**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 20 - Part 1**

**Episodes 2287-2468**

**Episode 2287**

GREYSON

I was really having a pretty shitty day.

Frustrated and worried, I headed back downstairs, trying to shake off the weird moment the tarot card had conjured into my mind. Me? And Aysel? In a bed? About to kiss? *Disgusting*.

It was so sickeningly clear what Aysel’s plan was: to get me to fall for her. That little vision she’d concocted, the wild fantasy of it and all, had made that even more obvious. Her nerve was jarring, almost terrifying—she truly thought she could *force me* into loving her. As if I were a puppet, an object with no voice or mind or heart of my own.

It was like living in a nightmare that I couldn’t wake up from.

I couldn’t wait to find this witch and fix this shit. The sooner Aysel realized that we were not going to be fucking, by any means—naturally, magically, theoretically, whatever the hell—the better. Since going into yet another war right now wouldn’t be good for the pack, all I wanted was to peacefully coexist with the Vanguards as best we could while they stayed the hell away from us.

And I meant *really* far away.

Still pissed off, I looked out the window and saw that Xavier’s car was back. Huh—their outing hadn’t taken very long. At least that was good news. Maybe I’d gotten through to Xavier earlier, with what I’d said about Cali’s shoulder.

Yeah, right. As if.

Shaking my head, I snorted, about to head to the kitchen for a glass of water when another thought hit me. What if they were back early because something *had* happened?

Fuck.

I rushed outside to the car. Xavier and Cali were still inside. The only thing she was wearing was a shirt—jacket and sweater gone—and Xavier’s hands were underneath it. But before I could growl my brother to get his hands off her, I realized that he was fondling…

Her back?

At the shoulder?

Even though they weren’t kissing and this didn’t look sexual, I felt a sharp pang of jealousy, an acidic taste under my tongue. I hated the fact that Xavier could just touch Cali when I’d been cursed to stay away from her. Why should Xavier have what I craved?

It made me *furious*.

Anger took a back seat, though, when Cali dragged her shirt down at her left shoulder. Her mouth formed an “O,” and when I looked at her soft, bare skin, I saw a handprint. But it was her right shoulder that had the handprint, not the—

She had *two* handprints now?

I couldn’t believe this.

“What happened?” I asked, after grabbing the handle and opening Cali’s door.

Cali and Xavier flinched in surprise, but I didn’t give a fuck about my brother—I only saw Cali. Fuck that vision with Aysel and all of that nonsense—I knew where my true emotions and love lay.

“Greyson, it’s okay.” Cali’s voice was quiet, and that wouldn’t do.

I glared at my brother. “You take her out for an hour and bring her back with this? How the hell did it happen?”

“We don’t know,” Xavier said evenly. “She had another pain episode.”

My heart lurched. “Are you okay, love?”

Cali nodded. “I’m okay now.”

I looked back at Xavier. “But her shoulder, there’s supposed to be only—”

“Only one?” Xavier huffed. “Yeah.”

“Why are there two now?” I asked. “How did this happen?”

I saw Cali’s expression and knew I had to cool it with the questions. She was clearly upset, and I didn’t want to make it worse. But another handprint? How?

“Love,” I said, swallowing. “Are you sure you’re okay?” I took her hand—thank god I was able do this much, because I’d have gone mad otherwise. “Are you hurting?”

“Not right now. But they’re both just…” She sniffled. “There.”

She turned around, and I could see the other handprint sticking out from underneath her shirt. I felt gut-punched, and her shiny eyes made me sick.

“No, don’t worry, it’s gonna be okay,” I muttered, caressing her cheek.

She looked up at me pitifully, and I could feel my heart pounding in my throat. Her sorrow was killing me. I looked at Xavier over her shoulder.

“Go see if Tom and Orla are back with the items for the tea,” I ordered.

Xavier glared. “I’m not leaving Cali’s side.”

My jaw clenched. We had two options right now to connect Cali with Seluna in order to remove the mark: the tea, or Lucian’s ritual. I would obviously rather try the tea first and see if we could do this alone. If not, I would go see the moon boy myself. We couldn’t wait any longer, not if this Seluna goddess bullshit was gonna keep hurting Cali.

Who the hell knew what she would do to my mate next?

If Aysel was behind all this and she just enjoyed torturing Cali, I didn’t know how she’d make it out of this situation alive. Same went for that royal asshole Lucian. I told myself that war was a bad idea, that I needed to do what was best for the pack, but my heart screamed at me to avenge Cali.

She didn’t deserve any of this.

“Go check on Tom and Orla,” I said again. “This isn’t a request—it’s an order from your Alpha.”

His eyes snapped up to mine in defiance.

“You took Cali out after I told you that something like this could happen,” I said to my brother, to kill his protest. My voice was low, icy. “You made a pledge to me, and to Cali, and I expect you to follow through and be a man of your word and follow orders. *Go*.”

Xavier gripped the wheel so hard I saw his knuckles whiten. Without a word, he got out of the car, slamming the door behind him. Cali flinched. I gathered her into my arms, wishing I could press my lips to her temple.

She buried her face in my neck, wrapping her arms around me.

“Don’t worry, love,” I muttered into her hair, “we’re going to help you and find out what Seluna wants. I’m gonna fix this. Okay?”

“Okay,” she whispered.

“Do you want me to pick you up and take you inside?” I asked.

“That sounds nice,” she whispered.

I smiled a little, wrapping her up in a hug and carrying her into the house, bridal style.

When I placed her gingerly on the couch, I called, “Someone bring Cali some water!”

Less than a minute later, Sage rushed over with a glass. Cali started to nurse it, and I sat down next to her, squeezing her thigh. In an instant, I felt the revulsion kick in, and I witnessed Cali’s face go pale.

This felt so horrible, I wanted to bring the house down.

All I wanted was to comfort her and hold her, but apparently, I couldn’t even fully do that.

“It’s fine,” Cali told me quickly, squeezing my hand.

No. It wasn’t fine, and the fury I felt was immeasurable.

“What the hell happened this time?” Big Mac asked. The witch entered the living room first, followed by Kira, Lola, Jay, and Sabine.

“The handprint,” Cali told her quietly.

“Oh, no!” Lola exclaimed and ran toward us, sitting down by Cali’s feet. She squeezed her other hand. “Did you fall again too?”

Cali glanced at me, pressing her lips together. “Sort of. While I was out with Xavier.”

“Shit.” Jay looked over his shoulder. “Where is he?”

“Went to find Cali’s parents,” I said.

