down into the soothing bubbles. Within seconds, I was imagining being here with Greyson. Just the two of us, free to kiss, to touch, to feel good together…

But then I had a flash of that dream, where Lucian had been in the tub with me.

*Oh no. Not today, Satan!*

“Can’t even have a moment of peace in my own *brain*,” I muttered. So much for relaxing in the tub. It was time to get out. And maybe stick to showers for a while.

“Maybe I should try some of those meditation videos,” I grumbled, wrapping myself in a robe. I fought to push the image of Lucian from my mind, irritated. The sooner we put an end to all that, the better. I just needed some peace and quiet in my life. Was that too much to ask?

A knock on the door startled me, as if saying that *no*, *peace won’t ever be possible, thanks.* Thankfully, though, when the door opened, it was Greyson on the other side. My heart instantly started pounding. I wanted to rush into his arms, but I knew that I couldn’t risk it. It would spoil the mood.

*I’ve figured out lately that revulsion tends to do that*, I thought, huffing internally.

“You look grumpy,” Greyson said, raising an eyebrow.

“I want to hug you, and I know I can’t, so I’m mad,” I said hotly.

He smirked a little, coming closer. “Did you think about my idea, then?” he asked. “We can see how far beyond holding hands we can go…”

His voice was low and sexy, and I got all tingly inside. Only moments ago, I’d been fantasizing about Greyson in the tub, and now he was here in the flesh, and I was getting all flustered and achy.

“I’d be a liar if I said I didn’t want to test the limits of the curse,” I admitted. “But I’m worried.”

Before I could say anything else, Greyson came near. Without letting me overthink, he pulled me into a hug, his arms tight around me. I exhaled in relief, warmed by the contact.

“See?” Greyson murmured against my forehead. “Hugging is safe, too. I don’t want you to worry. If there’s the slightest hint of any trouble, we can always just lie down and hold hands.”

I looked up at him. The way he’d said that sounded so sweet and sexy. He always made me feel safe and loved. “You’re amazing.”

“No, *you’re* amazing,” he said.

I snorted. “Okay, that’s enough sweet talk—how should we go about this?”

Greyson chuckled, releasing me. “Somebody’s eager.”

He had no idea.

“I haven’t had enough time to come up with a plan,” he said, “I suppose we should just feel our way along, love.”

He smiled softly, in that way that always got to me, and I wanted to kiss him, revulsion be damned.

*Cali, no*, I scolded myself. *Don’t bring an immediate end to what could be a promising night by acting impulsively.*

“We have to go slow and restrain ourselves, Greyson,” I told him in my most serious tone. “This is going to be very, very difficult.”

“You’re telling me.”

“Like, I’m barely managing not to attack you right now.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Attack me?”

I blushed profusely. “You know what I mean!”

He sighed. “I do. And you know I feel the same about you, love. I’m having a really hard time right now.”

“That’s great,” I blurted out.

Greyson’s eyebrows arched. “Great?”

“I mean it’s better when we’re both miserable, so we can commiserate,” I said honestly. I hoped that didn’t sound too weird, but Greyson seemed to know where I was coming from.

“I know what you mean.” He took my hand again, still with that smile, and said, “Why don’t we start there?”

He nodded at the bed, and I swallowed thickly.

“Okay,” I murmured, then pulled my robe tighter around me as I lay down on the mattress.

*Oh my god, what’s going on with me? Why am I so nervous?* I wondered. *I’ve been with Greyson so many times before!*

But this felt new, like we were just getting to know each other. It was exciting, tantalizing, but also terrifying. What if something went wrong? Would I puke on him?

“Are you okay, love?” he asked me quietly. He stood by the bed, his shirt partially unbuttoned, revealing his strong, vein-free chest.

My throat was dry. I was weirdly afraid to speak, so I just nodded. He lay down next to me, and I squeezed my eyes shut, as if that would somehow make the awkwardness go away. It didn’t.

“I think you should look at me,” Greyson said gently. “I want to watch you closely. Just to make sure you’re fine.”

I took a deep breath and looked at him. He was devastating to watch from so close. I knew how hard this had to be for him—his wolf had to be freaking out. But he was so calm, always putting my comfort first.

His proximity was intoxicating.

“Let’s start with what we know,” he said. He drew my hand to his, our fingers touching.

“So far so good,” I said.

Of course, just touching him made me want more. A lot more.

I was doing my best not to squirm when Greyson softly raised his hand to rest it on the nape of my neck. I gasped at his touch, leaning closer. His scent and the way he looked at me made me woozy. Trembling slightly, I stared back at him.

“Is this good?” he whispered.

“Yes,” I replied. “How does it feel for you?”

Something dark flashed through his gaze. “Amazing, love.”

I shivered, a swarm of butterflies erupting in my stomach, flapping their wings hard. It like my entire face was on fire. The fire only spread when Greyson traced his fingertips from the side of my neck downward. First over my collarbones, then even lower, until he reached the robe.

He raised an eyebrow.

“Yes,” I breathed.

He smirked, and I wanted to grab and devour him. I gripped the sheets tightly, fighting to control myself. It was hard to keep my breathing in check when he was so close, when he was touching me. He trailed his index and middle fingers across my collarbones before pushing my robe slightly to the side and trailing downward.

At that moment, nothing else mattered. I could remember nothing about curses and evil rivals and other horrible things. There was only Greyson, and his soft touch, and his dark eyes on mine, and how gorgeous he looked when he gazed at me like he needed me.

His index finger brushed at the spot between my breasts, my breath caught, and then—

We both flinched back, hit by a wave of revulsion.

**Episode 2263**

GREYSON

Cali and I pulled apart like we’d been shocked. I had to fight the urge to throw up—how fucking romantic was it that both of us were gagging in bed? I wanted to kill Aysel. Why the hell would she do this to me? To *us*?

Rhetorical question. I knew exactly why.

Because she was a crazy tyrant, just like her brother.

“Damn it…” Cali looked dejected. We were both breathing heavily, more than a foot between us now. The repulsion, the nausea—all of it started to fade. The feeling had started to retreat the moment I’d pulled away from her.

But what was the point of being with Cali if I couldn’t *be* with her?

The revulsion was gone now, so the lust had returned tenfold, and the love had always been there. If anything, I felt every emotion ten times more intensely now that I wasn’t allowed to show her how much I needed her. I had no idea how it was even possible for my feelings to continue to grow for Cali, day by day.

When I faced her again, she’d rolled onto her side, with her back to me.

My heart ached. This was fucking horrible.

I was ready to reach out, touch her shoulder, but I thought better of it.

“Cali?” I murmured.

She didn’t respond. I heard her sniffle. It made me want to break Aysel into a million little pieces for what she’d done to us. I couldn’t let my mate feel so defeated.

*Cali, love, please turn around and talk to me*, I mind linked. *I never want you to be afraid to look at me. Can you do that, love?*

Cali sighed and slowly turned around, wiping a tear from her eye.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m just so frustrated. I just didn’t really grasp just how cruel this spell is until now.”

My stomach clenched at her words and at the sight of her. She seemed so sad and yet so beautiful.

“Joke’s on Aysel,” I said gruffly. “This only makes me love and want you more.”

She sniffled, nodding. “That’s exactly how I feel.”

I was relieved. For a second there, I’d been worried that Cali would be too afraid—or too disgusted by me—to think that way. Perhaps if Aysel realized how much all this was making me loathe her, she’d have the curse broken without a thought.

I vowed to make her pay for this.

I didn’t want to think about her right now, though. The only person I cared about was Cali. The only person I wanted was Cali, despite all these damn revulsion issues.

“Maybe we should…” She swallowed. “Maybe we should just call it quits? I can put some laundry down the middle of the bed to keep us apart.”

Just the idea of that made me fucking furious. I wasn’t gonna let Aysel beat us. *No*.

“I have another idea,” I said. “You can imagine that I’m in another city.”

Cali frowned in confusion. She was so cute. “Why would you be in another city?” She looked alarmed suddenly. “Wait, are you leaving?”

“Cali, no,” I said, snorting. “This is a hypothetical situation. If I were in another city, and it was nighttime, and we missed each other…”

Cali was staring at me blankly.

I raised an eyebrow. “Haven’t you ever had phone sex?”

Cali gasped, scandalized. “No! Why? Wait—have *you*?”

Yeah, no. I wasn’t about to get into my past right now.

“I’m just saying that we can try a different approach,” I said softly. “Would you be interested in that?”

Biting her lower lip, Cali looked down at my body. “I… Yeah. Definitely.”

Smirking, I sat up and took off my shirt, then continued with my pants. I took them off slowly, watching for the exact moment that her breath would catch. Soon, I was left in my boxer briefs, and I knew that she was completely bare under that robe.

“Rest your back against the headboard,” I murmured.

She sat up and obeyed. I came to rest on my knees, right across from her on the mattress.

Without being told, she spread her legs. God how I wanted to be between them right now. Her voice was trembling when she said, “Come closer.”

I did. The air between us was electrifying. Her calf was just a few inches away from my knee. Her gaze slid between my face and my body, and the way she looked at me made me feel like a fucking king.

She wanted me, and I wanted her. No curse could change that.

“What now?” she asked throatily.

“Open up your robe,” I said.

She slid it off entirely, and I loved how eagerly she did it. She wasn’t usually so bold, but this whole thing clearly had her as worked up as I was, and it killed me. Need was obvious all over her body, too, and I couldn’t get enough of the sight of her.

Her soft flushed skin, pale and pink on her breasts, between her legs… Her thighs were wide open, so I could see how sweet and ready she was already, how much she wanted me. I was hard too, had been from the second I’d walked into this room, just at the thought of her waiting for me.

And we’d barely touched.

The mate bond was a hell of a thing.

“Your turn,” she said. Her voice cracked with anxiety, but I could see the fire in her gaze. My underwear came off a moment later, and when our gazes met again, she let out a whimper. It ran through me like lightning.

“Show me how you do this when you’re alone,” I murmured.

I ached to reach down and take hold of myself, but I wanted her to go first, wanted to focus on her for a moment. I wanted to watch her as she touched herself, as she looked me straight in the eye. I needed to cherish the moment. I loved the way she looked at me, the way she softly ran one hand over her breast, the other moving to the apex of her thighs. We both groaned when she traced her fingertips through the wetness.

“You look pretty enough to eat,” I said, and she gasped, her thigh twitching. “How long have you been this wet?”

“Ever since…” she rasped. “Ever since we talked about this earlier.”

When she started rubbing circles there, just going for it like she couldn’t help herself anymore, I decided I’d had enough. I took myself in hand and watched her watching me, how I stroked my hand up and down, twisting at the tip. Her mouth was open, her chest heaving.

“Does this feel good?” I asked.

“Yes,” she whispered, quivering.

“I’m gonna come closer to you now,” I said, “and I want you to spit in my hand. Can you do that for me?”

Even though Cali looked like she was about to die—both from embarrassment and lust—she did as she was told.

“Good girl,” I said.

When I worked myself over again, the slide was much smoother with the added glide, the sensation so incredible that I hissed. Cali’s responding sound was a loud moan, her hand moving faster between her legs, her whole body shaking as she stared.

When she came, it was with a spasm that started at her calves and moved to her chest. I followed soon after, trembling. I looked at her face the entire time, her pleasure always the most stunning thing I’d ever seen.

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Afterward, I lay back in bed. I loved what we’d done, and I knew that Cali did too, but it just wasn’t the same. It was only satisfying for a moment, and now I longed for even more. To feel her, touch her, taste her. I wanted Cali to rest her head on my chest like she always did, with one of my arms around her, keeping her close.

I glanced over at her—I loved watching the rise and fall of her chest. She was still panting slightly, her bare skin glowing with a light sheen of sweat. The urge to grab her reared its head inside me once more.

My voice sounded wrecked. “When we break this curse, you’d better be prepared. I’m going to keep you in my bed for days.”

She turned to me, grinning. “You’re the one who’ll need to be careful.”

I smirked. “Is that a threat?”

“No,” she said cheekily, turning to her side. “It’s a promise.”

I felt so much love and desire for this woman. I reached for her face without thinking—thankfully, when my fingers brushed her cheek, neither of us flinched.

“This is another thing we can do, then,” she whispered, placing her hand over mine on her cheek. “I love it.”

“I know,” I said. “I just—I want more. I’ll always want more.”

She pressed her lips together. “I want to kiss your hand, but I don’t know if it’ll trigger the curse.”

“It’s okay,” I said.

But it wasn’t okay. I’d been sharing Cali with my brother for so long, and now I couldn’t even have that. Aysel had chipped away one of the most important things in my life, and it wasn’t just about the sex. This was about intimacy and closeness and the freedom of being with the woman I loved.

I loved Cali, and I was so sick and tired of dealing with one obstacle after another.

I wouldn’t rest until everything was finally dealt with.

“Whenever this Lucian BS is settled, and after I’ve gotten rid of Aysel for good,” I said, “I will find the proof I need to show you that the *due destini* curse has been broken.”

Cali’s eyes widened. She probably hadn’t expected that. “But how?”

“The how doesn’t matter,” I said. There was only one thing that mattered right now. “When I do have the proof, though, will you want to know the truth?”

**Episode 2264**

MARTA

I couldn’t believe that Lilac had talked me into letting him drive. He’d just looked at me with those puppy eyes, and I’d melted like ice cream under the July sun. This was a horrible idea. The last thing we needed right now was to ruin Greyson’s SUV by hitting people’s mailboxes, or a lamppost.

Thankfully, we were finally parked—sideways but intact, so I’d take it. I’d thought that we were going to go into the restaurant and enjoy our meal, but Lilac had looked at me and said, “You wait in the car, I’ll be right back!”

And then he’d dashed inside. Whatever he was plotting had him looking positively gleeful, and I couldn’t help but smile. I’d really needed to spend some time with him, alone, just the two of us hanging out and having fun without any magic or wars or miscellaneous chaos. The only thing that dimmed my good mood was a bit of nervousness about Dani. Should I feel bad for going out with Lilac and leaving Dani at home with Torin?

I hadn’t had the chance to ask Cali to hang out with Dani, and Torin was always so upbeat and kind that I’d figured that he wouldn’t have a problem looking after Dani. The girl didn’t know him that well—or really any of us, for that matter—but she’d seemed okay when I’d left. At least she’d *said* she was okay. I felt a little guilty, but I hadn’t been able to bear the idea of turning Lilac down.

I had really, *really* been looking forward to this date with him.

I grinned when I saw Lilac come out of the restaurant, holding a very large bag. When he got into the car, he said, “I’m surprised you didn’t grab the driver’s seat.”

“You took the keys,” I said. “Also, I’m really hungry and I don’t want to spend twenty minutes debating who should drive. The food will get cold.”

“That would be a tragedy,” Lilac said, looking pretty proud of himself as he put the bag down on the floor by my feet. I got a whiff of it, and it smelled amazing. I’d always loved Italian food.

“So what’s next?” I asked, intrigued.

“It’s a mystery,” Lilac told me with a sly smirk. He was wearing dark-wash jeans and a dark green Henley tonight, along with a taupe leather jacket, and his hair was as effortlessly messy as ever.

He looked so darn cute.

“Where are you taking me, Lilac?”

With a wink, he turned on the ignition. “To see my favorite movie.”

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About ten minutes later, we backed backing into a parking spot that overlooked a beautiful forest. Lilac was taking it super slowly, and I had to bite my lip to keep myself from correcting his parking. There was probably a fifty-fifty chance that we would tumble over the edge.

At least the view was breathtaking.

I could see the faintest twinkle of lights in the distance, beyond the national park area. It looked like a photograph taken straight out of some sort of nature magazine or a documentary.

“I hope you like the movie,” Lilac said after he turned off the engine.

“What?” I asked, confused.

“Figure of speech,” he said, gesturing ahead. “It isn’t really a movie—just my favorite view.”

“It’s incredible,” I said, smiling. “Are we eating here?”

“Yep, but not yet. Let’s get out of the car for a moment.”

I followed his suggestion and immediately started shivering. It was cold out here. I should’ve brought a coat to wear over my jacket, but I’d thought that we were going to eat inside, where it would’ve been much warmer.

“Come on,” Lilac said, taking my hand.

We walked over to the trunk of the car, and when he opened it, I saw that he’d decked it out with blankets and pillows from the pack house.

“Wouldn’t want you to get cold,” he said cheekily. “After all, I’m trying to do something special for you here.”

I turned to him, beaming from ear to ear. I stood on my tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “No one’s ever done anything like this for me before. You’re so sweet.”

He seemed *very* pleased with himself. “I look forward to many more nights just like this one, where I can do nice things for you, and you can tell me I’m sweet. But also, like, really hot.”

I grinned. “I never said you were hot.”

He pretend-frowned. “I thought it was implied?”

I laughed, wrapping my arms around his neck to pull him down for a kiss. I went for it immediately, feeling warm and fussy and so damn lucky to be here with him. I loved the way he felt, the way he tasted, and I couldn’t get enough.

“Whoa there,” he said breathlessly, breaking the kiss. “I gotta feed you first before you ravish me.”

I blushed and swatted him away. As he went to the front seat to grab the food, I climbed up into the trunk and pulled a fluffy blanket over my lap. It was warm and cozy and so nice in here, and I felt my heart grow to twice its usual size. When Lilac returned with the food and smiled at me, so happy and fond, I thought that this moment between us was worth all the madness I’d been through recently.

“I hope you’re ready for this!” Lilac started setting everything up on a large tray-table in front of me, introducing every dish. “So I got six-cheese lasagna, which I know you love, a fancy-ass salad, breadsticks, chicken parmesan—and of course!” He pulled out a small box. “A slice of chocolate cake for dessert!”

He had thought of everything, and it all looked so freaking good.

“Oh my god, this is delicious,” I said, after trying out the food.

“I’m so glad you like it,” he said earnestly.

“And the view is phenomenal,” I said, looking over his shoulder at the gorgeous forest.

“It’s kinda my spot,” he said. “It’s where I used to come to when I was a wolf—I always liked the view.”

I frowned. “This reminds you of Plum, doesn’t it?”

Lilac shrugged. “Everything reminds me of Plum.”

I pressed my lips together. “I just wish… I wish I could reunite you two.”

“Oh no, no!” Lilac said, waving his fork at me. “Don’t make that sad face, this is our date night. I’m fine. And also, don’t even think of using your magic.”

“But—”

“I didn’t bring you here tonight for you to be upset about Plum,” Lilac told me with authority. “I brought you here because I wanted to share something special with you. Because you’re amazing and also incredibly sexy. Like, it’s blowing my mind.”

I shook my head. “You’re so ridiculous.”

He smirked. “You love it.”

“I actually do,” I breathed, and he smiled at me widely. My heart was going nuts.

“By the way, look what else I got…” He waggled his eyebrows, pulling out a couple of tiny cups from a bag. And then a small bottle of wine.

I gasped. “*Lilac!*”

He waved me off. “Pfftt, they won’t miss it.”

I laughed at his complete and utter nonchalance, and he poured a little for each of us. He then raised his glass and stared at me. “A toast to you. To an amazing medium, witch, bridge, and more. But you’re so much more than that—you’re Marta.”

I couldn’t even remember the last time someone, anyone, had made me feel so cared for and cherished.

“Thank you for being so good to me. For being there for me,” I said, my voice cracking with emotion.

He winked. “Always.” We clinked our glasses, and he leaned in and brushed his lips over mine. “Now, let’s eat!”

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We finished our dinner and dessert, and I felt so stuffed and warm and happy. Lilac’s arms were wrapped around me, and he nuzzled my temple. He smelled like chocolate, and I hadn’t felt so content in my entire life.

“You’re incredible,” I said, looking up at him.

“I know,” he replied, sighing.

I smacked his chest playfully, and he laughed, leaning down to kiss me. It was soft at first, our lips brushing together, tasting like Lilac and the chocolate from the cake, but then he deepened the kiss. The heat between our bodies instantly heightened, and I wanted more. I wanted to feel his skin, feel more of this pressure that made me ache.

Lilac laid me down on in the trunk of the SUV, making both my heart and body pound, and I parted my legs for him to slide in between. He hovered over me, then, his breathing shaky. I loved the way he looked at me.

“What?” I whispered.

“I’m so happy to be here with you,” he said.

No jokes, no teasing, just the absolute truth.

I pulled him back down. He kissed me again, so intense and hot, making me sigh, and then—

“Oy!” A man’s voice bellowed, and a light flashed over us. “What are you kids doing? Have you been drinking?”

“Shit!” Lilac hissed, and we jumped up, breaking apart.

The park ranger stood there, scowling. I looked over at the bottle of wine—oh my god, how were we going to explain this?

Before either of us could reply, though, everything got worse.

We heard a growl, and I recognized it immediately.

It was Plum, and he was right behind the ranger.

**Episode 2265**

“Are you serious?” I asked Greyson. “Of course I would want to know if the curse was broken! I hate being cursed!”

Greyson’s mouth quirked. “Curses suck.”

“I think that most people hate them,” I said dryly, and he chuckled.

“We’ll deal with one thing at a time,” he said. “First the crazy royals, then the *due destini*. Knowing whether or not it’s gone for good will make it much easier for us to move forward. And whenever you’re ready to choose, you won’t have that threat hanging over you.”

I swallowed, my heart rate picking up. I was nervous. I didn’t want to hurt him, but I couldn’t lie, either.

“But…” I shook my head. “Knowing the curse is broken and making a choice are two very different things.”

Greyson paused. Withdrawing his hand from mine, he sat up slightly. His eyebrows were furrowed. “I thought you wanted the curse broken so you could choose.”

“It’s not like that, I—” I huffed, frustrated. “You want me to be completely honest here?”

“Always, Cali,” he said evenly.

I swallowed roughly, blurting, “The first thing I felt when you told me that the curse is broken was dread.”

Greyson looked stunned. “What? Why?”

I cringed. I felt horrible—I wasn’t sure Greyson wanted to hear what I had to say, but he had told me to always be real with him, so I couldn’t just avoid this forever. It wouldn’t be fair to either of us.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to explain.

“When I learned that I was cursed, I was frightened,” I said. “Making a choice—even by accident—would kill one of you. I’ve had to be so careful, all the time, I mean…” My chuckle was mirthless. “Remember what happened during Torin’s *Bachelorette* game?”

Greyson’s expression was serious. He nodded.

“I thought I’d killed you, simply because I chose to go on a date with Xavier,” I said quietly.

“That was horrible,” Greyson said, rubbing his forehead.

“I used to agree with you, you know,” I said. “I used to think that having the curse lifted, that danger removed, would make me feel so much better. That I’d finally be free.”

“What’s changed since then, love?” Greyson asked. His eyes were intense, fixed on mine.

I couldn’t lie to him. He deserved better.