“How did the episode happen?” my mother asked.

I stared at Cali. She looked shifty. “It just did. And then…” She glanced at everyone in the room, wincing. “There’s a second one.”

Lola frowned in confusion. “A second what?”

“There’s a second handprint now,” I explained. “On her other shoulder.”

“Cali!” Orla rushed into the living room with Tom, both of them looking sick with worry. She leaned down to face Cali, stroking her cheek. “What happened?”

Cali swallowed, gripping my hand tighter. “Exactly what you see. There’s another handprint on my other shoulder.”

Big Mac clicked her tongue. “I assume I don’t need to tell anyone in here that that’s really fucking bad, huh?”

I glared at her. “We need to do something about this. Who knows how it’s going to progress?”

“*Nobody* knows, really. Which is why it’s a huge problem,” Kira said sharply, and Cali shuddered.

“My sweet girl,” Tom whispered, rubbing Cali’s arm. “Are you in pain right now?”

Cali shook her head. “It’s fine. I’m fine.”

She wasn’t fine. I knew that. The Vanguard pack was trying to swallow us whole, and my rage toward them was getting pushed to its limits.

Orla seemed worried and angry as well. She stared at her daughter, determination written all over her face.

“Your dad and I have all the ingredients for the tea,” she said evenly. “Do you want to try it right now, Cali?”

**Episode 2288**

All eyes were on me, and I could feel a headache building.

*I hate being the center of attention when it comes to this nonsense*, I thought. *Is it too much to ask for everyone to stare at me because I did something badass, for once, instead of the victim of something horrible?*

I definitely didn’t feel like a badass right now or even capable of anything to fit the criteria. I looked at my mom, trying to ignore everyone else. I was feeling a bit overwhelmed.

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, let’s do the tea.”

“Are there any risks to it?” Xavier demanded.

My mom shook her head. “There shouldn’t be. It’s a peaceful way to find clarity when you're looking for answers—connecting with the past and present to discover how to move forward.”

Nobody spoke. Xavier scoffed, breaking the silence. “Right. That sounds real specific and not dangerous at all.”

Greyson glared at his brother but kept his tone even. “Do you have a better idea, Xavier? Maybe you want to call Lucian and ask for his advice? Or is the moon ritual that fucker has in mind something you’d like Cali to go through?”

Xavier snapped his teeth. “No, of course not. But what the fuck am I supposed to do? *Not* ask questions about this?”

“Don’t you think I would’ve considered the consequences, if there were any, Xavier?” Greyson asked him evenly. “I would never let Cali do something that could hurt her. I think ahead, which is the reason why I told you it would be a bad idea to take her out on an adventure today.”

“But I liked the adventure,” I grumbled. “Up until this.”

Xavier scoffed. “Don’t act like you’re always right, Greyson.”

The two of them glared at each other like they were ready to start a fight to the death. I’d experienced this kind of thing a million times, now—every time I was in any kind of danger, the brothers would either fight like savages or magically become the perfect team. There was no in between.

I cleared my throat loudly. “I appreciate everyone’s concern, but I’m going to drink the tea. It’s my decision, and it’s final. I’m not going to change my mind.”

*And if it all goes to shit*, I thought, *at least we have a backup solution with Lucian.*

“Let’s not waste any more time, then,” my mom said, standing up quickly. “We should get to brewing the tea.” She turned to my best friend. “Lola, please check the door to see if the berries have been delivered yet.”

Lola nodded and stood up from her position by my feet.

“On it!” she said, before dashing toward the front door.

“Kira and I will help you with anything you need,” Big Mac told my mom, while Kira nodded.

Sage and Jay and a bunch of the others said they’d make sure the kitchen remained cleared out while my mother worked on the tea. “She doesn’t need any distractions or hungry werewolves rummaging in the fridge,” Jay noted.

Xavier and Greyson headed to the kitchen to ask my mom more questions. Everyone was jumping into action, and I felt both very loved and very much like a burden.

*I can’t believe I’m causing all this trouble again!* I thought, biting the inside of my cheek. *Not by choice, but still.*

I took a deep breath and drank some more water. Each movement was emphasizing the burn in my limbs, making me wince. Why the hell would Seluna have marked me for a second freaking time? What did she want?

And was it even Seluna who was doing this?

Could it be some scheme of Aysel’s, like the tarot card? Or could Lucian be the one responsible?

*UGH!*

When I was in the car with Xavier, he hadn’t seen anyone. And I hadn’t been in my bed sleeping alone—I’d been awake, in a moving vehicle, with Xavier right beside me. I couldn’t see the threat, and this worried me MORE. My enemy wasn’t a creep moving through a window—it was a thing that just randomly popped up when I least expected it.

How could anyone just mark me like that? So easily? It sounded like the workings of a—

A goddess.

*Oh no.* There was a solid possibility that fucking Seluna was, indeed, what she’d told me she was.

An ancient being. A deity.

*I’m… I’m fucked, aren’t I?*

I felt someone sit down next to me. I turned to see Lola. She looked worried. “You good?”

I laughed halfheartedly. “Not really.”

Lola’s eyes watered a little.

“Everything’s gonna be okay. I love you so much,” she whispered, and tried to give me a side hug.

“I love you too, but this hurts,” I said, wincing.

“Those damn shoulders,” Lola said, shaking her head.

“I’ll say.”

We settled for holding hands, leaning our heads against each other as we lay back on the couch. Lola’s quiet presence was an anchor, and I was grateful for it.

“Do you smell that?” Lola whispered a long moment later.

I sniffed the air, and only seconds later, a very fragrant scent came from the kitchen. “Must be the tea.”

With Lola’s hand still in mine, she and I moved to the kitchen. My mom and Greyson were hovering over a pot.

“Yes, indeed,” Mom was saying, “the tea is very potent.”

“How do we know when it’s ready?” Greyson asked.

“The scent,” she said, “the aroma will tell you if did it correctly.”

“It actually smells really good,” I said. “Though a little too much like I melted down a Bath and Body Works candle.”

Xavier snorted. He was standing on my mom’s other side, his eyes fixed on me. “Will you be drinking it right now?”

I sat down on the bench and nodded. My dad rushed to grab a mug. My mom ladled in some of the tea and brought it over to me. Lola and I exchanged a look when we noticed the mug. It said “A Serious Case of the Meow-days” and had a picture of a sad cat on it.

*It feels like I’ve had a serious case of the meow-days for days now!*

“Okay, so,” Mom started, “the tea works like this: you drink it, and I then try to lead you into a deep state of mind.”