“When the curse was lifted, I realized what it actually meant—that I would be free to choose, but that the death sentence would still be in place.”

Greyson scowled. “What? No, the curse is broken, so—”

“It’s more of a metaphorical death here,” I said. “People do die from broken hearts, don’t they?”

Greyson shook his head, pressing his lips together. “It’s definitely not the same.”

“Look, Greyson, if I were truly free to choose, I wouldn’t be forced to exclude one of my mates. But the *due destini* won’t allow that. Whoever I choose, the other will suffer. How would you feel if I chose Xavier?”

Greyson winced, the sudden hurt that flooded his features making me ache.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be harsh,” I murmured, grabbing his hand. Squeezing it, I said, “Choosing Xavier would not only cause you pain and suffering, but I would feel that pain too. And I would spend the rest of my life haunted by that choice, knowing the damage I’d caused. I would never be happy, and I doubt whoever I chose would enjoy watching their mate get eaten alive by guilt.” I shook my head bitterly. “It’s like, one way or another, we’re all trapped in misery.”

Greyson paused. His expression had softened. He covered my hands with both of his. “I’m sorry,” he said softly. “I never realized it would be like that.”

“Honestly, the curse was a blessing, in some ways…” I trailed off. I didn’t know if this made any sense. “At least it prevented me from making a damning choice.”

Greyson looked wounded. “I just wanted the death factor to be gone. I thought that would make you feel better. But now I see—”

“I’m not blaming you,” I said quickly. “I still want the curse to be broken. Someone literally dying is always the worst outcome. But I don’t want the curse being gone to create any expectations.”

Greyson pinched the bridge of his nose, looking away.

I swallowed nervously.

*Look at what you just did!* I scolded myself. *You should have shut up when you had the chance, Caliana!*

“You’re disappointed,” I whispered. My eyes felt ticklish, like tears were gathering.

He shook his head. “I mean, I obviously want you to choose me. But I’ll try to keep what you said in mind. I always want to take into account the way you feel—you’re my number one priority, Cali.”

Greyson was, as always, breathtaking. Sometimes just looking at him was too much.

“Have you discussed this with Xavier?” he asked quietly. “I suspect he won’t be thrilled, either.”

I shook my head wryly. “I’ll have to do that, now that I’ve told you. I need to keep him in the loop. I hope you’re okay with that.”

Greyson snorted. “I guess I could lie and say, *sure, that’s great!* But…”

I pressed my lips together. I hated doing this to him. “But you’re upset.”

“I also understand that you have to talk to him. That you have to be honest with him too.” Greyson paused. “Even though I want to punch him half the time he speaks.”

I snorted, flicking his shoulder. “You know you love him.”

Greyson shrugged grouchily. “Yeah, yeah.”

I stared at him. I wanted to kiss him all over, just to feel that he was here with me, for real.

“I wish things were different…” I trailed off, my voice a broken whisper.

“I wish a lot of things were different,” he replied. “I want you to feel free to choose when you’re ready to, but I also want…” He let out a sound like a laugh, only it was low and sad. “I’ve always fantasized about you choosing me. I’ve been thinking about what that would mean for us and the pack. I talked to Sabine…” He paused, correcting himself. “I talked to my mother about it.”

“What did you talk about with your mom?” I asked. The idea of the two of them discussing me had me on edge. But somehow, it also felt nice. Official, somehow.

“She told me she was proud that I’ve become Alpha…” Greyson trailed off, looking away almost shyly. I rested my hand on his shoulder, squeezing.

“Of course she’s proud,” I whispered. “You’re a great leader, Greyson.”

“It was just odd to hear that from her,” Greyson mumbled, fiddling with the sheet draped over his lap. “I wasn’t sure how to deal with getting praise from a parent.”

I knew that this conversation was out of Greyson’s comfort zone. I wrapped my arms around him, so happy that Aysel had allowed us to do at least this, and stroked his cheek. “Having a parent praise you isn’t an unusual thing, Greyson. I’m sorry you didn’t know that until now.”

He stared at me, taking in a breath. “Yeah. Me too.”

My eyes felt tight, but I wasn’t about to start crying in front of him. I didn’t want to spook him, make him feel that I was too upset to hear about his problems. I could be calm for him right now. I could be there for him, like he was always there for me.

“What else did you and your mom talk about?” I asked gently.

“She brought up how the pack would respond if you chose me.” He fiddled with my hand. “How things would change between all of us.”

My stomach did a little flip. This was nervousness, but also a kind of pleasure. Knowing that Sabine approved of me was very important.

“I told her that you choosing me would stabilize the pack,” he said, “and it would make me one happy Alpha.”

Greyson smiled a little, looking so fond that I didn’t know what to do with all the tenderness I felt toward him.

*Oh my god, stop crying!* I scolded myself.

“Should I assume those are happy tears?” Greyson asked, raising an eyebrow.

“There are no tears anywhere,” I said, sniffling and wiping my eyes at the same time.

He chuckled. But then, slowly, his smile faded.

I frowned. “What?”

“That’s not the only thing we talked about…” He trailed off.

“Oh?”

“My mother asked me about taking a Luna,” Greyson said, looking a little shifty.

I swallowed nervously. The last time Greyson had taken someone other than me as a Luna, my heart had been broken. I’d been so devastated, even though I’d been with Xavier, even though I’d known I *shouldn’t* technically have been Greyson’s Luna at all. But it had felt like such a massive rejection on Greyson’s part that I’d had a horrible, soul-crushing reaction to it.

“My mother said I should talk to you first,” Greyson said. “I know you’re not ready to choose, but…”

My heart was pounding. “Yeah?”

He squeezed my hand, his gaze intense as he stared into my eyes. “If you did choose me, would you be ready to be my Luna?”

**Episode 2266**

MARTA

I swallowed nervously when the ranger turned to look around for the source of the growl.

“What the devil was that?” he grumbled under his breath.

“Was that Plum?” I whispered in Lilac’s ear.

I thought I recognized the sound, and that I’d seen Plum’s shape moving toward the ranger. But now the wolf was nowhere to seen, and I had my doubts. Had I imagined it?

As if in answer, the growl came again.

“Damn,” the ranger said, huffing, swinging his flashlight around. “Sounds like a wolf… There shouldn’t be any wolves in this area.”

If only that poor ranger knew there was a whole house full of them only a few miles away.

“You two stay right here,” the ranger said seriously. “Let me investigate.”

“Yes, sir,” Lilac said, pretending to be afraid. When the ranger was out of earshot, he turned to me, breaking character. “It’s Plum.”

“Oh my god,” I hissed, swallowing nervously. “Will he do anything to the ranger?”

“Of course not,” Lilac hissed back. “He’s a super chill wolf, because I’m a super chill person.”

“Can you even control him, though?” I asked.

“What kind of question is that? Obviously I can, he’s *my* wolf,” Lilac said.

Right on cue, the growl came again, and the ranger almost jumped, so I wasn’t so convinced. I shot Lilac a look.

“Okay,” he said, “I mean, I *think* I can control him. He’s probably mad that the ranger interrupted us. Wolves are very instinctual.”

“Are you seriously saying that Plum got mad that the ranger didn’t let us have sex?” I deadpanned.

Lilac scoffed, “Obviously. He wants what’s best for me. He’s literally me!”

I couldn’t believe this was happening.

“Well, tell Plum not to attack this ranger, before we’re summoned before the werewolf council or whatever,” I said in a low voice. “I just made it through the witch council, I don’t need to be a witness to a werewolf murder of a human—I thought things were slowing down, not kicking up into high gear again!”

“Marta—”

I waved Lilac off and got out of the back of the SUV.

But then the ranger barked, “No, stay back!”

The flashlight’s light caught the wolf’s fur.

It was definitely Plum.

“There it is…” The ranger trailed off, his eyes wide. “Don’t worry, kids, we’re trained for this kind of thing.” He swallowed audibly. “Though I’ve never seen a wolf as big as this one. Holy crap, that thing is *huge*.”

Lilac got up too, all casual.

Unsure of what to do, I called out to Plum, “Everything’s fine! You can go!”

The ranger gaped at me. “What are you doing, kid? Don’t call it toward us!”

I glanced over at Lilac. Would Plum listen to him? Lilac closed his eyes, looking very pensive, and then finally…

Plum started to retreat into the woods.

“Oh, thank god,” I said under my breath.

The ranger breathed a sigh of relief. He turned to us, clearly shaken, and wagged his index finger in our faces. “Do you two know how lucky we all just got? That thing was huge!” He shook his head. “I’m going to have to report this, and you’re both witnesses.”

*Of course he’d say that. With my luck…*

The last thing I wanted was to get roped into this. And weren’t the wolves always going on about staying hidden? I wished I had my magic right now, though I wasn’t sure what I’d be able to do beyond freaking this guy out and making him seem crazy, which wasn’t exactly the kindest thing to do.

I had just wanted one nice night with my boyfriend, though, and it had all turned into chaos. Again. Was I really asking for too much?

I wanted to burst into tears.

Lilac shot me a glance and then turned to the ranger.

“Oh, no!” He slapped his hands together, startling me. “*Please* don’t include us on your report! You don’t understand—I took my older brother’s car, and he doesn’t know. He already hates me—he hates everyone! He lives all alone in his house, because he thinks that everyone is against him because he was bullied as a kid, and I’m always trying to reach out to him and convince him to go on adventures with me, but he says I’m just a dumb stupid kid who knows nothing and makes too many jokes and won’t stop talking!”

What…

What the hell was Lilac even saying right now? Where had this whole story come from? I mean, the ranger looked stunned, so it was apparently working, but I had no idea how Lilac was rolling it out so easily.

“And I keep telling him that people are multi-layered beings, you know?” Lilac went on while the ranger blinked rapidly, fighting to process his nonsense. “People are like onions, and I can see what he’s hiding underneath his tough exterior, and I actually want him to find a nice girl to settle down with, probably a redhead, because he likes redheads. But he’s always acting like an ogre, and I’m just so terrified that—”

“Okay, okay, Jesus Christ!” The frazzled ranger cut Lilac off, aghast. “Stop panicking, kid. It’s gonna be all right—you two won’t be included as witnesses.” He looked around, shaking his head. “But you should be more careful. You never know what’s out there.”

“Thank you so much, sir,” Lilac said, nodding quickly.

I was just glad that he’d gotten us out of this. I didn’t need any more drama in my life.

“You two get on out of here right now. That thing might come back,” the guy said sternly and went back to his car, looking around the entire time.

He peeled out of there almost comically fast and then was on his merry way.

I breathed a sigh of relief. “My god. That was close.”

A second later, a massive wolf popped up from the bushes.

I squealed and grabbed onto Lilac. “I think I’ve had enough surprises for one day.”

He wrapped his arms around me, giving Plum a stern look. “You know you can’t do that, Plum. You have to be good.”

Plum tilted his head, letting out a yip.

“No, no,” Lilac scolded. “You can’t get upset if someone comes to talk to me and Marta. You’ll get us into trouble.”

Plum kept looking between us, panting happily, so I gathered that Lilac’s lecture hadn’t exactly crushed his soul.

“Run along now,” Lilac said. “And don’t forget to be a good boy!”

Plum huffed and then trotted off into the forest. He was actually adorable, when he didn’t look deadly. I grinned, and Lilac turned to me.

“Apologies for what just happened,” he said. “Plum got territorial when the ranger approached, and well—you were there.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I thought you said he got mad because the ranger interrupted us.”

Lilac smirked. “I’d like to think it was that, too.”

I couldn’t help but laugh, shaking my head. I leaned up and kissed him softly, and he said, “For real, I’m sorry this ruined our special night.”

“It’s fine, it’s getting cold out anyway.” I looked over my shoulder. “Let’s clean up and get going.”

After we’d finished packing up, Lilac inspected the trunk and nodded with satisfaction. “Greyson will be very happy with us. I bet he’ll loan us the car anytime we want from now on.”

“What was that story, by the way?” I asked.

Lilac smirked. “It’s a movie called *Shrek*. It’s about an ogre who lives in a swamp and goes on a quest with a loud donkey to find a princess who turns into an ogre at night. It’s actually pretty good.”

“But what happens after—”

“We can talk about that later—there’s one more thing I need to do before we go,” Lilac said, cutting me off.

A second later, he was backing me up against the car, one hand at the small of my back, the other at the back of my neck, his lips on mine. I opened up to him instantly, clinging to his warmth, and he kissed me harder, making my toes curl.

I couldn’t *believe* how amazingly good he’d gotten at this.

I was swooning all over the place, my heart pounding so hard that I could feel it under every inch of my skin, my body rejoicing at the contact. I couldn’t wait to get home and get him into bed, just feel him and make him feel good and share all these amazing emotions with him.

“Thank you for a perfect evening,” I whispered when he broke the kiss.

“Even with Plum?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

I grinned. “Especially with Plum.”

He laughed a little and brushed his lips over mine one last time before we got into the car. We spent the drive home talking about the movie Lilac had mentioned, and many other random things, and everything was easy and fun. It felt like I was floating on air—apparently, I’d really needed this evening with the boy I cared about after everything I’d gone through at the witch council.

“We should watch that movie ASAP, actually,” I said after we got to the house and parked the car. All in one piece.

Lilac chuckled. “Yeah, it’s—”

“Guys!” Torin rushed up to us the moment we got inside. He was panting, his eyes wide. “You’re back! Thank goodness. We have a huge problem!”

“Torin, what’s going on?” I asked, alarmed.

Torin looked like he was about to cry. “Dani’s missing!”

**Episode 2267**

XAVIER

Lola looked surprised by my statement, but her expression quickly changed to intense interest. Whatever else I knew about Lola, I knew she loved a good scheme.

“I’m going to help you get rid of Ava, am I?” she asked slowly.

“Yep.”

“And what exactly did you have in mind? For the record, I don’t do murder for hire,” she said.

I rolled my eyes. “That’s not what I’m talking about. And, also for the record, I was literally a mercenary. So, if I needed someone dead, I wouldn’t need to ask you for help.”

“Well,” Lola said, “you do have kind of a history where Ava’s concerned. Regarding, like, her death,” she added clumsily.

“Listen, the situation with her is complicated. We were mates, and now that she’s back, it turns out that our mate bond isn’t as severed as I would have hoped,” I explained.

“Oh, *wow*. Really?” Lola said.

I narrowed my eyes. “I don’t even know why I’m bothering to explain this to you. You already know all of this.”

“*What?*” Lola exclaimed, feigning surprise—poorly. “This is brand new information to me!”

“Give me a break. I know you know, Lola. You had to in order to give Cali all that terrible advice,” I pointed out.

Lola looked around guiltily. “Well, I mean… Maybe she mentioned it. And I wouldn’t say it was *terrible* advice. And, anyway, word gets around. You know how werewolves like to gossip,” she said with a nervous grin.

But I shook my head. “Bullshit. I know Cali told you everything. How else would you have come up with that award-winningly stupid idea about me sleeping with Ava?”

Lola was caught, and she knew it.

“Okay,” she started, “the first thing you need to know is that a best friendship is totally sacred. There are things you tell each other—and some things you don’t—but the primary rule is that you have to be free to tell each other everything. I mean,” she reasoned with a slight smile, “you know how it is. You must know things about my relationship with Jay, right?”

I stared at her. “No,” I said flatly.

“*What?*” she gasped. “That can’tbe true.”

“Of course it’s true. Why the hell would I want to know about your relationship? I don’t care,” I said.

“But Jay’s your best friend,” Lola said, looking scandalized.

“Yeah, and we don’t go around telling each other all the serious shit we discuss with our girlfriends.”

Lola gave me a long look. “God, that makes so much sense.”

“What does?” I demanded.

“You!” she said. She looked me over, her gaze assessing. “You should be more emotionally available to the people around you, Xavier. I think it would be really healthy for you. There’s nothing wrong with some emotional intimacy between friends.”

“Lola,” I started, my voice a warning.

“My *point*,” she continued, “is that a best friendship is a very powerful thing. Cali and I are more than best friends—we’re practically sisters. And it’s not my fault if Cali felt emotionally burdened and was looking to open up about an intense situation. So don’t go blaming this on anyone.”

“Well,” I said reasonably, “not *anyone*. I’m just blaming you.”

Lola rolled her eyes, but her comment made me pause.

Cali had confided in her best friend because she needed another perspective, and that concerned me. Did that mean that Cali was reading too much into the Ava situation? Was she really that worried about it? Worried enough that she had to talk to Lola? Was she threatened by it?

Did she not trust me as much as she said she did?

The thought filled me with a frustration so sharp I balled my hands into fists and a growl rumbled in the back of my throat.

“Hey,” Lola said quickly, looking alarmed. “Listen, I’ll help you out, okay? I’m sorry about the bad advice to Cali—it wasn’t intentional, obviously—but something has to happen with you and Ava. I thought it would be for the best. You know—just scratch that itch.”

I glared at her. “Or rip the fucking scab off.”

Her eyes went wide. “Whatever image works for you, man. Now before you lose your mind, let’s try to think of what we can do to get rid of Ava, okay?”

I paced away, feeling the frustration growing, making my chest tight. “I’m not sure what more I *can* do. I’ve already tried kicking her out—”

“And she just comes straight back, like a stray dog,” Lola admitted grimly. She shrugged. “I mean, we could try that again, but based on the history, the likelihood of that working isn’t high.” She thought for a moment. “We could try to have Greyson officially exile her.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You know, where if we see her, we have to engage in combat and we’re not to blame if she, like, dies in the fight.”

I shook my head. “No. I don’t want any of that. Too messy. Besides, the pack’s experienced enough recent bloodshed.”

Lola gave me a narrow look. “Is that the mate bond talking, or Xavier Evers?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Listen, I killed Ava once, but it wasn’t something that was easy for me. I did it for a very specific reason.” I ran a hand through my hair, feeling edgy. “I might be a killer, Lola, but I’m not a murderer.”

“Xavier—”

“It’s not on the table,” I snapped, “so drop it.”

Lola groaned but didn’t press further. She heaved a sigh and went silent, clearly thinking.

“Wait a second,” I said, a thought suddenly dawning on me. “There is something that Ava cares about more than me.”

Lola gave me an incredulous look. “Is that even possible?”

“The Samara pack.”

“Her old pack?” Lola asked, surprised. “I thought it disbanded after her brother died.”

“It did,” I said, thinking hard. I knew Ava, and I knew the loss of her pack had nearly killed her. “If there were a way for her pack to be brought back together, she would feel responsible for it. She would have to deal with it.”

Lola furrowed her brow. “Okay. I think I see where you’re going with this. And you think she’d be responsive to the call of duty? Enough to leave you?”

“She’d have to,” I said, warming to the idea. “She’s the former Alpha’s sister. She’d be duty-bound. And it would provide her with a big enough distraction to get her out of my hair.”

“So you’re saying we need an Alpha. Where are we going to find an Alpha for the Samara pack?”

I grinned at her. “That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?”

We said good night with an agreement that we’d both try to think of a likely candidate, but as I walked away, I had to admit I wasn’t sure where we were going to find a spare Alpha just lying around. Still, I had to try. I knew it was the best chance I had to get rid of Ava. It would give her something to do, and a place to be while I figured out how to get rid of our mate bond. Permanently.

And not that I cared, but it would better for Ava, too. She needed to be somewhere she belonged. And that wasn’t with me.

When I opened the door to my bedroom, I felt a pang of disappointment when I saw my empty bed. I’d been hoping Cali would be waiting for me, but she was nowhere to be seen.

I pulled off my T-shirt and jeans and brushed my teeth, then climbed into bed, feeling the weight of exhaustion hitting me all at once. As sleep crept in, my thoughts drifted to Cali. I’d find her in the morning; I wanted to talk to her about this deal with Lucian. I needed to get her to see the light. Maybe none of it actually had to happen.

I yawned and closed my eyes as sleep pulled me under.

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Waking up felt like swimming to the surface from deep, deep water. Someone was calling my name, and I fought to open my eyes. When I did, I was staring into Ava’s face. Her eyes were bright on me, and before my brain could even begin to question why the hell she was in my bed, my body flamed to life and I pulled her into a kiss. She was ready for me, her body warm and open.

This was another dream, and fury mixed with lust as I pulled her beneath me. Why did she have so much power over my unconscious mind?

Her fingers slipped into the waistband of my boxers and pulled them down, her fingernails dragging along my skin. It stung, and I hissed in pain. She smiled, which pissed me off, and I bit down on her bottom lip and grabbed a handful of her ass, but this only made her smile wider.

I was hard against her, but, as she slipped her panties down, I heard a warning bell in the back of my brain.

Jolting awake, I looked around wildly. I was sweating and out of breath, and I rolled toward the edge of the bed.

A hand reached out and caught my arm.

“Hey,” a voice purred. “Where do you think you’re going?”

My blood felt like it had turned to ice. I looked over and saw Ava smiling back at me. Ava—the *real* Ava—was in my bed.

**Episode 2268**

It felt like everything hit me at once as I looked at Greyson. He had asked me to be his Luna! This was the moment I’d been thinking about since the Lupo Finale, all that time ago, when he’d chosen Joss instead of me. I was flattered, thrilled, and also completely terrified. My heart thudded at the very idea of it. Because—for the first time—me becoming Greyson’s Luna could actually be a possibility. For so long it had been a distant dream, made impossible by the curse. But now it could be real…

If the curse really was broken, then I would have the ability to choose either Greyson or Xavier without the fear that the other would die as a result. Which was good, obviously, but also left me with this enormous, soul-crushing anxiety.

Because, yeah, no one would die, but the thought of turning my back on one of them—of breaking either of their hearts—was unimaginable. I felt my shoulders tensing at the thought of it. I knew how it sounded. I knew it might seem selfish to an outsider—there was a time I would have thought the whole situation was selfish as hell, but that was before I’d actually lived with *due destini*. There was no way I could have known how incredibly heart-wrenching it was to be so intensely in love with two men. It was like living a double life, but never truly settling into one or the other. It was intense and beautiful and constantly heartbreaking. Having lived it, I wouldn’t have wished it on my greatest enemy.

“Cali? What do you say?” Greyson said. He was watching me, clearly waiting for me to speak, so I swallowed hard.

“I… I just… Of course I’ve thought about it. I mean, how could I not? I love you so much, and you’re the Alpha of the pack, but…” I looked down as I twisted the sheet nervously around my fingers. “There’s just a lot to think about. A lot of moving parts, you know? And things to consider, and I… I know it’s important, but I don’t know if I can give you an answer—”

“Cali,” Greyson said, speaking over me, his voice warm, “I know you can’t really make a decision right now.”

I shook my head, and a small kernel of frustration started to burn in my chest. I felt like his question was somehow unfair, though when I thought about it, I couldn’t see how. Greyson was the Alpha, and he had every right to ask his mate to be his Luna. It was completely natural.

Or it would’ve been, for anyone but me. My stomach tensed, but this time it wasn’t from revulsion. I felt like I was spiraling into despair, and I covered my eyes with my hand as the tears gathered.

Greyson grabbed my other hand and gave it a squeeze, which eased the tight feeling in my throat.

“Cali,” he said softly, “Love, look at me.”

I took a deep breath and looked into his stormy grey eyes.

“I know this is hard for you,” he said, “and I didn’t say you had to do anything right now. But I wanted you to think about, to know that *I* was thinking about it for our future.”

“The future?” I asked quietly. “Really?”

He nodded. “Of course. Whenever that is. Tomorrow. A year. Five years. Ten.”

That made me laugh. “I don’t know if you could get away with waiting ten years to choose a Luna.”

Greyson smiled, but the thought made my stomach tighten even more. Ten years was a long time, but—realistically—how long *could* he wait? How long would it be until the pack members—and members of other packs—started to notice? Started to ask where Greyson’s Luna was. How long until it became a problem?

He gave my hand another squeeze. “Hey, don’t worry about it,” he said. “I hate to see you so worried. It always makes me wish I could do something to make your worries disappear.”

I squeezed his hand back. “I think it’s okay to be worried about this, Greyson. Being a Luna is a big deal, and if I did choose to do it, I would take it seriously. I know how important it is to the whole pack.” I chewed my lip for a moment. “And I’m open to the idea of it—I always have been, even though I know it’s dangerous. It’s something I would be really proud to be.”

Greyson smiled at me, his eyes bright. “I’m glad to hear you say that, love. And I don’t expect you to make any decisions tonight. But just hearing that you’re open to it… That means the world to me.”

His eyes shone so brightly as he looked at me, and I could see the love shining in them. His look was so intense, I felt myself growing warm again.

“What?” I asked, squirming a little beneath his gaze.

He smiled. “You’re so beautiful.” He smiled wider when I rolled my eyes. “I wish I could kiss you right now.”

My heart gave a pulse of pain. “I do, too. Stupid Aysel.”

He reached for me and pulled me into his arms. I gasped and tensed—bracing for the nausea, though I hated that I was getting used to the feeling. But nothing happened. I felt fine.

I sighed and settled into his arms, breathing in Greyson’s scent and reveling in the feel of his arms around me. It felt so safe in his arms, and I let myself relax, letting the tension drift away. This was just what I needed.

“Don’t worry about being Luna, love,” he rumbled sleepily. “I love you. I’m willing to wait.”

I knew he loved me. In my heart, I’d always known it. Even before he’d said it. I nodded and—unable to stop myself—yawned.

Greyson pulled back to look at me and chuckled. “That’s probably a sign that we should get some rest.”

“Maybe,” I said, yawning again.

We looked at each other.

“Can we…”

Greyson shrugged. “Should we try?”

“The hug was okay,” I ventured. “Maybe spooning might not make us barf?”

Greyson grinned. “I’m game if you are.”

He lifted the blankets and, as I settled in next to him, he put his arms around me and drew me close.

“Only think about me as you fall asleep,” he said softly.

“If I think about you while I fall asleep, I’m not going to be doing much sleeping,” I pointed out, giggling.

“Dream about hugging me, and kissing me, and touching me,” he said, running a hand up my arm. “That way you won’t have any dreams about Seluna.”

I chuckled as my eyes drifted shut. “Okay.”

I felt warm and safe, and sleep was tantalizingly close, but then I realized that I didn’t have the talisman. I sat up and reached over the side of the bed for my jeans, rummaging through my pockets until I found the small touchstone. I gripped it hard. *Take that, Seluna.*

Then I laid back down in bed and snuggled deeper into Greyson’s arms, grateful that we could still do this, at least.

Aysel could eat shit.

I smiled at that and closed my eyes again. I tried Greyson’s suggestion, and I thought of him. I imaged wrapping my arms around him and standing on tiptoe to kiss him. I could almost feel the warmth of his mouth and the pressure of his hands on my back.

I must have drifted off, because suddenly we were in the middle of the Luna ceremony. The eyes of the pack were on me, but I stood before them, scared out of my mind. *What was I doing*? I hadn’t made this decision yet. I wasn’t *ready* to decide. I wasn’t ready! My heart beat fast in my throat, and I looked around at the dense trees surrounding us, desperate for a way out.

“*Cali*,” Greyson’s voice sounded in my head, echoey and far away.

I was still on the hazy borders of consciousness, and I shifted, trying to shake the thought from my mind. But it was stuck fast. Greyson had asked me if I would be his Luna because—ultimately—he wanted a decision. He was the Alpha, and he would be stronger and better prepared to serve and protect the pack with a Luna by his side. Everyone knew that.

But Xavier wanted a decision, too. He hadn’t hidden the fact that he would want me as his Luna as well, were he to become Alpha. My sleep-muddled brain tossed the information back and forth like a hot potato.

If the curse was truly broken, I knew I was going to need to act. There was no reason not to. But what could I do? How could I decide without being sure I wasn’t going to hurt one of my mates?

And how long did I really have?

**Episode 2269**

XAVIER

I stared at Ava, shocked into stillness. Was I still dreaming? Could this be real? I closed my eyes and rubbed them hard, hoping that when I opened them again, she’d be gone. Unfortunately, she was still there, her eyes intent on me.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I demanded, pulling back from her.

Her brows drew down into a frown, and she dropped her hand from my arm. “What are you talking about? You called me in here.”

My laugh was a harsh bark. “*I* called you in here? Yeah, right. Why the fuck would I do that?”

The idea was absurd. It made no sense. I didn’t want Ava near me, especially after our last exchange, which hadn’t ended well. Though when did our exchanges *ever* end well?

Her eyes flashed. “You *did*. You were calling my name in your mind. You sounded…” Her eyes scanned my face. “You sounded almost desperate. I thought something was wrong, but when I came in, you were asleep.”

“So you thought you’d just get into bed with me?” I demanded.

She narrowed her eyes. “I just came in to check on you, and I was about to leave, but then you said my name. *Out loud*. *You* reached for *me*.”

I felt myself starting to grow hot, but I fought to keep my expression neutral. The last thing I wanted was for her to see me getting flustered by this information. Was any of this possible? Had I really called out to her in my sleep? Said her name out loud? Reached for her? The idea that part of my consciousness was acting independently of the rest of my brain freaked me out, and the possibility made me feel edgy.

It did not escape me, however, that Ava could just be straight-up lying to me. It definitely wouldn’t have been the first time.

“Bullshit,” I snarled. “You’re lying. Why would *I* call out to *you*?”

Frustration sparked across her eyes. “I don’t know. But why would I lie about this?”

I stared at her. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” I growled. “Why *wouldn’t* you lie about this? Do you want a list of the shit you’ve lied to me about for no obvious reason?”

Ava’s face flushed, and she threw back the blanket and got to her feet. “I heard you calling my name, and I came in to make sure that you were okay. You said my fucking name, Xavier! You said it like we were making love. And when I stepped closer to see if you were awake, you grabbed my arm and pulled me into your bed. That’s how it happened. Not the other way around.” Her dark eyes flashed dangerously as she glowered at me. “I’m so sorry for caring. My mistake. I’ll leave now.” She turned toward the door.

*Don’t let her leave.*

The desire from my wolf echoed in my head, its request a deep, compelling force within me. Almost without thinking about it, I stepped out of bed and grabbed Ava’s arm before she could reach the door.

She was pulled around by the momentum and looked at me, surprised.

Inside me, my wolf was reeling. It *wanted* Ava. *Now*. It wanted her in bed, naked and beneath me.

But I thought otherwise.

Ava looked at my hand for a long moment. When she looked up, meeting my eyes again, I could see that the expression in her dark eyes was sad.

“So,” she said slowly, her loneliness an ache in her voice, “you didn’t know that you were mind linking with me?”

I could feel her sorrow. I could see it in her eyes, hear it in her voice—hell, I could feel it seeping through her skin—and the mate bond that connected us surged within me. My head felt like a tornado, swirling with opposing emotions.

I shook my head. “No. I didn’t know. How could I have? I was asleep.”

I didn’t mention the fact that I had been dreaming about her. She didn’t need to know that.

But somehow she must have guessed, because she gave me a searching look. “Were you dreaming about me?”

I didn’t answer, but somehow that seemed to tell her everything she needed to know.

She smirked, looking like her usual self again. “Well, was it good?” she asked, raising her brows.

Thinking about the dream, I felt the connection between us pulse. The mate bond sometimes felt separate and at odds with me, but in this moment, it was definitely a part of me, and the heat surging through my body reminded me of that. I *had* been dreaming about Ava, and it had been really fucking good.

I gritted my teeth and fought through the lusty, sleepy haze of those thoughts. If I was going to keep talking about fighting the mate bond, I had to actually fight it—especially in moments like this, when it was truly difficult.

I let go of Ava’s arm and took a step back. “You should go.”

“You want me to leave?” she asked, disbelief edging her voice.

“Yeah, I want you to leave.”

Her jaw flexed. “I don’t buy it,” she said quietly. “You called to me, Xavier. I heard it. That has to mean something. I know you feel our bond just as strongly as I do.” She gave me a level stare. “Is sending me away what you really want? Deep down?”

Deep down, my thoughts were a muddled, horny, aching blur, but the one thing that was apparent was that I needed Ava *out* of my room if I was going think clearly. I put my hand on the small of her back and pushed her toward the door.

But even that was a mistake. As soon as my hand came into contact with her, I felt the heat of her skin through her thin tank top. The heat sank into my hand and snaked through my body, making my every nerve sizzle with awareness of her. My wolf was howling for more. Much, *much* more.

I gritted my teeth and reached for the doorknob, but Ava got to it first. She turned and looked up at me, her dark eyes wide.

My breath caught in my throat. Ava was objectively beautiful. However much I wanted her out of my life, I’d have to lose my eyes completely not to see that. Her skin glowed like moonlight, and the dim light of the room highlighted her delicate features and high cheekbones. Without her usual smirk, her mouth was a soft pout, and even in the darkness, her eyes drew me in. Her head barely reached my shoulder, and as she looked up at me, her face looked strangely young and innocent. She was so small, and I remembered that innate desire I’d always felt to defend her. To wrap myself around her and shield her from harm. She looked like that still—like someone who needed me, needed my protection—and my inner wolf was all too willing to provide that for her once again.

But I knew better. Her beautiful face was a lie. She wasn’t an innocent person, and she had never needed my protection. Ava had always been able to fight her own battles.

Maybe it was this knowledge that made the air between us heat until it nearly crackled. Maybe it was this that had me pressing her against the door again, before I even realized I’d moved. Her breath hitched as she looked up at me, and I saw her pupils dilate. She pressed against me—not to push me away, but to increase our contact.

My boxers, her tank top, her short shorts and panties—that was all that was separating us, and it felt like the heat between us was going to incinerate them. I held perfectly still, and so did she. The only movement was the rise and fall of our chests as we breathed, in and out. Somewhere in the back of my lust-addled brain, I did the math—Ava was ready, so all it would take was one move from me and I could kiss her. I could strip off her clothes. I could fuck her against this door. And I could get my wolf to shut the hell up.

Maybe it would be for the best. Maybe it was the right choice. I could figure out whether the mate bond between us was just burning like a flare and would go out on its own. Maybe this was an itch that needed to be scratched. I’d thought Lola’s advice was shit, but maybe she had a point, because I *really* wanted to scratch this itch.

“Xavier?” Ava said quietly, her voice barely a breath. She shifted against me, only slightly, but enough that my lust flared to life again.

Could I end this tonight? All the questions I had about my bond with Ava? Could they be answered now?

With that thought teeming through my head, I leaned forward.

**Episode 2270**

GREYSON

When I opened my eyes into the morning sunlight streaming into the room, the first thing I thought about was Cali. Then I remembered that she was tucked into my arms, and I tightened them around her, hugging her close, reveling in the feel of her body against mine.

I took a deep breath and looked into the shafts of sunlight falling on the bed. The world felt so quiet and still as we lay together, like everything else in the world had been suspended. They were few, but I loved moments like this, where it felt like we existed somewhere out of time, in our own little world, where it was only the two of us.

I knew the world was waiting outside the door—with its demands and responsibilities and threats—but I wasn’t in a hurry to greet it. I looked down at Cali’s face, which looked perfectly peaceful in sleep. Ending the night and starting the day with her made my life feel whole, and I ran a finger along the gentle curve of her cheek. Her skin shone golden in the sunlight, and her tempting lips were slightly parted as she breathed softly.

Without thinking of anything but the perfect happiness I felt, I leaned toward her and pressed a kiss to her cheek. But an instant after I registered the softness of her skin beneath my lips, I felt a wave of nausea wash over me. It was so intense, I pushed away from her and swung my legs off the bed with a groan, wondering if I was going to have to run to the bathroom to throw up. My neck prickled, and I suddenly felt hot and clammy.

Next to me, Cali stirred and moaned.

“Ugh, god, I feel awful,” she muttered. She looked around, confused and miserable. “I feel like I’m going to barf.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, looking over at her. “That was my fault. I kissed your cheek. I forgot about the curse for a minute.”

“Oh god.” Cali groaned as she sat up, her hand on her stomach. She looked pale, and her face shone with sweat. “Is this how it feels to be pregnant?” she muttered, getting to her feet and heading for the bathroom.

*Pregnant.*

The word rang like a bell within me, and my thoughts flashed back to the dream I’d had where Cali and I had been having a baby. I remembered putting my hand on her rounded belly and feeling the life we’d made. The thought made me smile. It had only been a dream—one of the visions the witch sisters had given me—but it had been a damn good one.

“Cali? Do you need anything?” I asked, getting to my feet and walking to the closed bathroom door. I knocked gently, but she only groaned. “I’m going to get you some water and dry toast, okay? I’ll bring it up.”

“Okay. Thank you,” she called weakly.

I pulled a pair of grey sweatpants from the dresser drawer and headed downstairs. It was early, and not many people were up yet, so the house was still fairly quiet. In the kitchen, holiday music played softly as Torin puttered around the kitchen. The smell of baking sugar made my sour stomach turn, but I looked around at the piles of cookies in surprise.

“Wow. You’ve been busy.”

Torin grinned. “Good morning, Greyson! Of course I’ve been busy! It’s Christmas! I made spritz, stained-glass sugar cookies, chocolate raspberry rugelach, chocolate caramel pecan clusters, molasses spice, and these cute little Santa cookies.”

“Torin, do you even know who Santa is?” I asked, surprised.

“Yeah, he’s the guy in the cookies,” Torin said. “I’m just going to finish what I’ve got going, and then do some red and green macarons.”

I looked at the mountain of cookies, then at Torin. He was smiling brightly, but his skin looked grey and ashen, and his eyes were bloodshot. “You look worn out. When was the last time you slept?”

“There’s so much to do!” he said, dodging the question. “We have to get ready for everything, and Dani was telling me all about Hanukkah! I’ve never made potato pancakes or jelly donuts, but they sound like fun!”

“You really don’t need to be doing all of this,” I said, looking around. Despite all the cookies, the kitchen was spotless, and coffee was brewing. “You don’t have to cook and clean and make eight thousand cookies and organize Secret Santa for the pack in order to stay here. You’re welcome here, Torin. You can just… stay.”

“Oh, I know that,” Torin said breezily, looking around the kitchen, “but I like it. Staying busy is nice.”

I gave the guy a hard look. It hadn’t been long since we’d lost Astrid, and I knew that Torin had taken it hard. But I hadn’t seen him do anything for weeks except cook. I wasn’t a therapist, but I wasn’t blind either, and this spate of intense busyness seemed like a coping mechanism for him. Torin was young, and Fae, and it wasn’t like I expected him to know how to get over the loss of his friend in a perfectly healthy way, but he was clearly going too far in the opposite direction—and not taking care of himself in the process.

I hesitated for a moment, then took a step toward him and put a hand on his shoulder. “I’m not your dad, man, and I don’t want to sound preachy, but you have to take care of yourself, okay? I’m not telling you what to do, just what you *can* do. And you should take care of yourself. Rest. Eat. Go for a walk. Get some sleep. Okay?”

Torin looked surprised for a moment, then he glanced down at his hands, which were stained with food coloring. He was quiet, then he nodded. “Okay. Thanks, Greyson.”

An instant later, a timer pinged and he jumped. “Oh! My meringues!”

I figured I’d done all I could, so I left Torin to his meringues—whatever the hell those were—and the rest of his coping, and filled a glass of water for Cali. I toasted a slice of wheat bread and put it on a plate, then brought it all upstairs.

Cali was back in bed, but she sat up when I walked in.

“Hi,” she said, smiling weakly. She accepted the water and took a small sip. “Thanks.”

I looked at her, surprised. She was fully dressed and, though still pale, seemed ready to start the day. I glanced down at myself—still shirtless and in the sweatpants I’d pulled on when I left the room—and grinned at her. “Planning on going somewhere?”

I’d hoped if we could that we could stay in bed a little longer together. Without any kisses on the cheek to drive us to nausea. If only we could pick up from last night—if only I could touch her the way I wanted to.

Still drinking the water, Cali nodded. She wiped her mouth and set the glass on the table next to the bed. “I want to talk to a witch. Either Big Mac or Kira, it really doesn’t matter which witch.”

I sat on the bed and brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. She flushed at the contact, which made me smile. “What do you want to talk to them about?”

“The spell. Big Mac obviously saw that you were cursed, and she knows it has something to do with that tarot card.”

I grimaced, thinking of the card. Instinctively, I slipped my hand into the pocket of my sweatpants, and I was surprised when I felt the ripped card beneath my fingers. I felt cold—I definitely hadn’t put the card into the pocket of my sweats. The creepy thing just seemed to be following me around.

“Anyway,” Cali went on, “now that we have Dani, maybe we have an even better chance of breaking the curse on you. Maybe she can help amplify a spell for Big Mac or something.”

I thought about this. “Maybe,” I said slowly. “But we have to be careful. We really don’t know that girl all that well. What you’re suggesting would be putting a lot of pressure on her. And a lot of trust.”

Cali took this in. “That’s true,” she said thoughtfully. “Well, we’ll think about it. But I also have something else I want to talk to the witches about.”

“What is it?” I asked.

Cali shifted a little on the bed. She touched the plate of toast on her lap but didn’t move to eat it. When she looked back up at me, her dark eyes were solemn. “It’s about the curse.”

“The curse?” I asked. “The tarot card curse?”

She shook her head and placed a finger on my chest, where the black veins used to swirl. “I need to know if there’s a way to know for sure if the killing curse on you and Xavier is actually broken.”

“Cali—”

“I *have* to know, Greyson,” she said quickly. “And maybe there’s a way to find out once and for all.”

**Episode 2271**

I held my breath as Greyson looked at me, my heart beating absurdly fast. It was silly, but I was nervous about what he was going to say. I didn’t want him to think I didn’t trust him, or that I wasn’t ready to take his word for it that the curse was broken, but I knew that finding out about the curse one way or another was the only logical way forward.

There was another element to it as well that was making my pulse race—I was afraid that trying to find out if it was truly broken meant that I was starting to think seriously about making a choice.

Which I wasn’t. I was *not* thinking about making a choice. But… I wasn’t *not* thinking about it either.

Honestly, it didn’t even make sense in my own mind. It was just all so complicated, and if I didn’t have to think about it at all, I wouldn’t. But I didn’t see any way around it. The curse—broken or intact—was just part of my existence now.

Which was just terrific.

Greyson nodded. “I think that sounds like a good idea.”

I raised my eyebrows, unable to stop the small bit of skepticism in me. “You do?”

He nodded. “I know you’ve been worried about whether the veins being gone means that the dying aspect of the curse is gone, too.” He took my hand and—happily—I only felt butterflies in my stomach at his touch. “It’s a good idea. I’ll go with you.”

Why was he so amazing? “Thank you.”

He smiled. “I don’t want you to worry about this, love. I want you to have some peace of mind. I know that this is important to you, and anything I can do to help get you there, I want to do it.”

The butterflies fluttered fast in my stomach as I smiled back at him. I wanted to kiss him—*badly*—but I knew what that would do to me, so I grabbed my glass of water and gulped down the last of it. “Let’s go see if Big Mac and your mom are awake.”

He nodded and grabbed a shirt from the dresser drawer. I frowned as he pulled it over his head, sorry that he was covering up his sculpted chest and perfect abs, but I supposed it couldn’t be helped.

“Ready?” he asked, holding out his hand.

I nodded and got to my feet, grabbing his hand, then we headed into the hall.

He knocked quietly on Big Mac and Mrs. Smith’s door, but it wasn’t latched tightly and swung open to reveal Mrs. Smith and Big Mac on the floor, their limbs tangled together.

“*Oh my god!*” I exclaimed, my face flushing. “I’m so sorry, we didn’t mean to interrupt—the door just swung open. I’m sorry—” I stammered, grabbing for Greyson’s arm. “Let’s *go*!” I hissed.

But Greyson only chuckled at me.

Confused, I looked back at Mrs. Smith and Big Mac, and after a moment it occurred to me that they were both fully dressed—Mrs. Smith in brightly colored yoga pants and Big Mac in loose sweats. And beneath each of them was a purple yoga mat, laid out on the floor.

Mrs. Smith pulled herself upright and brushed her hair out of her face, giggling a little. “Is everything okay, Cali? You’re positively beet-red. And you don’t need to apologize for interrupting our morning yoga routine. MacKenzie always has trouble with the triangle pose.”

“You shouldn’t make me hold it for so long,” Big Mac muttered, sounding irritated. “It makes me light-headed.”

“Sorry,” I muttered, as Mrs. Smith and Greyson laughed again. “I just thought that I’d… walked in on something… *else*.”

“If you’d arrived a few minutes earlier, you might have,” Big Mac said, massaging her ankle.

“Okay, I don’t need to think about my mother doing anything of the sort,” Greyson said, shaking his head. “Especially this early in the morning.”

Big Mac shrugged. “Well, don’t worry too much about apologizing for barging in. I guess we’ve gotten pretty used to everyone around here barging in everywhere. That seems to be the way it is in a pack house. I guess werewolves are never taught to knock. Even when people think they’re alone, they’re probably not.” She shook her head. “The things I’ve seen…”

She gave me an unnerving look as she trailed off, and I shifted beneath her gaze. Something about the way she was looking at me made me wonder if Big Mac had somehow seen me in more of a compromising position than a failed yoga pose.

There was a beat of strained silence, and Mrs. Smith cleared her throat quietly.

Big Mac looked between Greyson and me. “Well? You obviously came here for a reason. Spill it.”