Lola squinted. “How deep?”

“Really deep,” my mom said seriously. She stared at me, her face full of determination and care. “You can count down from one hundred to… whatever you prefer.”

“And then what?” I asked.

“Above all else,” my mom said, “it’s important that you try to envision who you want to speak with. It could be a physical description or a feeling of some sort, but regardless, it needs to be something clear and concise. Do you understand, sweetheart?”

I took a deep breath and nodded again. I could feel Greyson’s and Xavier’s eyes burning holes in my face as I lifted the mug to my lips.

I stopped short.

“Everyone’s staring at me,” I muttered to my mom. “Aren’t I supposed to *relax* to do this?”

She looked at the two brothers and Lola, who continued to eye me like their entire lives depended on this moment.

*No pressure at all…*

“Actually,” my mom said, “it *is* very important that Cali relaxes. Otherwise she’s never going to be able to reach the mental state she needs to reach.”

“I believe in you,” Lola told me, sniffling as she kissed my cheek.

“Thank you.”

I stood up and—immediately—both Xavier and Greyson were at my side like a couple of guard dogs. Super subtle.

“I guess I’ll have to go somewhere else, then,” I told them wryly.

“Please be careful,” Greyson blurted. The “I’ll die without you” was evident in his tone, and it definitely didn’t help my stress levels.

Just to make things worse, Xavier said, “Yeah, you shouldn’t go anywhere. Stay here, where I can keep an eye on you. Forever.”

“Oh my god, *stop*,” I said, huffing as I waved them both off.

I also tried not to spill the tea everywhere.

“I need to do this, guys,” I told my mates, “and I can’t do it with a huge audience. I appreciate your support, and I love you both, but I’ve got this.” I looked over at my mother, whose expression was serious. “Come with me?”

“Of course,” she said.

My mom and I headed to one of the side rooms, just the two of us. I sat down in one of the comfy armchairs as she closed the door. She took a seat across from me and stared. “How are you feeling?”

“Much more relaxed.”

She squeezed my hand. “Whenever you’re ready, take a sip.”

I took a deep breath and looked at my mom. I felt so safe with her here, and much calmer. Knowing that she was the one who’d brewed the tea settled me down. It couldn’t be that bad. I brought the cup to my lips and took a tiny sip. The tea was warm and tasted a little sweet, but it had a bitter aftertaste.

“When you go under, focus on the person you want to talk to. In this case, Seluna,” my mom reminded me. “Okay?”

“Yes,” I murmured.

“Now, you just follow my voice.” Her tone was soothing. “Let’s count down together. One hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety-seven…”

My mom’s gentle, low voice made me relax that much more. A few seconds later, my eyes fluttered shut, and I felt myself starting to drift away. It was like falling asleep, or taking a nice bath. I felt so relaxed, and the discomfort in my shoulders eased up, like a weight was being lifted.

Per my mom’s directions, my mind drifted to the person I was looking for.

Seluna.

The glorious moon goddess, statuesque, with her beautiful face and ethereal form…

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When I opened my eyes again, I was in a foggy glen, surrounded by the sound of crickets. I swallowed roughly, looking around.

*Holy shit! Did the tea work?*

“Hello?” I called into the void. “Seluna?”

**Episode 2289**

I looked around, baffled. I had no idea where I was, but the one thing I did know was that I definitely was *not* in the woods near the pack house. Actually, nothing around me looked like it belonged in the human world. It was a forest, but not one like the one that surrounded the house. This one was dark and dense, but it seemed to breathe, somehow. And it wasn’t winter. The air was warm, and fireflies flitted through the trees, lighting the ghostly gloom.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something flutter, and I turned to look at it. It was gone before I could get a good look, but I could have sworn it had been a wisp. Had it?

“*Caliana*…” a distant voice breathed.

I squinted into the darkness. That had sounded like my name. Or, almost like my name. It had almost sounded like *Calliope*.

“*Calliope*…” the voice sounded again, growing softer.

It sounded like it was moving away from me, and I started after it, following the sound.

The woods thinned as I walked, opening out into a sort of glen, and I was able to move easier. A warm breeze blew around me, lifting my hair. After the freezing temperatures, it felt nice, and I closed my eyes as it blew across my face. When I opened them again, the breeze was rustling the leaves on the ground. I watched as the leaves swirled upward, like mini cyclones. They began to take shape, and my eyes widened when I saw that the forms they took were human.

“*Caliana*…” the voice called to me, echoing inside my head.

The leaves began to glow, and I stopped in my tracks. The leaf litter from the ground had formed itself into two figures that began to move as I watched.

One figure had the other by the wrist and was pulling her forward, as if they were moving down a hall. He moved as though he was opening an unseen door. Once inside, he pushed the smaller figure forward, and I instantly knew what he was doing. He was tossing her onto the bed.

“Strip,” Xavier’s voice commanded.

I shivered. I remembered that voice. How cold and distant it had seemed to me.

The smaller figure spoke in my own terrified voice. “I can’t.”

Xavier took a step toward me, and the Cali figure moved, as if pulling off a tank top.

“Shorts,” Xavier’s voice barked. When the Cali figure wiggled, like she was pulling off more clothes, the Xavier figure looked at her. “You’re really terrified of me, aren’t you?”

“What do you expect?” I heard my own voice snap.

All those old feelings came flooding back to me as I watched this little pantomime play out in front of me, and they felt as real and as fresh as if I were living it again. I had been so nervous yet somehow still so defiant.

And Xavier had been so different back then. His voice, his manner—everything about him had tried to push me away, even as he’d brought me in close.

Seeing the two of us—feeling the memories wash over me—I felt my throat tighten, and tears pricked the corners of my eyes. I had drunk the tea so I could see Seluna—I’d never expected to walk down this path of memories as well.

I loved Xavier, and looking at the swirling figure, my heart pulsed with the love I felt. I missed him, here in this shadow world. I wished he could be with me now, holding my hand. Supporting me and protecting me.

The leaf figures kept speaking, their voices chilly, and all I could think was how far Xavier and I had come from this moment.

And also… had my hair always looked like that?

I gave my head a hard shake. *Focus, Cali*.

The breeze changed, and the leaf figures blew themselves into chaos and then fell, settling on the ground once again. I dashed a tear from my cheek with the heel of my hand and walked onward, looking into the dimness. My eyes were wide and searching, but the only movement I saw was the bright flash of lightning bugs.

“Hello!” I called. “Is anyone out there? Hello? I’m looking for Seluna!”