I took a deep breath. “We wanted to ask you if there’s a way for you to determine whether the curse that caused those black veins on Greyson and Xavier has been broken. *Fully* broken. As in, no death. No one would die if I were to make a choice between them.”

Big Mac gave me keen look. “And what makes you think I’d be able to do that?”

I shrugged, feeling a little like a pinned butterfly beneath her beady stare. “I just thought that since you noticed the other curse on Greyson, maybe there was a way to figure it out.”

Big Mac thought about this for a long moment, still massaging her ankle thoughtfully. “There could be a way.”

“Really?” I asked, my heart rate ticking up.

She nodded slowly, still thinking. “Since it ultimately was the reaction to another spell, I could probably trace whether there’s still a—” She cast around, like she was looking for the right word. “Whether there’s still the fingerprint of the ancient spell on Greyson. And you,” she added. “I could look for a spell signature.”

I felt my mood lift. “That sounds good. Is that something that’s easy to do? Could we do it now?”

“Slow your roll, Caliana,” Big Mac said, glowering at me. “You’re going to need to let us finish our workout. Otherwise I’ll never hear the end of it from Sabine.”

“It’s fine, MacKenzie,” Mrs. Smith said, getting to her feet. “We were almost done, anyway.”

“Fine,” Big Mac said, taking Mrs. Smith’s hand and letting her pull her to her feet. Then she stepped to her dresser and opened the top drawer.

I watched as she pawed through an odd collection of items: black feathers, tangles of string, a number of smooth stones, and a few crystals that caught the light. Finally, she held up a small glass vial. It looked as though it held a very fine dust, but it was a bright orangey-pink color.

“What’s that?” I asked, staring at the vial.

“I’ll use this to try to detect the curse,” she explained. Then she peered up at me. “Expect the bill for my services in the mail.”

I didn’t answer that, but I watched as she poured a small amount of the dust into the palm of her hand. Then she walked toward me and, standing just in front of me, blew hard on the dust, so it puffed right into my face.

It felt as though the dust had shot straight up my nose, and I sneezed.

“What was that for?” I demanded, my eyes watering.

“The spell that triggered the lethal part of the curse was performed on you, girl,” she explained, looking irritated at my question. “Now hush.”

She closed her eyes and began to mutter, the words too fast and too low for me to understand.

A strange warmth spread from my chest outward, rolling into my arms and fingers and legs. Was that from the spell, or was I just nervous?

Then I noticed that the dust Big Mac had blown onto me had started to shimmer, then to glow. I could see it on my shoulders and chest. Was that a good thing?

I looked at Big Mac, but her eyes were still closed.

Turning my gaze back on the dust, I felt my stomach twist with excitement. Did this mean that we were going to get an answer? If felt like my life had been nothing but questions for so long, and the thought of actually getting some answers made me feel light-headed.

Big Mac stopped speaking and opened her eyes. She was looking in my direction, but it was clear that she wasn’t really seeing me. She wasn’t seeing Greyson or Mrs. Smith or even the room around us. Her gaze was hazy and unfocused, and it was clear she was seeing something far beyond what any of the rest of us could see.

The silence of the room pressed on my ears. All at once, the dust stopped glowing and Big Mac blinked, her eyes refocusing on me. She cocked her head to the side.

“Well?” I asked impatiently. “What did you see? Are we cursed?”

**Episode 2272**

XAVIER

When I opened my eyes, I registered three things: I was awake, it was early, and I was alone.

Which was a good sign.

I thought back to last night, when I’d had Ava pushed against the door, each of us daring the other to make the first move. My heart beat fast just remembering the feel of her body against mine. It had been… *heated*, to say the least. But luckily it hadn’t come to anything else. Still, my wolf had definitely tested me, and the thought that being with Ava again—sleeping with her again—could be so easy was intoxicating. Emphasis on the *toxic*.

I ran a hand through my sleep-rumpled hair, feeling edgy and anxious. If this shit between Ava and me continued, I didn’t know how much longer I was going to be able to hold strong. Based on how close I’d come in the past—and how much I’d wanted her last night—there seemed to be a strong possibility that one of these nights, I was going to fail. And that was the last thing I wanted.

What I did want was Cali. Our mate bond was intact and as strong as ever. The same crazy burn I felt for Ava, I felt for Cali, too. And that was kind of the problem.

Throwing off the blankets, I made my way over to the window, looking out at the cold morning. A greyish mist rose from the ground, and I watched as four pack members slammed out through the back door, yawning and stretching before shifting and sprinting into the mist to start a morning patrol.

I had to admit that the confusion I felt about Ava was a taste of my own medicine. I’d been so pissed off about the circumstances of the *due destini*—not that anyone was happy about it—but now I had this. The exact same situation. It definitely gave me a new perspective on what Cali was going through.

Turning away from the window, I gave my head a hard shake. Last night, I had won out over temptation. I had to remember that. And my resolve was strong enough that, so help me, it was going to stay that way.

I headed to the bathroom for a quick shower, and as I got dressed, I turned my thoughts back to the Samara pack. Finding someone to lead them was vital, and I recommitted to the idea.

But… how the hell was I going to do that?

I pulled a T-shirt over my head as I thought. The pack had been dwindling even before Nolan’s death. It had never been the same after Maya had left. The power had just collapsed after that. That happened sometimes, when a charismatic member left. Not all packs lasted forever.

Thinking about Maya made me think about Colton. Maybe Maya was the one holding their little pack together now. I smiled to myself, hoping my brother was having fun with that. But I had to figure out whether anyone else from the Samara pack was still around.

My head still felt foggy with sleep, so I headed downstairs for coffee and maybe some breakfast. The reality was that I didn’t really have time to worry about the Samara pack. I had plenty to keep me busy closer to home, what with Cali’s moon ritual thingamajig with Lucian and the Vanguards happening in less than forty-eight hours. And who knew what the hell that was going to be like? Add to that this new curse that Greyson had gotten himself mixed up in… the idiot. That was going to take some unwinding.

I reminded myself that I didn’t need to waste my time thinking about how to help Greyson. Whatever was going on with him, he’d gotten himself into it. If there was something he needed from me, I wasn’t going to be a dick about it, but I also didn’t need to spend my time coming up with a list of curse-breaking ideas for him.

What I needed to do was keep my focus on what really mattered. And that was *Cali*. All the other bullshit with Ava and the curses—they were just chaotic distractions, and I needed to ignore them.

Walking into the kitchen, I stopped—surprised—and looked around. Everywhere I looked, there were towering stacks of cookies. Every surface was covered with platters of brightly colored, frosted, and candy-studded baked goods.

“What the hell…” I muttered.

Torin, who had been leaning down to look into the oven, stood up with a smile. “Xavier! Good morning!”

“Hey, Torin. Did you make all these?” I asked, gesturing around.

He nodded proudly. “Try this one. Gingerbread, fresh out of the oven.”

I accepted the warm cookie he offered to me. He looked so pleased that I didn’t have the heart to tell him I didn’t like gingerbread, but when I bit into it, it was actually pretty good. Soft and buttery, not like the stale cardboardy taste I’d been expecting.

“It’s good, man,” I said, making Torin beam.

“Thanks! I’m perfecting my recipe. You know, Xavier, I’m glad you’re here. I was wanting to talk to you about something,” he said thoughtfully, leaning against the counter. “I was thinking of taking down some of the decorations I put up yesterday. I was looking at them again, and I realized I might have gone a little overboard.”

I swallowed another bite of cookie. “Hey, look, everyone was being stupid about the whole thing. You went to all the trouble of putting them up already; don’t worry about taking them down.” I clapped Torin on the back, making him gasp and cough with the force of it. “You did good, man. People like them.”

Torin looked at me, his eyes still streaming from the coughing, and smiled. “Thanks, Xavier.”

There was the sound of footsteps behind me in the hall, and I turned around to see Jay coming down the stairs. “Thanks for the cookie, Torin. I’ll catch you later.” I stepped into the hall. “Jay!”

Jay looked over, then—seeing me—turned quickly away and headed into the living room, keeping his gaze averted from mine.

“Jay?” I called again. *What was that about?* I followed him into the living room, where he was looking cornered. “What the hell, man?” I asked. “Are you avoiding me?”

Jay’s eye darted around, looking anywhere but at me, and he hurried past me, back into the hall. “What? No! Of course not. That’s crazy. I just have a… a patrol that I’m supposed to be on right now. I gotta—”

“No, you don’t,” I said, still following him. “I saw the patrol leave already. *Jay?*” I clapped a hand on his shoulder to stop him, and Jay spun around to face me, though he still wouldn’t meet my eyes. I looked at him for a moment, and my stomach dropped. “Oh god. Lola talked to you, didn’t she?”

“*What?*” Jay said, his voice nervous.

I shook my head. “She’s even worse with secrets than I thought.”

Jay finally looked at me. “Don’t get mad at her, dude. She’s my mate. Of course she would tell me about… you know…”

I narrowed my eyes. “What *did* she tell you?”

Jay looked deeply uncomfortable. “You know, about you and Ava kissing. Lola and I tell each other everything, okay—”

“Why, because you’re BFFs?” I taunted.

Jay looked surprised, but he shrugged. “I mean, yeah. Basically.”

I heaved an irritated sigh. “Okay. Well what else did she tell you?” I asked. I needed to know if she’d told Jay about our conversation, too. It would be good to know how far Lola’s gossiping extended.

“That’s it!” Jay said quickly, his eye skittering away from mine.

I rolled my eyes. “She told you everything, didn’t she?”

Jay met my eyes and nodded. “Yeah. You know she did.”

I shook my head. “Whatever. It’s fine. If she had to tell anyone, I’m glad it was you.” Lola had been right about Jay being my best friend. Sure, I didn’t tell him every detail about my life the way Lola clearly did, but I still trusted the guy. “But I will say this—if Lola embellished what happened like I know she did, just give me the benefit of the doubt, okay? Just assume it didn’t happen exactly the way Lola’s telling you it did.”

Jay grinned. “Xavier, think about who you’re talking to. Who knows better than me how Lola likes to *interpret* facts?”

“I guess that’s true,” I said with a rusty chuckle.

“And you know I’m here for you if you need anything, right?” Jay asked. “When it comes to Ava, or anything else. I’ve got your back.”

“Thanks, man.” Then an idea occurred to me. “Actually, there is something you could do.”

“What’s that?” Jay asked.

“Do you think you could find out whether any of the Samara pack is still together?”

**Episode 2273**

VIOLET

I padded downstairs in my pajamas, yawning and rubbing my eyes. I was tired, but Charlie was still asleep, and I’d slipped out of bed to surprise him with some coffee before he woke up. Or—ideally—a mocha.

Caffeine was on my mind when I walked into the kitchen, but as I stepped in, I stopped and stared around, shocked. “Holy crap! Where’d all the cookies come from?”

Torin turned and looked at me. “I made them! Merry Christmas!”

Still flabbergasted, I laughed. “It looks like a cookie workshop in here, Torin. How long have you been at this?” I stepped forward to look at some sugar cookies. They were circles, and on the inner circle, he’d cut out the dough and melted hard candy so they looked like stained glass windows. “These are beautiful. You could be on a bake-off show. I think you’d even win.”

He grinned. “I’m not sure I would, but thanks, Violet.”

“Can I have a couple?” I asked, looking at a plate of oatmeal chocolate chip cookies. Those sort of counted as breakfast, right?

“Of course!” Torin said, looking happy. “Have as many as you want. I made them for everyone.”

When I went to grab a plate, I saw a small pile of empty frosting bowls piled in the sink. “I’m going to take these cookies upstairs, but I’ll be back down in half an hour. Do *not* do those dishes while I’m gone, okay?”

Torin frowned. “It’s just a few. I can wash them up in two minutes—”

“No way! The baker shouldn’t have to do all the dishes. Don’t touch them, Torin,” I warned.

He smiled. “Okay. I’ll try to keep my hands off them. Thanks, Violet.”

I grabbed a couple of mugs and made the mochas, then carefully balanced the plate of cookies on top of one. I walked carefully up the stairs, but when I reached my door, I realized I didn’t have the hands to open it.

“Dammit,” I whispered. I looked around desperately.

There was a slender table at the very end of the hallway, beneath a window, and I walked toward it, the mochas sloshing in their mugs.

“This was a bad idea. Very bad idea,” I muttered to myself as I walked slowly.

I very cautiously set everything down, then walked back to my room holding just one mug, which was a hell of a lot easier. I opened the door and set the mocha on the dresser, then hurried back for the other mug and the plate of cookies. It was foolish to leave them where anyone could grab them. There were about eight zillion cookies in the kitchen, but I wouldn’t put it above anyone in the pack house to swipe mine, just because they were closer.

I set everything down and tiptoed toward the bed.

“Charlie,” I said softly, shaking the pile of blankets. “Wake up! I brought mochas and cookies.”

Charlie didn’t answer. He didn’t even move. He was just a lump, buried in the blankets.

I grinned to myself—I must have worn him out last night if he was so exhausted this morning. I couldn’t help but feel a bit of pride at that.

“Come on, Charlie,” I said, prodding. “I brought dessert for breakfast.” I pulled back the blankets and let out a gasp.

Charlie wasn’t there!

My hackles rose, and I looked quickly around the room, searching for anything out of place. Where was he? Had someone taken him? Were there any signs of a struggle?

I took a deep breath, trying to scent the room, but I didn’t detect anything that didn’t belong. That didn’t mean much, though. Hunters had been masking their scents for a while—maybe someone had done that again. I looked at the window, but it was closed. I stepped into the bathroom, but he wasn’t in the shower. I could feel my heartbeat speeding up as terror bloomed in my chest. Anger and fear surged through my veins. I was ready to tear this house apart—along with anyone who might have done something to my mate.

Breath heaving, I charged for the door, ready to sound the alarm, but when I opened the door, I slammed into something hard.

It took the wind right out of me as I stumbled back. When I looked up, I gasped. “Charlie!”

But Charlie wasn’t looking at me. He was looking down at his shirt, where he’d sloshed a large amount of white chocolate mocha from the two mugs in his hands.

“Oh my god,” I said, stepping forward. As I threw my arms around him, he raised the mugs quickly, out of the way of my embrace.

“What’s that for? You okay?” he asked, clearly baffled.

“I could ask you the same thing,” I said, pulling back and putting my hand over my heart, which was still racing. “I thought something happened to you.”

“Why would you think that?” he asked, frowning. He glanced around the room.

“I went downstairs to get coffees for us, and when I came back, you weren’t there. I just panicked, I guess,” I said, shrugging.

Charlie laughed. “Well, clearly I had the same idea,” he said, holding out the mugs.

I leaned forward and kissed him, feeling an incredible rush of gratitude that he was okay. “I guess after everything that’s happened, I jumped to the worst possible scenario on my head. It was silly.”

Charlie pressed a kiss to my forehead. “It wasn’t silly. We *have* been through it. But you don’t have to worry now. We’re safe, remember?”

I nodded and was about to go in for another kiss when Charlie stepped sideways.

“Can I put the mugs down first?” he asked.

I laughed and took one from him. “To safety,” I said, clicking my mug against his.

“To you, Violet,” he replied, his eyes twinkling at me.

“Come on,” I said nodding into the room, “I have cookies.”

“*Ooh*,” Charlie said, looking interested.

We climbed back into bed with our mochas. As much as I loved them, now we both had two each, which was possibly too much coffee for me. I might have to give one away, because Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mochas were not to be wasted.

I took a sip and snuggled into Charlie. He leaned back against the headboard, and I felt him sigh. I knew how he felt, and I closed my eyes, letting myself truly relax into his arms. He was right—we were safe, and I wanted to enjoy this moment.

“I missed this,” Charlie said, his voice rumbling low in his chest.

I craned my neck to look up at him. “Missed what?”

Charlie gestured vaguely. “This. These quiet moments where we can chill, hang out, have fun. When we’re not battling hundreds of enemy werewolves or rogue hunters or creepy-ass zombie things. Where it can just be you and me, relaxing and being happy.”

He tightened his hold on me, and I felt my heart swell with happiness. I knew exactly how he felt.

“I couldn’t do any of this without you,” I murmured. “You saved my life, Charlie.”

“Violet, we don’t have to talk about this,” Charlie said quietly.

I shook my head. “If you hadn’t found me when Zachery was going in for the kill…” I shuddered. I could still remember the moment, in perfect detail, when Charlie had appeared. I felt cold just thinking about it again, and I wrapped my hands around my mug. “I still don’t know how you found me.”

He pulled me close. “You’re my mate, Violet. I’ll always find you.”

I looked up at him, and his eyes shone like burnished gold in the morning light. He leaned down to me, and his kiss warmed me faster than the mocha.

When he pulled away, he licked his lips with a smile. “You taste like white chocolate.”

“You too,” I giggled. “Oh, you should try a cookie.”

I fetched the plate, and we’d almost finished off a handful of Torin’s masterpieces when Charlie’s phone rang.

He glanced at his phone on the bedside table and grimaced. “I’d better answer it.”

“Who is it?” I asked, looking over.

“My mom,” he said, reaching for the phone.

Instantly, my stomach twisted with a bit of anxiety. The hunters had taken Zachery and Shanna away with them. Was Iris calling to tell us something had gone wrong?

“Hey, Mom,” Charlie said breezily. “Good morning.”

“Charlie,” his mom said in her usual clipped tone. “Morning.”

“What’s up?” Charlie asked.

I could feel genuine panic building inside me. If something had happened—if Zachery had gotten away—I just didn’t think I could go through all of that again.

“I was just calling to let you know that we’re getting ready to transport the prisoners,” she said, and I felt a surge of relief.

“Okay,” Charlie said. “That’s good.”

“Yep,” his mom said shortly. “We should be back in Minnesota by tonight. Will you be coming with us?”

**Episode 2274**

I stared at Big Mac, waiting for her to answer. Every second of silence that slipped by made my shoulders tense even tighter. What could Big Mac have seen? Was it possible that the curse really had been broken? Were we finally in the clear? And—if we were—what the hell would that mean for Xavier, Greyson, and me?

I felt like I was about to crawl out of my skin, just thinking about it.

“So… what is it? Do you know?” I snapped impatiently.

“Cool your jets,” Big Mac shot back, barely looking at me. Her brows were furrowed, like she was still thinking hard. “I’m analyzing what I saw.”

“And what *did* you see?” I demanded.

She huffed irritably. “The dust helps a witch look at the auras of the things around her.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“I could see your auras, and—in relation to each other—they manifested as this kind of pinkish-red color. It indicates passion. The auras were interacting with each other.”

“Was that the mate bond?” I asked.

Inside, I wondered if the *due destini* bond would look different to a traditional mate bond. It wasn’t the time to ask, though, and in any case, I was relieved to hear that the mate bond between Greyson and me was still intact, even after Aysel’s scheming. It proved that nothing—not even some cut-rate princess—could stand in the way of the love we felt for each other.

“I was able to see the new curse on Greyson,” Big Mac went on. “And while it’s not life-threatening, it was clearly cast by a powerful magic user.”

“Could it have been cast by some kind of werewolf-witch hybrid?” I asked.

Big Mac narrowed her eyes at me. “Almost certainly a witch.”

Honestly, it was a relief to hear that. I hadn’t really thought Aysel was a witch, but I was still glad to know that she didn’t have that kind of power. I looked over at Greyson. “I guess this proves the Vanguard pack does have one, then.”

“Yeah,” Greyson agreed, though he didn’t look pleased about the information. “And I guess it would make sense that they do, given the type of pack they are. Lucian doesn’t seem like the type to leave anything to chance. They’d want all their bases covered in any situation, so their having a witch would make perfect sense.”

Big Mac looked beadily at me. “There’s something else.”

My stomach dropped. “What?”

“I can see something on you, too.”

My mind raced, but then I remembered the Seluna mark.

But Big Mac shook her head when I mentioned it. “No. The magic on you is older.”

“Older? What is it?” Greyson asked.

“I couldn’t get a clear read on it,” Big Mac admitted. “Not like how I could see yours.”

My skin prickled. Old magic? Something Big Mac couldn’t see? I couldn’t help but feel deflated. I had hoped—for just a moment—that maybe there would be a simple explanation for what was going on, but clearly the mystery of Seluna was going to continue to unfold.

I let out a frustrated breath, then gave my head a little shake. “Okay, so what about the other curse? The one that caused the veins. Could you see that? The veins are gone, but were there any remnants of the curse?”

Big Mac shook her head. “Not a trace that I could see.”

I shot a glance at Greyson. “But that’s good, right? That means there’s no remaining trace of it.”

Big Mac shook her head again, and I suddenly got a sinking feeling.

“What?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes, like she was sick of explaining everything. “It isn’t that the curse is gone—it’s that I can’t see it. The other two curses on both of you are masking everything else. I couldn’t see anything past them. I could barely see *anything* because of them. When I said I could see your auras, I was being generous. Even those are being pushed off to the side with these curses coming to the forefront.”

I looked up at Greyson, who was listening to Big Mac, his expression grim.

“Maybe you could try looking at Xavier, MacKenzie,” Mrs. Smith suggested. “He’s subject to the same *due destini* curse, but he doesn’t have these other spells overshadowing it. Maybe you’d be able to see something on him that you can’t see on these two.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said quickly, latching onto the suggestion.

Big Mac didn’t look convinced. “There’s no guarantee, even with him. Xavier’s got his own problems. He’s got two mate bonds inside him, and from what I can tell just by looking at him, they’re at war with each other. His magical footprint is almost certainly as messy as yours.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, feeling huffy. I’d come here for answers, but it was hard not to feel like we’d just taken two steps backward.

Still, though, a strange sense of relief flowed through me. It was small, but steady, like a trickling stream. I felt bad about admitting it—even to myself—but if we weren’t sure whether the curse was really broken, then that meant I still couldn’t choose. I bit my lip as I tried not to smile.

The fact that Big Mac couldn’t see for sure left the three of us in a state of limbo, which I was sure no one was going to be pleased about, but it wasn’t my fault. That part made me feel a sliver of happiness. But beneath that, I also knew that bad things kept coming our way, and we really did need to find out about this curse. I thought about my old fear that the *due destini* would one day drive me mad. Maybe it was already happening. Maybe I was already on that road.

“Thanks anyway,” I said, looking up at Big Mac and Mrs. Smith. “Thanks for trying. And I’m sorry for interrupting your workout for something that wasn’t that helpful anyway—” I groaned to myself. “That’s not what I meant. I just—”

“It’s fine,” Big Mac said, waving me off. “Better luck next time.”

Greyson followed me out into the hall, and then he put a hand on my arm to stop me. “Cali, hang on. It’s going to be okay. You know that, right? At least now we know.”

“Know *what*?” I asked, my frustration surging. “We don’t know anything.”

“We know that there’s nothing we can do right now. It is what it is.” He put his hands on my shoulders and looked into my eyes. “Listen to me—if we were able to figure out how to find Letifer, and then kick his ass, we can figure out how to get rid of two measly little curses.”

My face worked like it was trying to smile but couldn’t quite manage it. “I was just hoping we’d get some answers,” I confessed.

Greyson looked at me for a moment. “I think we should go downstairs.”

“What?” I asked, frowning. “Why? What’s downstairs?”

He gave me a small smile. “I just think what’s down there will make you happy.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Greyson, you tell me what you’re talking about.”

He laughed at the expression on my face. “Okay, okay. Torin’s made practically every kind of cookie imaginable. Just stacks of them.”

I took a deep breath. “I thought I smelled cookies, but I thought it was just a candle or something from Lola’s room.”

“It’s cookies. So many cookies,” Greyson said. He smiled at me and pulled me into a tight hug.

I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him back, breathing in the scent of him.

“It’s going to be fine,” he said, stroking a hand down my hair. “You just need to focus on this moon ritual. We’ll get some answers from that, and hopefully get that weird mark taken off you.” He pulled back to look at me, then kissed the air just in front of me.

He looked like a dork doing it, but it made me smile. He was *my* dork.

“Sound good?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yeah, that sounds good. Especially the part about the cookies.”

Greyson laughed. “I’m pretty sure Torin made every cookie imaginable.”

“What are we waiting for?” I asked.

I grabbed his hand, and we headed toward the stairs. But just as we reached them, I pulled up short, my breath catching in my throat. I grabbed hold of the bannister at the top of the stairs as a wave of intense pain rolled through my shoulder. It radiated out from there, making it feel like my whole body had been set on fire.

“Cali?” Greyson asked, alarmed, looking down at me. “What’s going on?”

“Oh my god,” I gasped, gripping the bannister to keep from falling. I closed my eyes as another wave of pain rolled through me. “What’s happening to me?”

**Episode 2275**

GREYSON

I reached for Cali, catching her as she stumbled, barely stopping her from tripping down the whole flight of stairs. She was gripping the bannister so hard her knuckles were white, and her face had gone bloodless.

“Cali? Are you okay? What’s going on?” I asked.

But she didn’t answer. Her eyes were closed and her face was contorted into a grimace. She was breathing hard through her nose, clearly in incredible pain, but from what? What the hell could have happened? She had been perfectly fine a minute ago.

“*Big Mac!* Get over here!” I yelled.

“No,” Cali gasped, trying to wave her hand. “You don’t need to call anyone. I’m fine.”

“You’re obviously *not* fine,” I snapped, my heart beating hard.

“Greyson—” she started, already out of breath.

“Cali, I can see you’re hurting. You practically fell down the stairs,” I growled, fear making me sound angry.

“What’s going on?” Big Mac demanded, rushing toward us.

“Something’s happened to Cali. She just collapsed. What the hell was in that dust you blew on her?” I snarled.

Big Mac looked baffled. “Nothing. Nothing that would cause something like this.”

“It must have done something to her,” I insisted.

Big Mac shook her head. “The dust is just dust. It’s a tool, not a spell. It only reveals what’s already there.”

“Well, something—” I started, but Cali spoke up.

“I’m okay,” she said breathlessly. “I’m fine, Greyson. Really. I’m already feeling better.”

And she pressed against me as she tried to put her weight back on her own feet. She was feeling a bit steadier in my hands, but she still swayed.

“What happened?” Sabine—who had followed Big Mac—asked, looking concerned.

“I don’t know,” Cali said, shaking her head. “I just suddenly felt this burning sensation in my shoulder. It spread through my whole body, and I just got really light-headed.” She took a breath. “It has to be that handprint mark from Seluna.”

I frowned down at her. I hadn’t thought of this possibility, and I was unsettled by the idea. The mark itself was bad enough, but now it was causing her pain? That was bullshit. “Could it have been caused by that talisman Lucian gave you?”

She put a trembling hand into her pocket and pulled out the small token. “What do you think, Big Mac?”

Big Mac leaned close, looking at the small object in Cali’s hand. Then she leaned back, shaking her head. “No, that’s just a regular old talisman. To cause physical harm, it would have to be laced with something pretty secretive—something like dark magic. If you’d been carrying around a dark object, I would have seen something on you when I was looking at the dust.”

“And you didn’t?” I asked.

“No. I didn’t see anything that could cause her pain,” Big Mac confirmed.

My mom stepped forward and took Cali’s arm, pulling her gently back from the edge of the stairs. “Let’s get you down these steps and onto some level ground, dear. In case you start to feel dizzy again. Okay?”

Cali nodded, her face still pale. “Okay.”

My mom looked at me. “Greyson? Why don’t we help Cali down the stairs?”

“I can do it,” Cali protested.

But we ignored her, and with me on one side and my mom on the other, we helped her down the stairs.

“Let’s go into the living room and make her comfortable,” my mom murmured.

I half-carried Cali into the living room and helped her down onto the couch.

“Why don’t you lie down?” I suggested, but Cali was already shaking her head.

“I’m really already feeling better. I don’t need to lie down, I promise,” she said stubbornly.

I recognized the look on her face, and I knew there wasn’t much point in trying to argue with her. “Okay. At least just wait it out for a few minutes in case it happens again, okay?”

She didn’t look happy, and her bottom lip stuck out in a pout.

“Cali?” I said warningly.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine.”

“Who wants a cookie?”

We looked over to see Torin walk into the room, carrying a platter stacked high with cookies. He clearly didn’t realize what had happened, and he was beaming at all of us.

“I’ll take one,” Big Mac said, grabbing a handful of chocolate chip cookies from the tray. “Haven’t had breakfast yet. Yoga always makes me hungry.”

My mom gave Big Mac a look, but she took a cookie from Torin’s platter with a smile. “Thank you, Torin.” She took a bite, and her eyes went wide with surprise. “Oh, my word. Torin! This is delicious! What is it?”

“Spritz!” Torin said happily. “You like it?”

“I *love* it,” my mom said, taking another bite. “Is that almond extract?” Torin nodded. “I’ll have to get the recipe from you.”

My mom was making such a big deal about the pink and green cookies, I got curious and took one from Torin’s tray. It was good—kind of like shortbread—but too sweet for me. Especially this early in the morning.

And anyway, what the hell was I doing, thinking about cookies? I needed to focus on Cali.

Big Mac had moved to sit next to her on the couch, and I turned to look at both of them. “So, if there was a signature on Cali’s aura from the handprint, that means that we can do something to get rid of it, right?”

Big Mac swallowed her last bite of cookie and shrugged. “Depends.”

“On what?” I growled.

“On many things,” she said. “It’s possible to do something about it, but from what I saw, it’s going to be hard to tell who cast it.”

“Why does that matter?” I demanded.

“Well, it’s usually easiest to get the person who cast a spell to undo it. More efficient,” she said, wiping a cookie crumb from the corner of her mouth.

Cali looked thoughtful. “Maybe during the ritual with Lucian, I’ll be able to talk to Seluna and convince her to take the mark off me. I mean, it shouldn’t be hard. I’m not really mystical moon princess material, and I’m sure she’ll see that, so she’ll probably want to take it back just so that I don’t mess up her reputation or anything.”

She made an interesting point, and for the first time since I’d heard about the stupid ceremony, I started to think that maybe it was a decent idea after all. If doing the ceremony would let her get rid of that mark, then I was all for it. No one knew better than me—except maybe Xavier—what it was like to live with something on you that physically affected you and leeched your energy. That was what the veins had done to me, and now—looking at Cali’s still trembling hands—I was afraid that the handprint was doing the same thing to her.

“Yeah, I think that’s a good idea,” I said. “It might be our best bet if Seluna really is a moon goddess, and not a witch or something else.”

Big Mac nodded. “You’re right about that. There are things I could try, of course, but there’s no guarantee they would work. And you know how ancient magic can work.” She raised her eyebrows. “Not well.”

“Don’t remind me,” I muttered.

“Me either,” Cali said, looking unsettled by the memory.

Even more reason to take the problems with the handprint directly to the Vanguard pack. Let Seluna deal with the problem. She’d caused it, so she could solve it. And going to the Vanguard mansion might solve my problem, too. I knew a witch had put the curse on me, and if the Vanguard pack did have a witch—even if the ritual didn’t work—maybe that witch could still get rid of the mark on Cali.

I was just assuming that whoever the Vanguard pack had as their witch was also some kind of moon goddess expert. It would check out given how moon-gaga they were over there. It was a theory at least.

All in all, I was feeling pretty motivated about going to the Vanguard pack for the ritual, but I knew we needed a plan. It would be absurd to go into their territory unprepared.

Just as I was thinking this, I saw Sage walk across the doorway of the living room. She looked like she was on her way to the kitchen, but I called out, stopping her.

“What’s up?” she asked, leaning into the living room and looking around.

“Find Xavier for me, will you?” I asked.

Sage nodded. “Sure thing.”

She disappeared, and then—an instant later—Artemis and Rishika walked by, Rishika holding a plate of cookies. They must have just come from the kitchen.

“Hey!” I called out to them, and they both looked over.

“What’s up?” Rishika asked, looking over curiously.

I waved the women into the room. “Bring those cookies over here. We need to make a plan.”

**Episode 2276**

XAVIER

I leaned my head back against the couch, looking up at the beams spanning the ceiling of the den, thinking hard.

“Got anyone yet?” Jay asked.

“I’m thinking,” I growled.

Jay and I had been brainstorming possible leads for the Samara pack. It was tough, though. I hadn’t known everyone in the pack—only Ava, Nolan, and Maya, plus some of the others who’d been around a long time and who had held leadership positions with Nolan. And most of those people—Nolan included—were dead.

“Do you have any idea where they all went after Nolan bit the dust?” Jay asked. “Did they all just scatter after that? Maybe some of them stayed together.”

I considered this. “I’m not totally sure. There’s a place out near Crescent Lake that we could check out. We could drive out there after this Vanguard ritual thing.”

“You think they might be out there?” Jay asked hopefully.

I shrugged. “I’m not sure, but I know it was a meeting ground for the pack before things—” I stopped, looking up as Sage walked in. “What’s up?” I asked her.

“Greyson’s looking for you,” she said.

I stared at her. “And?”

She looked a little uncomfortable, and her eyes darted nervously to Jay, then back to me. “And he wanted me to come find you.”

This irritated the fuck out of me. I didn’t like that Greyson felt like he could just send for me and I’d come running. I supposed I *had* just pledged my loyalty to him, but that didn’t mean he could treat me like a fucking lap dog.

I got to my feet with an irritated sigh.

“Fine,” I muttered. I looked back at Jay. “Keep thinking about it, okay?”

He nodded. “I will. We’ll figure it out.”

I looked at Sage. “Okay, I’m ready. Lead me to the Lord Alpha.”

Sage shifted on her feet. “He’s in the living room.”

I headed in there and found Cali sitting on the couch with Artemis, Rishika, Big Mac, and Greyson gathered around her. Despite the crowd, my eyes went right to Cali, and I felt a pang of fear. She looked tired and pale.

“Are you okay?” I asked, walking over. “Did something happen?  
 Cali shook her head, smiling weakly. “I’m fine. I just had a little bit of a… fainting spell or something.”

Big Mac cleared her throat. “From the handprint.”

Alarm bells clanged in my head. “*What?*”

“But I’m fine now,” Cali said quickly.

*Are you sure?*

She smiled at me. *Yes. I’m sure. Love you.*

My chest warmed. *Love you, too.*

Greyson stepped toward me. “I wanted you to know what was going on. And you, too, Artemis,” he said, turning toward her. “Rishika and Big Mac, you’re welcome to stay and listen if you want, but the three of us have to figure out a plan for this moon ritual.”

Big Mac didn’t hesitate. She slapped her thighs and quickly got to her feet. “If you don’t need me, I’m going to go get more cookies.”

Artemis took a seat on the couch beside Cali, and Rishika sat down next to Artemis.

“Okay,” I said, looking at Greyson. “So what about the moon ritual? We know it’s happening, but we don’t know anything about it, other than the fact that it takes two days for those weirdos to prepare for it. What are we supposed to be planning here? How can we prepare for something when we don’t know what the hell it’s going to involve?”

“I don’t really care about the details,” Artemis said, “just as long as Cali’s protected.” She looked between Greyson and me. “That’s the point of the plan, right? To keep Cali safe?”

“That’s *always* the most important thing,” I said, my voice a low growl. “And if we’re going to make a plan, then you’re the perfect person to watch over her, Artemis.”

Everyone looked at me, surprised.

“What?” I demanded.

“Nothing,” Rishika said quickly, her gaze darting away.

“Not that Artemis isn’t a good choice,” Greyson started, “but I figured you’d want to keep Cali in your sights the whole time. I mean, that’s basically what you said to me the last time we talked about this.”

I shrugged. “That’s what I’d prefer, yeah. But think about it—you and I will be stronger if we move around the palace together. If it all goes sideways and we end up in a brawl with the Vanguard pack, I’m better equipped to handle that than Artemis. No offense,” I said, looking over at her.

She narrowed her eyes. “Some offense taken.”

“Come on,” I said, “think about it. Your magic is kickass, but it’s not totally reliable right now, and when it comes to the Vanguard pack, I’m not going to take any chances. I think it’s just best if I take patrol duty.”

I looked over at Greyson, wondering if he was going to even acknowledge how selfless I was being. He was looking at me curiously, but he didn’t say anything.

“It’s probably for the best,” Artemis admitted. “I’m getting better at controlling my powers, but I’m not working at full capacity yet. Though I could probably still kick Lucian’s ass if I had to.”

I felt a pang of worry as she spoke. Artemis was strong, but Greyson and I had both seen Lucian’s wolf, and it was huge. None of us had seen the prince in a true fight before, either, so that was another unknown variable.

“Hopefully it’s not going to come to that,” I said, *really* hoping it wasn’t going to come to that. Regardless, I was glad that Artemis was going to be there with Cali. Artemis was more than a match for the Vanguard pack’s dollar-store goddess.

Artemis clapped her hands. “Okay, well that’s settled then.” She got to her feet. “I’m going to go eat breakfast. And by breakfast, I mean a bunch of cookies.”

Rishika laughed and stood up. “Same.”

“Do you want anything?” I asked, turning to Cali.

She shook her head. “I’m fine. I’m not hungry.”

She still looked pretty weak, so she probably wasn’t just trying to cover.

“I’ll get you some tea,” I said, turning to go.

I was in the hall when I realized Greyson was following me.

“What do you want now?” I asked gruffly, turning to face him.

“I wanted to thank you for agreeing to come with me on this mission,” he said. “And I think you’re right—it’s probably best for Artemis to be with Cali. But have you thought about Ravi? We could always bring him along. He’s a good fighter.”

“Yeah,” I said slowly. “That’s true. And it’s not like there’s a limit on how many people we can bring with us.”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “The Vanguard pack loves their parties.”

We both chuckled at that, but stopped quickly, both realizing how weird it was that we were laughing together. We looked at each other awkwardly for a moment.

“Listen,” I said. “I want to make a few things clear before we do this thing.”

“Okay,” Greyson said warily. “Like what?”

“Like if you get over there and end up drinking the Kool-Aid and decide you’re madly in love with Aysel or some other form of Vanguard bullshit, I’m reserving the right to punch you in the face.”

Greyson laughed again. “That’s exactly what I’d want you to do.”

It was a strange moment, because looking at him as he smiled at me, I felt a strange warmth in my chest. Almost like I was glad to have something to share with him, and proud of myself for making him laugh.

Those feelings were strange and ill-fitting, and I was immediately uncomfortable. I mumbled something about tea and headed toward the kitchen.

I had to move three platters of cookies out of the way to clear some counter space for the mug, and as I waited for the water to heat, I started to think about this mission. I did think my plan was the best solution under the circumstances, but it did worry me that I wasn’t going to be able to be there fully for Cali during whatever this ritual involved. I hoped I wasn’t going end up regretting this decision. If things went to hell and I felt like I could have prevented it, there was no way I was ever going to be able to forgive myself.

I thought about Cali’s face as we’d talked about the plan. She hadn’t said anything, but she’d had her classic “Cali Worried Face” on, and I hated to see it.

I unwrapped the tea bag and dropped it into the mug, thinking. We already had a plan for the moon ritual, but I didn’t want Cali to be worried about everything for the next few hours. I knew her, and was well aware that she’d just let her fears eat her up inside.

As I poured water into the mug, an idea hit me, and I smiled to myself.

It was time to make a different kind of plan.

**Episode 2277**

“Thank you,” I said, accepting the tea Xavier offered me. The warm mug felt good in my hands. Maybe Xavier had been right—maybe I did need something in my system. I took a small sip and had to force myself to swallow. It was way too hot, but I smiled anyway. “It’s perfect.”

Xavier bent and pressed a kiss to my forehead. It felt nice to feel nothing but pleasure at the contact—something I couldn’t feel with Greyson at the moment.

“Do you want to sit?” I asked, patting the space next to me on the couch.

He smiled. “I do, but I need to go see Jay for a second. We were just talking about something, and I want to check in about it. I’ll be right back.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “I’m just going to rest for a second and drink this.” I lifted my tea. “You know, try to relax.”

He bent and kissed me on the lips. “Good. You should.”

I felt my face heat with a flush as he walked away, but as soon as he was out of the room, my thoughts turned back to the handprint on my shoulder. I dug into my pocket for the talisman and rubbed it between my fingers. It felt warm to the touch and was strangely comforting, but I felt a flash of fear. Was *this* the cause of my problems? Was it more harmful than helpful? The ritual was coming up, but would that really fix everything?

My anxiety made my pulse race, so I took another sip of too-hot tea and tried to breathe. I had to remember that my mates were going to be with me. And my sister. And all of them were going to protect me. It was going to be okay. The three of them were going to take care of me, and I still had my own magic, in case anything crazy happened.

The tea was still scorching hot, so I was blowing on it to cool it down when Torin came in.

“Hi, Cali,” he said, walking over.

“Hey, Torin. That cookie was amazing, but my stomach’s a little funny this morning, so I’m going to wait to have another.”

He shook his head. “This isn’t about the cookies.”

I frowned. There was a strange urgency about him, and I was instantly on guard. Torin had been acting strangely ever since Astrid had died. I’d been worried, of course—we all had—but it was hard to tell him to take care of himself when he swore that cooking like a maniac was what he liked to do.

Leaning forward, I put my tea on the coffee table and turned toward him. “Is everything okay?” Torin shook his head, which made my stomach clench with fear. “What’s going on? Is there anything I can do?”

He still wasn’t talking.

I leaned closer to him. “Are you in danger? Are you hurt? Did someone say something to you? Are you missing the Fae world? Are you sick—”

Torin put a hand up to stop me. “No, Cali, it’s none of that.”

“So what is it?” I asked.

He was quiet for a moment, then he leaned forward, speaking in a whisper. “It’s about Secret Santa.”

A wave of relief washed over me, followed by a flare of exasperation.

“Torin!” I punched his shoulder. “Why did you say it like that? I was freaking out! I thought something was seriously wrong!”

Torin’s eyes went wide. “Something *is* seriously wrong, Cali.”

I frowned. “What are you talking about? How could Secret Santa have gone horribly wrong? People haven’t even had a chance to offend each other with their bad gifts yet.” But it was clear from Torin’s expression that this was no laughing matter, so I tried to focus. “Okay. Tell me. What’s going on with Secret Santa?”

As Torin took a deep breath, I had to admit I was a little grateful for the distraction his problem provided. I’d been starting to spiral, so I was happy to problem solve about something that didn’t have life-or-death stakes.

“I didn’t want it to go this far,” Torin started, “but it’s started to become bigger than me. You know, you start something in good faith, but then it just kind of spirals and suddenly you realize you’ve just totally lost control of things. I didn’t mean for it to get this bad, and the last thing I want is for anyone to get hurt—”

“Oh my god!” I stopped him. “Stop talking in riddles and just tell me what’s actually going on.”

Torin blanched. “Okay. I’ve given your name to both Greyson and Xavier for Secret Santa!”

That this was Torin’s “serious problem” seemed a little outrageous, but I kept my expression neutral. “Okay. And that’s bad?”

“Of course it is!” Torin exploded. “They both think that they’re the only one who has you! And I lied to them! But how was I supposed to say no when they both asked me to have you for the gift exchange?” he wailed, looking miserable.

I actually thought it was pretty romantic that both Greyson and Xavier had specifically asked for my name in the gift exchange, but it was clear from Torin’s anguished expression that he’d been put into a difficult position.

“Okay, let me think about it,” I said. “I’m sure we can come up with a solution. Could you just give both of them someone else? So neither one of them has me?”

Torin shook his head. “No, that wouldn’t work. I already promised.”

“Can I have both of them as *my* Secret Santa?” I wondered. “I wouldn’t mind buying two gifts.”

Torin look shocked. “But that breaks the rules!” he said, scandalized. “They were assigned other people at first, but now what are they going to do? Who will give *them* something? I’ve ruined Christmas!”

“Stop right there,” I said firmly. “You didn’t ruin anything. You are the only person in this house with an ounce of holiday spirit, and this is your first time celebrating, for crying out loud!” I took his hands in mine and gave them a reassuring squeeze. “Please don’t worry about this. I’ll think of something. I promise I will.”

Torin took a shaking breath and nodded. “Okay.”

“You shouldn’t worry so much about something that’s supposed to be fun. It’s not supposed to feel like a burden.” I gave him a searching gaze. “You’ve been taking on a lot. I wonder if you’re just feeling a little overwhelmed.”

“But I *like* it,” Torin started to protest.

“I’m not telling you to stop,” I said. “But what if I helped out a little? I could be your partner in holiday crime.”

Torin perked up at this. “Really?”

I nodded. “Just give me the Secret Santa list, and I’ll figure it all out. No one else knows who they have yet, right?”

Torin sniffed, then wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “No. Not yet.”

“Then it’s totally fine. I’ll reorganize it, and it’ll all work out. Okay?”

Torin nodded. “Okay. Thanks, Cali.” He gave me a shaky smile. “I knew I could count on you. But I should probably get back to the cookie station. I think Mrs. Smith is trying to poach all my ideas.”

I laughed at this, and as he walked out of the room, I could see that he looked happier and less tense than before. Looking down, I found the talisman still in my lap, and with a sigh I slipped it back into my pocket. Then I picked up my tea and walked to the front door and out onto the porch. I was feeling less shaky, and I figured I could use the fresh air.

I stood there, looking out at the cold winter morning, and took a deep breath, letting the frosty air fill my lungs. My face still felt hot and clammy, so the cold air felt good. There was just so much going on—it always felt nonstop at the pack house. It was hard not to feel overwhelmed. I reminded myself that I needed to take more moments like these.