But there was no answering call. I had convinced myself that by thinking of Seluna as I was counting myself into unconsciousness, I’d somehow be able to summon her, but it seemed like that wasn’t the case. There was no one in the woods.

The silence and solitude pressed in on me, and I took a deep breath. I could feel fear rising in my chest, but I had to remind myself that I was only asleep. This was only a vision. None of this was real.

*Right?*

As much as I would have loved to believe that, the handprints on my shoulders—and the intense pain they’d caused—begged to differ.

The breeze picked up again, and I looked around. The leaves swirled, and I watched as figures took form once again. This time I knew what they were, even before they resolved into proper shapes. It was Greyson and me, facing each other. I had my hands on my hips, and the leaves joined to make the contours of my face clear—almost like looking at a hologram—and I could see that I looked *mad*.

“Tell me, Greyson,” I heard my voice snap, “is arrogance a genetic trait in your family?”

“That and our high cheekbones. And our natural good looks,” he answered, his voice laced with laughter.

I remembered this moment. We hadn’t let him come inside because we didn’t know if we could trust him. He’d been out on the porch, and I’d brought him a cup of tea. Earl Grey. He’d made me feel all sorts of ways, but I hadn’t trusted him.

It was funny, how wrong I had been about him. Though it had taken me a while to figure that out.

I watched this version of Greyson as he spoke to the Cali in front of him. I remembered feeling so intimidated by him—and desperate not to show it—but watching him, I saw a look in his eyes that wasn’t unlike the looks he gave me now. Admiring, amused, adoring. I’d let it intimidate me then because I hadn’t understood it. But I understood it now.

I watched him in disbelief. He was incredible. Handsome and charming and funny. How had I pulled this off? *Due destini*?

The Greyson apparition took a step toward the glowing Cali, and I saw his eyes smolder. “Maybe if you’re not so quick to go back inside, we could find many things we have in common.”

I heard myself gasp, and I remembered how stunned I’d felt at the time. He grinned, and I watched his gaze travel to the lips of the Cali in front of him. Slowly, his head tilted down, and he leaned in.

And then I gasped again as the Cali apparition slapped his face. I put my hand over my mouth as the leaves burst apart with a puff of wind and settled back down to the forest floor. I’d completely forgotten that I’d slapped him! I would never slap the Greyson I knew now, though it had felt appropriate at the time. He’d been pretty cheeky.

I tried to gather myself as I walked on, looking around in interest. This place—wherever it was—was beautiful. Night-blooming jasmine perfumed the air, the trees swayed gently in the warm breeze, and birds called softly to each other. It felt better now, somehow, than when I’d first entered. It had lost the lonely feeling I’d experienced before.

Seluna wasn’t here—I was almost convinced of that—but maybe I could still get some answers out of this place. What answers, though, I wasn’t sure.

I thought hard as I walked on. Why would this place show me those memories? The beginning of things, with each of my mates? Was it to show me how far we’d come? To remind me not to take anything for granted? To demonstrate what kind of person I was?

Back then—with both Xavier and Greyson—I’d had no idea what was coming. It was hard not to feel proud of how much I’d grown. I wasn’t perfect, by any means, but I wasn’t the same sheltered, terrified girl I had been.

But, in some ways, I guess I was. She was the one who’d stuck up for herself, dug in her heels, and survived in a werewolf world she knew nothing about. She’d been reckless and maybe sometimes a little impulsive, but she’d gotten herself to this point, hadn’t she?

Walking on, the trees gradually thinned out until I reached a clearing. In the center of the small clearing was a fairy circle, the stones perfectly placed. Inside the circle were two tree stumps, facing each other, almost like chairs.

I walked through the clearing and into the circle. I sat down on one of the stumps and looked around. Was this where I was meant to go? No answer came, so I looked around, taking in the dark sky and the darker silhouettes of the trees, etched against it. The moon was full and so bright I could see my shadow on the soft grass beneath my feet. I felt relaxed for the first time in a long time, and I closed my eyes, breathing deeply.

A cold breeze snaked around me, making me shiver. I opened my eyes, and what I saw made me grow colder still. There was a shadowy figure seated on the other stump.

The figure was blurry and unresolved, like an image in the process of downloading.

I braced myself. Was this Seluna?

The figure before me sharpened, and I took a deep breath. “Who are you?”

**Episode 2290**

CHARLIE

The silver trap glinted menacingly, and I tried to pull up, tried to change direction, tried everything I could to slow my forward momentum, but it was too late. I was heading directly for it. The trap was too big, and I was moving way too fast to get out of its way. I closed my eyes—bracing for the searing impact of the crushing silver jaws—when pressure like a battering ram hit me from the left, and I flew sideways. I tumbled to the ground in a daze, and a figure fell next to me, groaning.

With every sense on high alert, I scrambled, trying to get to my feet, ready to fight, but then I caught the scent of the figure.

*Chad?*

I got to my feet and turned toward him, but Chad held up his hands to ward me off, breathing hard.

“Hang on,” he gasped. “It’s all right, but you gotta give me a sec, ’kay?”

I nodded and shifted back to human.

“Where the hell did that thing come from?” I demanded, looking around for the trap. It was visible in the underbrush, the silver shining like a light. I shot Chad a sideways glance. Was there a chance that he’d planned that for the race? I wanted to say no, but honestly, I wasn’t sure.

Chad got heavily to his feet and walked toward the glittering silver menace. Picking up a stick, he touched the trap, activating it. It snapped shut, shattering the stick.

Knowing that that could have been my leg, I shuddered.

Chad looked back at me. “We must have missed this one.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Kind of convenient that you failed to find the one I nearly ran into, don’t you think?”

Chad stared at me for a moment, then glared. “We combed through all this land collecting these things because we’re allied with your pack, man.” He shook his head. “I was running right next to you, Charlie. You really think I’m going to risk losing my own leg to—what?—try to kill you when I just saved your life?”

I sighed. “Yeah, that’s a good point.”

Chad picked up the heavy trap and tossed it—throwing it like a frisbee across the lawn in the direction of the house.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Getting it out of the way. We’ll pick it up later.” He looked back at me. “We’re even now. You saved me, and I’ve saved you.”

“I guess so,” I admitted.

There was a beat of silence, and—as we looked at each other—something unspoken passed between us. A mutual understanding.

Then Chad’s wild grin returned to his face. “Now, where were we?”

Before I could answer—hell, before I could blink—Chad had taken off running again.

“Shit,” I muttered. I shifted back to my wolf form and bounded after Chad’s quickly retreating form. Sprinting hard, I was able to catch up to him, and our race continued.