Gazing out across the lawn, I looked into the trees at the edge of the forest. They were the same trees that I’d seen Seluna emerge from in my dream.

Those stupid, worrisome dreams. I wished there was something I could do—all on my own—that would take care of this problem and answer all the questions we had about Seluna and the handprint. Something that wouldn’t worry everyone so much and waste everyone’s time with this Vanguard moon ritual. It was clear that the whole prospect was putting Greyson and Xavier on edge—along with everyone else involved.

I took a sip of tea and thought this over. Did I really *have* to wait for Lucian and this ritual? *I* was the one with this supposed connection to Seluna—so was there a way for me to ask Seluna to remove the mark myself?

**Episode 2278**

CHARLIE

My mom’s words echoed in my head.

She wanted me to go back to Minnesota? For real?

I glanced over at Violet, and the apprehension was obvious on her face. Clearing my throat, I shook my head, mumbling into the phone, “Go back? Like, *back* back? Mom… You *know* that I can’t do that right now.”

I winced when the words were out of my mouth. I felt like a horrible son, saying that to her when she’d come all this way to help me and my mate. But what was I supposed to do?

Fighting to cushion the rejection, I said, “We’re very grateful for all you’ve done for us, but I can’t leave my mate, that’s—”

“Charlie, no,” my mom said, cutting me off. “I wasn’t asking whether you were going to come back to Minnesota with us.”

Violet frowned, and I did too—we both had matching confused expressions as I asked, “Wait, what?”

“I was asking whether you were going to come and say *goodbye* to me,” my mom explained, and I blinked in surprise, the back of my neck heating up in embarrassment.

“Of course, yeah,” I said right away, shaking my head. “I’d love to see you before you leave.”

“Good,” she said. She sounded satisfied, despite my misunderstanding. “We should head over soon—the hunters are packing up. See you in a bit!”

We hung up, and I looked over at Violet. Her pretty face was unreadable. We’d been having such a nice morning until my mom had called. I understood the way Violet felt—I knew that if I were in her shoes, I’d have felt uncomfortable, in the very least.

“We don’t have to go say goodbye if you don’t want to,” I said, reaching out to hold her hand. “I know that it might be a little triggering to hear them talk about Zachery, and you might see him and all, and if I’m gonna be struggling with not punching him in the face, I can’t even imagine how you—”

“Charlie, no,” Violet said, stroking my cheek. “I’ll be fine. We should go say goodbye to your mother. She helped us, and it’s the right thing to do.”

I stared into Violet’s eyes, sighing as I placed my hand over hers where it rested on my face. I leaned forward, brushing my lips over her upper lip, then the lower, then across her jawline. She shivered slightly before I gave her a proper kiss, slow but firm, feeling her warmth seep into me.

When we broke off, I whispered against her mouth, “Thank you.”

“For what?” she asked, smiling a little.

“I don’t know,” I murmured. “Just—for being so kind and brave. I feel lucky to have you.”

Sniffling, Violet said, “Me too.”

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Violet and I were dressed and ready to go a few minutes later. When we got into the garage, Violet looked between Greyson’s SUV and Xavier’s large selection of cars.

“I mean…” Violet trailed off, giving me a shifty look. “I don’t think we can just take Greyson’s car without asking. Xavier, on the other hand—”

“He literally has no control over his own stuff, does he?” It was more an observation than a question.

“Not really,” Violet said. “He’s always been like this. Pretty generous.”

“I’ll say…” I snorted. “He gave Torin his Black Amex to do the Christmas shopping.”

“Probably not the best idea—I don’t think Torin knows how human money works,” Violet noted. “But it’s kinda nice too, especially because Torin needs so much cheering up.”

I smiled. “Xavier’s a good person deep down, isn’t he? Like, underneath all the growling?”

Violet nodded, grabbing a set of keys from a box on the counter. “Of course he is. He does all that growling because he cares,” she said. “And he loves me, so I’m sure he wouldn’t mind if I borrowed the old Prius—as long as we don’t blow it up or crash it.”

“Right,” I said seriously. “I hope we can manage that.”

Violet laughed and tossed me the keys.

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Shockingly, we made it to the other pack house in one piece. I parked, and Violet took in the lake house with a wistful sigh. “I kinda miss this place.”

“Me too,” I said. “It was the first pack house I ever lived in.”

“In theory it’s a literal battle site, but it’s looking much better now, so it’s easier to forget about all the Letifer madness,” she said.

I pulled Violet closer, leaning in to kiss the side of her head. “I agree. Phil’s done great work with the renovations after the fire. Maybe Greyson will set things up and we’ll be back here at some point.”

Violet nodded with a beautiful smile, and I was about to kiss her again when I felt eyes on us. We both looked over at the house again, and saw that the door had opened. Hunters started moving in and out between the house and their cars, which had been parked in the front yard.

My mom stood at the doorstep, eyeing Violet and me.

“Guess we should get this party started,” Violet said wryly.

I swallowed. “It’s gonna be fine. I’m right here.”

Violet squeezed my hand, taking in a breath. “I know.”

My mom walked up to us the moment we were out of the car, making a beeline for me.

“Charlie,” she said, giving me a hug. Then she turned to Violet. She looked a little constipated and awkward, but that was to be expected.

Violet blinked. “Um. Hello.”

“Hello, Violet,” my mom said. Still looking constipated. But despite that, she took a step closer and pulled Violet into an embrace, which Violet gingerly returned. It was visibly uncomfortable for both of them, like they were trying some sort of food that they didn’t really want to eat but would make an effort so as to not upset the chef.

I was the chef here.

At least my mom was trying, though. I was actually amazed to see how far she’d come already. She was making a point to get along with Violet, and I appreciated that, especially if you considered that just a few weeks ago she’d been gunning for Violet, almost quite literally.

This was a step forward, and even if their hug reminded me of a cat poking a baby bird, I would take it.

Once the two separated, I looked at Violet. *All good?*

*Yes*, she said*. This is nice*.

She was so wholesome it killed me.

I turned to my mom. “So are there are any updates on Zachery? What is going to happen when you get back to Minnesota?”

“We’re taking him back to the LOL council for a second time,” Iris explained. “But this time, he won’t get to walk free. He’s definitely guilty, and we have Shanna on the line as well. She will only make him look even guiltier.”

I frowned. “Wait, so Zachery will go to, like, to hunter *jail* this time? What’s that even like?”

My mom gave me a serious look. “That’s not something you want to know. Hunters are punished appropriately when they disobey the code. Shanna thought she could operate outside of it, and she’ll see justice for her past.” Mom paused, looking between Violet and me. “Zachery will have a similar fate.”

Zachery was someone that I had known growing up—someone I used to call a friend. The fact that he’d gone completely off the fucking rails was a hard pill to swallow, but I had no choice but to do so. I couldn’t just forget that he’d been one hundred percent ready to kill Violet for a myriad of monstrous reasons.

The son of a bitch was lucky *I* hadn’t been the one to end him.

“Bad deeds shouldn’t go unpunished,” Violet said.

My mom nodded solemnly before clapping her hands. Both Violet and I jumped in surprise, and then she said, “Now, how about you two help us load up the cars? There’s a lot of hunter gear to pack.”

My mate and I agreed and headed into the house. Violet looked around, her eyebrows arched. In a low voice, she said, “Strange to see all this hunter armory stuff in a werewolf pack house.”

I cringed. “True. But soon, it’ll just be ours again.”

Violet gave me a smile. *I’m so glad it’s all over.*

*Me too, Sunshine*, I mind linked back.

“Charlie!” my mom called from a few feet away. “More helping, less making googly-eyes at Violet!”

I blushed furiously, but Violet just laughed, covering her face. We’d picked up some boxes to take outside when Sophie appeared, grinning from ear to ear.

“Hi, guys! So nice of you two to help out!”

“It’s nothing,” Violet said, settling the box in the back of a truck. “I’m just bummed we didn’t get to spend more time together—you know, doing something fun.”

“Less war-oriented,” I added.

Sophie snorted, nodding. “I totally get it—I feel the exact same way.” She looked between us, grabbing both our hands. “I’m gonna miss you both. I—”

“Hey, Charlie!” someone barked, interrupting her.

Surprised, I turned around to see Chad marching up to me.

“I’ve got a score to settle with you,” he said.

**Episode 2279**

Today had been interesting so far. I was currently—supposedly—helping Torin make some more spritz cookies. How was it going? Well, it was… going. Some type of way. Perhaps. I was trying my best, though, which was the most important part. A for effort!

Biting my lip, I fought to concentrate as I squeezed the cookie gun/press thing and watched the dough plop out of it like a blob and onto the sheet pan.

My cookie children were a sight to behold.

“Hey, hey, how’s it going?” Torin asked me cheerfully, popping up next to me.

I squinted. “Well…”

Torin frowned at my blobs. “I mean. Those are, uh, *something*.”

“At least they’ll taste good, right?” I asked hopefully.

Torin smiled, patting my shoulder. “You bet they will.”

I smiled, very pleased with my progress. I could feel myself getting better at this baking thing with every passing second. I was destined for baking glory. My dad would be so proud.

Great British Bake Off*, here I come!*

As I tried to get the cookie press thing to cooperate, I considered my idea to talk to Seluna before the ceremony with Lucian. It was just turning into this huge deal, and I knew that Greyson wanted to take care of the curse with Aysel, but I wondered if we’d be better off if I could eliminate one factor from that equation.

*I’m so good at equations, anyway! I’d always been a math prodigy! Not.*

Sighing deeply, I looked around the kitchen—people were walking in and out, but I hadn’t seen Marta yet. Maybe I could get some medium séance tips from her. I didn’t think the pack house had a Ouija board, but maybe there was one buried in a closet somewhere.

*What? A Ouija board is SUCH a good idea! It’s not like there’s a whole movie genre dedicated to how people shouldn’t fuck around with them.*

The point, though, was that I had a plan. I would use the board, call out to Seluna, and just ask her nicely to remove the scary handprint from my shoulder. Easy peasy lemon squeezy, right?

*Oh my god, this is such a stupid idea. It’s like Lola thought of it or something!*

Speak of the devil, my best friend sauntered into the kitchen.

“Oh my goodness, how gorgeous are these, Torin!” she chirped, before sliding over to look at my sheet. Her eyebrows arched. “And then there’s… this.”

I glared at her. “I don’t want to hear it.”

Lola gave me an innocent look. “Wouldn’t dream of saying anything.”

I kept glaring. “You don’t have to say anything—I can see it in your judgy little eyes!”

Lola sighed deeply. “May I please try using the cookie gun?”

I gave it to her, scowling, and Lola flipped her hair over her shoulder like a princess and made a beautiful cookie on her first try.

*The INJUSTICE of it all!*

“Okay!” I huffed, throwing my hands up. “I’m giving up!”

“Giving up?” my mom walked in and stared at me, clearly surprised. “That’s not my girl. You’re a sucker for a lost cause.”

“And Xavier exploited that to the max,” Lola said, inspecting her nails.

I shoved her, she laughed, and my mom stroked my arm. “What’s going on, sweetie?”

I took a deep breath. “I’m just feeling so antsy about this ritual thing with Lucian—I don’t know what to expect. I’d rather try to contact Seluna on my own.”

Lola looked skeptical. “But doesn’t Lucian know more about contacting Seluna because he’s a Seluna stan?”

“Maybe,” I mumbled. Eyeing my mother carefully, I asked, “Is there maybe some sort of Fae ritual that we could do instead?”

Mom looked thoughtful. “What do you mean?”

“Like the fairy circle,” I explained. “Could we somehow use that to contact Seluna?”

Mom crossed her arms over her chest, mulling it over. “I’m not sure a fairy circle could work, but there are stories of Fae drinking a specific tea and trying to enter a trance to speak to ancient Fae beings—to get wartime advice, and ask other important questions. High stakes situations.”

“This *is* a high stakes situation, Mom,” I declared. “And did the tea actually work?”

My mom looked cautious. “I’ve never tried it myself. But my father performed the ritual quite a few times, and he always claimed to have spoken to someone important in the trance realm. But whether that was a figment of his imagination or a real being, I have no idea.”

“Fascinating!” Lola looked excited. That should’ve been a red flag, considering the safety of my plan, but I was on a roll here. “Can we get the things to make the tea here?”

I stared at my mom, eager as well. “Right! Could we just brew it? Is it safe to drink?”

I flashed back to that time when I hadn’t cooked the mushrooms for Mrs. Smith’s remedy and had taken a wild trip instead. Literally a drug trip. But if this idea were to work, I wouldn’t have to go see Lucian and be at his mercy during whatever shady ritual he was planning.

“It’s totally safe to do,” my mom said, and I was relieved. This could work! “We might even be able to find the ingredients around the property.”

“Like what?” I asked, excited.

“Pretty common things,” she said. “Pine needles, and a type of berry, but there’s a similar berry in this area called the cascara berry.”

“That sounds great,” I said, feeling hopeful. “Could you write down everything we need?”

My mom nodded, smiling. “Of course. I’ll take care of everything.”

Lola clapped her hands together. “Yay! This is such a great idea!”

I was still a little alarmed by Lola’s enthusiasm—by now, I considered anything she liked to be a bad idea—but I was trying to be optimistic here. I was about to ask my mom more about the tea, but then I glanced behind her and saw Greyson passing by.

“I’ll be right back,” I told my mom and Lola, then hurried after him.

“Greyson!” I called as he walked down the hallway, and he paused and turned to face me with a smile.

“You look excited—what’s up?” he asked as I rushed over.

I grabbed both his hands, looking up at him. His expression was soft, and I wanted to kiss him so badly that I felt woozy.

*Soon. SOON!* I thought, determined.

“I love you so much,” I breathed, wrapping my arms around his torso.

“I love you too.” He laughed a little, squeezing me against him. “You’re in a good mood. Having a sugar rush?”

“Yes.” I looked up at him, keeping my hands in his after breaking the hug. “But I also have some exciting news—I might be able to contact Seluna on my own.”

Greyson’s face fell slightly. His smile turned into a thin line, and his eyes went all squinty.

“Don’t give me that look!” I huffed, poking his chest.

He raised an eyebrow. “I’m just processing here, love—what do you have in mind?”

I rambled on about the tea, and Greyson watched me, his expression turning grave. “That sounds very dangerous.”

“It’s safe,” I said and squeezed his hand. “My mom said so.”

Greyson suddenly looked far less troubled. “I guess that makes me feel better.”

I scoffed. “You say that like you don’t trust me, Greyson!”

He stroked my arm. “I do trust you. I think you’re brilliant and beautiful and the perfect woman for me.”

I blushed.

“But I also think you’re a trouble magnet and your self-preservation instincts tend to go a little haywire, so your mom approving of this plan is helpful,” Greyson concluded.

I pretended to be offended. “Lies!”

“Are they, though?” He squinted at me, and I grumbled, poking his chest. He smiled, brushing his thumb over my hand. “All jokes aside, I don’t see a problem with it. Just be careful, all right?”

I nodded. “I promise I will be. I just want to take care of this without Lucian.”

“That’s an amazing idea, actually,” Greyson said in a serious tone. “See? I told you you were fucking brilliant.”

I blushed. “You’re such a flatterer.”

He smirked. “You love it.”

I nodded, looking up at him. My voice was quiet. “I do.”

He pulled me into another hug, and I rejoiced in his warmth. I wanted more of it—I couldn’t wait for this damn curse to be gone. “Let me know if you need anything. I’m always here to help, you know that, right?”

“Of course,” I mumbled, rubbing my face against his chest.

And then someone cleared their throat. Angrily.

*Well, shit.*

I broke the hug, turning to see Xavier. He stood there, brooding (of course), his arms crossed over his chest.

“Cali. Can I speak to you?” He glared at Greyson. “Alone.”

I was immediately alarmed. This couldn’t be a jealousy thing—we were past that, weren’t we?

Sighing, I turned to Greyson. “Sorry, I need to—”

“No need to apologize,” Greyson said, brushing it off. He gave Xavier a serious nod before stepping away. Xavier approached, and I examined his grave face anxiously.

“What is it?” I asked. “What’s wrong?”

Xavier’s scowl vanished in a second. “Nothing’s wrong.” With a sly grin, he said, “I’m going to take you somewhere.”

**Episode 2280**

XAVIER

I watched as Cali’s eyes went wide. “You’re taking me somewhere? Where?”

“It’s a surprise,” I said, still smirking.

She smacked my arm lightly, shaking her head. “Xavier! You were so serious before—you had me worried!”

I chuckled, taking her hand and guiding it to rest on my chest. “Sorry—I couldn’t help myself. You know it’s fun to tease you.”

She grumbled, and I kissed her cheek. I loved how empathetic she was about everyone and everything all the time. Mostly because it was the exact opposite to my usual modus operandi.

“I’m sitting here freaking out about Lucian and Seluna’s BS, and you’re just having fun,” she said, pouting, and I shook my head.

“I know you’re kinda freaking out about that whole thing, and I’m here to help take your mind off things,” I said.

She pursed her lips. “Are you being thoughtful right now, or just selfish? You know, since you did pull me away from Greyson and all?”

“How about both?”

She snorted.

“For the record,” I said, “you don’t have to do this thing with Lucian.”

“Actually, I might not,” Cali said.

I was surprised but happy to hear that. I, of course, didn’t trust Prince Creepy at all, especially not with Cali.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“My mom is going to get the ingredients for this Fae tea that might be able to connect me with Seluna,” Cali said excitedly.

I processed her words and deflated a bit. I’d really wanted to take her out for a little bit of fun and have her all to myself, but apparently, the right fucking thing to do right now would be to be helpful. Kinda gross, but what else was I supposed to do?

“Should we stay here and help?” I said. It was like pulling teeth, but I’d managed not to be a dick. My common decency deserved a medal, mostly because it wasn’t actually all that common.

“Aw, Xavier…” She smiled, stroking my cheek. “I appreciate that.”

I liked seeing Cali happy, so I tried not to be self-centered—it took some effort—and nodded. “Why don’t you go see if your mom needs us, and I’ll be right there to help you guys out. Let me know, okay?”

Cali grinned brightly, stretching onto her tiptoes to plant a quick kiss on my mouth. “Okay. Thanks!”

She fluttered back into the kitchen as I stared at her ass, sighing. I could’ve had my hands all over her right now, but I’d decided to do the right thing instead. Horrible. And if all that wasn’t enough, another responsible thought hit me right then:

Greyson had been super pissed off the last time Cali and I had gone out without letting him know. So, in theory, if we were to go out, I’d have to fill him in, because he was annoying.

I shouldn’t have to ask Greyson’s permission to do anything. Ever.

I took a deep breath and reminded myself that I was playing the long con here—I’d decided to be Greyson’s ally, so I had to play the game with the cards that I’d been dealt. Swallowing down my irritation, I sought out my older brother.

“… go out with a patrol and make sure that all the traps that Shanna left behind are really gone,” Rishika was telling Greyson when I spotted him.

The two of them looked focused, serious, like a good team.

Perhaps I was kinda jealous of the way they worked together so seamlessly, especially considering what a formidable fighter Rishika was, and how important it would be if she decided to side with me over him. But I wasn’t about to fucking admit any of that, ever. Obviously.

“You’ll have to be extremely careful while doing the sweep,” Greyson told her seriously.

She raised an eyebrow. “You know I always am.”

“I do,” he said, “but I just had to say it. You know how it goes.”

Rishika snorted, patting his shoulder. “You’re kind of like a dad. It’s nice.”

Greyson visibly cringed, huffing at her. Laughing, Rishika sauntered off, and Greyson turned around to face me.

“What?” he asked.

“Just here to let you know I’m going to take Cali out somewhere,” I said.

He frowned. “Where?”

I sighed. The man was insufferable. “None of your fucking business.”

He walked up to me. “Cali just had that shot of pain go through the weird mark on her shoulder, so it’s not a good idea for her to go out. Also, we just finished wrapping up our massive hunter problem, and—”

“That’s solved now,” I said, cutting off my rambling brother. “Besides, Cali will be with me. Safe.”

Greyson huffed. “That means nothing if her mark starts hurting all of a sudden. What would you do to alleviate the pain if you were away from the pack house?”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re making too much of a fuss, like always. I may have pledged myself to you, but I didn’t think you’d assume that meant I’d be kissing your boots and obeying your orders all the time.”

He glared at me. “You’re being a pain in my ass right now for no reason. You can’t just walk out with Cali without telling me where you’re going. It just doesn’t work that way.”

I poked his chest. “It does, because I can protect her. Don’t you ever question that again, or doubt my judgement. Dipshit.”

Greyson laughed icily, throwing his hands up. “Then don’t give me a reason to. You can’t just pick Cali up and run off somewhere without telling me *where* that somewhere is!”

“Whatever,” I snapped. “I don’t know what we’re doing yet. Happy now?”

“Was that so hard?”

“Go to hell, Greyson.”

“Right back atcha.”

Huffing in annoyance, I walked away from my asshole brother. I hated it when Greyson questioned my abilities in any way, shape, or form. Regardless, if Cali came back saying that Orla needed our help, then that was how we were going to spend the afternoon, no question. No matter how much I wanted to take Cali to do something fun, I would always prioritize her needs.

“Xavier!” Just then, Cali left the kitchen and ran straight to me. Wrapping her arms around me, she looked up at me. “My mom said she would take care of everything, and she’s got Artemis if she needs help.”

I grinned. “Does that mean you’re off the hook, and we can go out and have fun?”

She smiled. “Sure.”

Excited, I grabbed Cali by the hips and threw her over my shoulder, grabbing her ass for good measure. “All right, I’ve got everything I need—it’s time to go.”

Cali burst into giggles, punching my back. “Oh my god, put me down!”

I plopped her down and said, “Grab your stuff—we’re heading out right now.”

I leaned down and kissed her full on the mouth before twirling her around and pushing her toward the staircase. Her laughter made me grin.

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Five minutes later, Cali and I were in the driveway, heading toward my car. She looked like a cute little snow bunny in her jacket. It was the one I’d made her buy, and it had been a great choice—she looked adorable in it.

I took her hand and grinned at her when she asked, “So where are we even going?”

She was all aflutter and flushed, and I loved seeing her like this. Just… *not* worried.

“It’s a surprise,” I said after we got into the car.

“Better not be anything scary,” she told me seriously.

We spent the entirety of the drive listening to whatever she wanted on the radio as she rambled on. I loved doing this kind of thing with her.

When we finally got to our destination, her eyes widened.

“Xavier…” She turned to me, frowning. “Why are we at a *car dealership*?”

I chuckled. “Come on, let’s go.”

I hopped out, and she did the same, still looking confused. “This wasn’t what I expected when you said you were taking me somewhere.”

I took her hand in mine, leading her inside the store. “I know, but I promise it’ll be fun.”

“Mr. Evers!” Vera stood up from her office the moment she saw me. She always got me a good deal whenever I needed a new car. Safe to say, that happened pretty frequently, so she was really happy to see me each and every time. I liked her because she didn’t really ask any questions.

“So nice to see you,” she told me, shaking my hand, then Cali’s, who still looked weirded out.

“I know just where to take you two!” Vera winked at Cali and sauntered away, waving for us to follow.

“What is *happening*?” Cali hissed at me, still looking super surprised.

I grinned, loving this moment. “You’ll see…”

“Ta-da!” Once we were outside, Vera gestured at a beautiful little sports car. “Isn’t she a beauty?”

Cali squinted at the car.

Vera handed the keys to me and grinned. “Have fun, you two.”

Cali stared at me, eyebrows raised. “This is what we’re doing? I’m gonna watch you drive this thing around?”

I smirked and dangled the keys in front of her. “Nope. How about you drive it yourself?”

**Episode 2281**

MARTA

Lilac was talking to Plum, who just sat there like a good boy and listened, his tail wagging. His fur looked shiny and soft, his eyes focused as he stared at Lilac. It was outrageous how such a massive wolf could look so… *normal*. Not exactly like a pet puppy, but definitely an entity that I felt safe around.

It was shocking to realize, and I was certain that there had been a time when I would’ve been afraid of Plum, but not anymore. Not while knowing that Plum was part of Lilac, and vice versa. That gave me all the peace I needed, and I actually enjoyed watching them together.

Lilac—cute, cheeky Lilac—seemed content, and I adored seeing him like this.

Dani, on the other hand, was standing further away, right next to a bush. It looked like she was ready to hide behind it if necessary. I didn’t blame her for looking nervous—she had a bad history with werewolves. I slowly walked closer to her, meeting her gaze.

“Are you okay?” I asked in a low tone. “We can go inside if you want.”

While Lilac continued to talk to Plum in the background, Dani took a deep breath, shaking her head. “No, this is good. I know that Lilac is nice, and Plum…” She swallowed audibly. “I mean, he’s huge, but I know that he must be good too, since he’s part of Lilac. It’s a little difficult, though.”

“I totally get it,” I said.

“He looks like a really, really big dog when he’s calm like this,” Dani said nervously. “Which is just so weird.”

“I know,” I said, snorting, but then I noticed that Dani’s hands were shaking. I frowned. “We really should go inside, you know—you don’t have to push yourself. Especially not right after last night.”

The night before, Dani had been gone.

Or at least Torin had *thought* she was gone—he’d been so nervous and afraid, running up to Lilac and me the moment we’d returned from our date. The alarm had been pretty short-lived, thankfully, because we’d found Dani in one of the studies. She’d been tucked away, quietly sleeping on an armchair, entirely covered by a big fluffy blanket, and Torin just hadn’t seen her.

She’d looked like a tired kitten, and waking her up had broken my heart a little. She’d needed to get to her room, though, along with everybody else who then headed off to bed.

But I wondered if Dani had slept at all after that.

“Marta, watch!” Lilac called out, before Dani could reply to my suggestion. The two of us turned to look at Lilac. He stood there, all serious, and snapped his fingers at Plum, calling, “Plum, plunge!”

I stared, wide-eyed, as Plum scooped Lilac up onto his back and took off running. They did a quick lap around some trees before returning and bounding toward Dani and me. Lilac looked so handsome and regal on Plum’s back, like a powerful fighter, and I grinned.

He smiled back, winking.

Dani, though, flinched.

*Damn it…*

Lilac hopped off Plum’s back and walked toward us.

“Wasn’t that awesome?” he asked Dani and me. “Plum and I have been working on this for a while! Now I’ll be able to fight with him if we ever have to face off with anyone ever again—which we probably will, right?”

I wanted to run up to Lilac and grab his face and kiss him, tell him how cool seeing him do that had been. But I was all too aware of Dani’s reaction, and I didn’t want to make things worse for her.

“That was great,” I told Lilac, and he looked happy.

I gave Dani a sideways glance, and Lilac’s gaze moved to her too.

“Anyway,” I said. “You keep doing your thing—we’re gonna go inside now, okay?”

“Of course,” Lilac said, catching my meaning. “Thanks for hanging out, Dani.”

Dani blushed a little as she stared at Lilac, nodding. This all must’ve been so new to her—having a wolf be nice. With that disturbing thought in mind, I headed into the house with her, hearing Lilac’s command echoing in the woods behind us once more.

I wished I could have stayed behind with him, but I felt that Dani needed me more.

“Thank you for that,” Dani told me, once we were in the kitchen. “It’s definitely been a bit difficult to get used to staying at a werewolf pack house.”

“I get it,” I said, squeezing her shoulder comfortingly.

“There you are!” Torin said, entering—or probably returning to—the kitchen, which was his favorite spot. “You two have to try out the cookies I made!”

We thanked him and picked up a couple—they had a weird shape, but tasted pretty good, and that was the most important part. Dani seemed to like them, which made me smile. Any small bit of comfort we could offer her made me feel better.

“I saw Big Mac and Kira in the living room,” Torin said. “I think they were talking about you.”

After finishing our cookies—wouldn’t want to get crumbs in the living room, Torin had said seriously—Dani and I went to find Kira and Big Mac. The two witches were sitting on the couch, drinking mochas.

“Speak of the devil,” Big Mac said, eyeing Dani and me as we approached.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Kira looked between Dani and me, gesturing for us to take a seat. “We were just discussing who we think you girls’ mentor might be.”

Dani and I exchanged a look after sitting across from the witches.

“Do you have any ideas?” I asked.

I’d been thinking about the mentor as well, actually. I was determined to do my best and get my magic under control, but there were so many unknown factors at play.

“We know that it’s got to be a necromancer because… Well, because of the obvious,” Kira said.

I looked down at my shoes sheepishly, clearing my throat. “Right. Makes sense. I did bring someone back from the dead.”

The window was cracked open, and I heard Lilac in the distance, bellowing, “*Plum, plunge!*”

Talk about perfect timing.

“The part that’s throwing us off is Dani, though,” Big Mac added, looking at the girl.

Dani swallowed roughly. “Me?”

Big Mac shook her head. “It’s nothing bad. We are just mulling over the fact that they said the mentor would be for both of you, but your magic is so different from Marta’s.”

Kira squinted at us. “Not sure what kind of witch could teach both of you what you need to know.”

Dani cringed. I glanced between the witches. “So there’s no one you can think of?”

Big Mac remained skeptical. “It’s not like all witches know each other. It’s certainly possible that someone knows how to deal with both your powers, as different as they are, but we were just wondering how easy, or difficult, it will be for the council to find the right person.”

Well. That didn’t feel particularly encouraging.

I suddenly I wished I was back outside, with Lilac, on Plum’s back, running through the forest. That would’ve been fun, with zero worries in sight. Lilac and I had had an amazing evening the night before—right up until the part where that ranger had arrived and Plum had gotten offended.

“You look worried,” Big Mac noted.

I realized she was talking to me, not Dani.

I chuckled awkwardly. “I just—I was hoping to take control of my magic sooner rather than later.”

“I get it,” Big Mac said. “This isn’t an ideal situation, but hopefully the council has someone in mind already and can send them along right away.”

“I hope so too,” Dani said.

I sighed and leaned back into the couch. “Sounds to me like Dani and I are just going to sit around and wait for this mentor to show up, though. How long could that take?”

“We can’t know for sure,” Kira said earnestly, and my heart pounded.

As the two witches and Dani discussed how Dani was doing, I stared at the bracelets around my wrists. I had a sinking feeling that things might get worse with my magic before they got better.

Even though I hadn’t told anyone, I’d been feeling the magic pulsing through me ever since Dani had grabbed my hand at the council. My magic was in there, waiting. And I could almost feel it…

*Growing*.

It was an odd sensation, and I couldn’t shake it. It couldn’t be that bad, though, could it? No—I was here, in a place I could call home, with an amazing, ridiculous boy who I had so many feelings for, and my magic was part of me.

My magic would never turn on me. *Right?*

I tried to swallow down some of my fear, but the question remained in my head: was it possible that my magic could become too unyielding for any mentor to help me?

**Episode 2282**

I looked at the sports car.

Then back at Xavier.

Then at the sports car.

Then back at Xavier.

*What is even happening right now?*

I had never imagined, not in a million years, that Xavier would bring me to a car dealership. Nor had I thought that he’d ask me to drive a car like this. I’d never driven anything so nice and expensive before—it looked like a gleaming little gem.

A gem that I would undoubtedly DESTROY.

*Seriously, has he lost his mind?*

“Xavier, this is…” I looked over my shoulder, but the dealership lady was gone. She’d left us alone. “Is this a joke? Are you sure you want ME to drive this car?”

He smirked, looking sexy and handsome and all that good stuff. “I’m looking at you, aren’t I?”

I shook my head. “But this car is so expensive and beautiful, and I’m me! I’ll probably trip while driving it!”

Still grinning widely, Xavier pulled me close, strong arms wrapping around my waist, his hand cupping my cheek. “And I’m me, and that’s exactly why I want to see you behind the wheel of this car.”

I narrowed my eyes at Xavier. “So is this like a fantasy of yours? Seeing me driving this kind of car?”

He shrugged, running his hands through his hair. “What am I supposed to say to that?”

I huffed. “You’re supposed to tell the truth!” I poked him in the ribs, and he chuckled, his eyes dark as he stared into mine.

“It’s not *not* something I’ve thought about before,” he said coyly.

“You’re just a horny little asshole, aren’t you?” I deadpanned.

He smirked. He kissed my cheek, then my mouth, making me feel light-headed. “Give it a try. I promise you’ll like it.”

Feeling all flustered, I sighed and took the keys. “Fine. I’ll give it a try.”

He actually looked giddy. Unbelievable. I’d never seen him like this—his usual vibe was to brood for hours on end for literally no reason, and now he was excited over a car and me, together. Boys were weird. I’d take it, though, if it meant him looking so happy.

“After you,” he said, opening the driver’s door for me.

I snorted and got in. The seat was a little low, but the car felt spacious inside, and super luxurious.

“Isn’t it nice?” he asked.

“It’s perfect,” I said. “*Obviously*.”

Snorting, he closed the door and moved around to the passenger seat. When he got in, he seemed right at home. But I was feeling nervous. I looked around, grumbling as I held the keys.

“So where do I, like, put these? Wait—” I searched for the ignition, frowning. “Is there no actual key? Is this a spaceship?”

Xavier laughed and reached over to press a button.

A second later, the car roared to life.

“Oh my god, it’s alive!” I squealed, and Xavier snickered. I hadn’t seen him so pleased in a while, and I loved it. “Okay, now what?”

“Now, you drive,” Xavier told me, smirking.

“Easier said than done,” I said wryly, placing my hands on the wheel. It was too far away, actually. “Am I supposed to know which button to use to bring the seat forward? Because I struggle with that even in normal cars!”

Xavier showed me what to poke, and I did it, and he just stared the entire time, looking like the cat that got the cream.

“You’d better not fucking laugh,” I said, pointing at him. “You were the one who wanted me to drive!”

“And I’m already loving this,” he said with a wink.

I offered a long-suffering sigh and got comfortable in the seat. At least it was super comfortable. I could do this. It couldn’t be that hard. I was able to drive a fancy car that was worth more than anything I owned, right?

“It’s going to be fine,” Xavier said soothingly. “Go ahead.”

I nodded, took a deep breath, and reached to move the car into drive…

When I realized that it had a stick shift.

“Oh no!” I exclaimed. “What’s that? I don’t know how to drive stick!”

Xavier shook his head. “It’s fine—I’m here to teach you.”

I blinked at him, feeling even more nervous. “I thought we came here because you wanted me to leave my worries behind or whatever. Please explain how this is supposed to be fun for *me* instead of you and your penis?”

“Cali, please don’t stress—”

“Xavier! You want to teach me how to drive a stick shift in a car that’s worth the entirety of my college tuition! How can I *not* be stressed out?”

This was such a bad idea, it was like Lola had cooked it up.

“Baby, come on,” Xavier said in a lower tone as he cupped my cheek. His touch was tender and soft, his eyes smoldering, so I obviously got distracted. “It’s fine. That’s why I’m here. I’m going to show you how to do everything. Do you trust me?”

His words made me feel better right away. “Of course,” I said as he let go. It was the absolute truth. “Okay. Yeah. I can do this.” I looked between him and the wheel. “If you’re going to help me, that is. It would be a disaster otherwise.”

Xavier nodded. “It’s pretty simple. You lift your foot off the throttle while simultaneously stepping down fully on the clutch pedal. When the car starts, you move the shift lever from first-gear position into second-gear, and then—”

“One thing at a time, please,” I said nervously.

Xavier explained everything all over again, and I tried to follow direction. It was not fucking working as well as he’d hoped—there were a few false starts, so I had to restart the car.

“Bet I look stupid in front of that car lady,” I grumbled.

Xavier shook his head. “Don’t even think about that. It’s just the two of us, and you never need to feel embarrassed with me.”

I pressed my lips together. “That’s actually shockingly sweet of you, Xavier.”

Xavier snorted. “What can I say? That’s me.”

I chuckled, and he shook his head.

“Seriously,” he said, “don’t sweat it. I know this is your first time doing this—some mistakes are to be expected.”

I nodded sharply, taking a deep breath. “Okay. I’m doing this.” I paused. Then I turned to him. “How was I supposed to start again?”

With a wide, gorgeous smile, Xavier explained the basics once more. I listened closely, and after another three or four—who was counting?—tries, I finally started the car. For real!

“Perfect,” Xavier said, placing his hand over mine on the stick. “Let’s do this together now.”

He helped me shift gears from first to second, and I did it all from the beginning without his help after a few minutes of trying. In the end, it wasn’t that horrendously bad, actually. Like, I was kinda getting the hang of it!

*Yay me!*

“Hey, this is working!” I said as I drove around the parking lot of the dealership, smiling from ear to ear.

Xavier patted my thigh, looking pleased. “All right, you’re doing well. Let’s go on the road now.”

I stepped on the brakes really hard, and the tires screeched. “What! We aren’t staying in the parking lot?”

Xavier, who was apparently unshakable, simply laughed. “Oh come on! You’ve been doing so well—I have to help you graduate to the next steps.”

“Do I have to?” I grumbled.

He raised an eyebrow. “Do you trust me? Because I definitely trust you.”

He had me there. “Fine,” I said. “I can do this.”

“I know you can,” he said, leaning in to kiss my cheek.

His tenderness and patience and all his growth—because the old Xavier would NEVER have been so patient with me—made me feel really nice. In the end, we reached the road, and it was thankfully not busy at all. My confidence was climbing—I’d definitely gotten the hang of this, especially when Xavier placed his hand over mine.

“Hey,” I said breathlessly, looking ahead at the open road. “This is actually fun!”

Xavier whooped. “Told you it would be. Go faster!”

I wanted to protest, but then—why should I? This really was fun, and I felt so powerful driving this car. I’d never thought I’d be able to do something like this before, to control this kind of machinery without making it explode or something.

“Okay!” I said, “I’m gonna do the gear change!”

Xavier leaned in. “Let’s do it together.”

With his instructions and his hand over mine on the gearshift, I felt as safe as could be, despite the climbing speed. It was exhilarating.

But then—

*Ouch!*

I suddenly was hit with a painful pang in my shoulder.

*Oh, shit! Not this again!*

Wincing, I tried to fight it off. The pain hadn’t been comfortable last time, but it hadn’t lasted very long, so this had to be okay, right?

*Oh, no…*

The pain wasn’t going away. It was sharp, my eyes felt heavy, and Xavier’s voice sounded almost like he was talking underwater. Was he yelling at me? What was going on? Both of my shoulders started to burn uncontrollably, the ache making me whimper. The car kept going and going, but this time, it wasn’t under my control.

*Oh, no! NO! This can’t be happening! AND I WAS HAVING SO MUCH FUN!*

“Ice!” Xavier shouted, grabbing the wheel.

And just then, I felt the tires start to slip.

**Episode 2283**

CHARLIE

Chad was all in my face, pointing at me. Confusion made me scrunch up my eyebrows in a way that Violet had said made me look cute. I hoped I just looked angry and manly.

“What kind of score, man?” I asked. “What the heck are you talking about?”

Chad puffed up his chest, because he wasn’t very smart and he didn’t like making good life choices. “You know exactly what I’m talking about, Kim. The race?”

I fought to remember what on god’s green earth this guy was talking about. All that had been in my head lately was Violet and her safety and the damn battles we’d been fighting, metaphorically and literally.

Most recently, Shanna had been a huge problem, and before that it had been Letifer and the revenants, and before that it had been Silas, and for me personally, the Rogue who’d turned me into a werewolf and had wanted to murder Violet and me. Like, we couldn’t catch a break.

“There’s been quite a bit going on, Chad,” I said impatiently. “Life-threatening situations and stuff like that. So I’m gonna need you to remind me what the hell you’re talking about.”

Chad gaped, appalled. “How can you not remember? It happened during training—when we raced for the first time and did the obstacle course and you beat me!”

I blinked. This guy couldn’t be for real.

“I want a redo,” Chad declared, poking my shoulder. “If I’d known I was up against a werewolf, it would’ve changed things.”

“How?” Sophie asked Chad, raising an eyebrow.

Chad huffed. “Well, I could’ve changed up my strategy!”

Violet squinted at him. “So you had a strategy? During a race?”

“Of course!” Chad declared. “It’s what the best of the best do—always have a strategy. Now that I’m aware of what you are, dude, it’s go time.”

I looked over at Violet and Sophie. At least they both looked amused. I took a deep, long-suffering breath. This kid was exhausting. “Please me this is a joke, Chad. You can’t be serious.”

Chad glared. “Why wouldn’t I be serious?”

“We have to pack up, you have to go, and my mom is glaring daggers at us right now because we’re not working,” I said.

Chad rolled his eyes. “She’s not.”

“She is,” I said seriously. “Even when you don’t see Iris Kim, she’s there, watching and judging. And right now, she’s judging us for slacking.”

For a moment, Chad looked intimidated. He looked around before catching himself and turning to me again. “Okay, cut the bullshit! I’m serious here!” He pointed at his chest. “Do not question me. I am Chadford Bowman, and I am a man of my word. It’s now or never.”

Violet frowned. “Your name is Chadford?”

Sophie snickered. “For real?”

“What’s wrong with Chadford?” Chad glared at them.

“I thought it was Chadster,” Sophie told him seriously.

“No, no,” Chad said. “That’s my nickname!”

“Are you sure Chadford isn’t your nickname?” Violet asked him seriously.

“Yes. I mean, no. I mean—” Chad frowned. “What the fuck are you two getting at right now?”

The two girls burst into giggles.

Chad huffed, wagging his finger at them. “Stop bullying me!” He then turned to me. “Well, Kim? Made your decision yet? Because I’m gonna destroy you.”

I snorted. “Why should I say yes?”

Chad cracked his knuckles. “Afraid you’re gonna lose? Didn’t know you were a werechicken!” He started squawking like a chicken, and that was when I decided I’d had it.

“You know what?” I said, flicking his shoulder. “You want a race? You’ll get one.”

“Ooh!” Sophie said, scandalized.

“I know,” Violet said, a pretty grin on her mouth. “This is gonna be good.”

“Of course it’s gonna be good,” I said, “because I know this area better than Chadford over here, and there’s no way he’s gonna win against me.” I stared at Chad. “But hey, if you wanna make a fool out of yourself again, be my guest! I love winning.”

“That was some good shit talk, Kim. You’re like a beast unleashed,” Chad said darkly.

“Oh, you have no idea,” I replied.

Violet clapped her hands excitedly. “This is gonna be so much fun!”

“Sophie!” Chad barked.

Sophie jumped. “Yes, Chadford, sir?”

Chad glared at her. “Can you time us? It’s go time.”

Sophie nodded eagerly. “Let me get my phone!”

Chad walked away after cracking his neck, Sophie following.

“We’ll be back!” she called. “Get ready, Charlie!”

I shook my head and chuckled, watching them go while Violet moved to stand in front of me. She looked flushed and pretty and precious as ever.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this, but I love it,” she said, laughing.

“I clearly have no idea what I’m getting myself into,” I deadpanned.

Snickering, Violet took my hand. “We both know you can beat Chad. It’s just a little fun, right?”

“Yep,” I said. I leaned forward with a smile, brushing my nose over hers. “Though it’ll feel pretty good to smoke Chad in a race, after everything. The look on his face will be worth it.”

“You have to win. It’s a matter of honor for all wolf-kind,” Violet told me seriously.

“Of course. Can I get a good luck smooch?” I asked, and Violet chuckled, fluttering her eyelashes.

“Of course,” she said.

And then she grabbed my face and kissed me hard enough to see stars.

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A few minutes later, we were down by the lake. I was doing my stretches as Sophie looked seriously between Chad and me, explaining the rules.

“This will be a footrace,” she said. “Twice around the lake. First person who crosses this line”—Sophie drew a line in the dirt—“wins.”

“Hah!” Chad huffed, cracking his neck for the millionth time probably. “Get ready to lose, Kim!”

I rolled my eyes. This guy made a big show of things all the time, but there was no way I’d lose. There was, like, zero chance of that happening. I wouldn’t even have lost if we were both human, let’s be honest here.

“No more chitchat! Assemble on the line I just drew, please!” Sophie said officially. She looked like she was having a good time, so I was happy for her.

Chad and I followed Sophie’s directions, and she started counting down.

“Ten, nine, eight…”

I looked over at Violet, who was standing a few feet away, smiling wide. She gave me a thumbs up, and I winked at her.

*I love you*, she mind linked. *Show these hunters how it’s done!*

I blew her a kiss.

“… three, two, one, *go*!” Sophie shouted.

Off.

We.

*Went.*

We raced forward together, neck and neck—I was only letting Chad gain some ground so that he’d tire himself out like a toddler. He got cocky, though, and started to pull out in front of me.

“Aha!” he yelled. “Eat my dust, wolfboy!”

How could this doofus really think that he was gonna win? In real life? Today?

Smirking, I shifted into my wolf, and Chad gasped. “Hey! That’s not fair!”

*Life isn’t fair, bud!* I wanted to say, but instead, I just yipped at him before I ran forward, bounding ahead. Besides, there had been no rule that said that I couldn’t shift. If Chad wanted to race a werewolf, he was going to race a werewolf, no problem.

Well, there was one problem. Namely that freaking *Chad* was almost managing to keep up with me.

I was shocked. And I mean *shocked*.

Who would’ve thought that the Chadster would be so good at this?