We sprinted by Violet and Sophie, who were only a colorful blur as we passed, and then I heard Violet’s voice in my head.

*Everything okay?*

I dropped my head as I sprinted harder. Luckily, the voice I used in the mind link didn’t sound winded as I responded. *There was a trap. Silver. We must have missed it. I would have hit it if it hadn’t been for Chad.*

*Charlie!* Violet sounded scared. Then she said, *So Chad saved you?*

*I guess so*, I admitted. *Maybe the Chadster’s not so bad after all*.

Then I stopped myself. Had I really just said that Chad wasn’t so bad? What the hell was happening to me? This race had definitely taken a very unexpected turn.

As we rounded the turn, I was able to catch up to Chad and—despite his initial lead—pass him.

“Come on!” Chad yelled as he barreled onward.

It was neck and neck, but even when he drew level with me, Chad didn’t play dirty. I could tell he wanted to win this race purely on merit. Almost like he wanted to prove something to himself. I knew how he felt, because I felt the same way.

I could hear his breath coming fast as he strained, but I was still really impressed. That he could keep up with me as a wolf was impressive. But Chad was a hunter, and a good one at that. Watching him reminded me how strong hunters were, and how lucky the pack was to have them as our allies.

But, then again, I was a hunter, too. I was working with the best of both worlds—werewolf *and* hunter.

We rounded the lake for the last time, and the finish line was in sight.

My muscles were burning from the effort, but I put on one more burst of speed as I charged toward it. Next to me, I could hear Chad doing the same, grunting with the effort he was making. My breath was coming fast and hard as we passed the finish line, and I couldn’t tell who had edged ahead.

I carefully slowed my sprint down to a jog, and then finally stopped, my heart hammering. I shifted back to human and put my hands behind my head, trying to draw as much oxygen into my lungs as possible.

Chad had collapsed onto the soggy ground, but he looked around.

“Who won?” he demanded breathlessly. “Was it me?”

Violet and Sophie had jogged over to us, and they exchanged a glance at Chad’s question. They were looking at each other almost like they were having a silent conversation.

Finally Sophie looked back at us. “It was a tie.”

“What?” I demanded. “A *tie*?”

Chad sat up, shaking his head. “No, that can’t be right.”

“Come on, just tell us who won,” I insisted.

“Only two options, girls,” Chad said, getting to his feet. “Either Charlie or me. No way that was a tie.”

“It was,” Violet said. “Just calling it like I see it.”

“Come *on*,” I said. “I’m pretty sure Chad got out in front of me there at the end. I think he won the thing.”

“Get real,” Chad scoffed. “Don’t do me any favors, Kim. I don’t want you to *let* me win. I know your wolf edged me out.”

“I thought I was going to,” I said, “but you just charged there at the end.”

“Give me a break. You know you had it,” Chad said, shaking his head. “I’m amazed it was as tight as it was.”

As we went back and forth, each of us trying to get the other person to accept that they’d won, I had a weird, out-of-body experience. I never would have thought there would come a time when Chad and I would be voluntarily hanging out, let alone trying to give each other props.

Before we could conclusively decide on the winner of the race, a voice rang out, and we all looked over toward the house.

“What are you doing? We’re all still packing!”

“Maybe we should get back,” Violet said, grinning.

The four of us headed toward the house, Chad and me still buzzing with adrenaline from the race. As we neared the porch, it occurred me that I was really going to miss Chad and Sophie when they left.

Chad bent and grabbed the rogue silver trap as we passed it, slinging it over his shoulder. “Don’t want to leave this lying around.”

“Thanks for taking care of it,” Violet said.

Chad shrugged. “No prob.”

We headed into the house and split off in different directions. I sprinted upstairs and into what I really hoped was Xavier’s room. It was big, with a sweet-ass bathroom, so I assumed it was his. I opened a drawer of the dresser and pulled out a pair of dark grey joggers and a black T-shirt. That tracked with Xavier’s vibe, so I hoped for the best. And that he wouldn’t mind my stealing his clothes for a bit.

Then I headed back downstairs to help the hunters finish up.

When we’d loaded the last of the weapons into security-proof bags to get through the airport, my mom walked over to me and pulled me into a hug.

“I’m going to miss you, Charlie,” she said, holding me close.

“You too, Mom,” I said, awkwardly patting her back.

She pulled back to look up into my face. “You keep calling me, you got it?”

I laughed. “I got it. I’ll call, Mom. I promise.”

Violet was next to me, and her eyes widened when my mom turned to look at her.

“So,” my mom started.

“So?” Violet asked, after a moment’s silence.

I felt my heart pounding. I had no idea what my mom was about to say, and I was suddenly nervous as hell.

She lifted her eyebrows as she eyed Violet. “So, after all this, will you be joining us for the holidays?”

**Episode 2291**

I was silent as I watched the person materializing on the stump before me. The figure slowly came into sharper focus. It wasn’t Seluna, as I’d been expecting—this was an older man with greying hair and blue eyes. There was something about him that looked familiar, but I didn’t recognize him. As he turned opaque and fully resolved, he blinked and looked around, as if confused.

“Hi,” I started hesitantly. “Um, sorry, but—who are you?”

The man looked at me like he was surprised to see me—or maybe just surprised to see *anyone*—but as his gaze focused on me, he cleared his throat. “Well, this is quite a surprise. Who might you be?”

“I’m Caliana Hart,” I offered.

The man nodded, taking this in, but it didn’t appear to ring any bells. His frown deepened as he glanced around the small clearing. “And where are we?”

I felt myself deflate. “Oh. I guess I thought you might know the answer to that question.”

The man shook his head. “No, no. I’ve never seen this place before.” He glanced back at me. “Or you, for that matter.”

I gave a disappointed sigh. “I don’t know. Maybe we’re both in the wrong place, then.”

The man’s expression changed completely—cracking into a wide, friendly grin—and he started to laugh. The sound was loud, and he slapped his knee, apparently very pleased with himself. “I’m just kidding!”

I stared at him. “What? *Kidding?* What does that mean?”

The man’s laugh echoed back at us from the trees. It was a jolly laugh, and so infectious that I felt it snake through my confusion, and I almost smiled back at him. “I was just testing you, girl.”

“You were *testing* me?” I repeated, more baffled than ever.

“Of course,” he said, still chuckling. “I know exactly who you are and where we are. All of it.”