Then again, I supposed I shouldn’t have been *that* surprised. Hunters were meant to be well matched with supernaturals. But I wasn’t just any werewolf—I’d fought in wars, dammit!

Putting more of my power and speed into it, I pushed myself as we hit an area with a bunch of fallen trees scattered everywhere.

I decided to move around the space—no need to complicate things—but I was weirded out to see Chad go straight in. Then the dickhead actually jumped from fallen trunk to trunk and ended up doing a flip, landing in front of me.

How the hell was he so good at this? What was happening here?

*Unbelievable!*

Chad laughed in my astonished face and burst into a run again. Looking over his shoulder, he shouted, “Parkour, bitch!”

I snarled and took off after him—I’d show him fucking parkour.

We were nearing the end of the first lap, and I jumped over a few large rocks, running across them like a spider-wolf, doing my own version of parkour to get in front of Chad.

“Asshole!” Chad yelled at me, and I was feeling pretty smug here.

I was racing ahead, my momentum amazing, but then suddenly…

I saw the glint of silver up right in front of me. It was one of the silver traps, and I was going so fast, high on adrenaline, that I couldn’t dial down my speed.

I was heading straight for it.

**Episode 2284**

GREYSON

I’d checked out the window a million times now.

When the hell were Cali and Xavier coming back?

I hoped she was okay. She had better be fucking okay, otherwise I’d just have to murder my brother. The little jackass had evaded death for a while now, but if he was responsible for Cali getting seriously hurt, all bets would be off.

He was fucking *insufferable*.

I’d told Xavier that it wasn’t a good idea to take Cali out in the state she was in, but had he listened? No. And Cali hadn’t listened either, because she was Cali. They were a couple of risk-takers all up in here, and I was fucking fed up.

I’d been there when Cali had collapsed on the staircase earlier—she’d been weak and hurting and it had been a punch in the gut. I would’ve rather had her nearby, in case it happened again, but had either of them thought of that?

*No*.

Huffing, I ran my hand through my hair as I entered the Cookie Zone™. Orla was putting her jacket on, right along with Tom.

“Where are you two heading off to?” I asked.

“Just getting the things for the tea Cali talked to you about,” Orla said.

Tom held up a Post-it excitedly. “Here’s the list of the stuff we need!”

“We have most of it already,” Orla said. “Just picking up a few odds and ends.”

“Do you need my help?” I asked Cali’s mom.

She smiled. “No, it’s all right. I’m certain you have more important things to do. The tea is pretty mild overall, and the ingredients are easy enough to find.”

Tom’s eyebrows scrunched up. “What about this berry, though?” He pointed at his list. “Where are we gonna find it?”

Orla patted her husband’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. I ordered it already—it’ll be delivered in under two hours. Gotta love the twenty-first century.”

Tom and Orla chuckled at that, and even though I didn’t think it was all that funny, I laughed along, trying not to seem as awkward as I felt. I wanted to get along with the in-laws, obviously.

“Anyway,” I said, clearing my throat, “I could definitely come with you for protection, though, or send a patrol with you.”

Orla sighed, giving me another smile. “Oh, Greyson, that’s very sweet of you, but I’m sure we’ll be fine. We shouldn’t have to go further than the yard.”

That was settled, then.

After Cali’s parents were gone, I just stood there, glaring at Torin’s misshapen cookies—okay, those were probably Cali’s cookies. I wished Tom and Orla had needed my help. I hated feeling useless, especially when it came to Cali.

Huffing, I put my hand in my pocket and felt the torn tarot card. This stupid thing—couldn’t I just get rid of it? I fucking despised the reminder of Aysel, and the fact that I couldn’t kiss Cali without both of us becoming physically ill.

We’d found a pretty great workaround last night, and I could still see her when I closed my eyes. Her legs spread for me, her gorgeous body shaking as she touched herself, stared at me, moaned like she needed me… It had taken all my willpower not to just fucking grab her, feel her like I used to before this damn curse had taken it away from me.

Last night had been awesome, yeah, but there was nothing like touching Cali for real.

I needed to figure out a way to keep this horrid tarot card out of my hands.

Feeling both furious and turned on, I stomped upstairs. When I got to my room, I set the tarot card on the dresser, glaring at it. This thing was like a major infuriating inconvenience—much like Aysel.

I pointed at the card threateningly. “You stay there.”

The card looked back at me. Silently. Obviously silently, because it was a fucking piece of paper. It was magical, though, so…

I squinted at it.

Could it hear me? Because if this card could hear me, I could, in theory, try to reason with it. Trying this out probably meant I was going nuts, but at this point, I was desperate.

“You know,” I told the card, because I was a goddamn fruitcake, “I know that it’s not your fault that Aysel got some witch somewhere to do this to you. I know you’re a perfectly good card, you’ve got very nice colors and all, and I just wanted you to know that I obviously had nothing to do with all this.” I pointed at myself. “I’m just a victim here—much like you are, I assume. Right?”

Shockingly enough, the card remained silent.

“I’m just saying,” I said, like a madman, “Aysel did this to punish me for not hooking up with her. She’s a horrible, evil person. If you’re going to annoy anyone, it should be her.”

I stood up, making sure to keep my expression serious as I backed away from the card.

I kept my eye on it the entire time, until I got to my door and opened it, still looking at the card. I left the room then, shutting the door behind me. I exhaled a sigh of relief. The second I turned around, though, I felt the weight of something in my pocket.

“You have got to be kidding me,” I muttered.

I reached in, and sure enough, there was the tarot card.

Fuck.

“You know what?” I snapped, heading back into my room. I thrust it out onto the dresser again and glared at it. “You won’t be able to blame me when I stop playing nice with you! I thought we had a good thing going for a second there, a truce almost, but then you just went ahead and fucked me over again!”

The card remained silent.

Because it was a fucking card.

I groaned, rubbing my face. I had no idea what to do with this thing. It seemed like finding the witch who’d created the charm had to be the only way to stop it. Huffing, I snatched the stupid thing up in my hand and begun to crumple it. It felt good to crush the damn thing, but then—

A shock ran through my body, making my entire body seize.

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When I opened my eyes again, I was no longer alone.

Aysel was sitting on my bed. She was naked—bare, creamy skin, long white hair covering her chest, her teeth worrying her full bottom lip. Her eyes were fixed on me, her hand on her thigh, and her gaze was pinned to me, lusty and wanton.

Beautiful, gorgeous Aysel.

This was where…

This was where she was supposed to be. Obviously.

She was supposed to be in my bed. In my life.

*Right?*

“My darling,” Aysel said, pouting as she beckoned me closer. “Where have you been? I missed you.”

I smirked at her eagerness. I leaned down, hovering over her. She made a move to wrap her arms around my neck, but I gripped her wrists, pinning them over her head. She gasped at the swiftness of the movement, the skin of her collarbones reddening, her eyes wide. Her sweet breath fanned my face, and she spread her legs further for me, a whimper escaping her mouth.

“Sorry I kept you waiting,” I murmured, leaning closer. Her pupils were blown wide, her body shivering under mine. “I’ve been thinking about doing this all day…”

“*Please*, Greyson,” she whispered.

At the sound of her words, I moved my face closer to hers, focusing on her full lips. But before I could kiss her—

A shock ran through my body, making my entire body seize.

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When I opened my eyes again, I was in the same position, standing by the dresser with the tarot card uncrumpled in my hand. I felt as though I’d just walked in and out of some sort of twisted daydream where I hadn’t been myself, even though I’d *felt* like myself.

The thought was terrifying. Horrendous.

Questions burst inside my head, fear and anxiety overwhelming me.

*What. The fuck. Was that thing. That I just saw?*

*What the fuck?*

Why the hell hadn’t I been disgusted by Aysel?

Why the hell hadn’t I thought about Cali instead of this fucked-up woman who wanted to trap me against my will?

What sort of ancient magic was bound to this curse, if it could make me forget my mate in a daydream?

Werewolf mates were sacred, the bond practically unshakeable. And especially with *due destini*, my bond with Cali felt like it had been fortified in order to survive the strain of that first curse.

But this new curse…

Panting and upset, I stared at the damn card in my hand.

Was it fighting back against me?

Was it going to use me like a puppet, cut off all my thoughts and feelings just to fill me up with whatever Aysel wanted?

Could this card be far more powerful than I’d thought?

**Episode 2285**

XAVIER

“Shit!” Cali gasped, twitching, her eyes wide. Things had been going so well, and we’d been having such a great time, but now everything had turned into shit.

Cali was in pain.

I rushed to grab the steering wheel, and she gripped her shoulder, moaning in agony. That freaky handprint on her skin was doing this to her. *Damn it.* My thoughts were going a mile a minute—I had to protect Cali, had to act fast. Greyson’s words were echoing in my head as I burst into motion and tried to control the car.

I hated to admit it, but he’d been right. I should’ve just kept Cali at home.

*Fuck.*

Gritting my teeth together, I pushed those thoughts aside and remained calm like I knew Cali needed me to be right now.

“I got you,” I told her.

I straightened the car’s route the second it started to spin from the ice, steering it in the opposite direction of the skid. I was fighting to correct the direction of the car before we go too far out and hit a tree or ran into oncoming traffic.

“Oh my god, it hurts so bad!” Cali dry-heaved, grabbing her shoulder.

My wolf howled to protect her, to save her, to make it all right. I felt a surge of adrenaline as I manned the wheel, and the car finally began to correct itself off the slick road.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I hissed under my breath. *Of course* something like this would happen when all I’d wanted was for Cali to have a good time.

I’d dealt with a similar situation with Ava once, many years ago, but I’d been the one driving—I’d felt bad then, and I felt horrible now, and I felt even fucking worse when I realized that I was thinking about goddamn Ava while Cali was in danger.

I made myself *sick*.

Pushing these feelings aside, I managed to reorient the car. I felt it right itself on the road, and thankfully we were losing some speed now. Cali’s breaths were trembling. When I faced her, I wanted to hug and comfort her. Her cheeks were blotchy, her chest heaving.

“Cali, babe, I’m so sorry but I—I need you to hit the clutch. Can you do that?”

She woozily nodded and followed my direction. We were finally able to shift down one gear, and the car stalled. Concentrating, I guided it over to the side and pulled the emergency brake, forcing it to a complete halt.

Fucking *finally*.

Hating everything, I grabbed Cali and pulled her into my arms. I cupped her face, making her look at me, sick with worry. “Cali? Can you hear me? Are you okay?”

“Xavier…” She choked, focusing on me. She looked so out of it, scared, and still in pain.

“I’m so fucking sorry, I’m such a dumbass, I—”

She reached out to grab me by the shirt, her eyes closed as she winced again, going through another wave of pain. She cried out in agony, and my wolf howled along with her, feeling helpless and worthless.

What the fuck could I do to help her right now?

How the hell had I fucked up so horribly?

I had always sworn to protect her, but look at me now—useless! If there had been a way for me to take on the pain for her, I would’ve done it in a heartbeat.

“I got you,” I whispered into her hair, rubbing my hands up and down her sides.

She was trembling against me, fighting through the pain.

I felt sick with guilt.

A few minutes passed, and finally, Cali’s shivering lessened. Then, I heard her quiet voice saying, “I’m sorry.”

I shuddered at the sound of those words. What the hell?

“There’s nothing to be sorry about,” I said, trying not to choke. My throat felt closed up, and I held her tight, kissing the top of her head. “I’m the one who’s sorry—I suggested all this, because I’m a fucking idiot. Are you okay?”

Softly, she said, “Yes. It’s getting better.”

I was furious at myself—at least until I remembered the one person who was truly to blame for all this. Lucian. If the Vanguard pack hadn’t shown up, then none of this Seluna bullshit would’ve happened. I didn’t think for a second that Seluna was real—I was certain that this had to be something the Vanguards were doing to Cali.

I didn’t know why, though. I had no idea what the fuck they really wanted, but it all felt like one huge trick. And if Lucian had indeed done something to cause this handprint that was hurting Cali, he was going to have to answer to me.

“I almost killed us,” Cali said, sniffling as she looked up at me. The sadness in her gaze was a blow, and I couldn’t believe that she could just sit there and blame herself for this.

“No,” I said firmly. “That’s not what happened. We just hit some ice, it’s okay. I never would’ve let anything happen to you. You know that, right?”

Cali nodded but sniffled. Her sobs were no longer dry—real tears were streaming down her cheeks, and I could feel my heart breaking as she began to cry. I hated seeing her like this.

“The pain just c-came out of n-nowhere,” she said, quivering, “and I tried to fight it off, t-tried so hard, but I couldn’t, I…” She sniffed, wiping her eyes. “I just wasn’t strong enough.”

I swallowed, lifting her chin up to face me. “Never say that again.”

She pressed her lips together, her pretty hazel eyes watery, her lips trembling. It felt like someone had reached inside my chest and was fucking rearranging my insides.

“It’s true, though,” she whispered. “I just can’t do anything right. I’m not strong enough to—”

“No,” I said sharply, shaking my head. “You don’t need to be strong like anyone but yourself. You are strong, and kind, and sweet, and you did nothing wrong.” I stroked her hair back, caressing her wet cheeks, wiping her tears away. “I love you so much. I’m sorry I forced you to do this stupid test drive—I wish I could take it all back.”

She sniffled, chuckling a little before cupping my face. “You really did insist. I told you it would be a disaster.”

My smile was pained, and I shook my head, pressing my forehead to hers. “I know. It’s like you have a sixth sense or some shit.”

She wiped her eyes, snorting. “Doubtful. It was nice while it lasted, though.”

I pressed my lips together, kissing her cheek. “We’re okay. You’re okay. I would’ve never forgiven myself if you’d gotten hurt, I—”

“Shh,” she said, running her fingers through my hair. “Everything’s good now. I love you.”

“I love you too,” I said, nuzzling her cheek. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

I kissed the corner of her mouth, her jawline, before brushing my lips over hers. I needed her warmth, and she needed mine—I could feel it, sense it from the way that she gripped me tighter, wrapping her arms around my neck.

She deepened the kiss, making me open up my mouth for her tongue, and the feel of her made me shudder. This was comfort and relief and all the good things, and I gradually felt her stop shaking with fear. Her tension had melted away, and she molded herself against me, softly sighing into my mouth.

“Feeling better?” I asked, rubbing my hands up and down her arms.

She nodded, glancing at my mouth. “Better by the second.”

I smiled, relieved. This fucking nightmare was over. I kissed her cheek and hugged her tightly, taking in the scent of her hair. She hugged me back with the same fervor, and it was good to feel her strength return.

I was so relieved I could taste it.

I leaned back, facing her. Raising an eyebrow, I said, “I’ll drive.”

She laughed, her cheeks flushed. Her eyes were bright again, and everything was better. “Probably for the best.”

“Come on,” I said, taking off my seat belt. “Let’s change seats—”

I had barely finished my sentence when I heard a click.

“What’s…” Cali’s mouth dropped open, her eyes wide. She gasped when the car started to roll backward.

It took a second for me to register what was happening—I had secured it, I was certain.

“Oh my god, not again!” Cali screamed. “Xavier!”

*Fuck!*

I grabbed the brake again, ready to force the car to a stop. But before I could complete the action, the car hit a huge bump that made my stomach drop. Automatically, I reached out to grab Cali, to keep her from getting hurt. The impact shook both of us up, everything moving out of place as the car moved backward.

And then I realized exactly where we’d ended up.

We were at the edge of a ravine, ready to tumble down.

**Episode 2286**

The car had stopped moving.

At the edge of a FUCKING ravine!

It was basically hovering there, ready to flip and roll down like a basketball.

HOW was this real life?

“What the hell do we do?” I whispered to Xavier. He was clutching at me hard, not moving at all, his breath hot against my ear.

“Why are you whispering?” Xavier whispered.

I wanted to scream at him.

“Because if I make one wrong move the car might go down,” I hissed, “and we’re at the edge of a goddamn ravine!”

“What are you—”

“All I’m saying is, what if the velocity and volume of my shrieking voice makes us fall?” I demanded. Xavier faced me, moving, and I quietly shrieked, “Oh my god, don’t move!”

He looked calm, surprisingly. “I need you to listen to me right now, okay?”

“O—”

I froze.

My nose started twitching.

*Oh my god, I wanted to sneeze.*

I shut my eyes, gritting my teeth as I wiggled my nose to stop it from itching.

“What’s happening right now?” Xavier asked.

I closed my eyes, hissing, “I want to sneeze! We’re going to die!”

*DON’T SNEEZE AND THROW OFF THE CAR’S BALANCE, CALI!* I told myself. *Dammit, I just wanted to do a test drive with a pretty car, why can’t I have this* one nice thing*?!*

“Just—stay here,” Xavier said. Was that humor in his voice? *Humor?*

I opened my eyes, ready to cut him, only to gape. In a matter of seconds, before I could even fucking scream, Xavier got out of the car, and the car started to shift its weight to the side and into the abyss! It looked like it was about to collapse and crush my dumbass mate, who apparently thought it was a good idea to play with these things!

“OH MY GOD! XAVIER!”

*Sidenote, good thing I put the seat belt on!*

I guessed that wouldn’t matter if the car crushed Xavier, or if I freaking died. Before I could dwell on the idea of my imminent death, though, I heard the sound of metal being squeezed, and when I turned to look at the back, there he was.

Xavier, partially shifted, grabbing the bottom edge of the car and pulling it right back onto the side of the road and away from the edge.

“Oh my god…” I breathed, clinging onto the headrest for dear life.

*What in the superhuman power is happening right now?*

I got the answer to my question pretty quickly when Xavier unceremoniously put the car down on solid ground with a thud that shook me up, but only slightly. That was nothing in comparison to what I’d been through these past few moments.

My heart pounding, I watched as Xavier came around to the window, looking all sweaty and hot and very much alive.

*HURRAY!*

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I literally couldn’t speak, so I just nodded.

His expression was severe. He curtly gestured behind me. “Move to the passenger side.”

Swallowing audibly, I took off my seat belt and slid to the passenger side, then opened the door. The cool breeze hit me, but I didn’t shiver. I was still feeling pretty warm and delirious from what had just happened.

*We’re alive! And my boyfriend was just so hot when he saved me!*

Thank god he had, though—Greyson would’ve literally killed Xavier if anything had happened to me. This way, we all stayed in one piece. Sounded like a victory to me!

“Cali?” Xavier said, moving around the car to meet me.

“All good,” I squeaked. I wasn’t sure if that was true, though—it felt like my shoulders had their own little pulse, but there was no pain.

*That’s so weird*, I thought, panting slightly.

When I stepped out, my footing faltered.

“You said you were okay,” Xavier said.

Before I could reply, I stumbled slightly. It seemed like I was destined to eat pavement today, one way or another. But as my knees buckled, Xavier did his best yet again and wrapped me in his strong warm arms.

“You don’t look so good,” he murmured, picking me up bridal style. “Let me help.”

He put me back in the car, in the passenger seat. He zipped up my jacket and put my seat belt on, looking into my eyes the entire time.

“Thank you,” I said breathlessly.

Xavier smirked. “There’s a fee for that.”

I snorted, grabbing his face and planting a peck on his lips.

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Xavier’s driving back to the dealership was very smooth, obviously.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“I’m trying to figure out if I was really about to die, or if it all would’ve been fine either way,” I mused.

Xavier swallowed, shaking his head. “Don’t joke about that. I think the scariest part was when your shoulder started burning. I had no idea what the hell to do…”

“I know,” I said quietly. Both my shoulders felt tender.

Silence fell between us. But then Xavier said, “You wanna try the stick again? You were doing pretty well, before catastrophe struck.”

Blushing, I placed my hand on the shift, and he put his own back on top. I really had been getting the hang of it, actually, all drama aside.

“That was fast!” Vera said, after we got back to the dealership.

Xavier tossed the keys at her. “We’re all set for now.”

*Understatement*, I thought, scoffing internally.

He moved his arm to drape across my shoulders as we headed back to our own car. The drive home was much quieter. I kept stealing glances at Xavier, and he looked completely serious.

I sighed. “I didn’t mean to ruin our date. I’m really sorry…”

Xavier gave me a side-eye. “I’m not gonna accept any more apologies, so you’d better cut it out.”

I huffed. “Fine.”

He snorted. “Are you mad at me for not letting you apologize?”

“Yes? No? I don’t know!” I said stubbornly.

He took a deep breath. “You know I’m the one who should apologize, Cali. Again and again. I shouldn’t have taken you out when we had your shoulder to worry about.” He glanced over at me. He looked so guilty, and I felt a pang in my stomach. “Was there any warning before the pain struck?”

I shook my head, looking straight ahead. We were almost there—going down the winding road that led to the pack house. “I have no idea where it came from.”

He frowned. “It’s happened twice—once at the stairs, now in the car. And there were zero indications, both times?”

I paused, pulling up the memory of the stairs.

“No,” I said. “I don’t think so, at least. On the stairs, I just felt it, out of the blue, and that was it. Same thing happened in the car. It just happened so suddenly both times that I was struck.” I pressed my lips together, folding my hands in my lap.

Remembering the pain made me shiver.

“It ends pretty much as quickly as it starts,” I added. “And I couldn’t do anything to stop it.”

*What could the pain mean, though?* I wondered. *Could it be that Seluna is trying to connect with me, and this is the only way she knows how? Like she’s trying to FaceTime with me by literally hurting me, and I have no idea how to respond?*

The Fae tea was really seeming like an excellent idea at this point.

If this pain kept happening, I would burst with anxiety. This whole thing was putting me—and the people I cared about—in danger. Yeah, Xavier had literally just pushed a car away from a hill, but I couldn’t just stay in the house forever from now on, just in case the pain struck.

*What kind of terrified existence would that be?*

“Here we are,” Xavier murmured as he pulled into the driveway, parking the car.

I went to open the door, but he stopped me, gently taking my hand.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” He glanced over my shoulder, at the house. “We don’t have to go inside right away.”

Despite his little jokes earlier, I knew that Xavier was shaken. I could tell by the paleness of his face, by the intense way he looked at me. It was like he was afraid I was going to break.

“I’m fine,” I mumbled. “It’s just—my shoulders feel a bit warm. To be expected, I guess.”

Xavier scowled. “Show me the mark.”

I shrugged off my jacket—the cool air felt good on my heated skin. I turned to look at my shoulder, and the mark was, unfortunately, still there. Xavier, his expression focused, his beautiful face somber, gingerly placed his hand over it.

“Does this hurt?” he asked quietly.

I bit my lip, shaking my head. I loved his touch, always. “It feels cooling. Can you do the other one?”

“Of course,” he said. I turned around to give him access.

He suddenly fell quiet.

“What?” I asked.

“Cali…” Xavier’s voice was tight. “I thought you only had one?”

I frowned. “Huh?” I looked at my other shoulder and gasped in horror.

There was a second handprint.