I narrowed my eyes at the old man. Had he really been tricking me? Was any of this for real? Could he be trusted, or was he just some crazy old dude? I glanced around, wondering which direction the fastest exit would be if things got weirder. “Okay, you know who I am, then. Who are you?”

When the man smiled at me, there was still a laughing twinkle in his blue eyes. “I’m Innes Wrenthorn.”

I nearly fell off my stump in surprise. “Wrenthorn?” I repeated in disbelief. “Wrenthorn? As in my grandmother, *Hera* Wrenthorn? Are you related to her? I mean, how common a name is Wrenthorn? You must be related, right?”

Innes tipped his head as he gazed at me, his eyes suddenly gentle. “You know, you look just like my Orla did when she was your age.”

For a moment, it felt like all the oxygen had been sucked from my lungs.

“*Grandpa?*” I whispered.

His eyes grew bright, and he nodded. “Yes, sweetheart.”

A thousand questions leapt into my mind, and my brain spun trying to process them all. Failing that, I just started asking them, rapid-fire. “How are you here? Where have you been? How did you know where to find me? Where are we? What is this place? Wait.” A thought suddenly occurred to me. “Are you dead? Oh god, am *I* dead?”

My grandfather shook his grey head. “I can assure you that you are not dead, Caliana.” His smile ticked up. “While I, on the other hand, am very much so.”

“*What?*” I gasped.

“Don’t look so worried about it. It is not a new development. I died in battle, absolutely ages ago.”

I stared at him, my thoughts still racing. I had met my grandmother, Hera, but she’d never mentioned my grandfather. Why not? Had she been trying to hide something from me, or had it been something else? Something less sinister? Was it that she was still mourning her husband?

And what about my mom? She’d had so little contact with her Fae family since joining the human world. She never really even mentioned her father. Did she even know that he was dead?

I felt a weight settle on my chest, and I swayed a little on my stump, suddenly feeling dizzy. This felt like a lot to bear, all at once.

“So, where are we?” I rasped, planting my feet and trying to stay upright.

My grandfather looked fondly around the clearing. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it? This is the place where the Fae come when they want advice from those who have passed on.”

“So you just… live here?” I asked weakly.

He smiled. “Oh, dear, no. That would be terribly boring, wouldn’t it? I came to meet you when I heard you calling out. I came to see what I could do. Now, tell me: what answers do you seek?”

I heaved a heavy sigh. “It’s hard to know where to start. How much do you know about me?” I narrowed my eyes warily. “How much can you see?”

Grandpa Innes chuckled to himself. “Well, I know you are living with werewolves. That is not something I ever would have imagined for my granddaughter, but both of your young men are fierce in battle. They are good choices—good fighters.” He shrugged. “And so I can overlook the fact that they are werewolves.”

“Thanks,” I said dryly.

Grandpa Innes gave me a beady stare. “One of the strengths I see in you is the ability to recognize someone’s worth beyond what others expect from them.”

I felt my face heat with a flush. “Thank you.” I hadn’t expected… well, any of this. And I certainly hadn’t expected him to know me so well. I cleared my throat. “So, you can see… a lot?”

I was trying to find out if my grandfather had been watching me kiss my two mates—and the rest of it—and desperately hoping I could avoid any awkward conversations, but Grandpa Innes’s expression darkened.

“I see enough, and what I see troubles me.”

“What’s that?” I asked nervously.

“I know that you have come because of a dark force that has set its sights on you.”

A chill shivered up my spine, making my shoulders ache with remembered pain.

“Are you talking about Seluna?” I asked quietly.

My grandfather passed a hand over his eyes. “Dark forces are highly mutable, my Caliana. They change and evolve. And they always have different names.”

“Seluna is a moon goddess,” I explained quickly. “Is that something you might have heard of before?”

He shook his head. “No, I don’t believe so. I don’t know any goddesses. In the Fae world, the Fair Folk are the most powerful beings. We are not like humans, always looking for explanations and someone to blame. We have no need for deities when we already exist.”

“Wow,” I said, raising my eyebrows. “So everyone in the supernatural world thinks they’re the best, right?”

I was joking, but I was also feeling frustrated. I had hoped that passing to this world—wherever we were—would allow me to connect with Seluna and ask her to remove the marks she’d left on me. As the only person who’d shown up here had no idea who Seluna even was, it didn’t seem likely that she was about to materialize and start granting my requests.

Which meant that I had no idea what was going to happen when I left this shadow land and returned to the real world. Was I going to get another handprint? Would I continue to feel the blinding pain they caused? Was this just going to continue until it drove me insane? Until it killed me?

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes as I thought this through. I felt so weak and so powerless to protect myself. All the Fae magic in the world couldn’t stop something I couldn’t even see or sense.

Just as a tear coursed down my cheek, I felt a hand wrap around mine.

I looked up, surprised that I could feel the pressure of my grandfather’s warm, calloused hand, and I squeezed back. It was amazing how having someone with me—someone whose love was clear in his eyes—made me feel better. It made me feel less alone.

“Caliana,” he rumbled, more somber than before. “I will admit that I know little about your world. I know nothing about werewolves or moon goddesses or those little boxes you carry in your pockets and stare at all the time. But I do know about magic, and I know about battle. You are in a fight with this Seluna—whoever she is—and you need help.”

I wiped a tear from my face and nodded. “I guess I do.”

“Every general knows how and when to marshal her resources. I cannot be with you physically, but perhaps I can give you some wisdom to take back with you. Back into your world.”

I took a shaking break and gave him a weak smile.

“I’d like that.” I shrugged. “I need all the help I can get right now. So, Grandpa, what should I do?”

**Episode 2292**

I waited, breathless, for my grandfather to respond. I *did* need help—he’d been right about that—but I wasn’t totally sure how anything he could tell me was going to help.

Beyond that, and more worryingly—was I even sure if I could trust him? He *said* he was my grandfather, but maybe it wouldn’t be wise to take this stranger at his word. He could be anyone—or any*thing*. I didn’t even know where I was, and—like he’d said—dark forces were always changing and evolving. They took on different names, and I could only assume different faces as well.

But even as I worried about all these possibilities, I could still feel his warm hand squeezing mine, and that brought me a feeling of comfort, and even safety. Everything about him felt familiar, like a partly remembered song. Maybe it was a trick, but maybe it wasn’t. And if living in the world of supernaturals had taught me anything, it was that sometimes I had to go with my gut, and my gut was telling me that I should find out what he had to say.

“Well?” I asked. “What should I do?”

Grandpa Innes gave me a steady look. “It might be better if I showed you.” He braced himself to stand, but—seeing me hesitant to follow—he sat back down, a concerned look on his face. “What’s wrong?”

I looked down at my hands but didn’t speak. I didn’t know what to say.

He looked carefully at me. “Ah. I think I know what’s going on. You’re not sure if you can trust me, is that it?” He nodded sagely. “You’re a smart girl, Caliana. I could tell from the start that you had a good head on your shoulders.”

“I’m sorry,” I said in a rush. “I just don’t…”

I still wasn’t sure what to say. If this man *was* my grandfather, it was awful of me to doubt him. But how could I be sure I wasn’t playing into the hands of some kind of evil Fae force? After everything with the Orb and watching my sister get played by it, I was wary of everything.

My grandfather shook his head. “There’s no need to apologize, Caliana. You’ve got good instincts. You get that from my side of the family, surely. And you are correct; there are people who want to deceive you. The Fae world and the realms beyond are full of such beings. And I take it you’ve run into them in the past. You should always let people prove themselves before you trust them fully. Trust is a hard thing to come by, after all. Elusive. You’re smart to not give it out cheaply. But I’ll tell you what—I will gain your trust.”

“You will?” I asked. “Um… How?”

He nodded, then peered into the trees. “Do you know why the wisps call you by another name?” he asked, gesturing toward the forest where the shimmering creatures were darting by.

My interest was officially piqued. I looked into the trees and considered this. I had long wondered why the wisps called me Calliope. They’d done at the Lupo Finale when they had appeared in the fire—the first time I’d ever seen them—and they’d been doing it ever since. Sometimes I wondered if the wisps just had the wrong number, and there was some other girl out there named Calliope who they’d been trying to get in touch with. Some poor girl who needed help from the wisps and had never received it.

“All Fae have two names. Did you know that?” My grandfather asked me.

I felt my eyes widen in surprise. “No, I didn’t. Two names? Why?”

“There’s the name that others call you, and the name that is only known to those who earn it,” he explained.

I frowned. “So how do the wisps know my name? I didn’t even know it myself until they started using it.”

He sat back a little on his stump and gestured toward the trees again. “The wisps are magical beings, my Caliana, and their rules of power operate differently than ours. To the Fair Folk—our people—our names are our power. Names can be used against you. They have to be guarded. But wisps are different. They call on that power to draw it out from you. They tap into your inner strength and your sense of self.”

I stared at him, confused, my brow furrowed. “I don’t think I understand.”

“Your Fae name is what lives before and after your corporeal body, my Caliana. You have been Calliope before, and you will be Calliope after. You have always been Calliope,” he said, his blue eyes intent.

I sat still and silent, letting this information settle in. Then I looked at him. “Okay, but how do *you* know my name?”  
 My grandfather smiled. “Oh, that part is very simple. I know it because I am of the wisps now. I’m in the other place.”

“Oh. I see,” I said, but I didn’t. Not fully, anyway. But it was all I could do to nod and hope I’d follow as he continued.

“Did you know,” he asked me, “that the strongest form of trust between two Fae is telling each other your Fae names?”

I shook my head. “I haven’t met very many Fae,” I explained.

“Would you like to know mine?” he asked.

I thought for a moment, then nodded. “Yes.”

“Iskender.” His blue eyes twinkled. “Now you know. Now you have the power. Names are power. And because of that, I warn you, my girl, to only tell your Fae name to those you trust *absolutely*. This is not something to be treated lightly. You should never underestimate how corruptible people can be. Will you promise me that you’ll always protect yourself in that way?”

I nodded. “I promise.”

He looked at me steadily. “So, do you trust me now?”  
 I paused for just a second more, and then I nodded. “Yes.”

My grandfather grinned, and when his eyes twinkled at me, he looked a lot more like a grandpa than a general. He stood and reached for my hand. “We should get to work.”

I took his hand and got to my feet, but I was confused. “*Work?* I thought you were just going to talk to me. Actually, I thought that thing you said about trust was the wisdom you were planning to share.”

“Oh, no,” he said, clearly surprised. “Not at all. There is so much more I can show you.”

“Like what?” I asked dubiously.

“You have your magic, yes?”

“Yeah,” I said, wary now. “Why? And you should know I’m not that good with it yet—”

“I would beg to differ,” he said. “I have been watching, and you are getting better and better. Though there are some techniques you can learn that will allow you to advance much faster. How does that sound?”

I smiled, but my stomach was doing flip flops. He looked so excited, but I wasn’t so sure. It seemed like he was expecting kind of a lot from me. I felt good about my magic, but I was really just starting gain control over it, and that was only because I’d been spending so much time with Artemis, trying to get her magic back into sync.

Grandpa Innes might have sensed my hesitation, but he didn’t let it stop him. “All right, girl, get ready. I want to see what you can do.”

My heart was fluttering, but I took a deep breath and looked out toward the tree line. Narrowing my eyes, I focused on a tall pine and sent a blast of magic toward it. The blast exploded the trunk of the tree and made the entire tree line shake.

“Again!” Grandpa Innes called out, his eyes alight.

I shook out my hands, digging deep for an even stronger blast. This one cracked like a shot and echoed back to us so loudly my ears rang.

“That’s my granddaughter!” he shouted, clapping his hands.

I grinned back at him as warmth spread through my chest. There had definitely been a time when my magic and heritage had made me feel really alone. Between not knowing how to use it and all the other secrets around me, I hadn’t felt like I had any support. But this felt like such a big, positive step forward.

“That was really good!” my grandfather said enthusiastically. “Really great. You’re a natural. Your offensive posture is good. I liked the way you planted your feet. It grounds you to the earth. That’s important when you’re using magic as powerful as yours.”

I nodded, basking in the warm glow of my grandfather’s praise. It just felt so… new.

“But, my Caliana, a strong shield is just as important as a sharp sword.” He fixed me with a penetrating stare. “You know how to use your magic to attack, but do you know how to use it defensively?”

**Episode 2293**

I had the distinctly uncomfortable feeling that I was about to take a quiz I hadn’t studied for—and I was going to fail it.

Did I know how to use my magic defensively? Wasn’t all magic technically defensive? If I shot at an enemy enough times and stopped it, I would think that by definition I was *technically* defending myself. Somehow I had a feeling that was not quite what Grandpa Innes meant. Neither Artemis nor my mom had ever even mentioned the concept of defensive magic to me.

I smiled nervously. “I thought magic was all about shoot first, ask questions later.”

Grandpa Innes frowned. “What’s that? Questions last? Shoot first? What does that mean?”

“Nothing. Never mind,” I said hastily. I had to remember not to use human idioms with the Fae. “The thing is, I didn’t always know about my magic, and since I’ve learned about it, every time I’ve had a chance to train with my sister, *Artemis*…”

I watched his face, looking for a sign of recognition at Artemis’s name, but it was unreadable. I couldn’t tell if he knew the name at all. If he did, he wasn’t showing it.

“Anyway,” I said, trying to shake off this disappointment at his non-response, “it seems like every time I get a chance to train or try to learn more about my abilities, we’re attacked by someone else. There are a lot of threats to the werewolf pack that I live with, and we all have to deal with them. It’s really constant, and in the in-between times, when there *is* time to train, I’m just… tired. You know? Like, I *want* to do it. I want to get better, but I’m just worn down by everything else. I get overwhelmed, I guess, and the motivation is seriously lacking.”

As I spoke, my grandfather started giving me a look *identical* to the one my mom always gave me when she was disappointed in me. My mom must have learned that look from her father, and seeing it reflected back in Innes’s eyes, I was *shook*. I hadn’t known the man for more than ten minutes, but I just knew that he thought my explanations were completely weak. He was practically a stranger, but I could read the emotions on his face, and—to my surprise—I found I really cared what he thought.

“Anyway… No, I don’t know how to use my magic defensively,” I finished, trailing off into embarrassed silence.

My grandfather crossed his arms. “I’m hearing a lot of excuses right now, Caliana. That’s not what I want. What I do want is for you to show me who you are and what you’re made of.”

“What I’m made of?” I asked. I wasn’t going to tell him this, but I wasn’t sure *what* I was made of.

“You might be half human, but you’re still Fae. Wrenthorn blood still runs through your veins, girl. You come from a long line of fighters,” my grandfather said, his voice growing warm with passion.

“Do I?” I asked.

“Of course you do! Now, the trick is, you can’t let your magic control you. You control it. It’s a tool like any other. You have to know how to use it, and then you can have it at your disposal. Do you see?”

Swallowing hard, I nodded. I was trying to keep up my courage, but the man was tall and impressive, and it was hard to not feel like I was getting in trouble for not trying hard enough. I supposed that feeling was caused by the general in him coming out. I wondered if this was what it had been like for my mom to grow up with him. I thought of my own gentle father, who never raised his voice. Having a father like Innes would have been pretty intense.

“I want you to watch my technique as I do this,” he commanded, stepping forward. He raised his hands in a defensive position and planted his feet. “Give me a blast of your magic.”

I stared at him. Then I started to giggle. It was a nervous laugh, because I was *super* nervous. “I’m sorry, I think our magical connection must have gone bad for a moment. You want me to do *what*?”

“Blast me,” he said again.

“No way.” I shook my head, trying to stifle my giggles. “I’m not going to do that.”

“Why not?” he asked.

I rolled my eyes. “I just met you! I’m not going to blast my long-lost grandfather with my magic.”

“Don’t be afraid, Caliana. You won’t hurt me.” He grinned. “Remember, I’m already dead.”

“That’s true,” I said slowly. “But what if something goes wrong?”

“What could go wrong?” he asked.

I leveled a glare at him. “Plenty.”

He shook his head. “I promise nothing here can go wrong. Come on. Go on and try.”

I took a deep, calming breath. My grandfather was asking me to do this. I wasn’t going to hurt him, apparently. Everything was going to be fine.

With one last deep breath, I held up my hands and sent a blast of magic shooting right at him. As I did, I saw that he was just standing there, waiting. He wasn’t moving to block or anything. Was he going to let it hit him? How the hell was that going to teach me anything except profound regret?

“*Move!*” I screamed, panicked.

But even as I shouted at him, he moved his hands in an arc—so quickly they were almost a blur—and a golden glow surrounded him. My magic bounced off the glow, and he redirected the energy into a nearby pine tree. I watched—wide-eyed—as the tree exploded.

Slowly, I moved my gaze back toward my grandfather and stared at him in awe. The golden magic he’d produced was still in front of him. It looked as though he was holding a glowing shield made of magic. On closer inspection, I could see that the shield even had a crest on it. The Wrenthorn crest.

“How did you do that?” I asked breathlessly.

He chuckled. “Lots of practice, my girl.”

“Wow,” I breathed, looking at the detail in the Wrenthorn crest.

“You can do this too,” he told me.

I shook my head. “I don’t know about that.”

“You *can*,” he assured me. “You can do this and even more. *If* you practice,” he added sternly.

“But how?” I asked, still stunned.

“It’s all about knowing how to manipulate the energy around you.”

I was listening hard, but my mind was spinning. I wasn’t even sure what I wanted to eat for dinner most of the time, never mind what I wanted “the energy around me” to be doing at any given moment.

Some of my confusion must have shown on my face, because my grandfather’s expression gentled into a smile. “Learning to make a shield like this is important, Caliana. Especially in battle.”

“I can see that,” I said quietly.

“I can tell that you’re well-practiced in offensive techniques. You’ve got good instincts. But all you’re doing now is sending the energy *away* from you. To make a good shield, you must find a way to get comfortable with bringing the magic *toward* yourself.”

My eyes widened. “That sounds like a good way to blow myself up.”

“No, no.” My grandfather laughed. “Nothing like that. You would be using it to protect yourself.”

Still confused, I shook my head, so he tried another tack.

“Think of it like packing snow together to make something stronger than it was otherwise.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “I think I know what you mean.”

“Let’s try it,” he suggested. “Close your eyes. Focus on the energy in the air around you. Feel it surging. Think about bringing it together.”

This all sounded absurd, but I was willing to give it a try. I closed my eyes, ready to tell him this wasn’t going to work, but—to my absolute surprise—I could feel it. There was energy in the air all around me. When I thought about it, I could feel it crackling against my skin.

I squeezed my eyes shut even tighter and concentrated. I tried to reverse a blast of magic, holding the energy in front of me.

And when I opened my eyes, I was amazed to see a small, flat circle forming in the air in front of me.

“Look at that!” I cried, amazed. “Do you see this? I’m doing it!”

“Careful,” he said warningly. “You want to be careful with this. Hold on to the magic, Caliana. If you let go too quickly, it can cause the magic to—”

I had stopped listening because I was jumping up and down in celebration. And then the magic snapped back on me with so much force it felt like I’d been kicked in the chest.

All the breath left my lungs as I sailed backward across the clearing. The last thing I remembered was slamming into a tree with the force of a rocket, and then everything went black.

**Episode 2294**

XAVIER

Leaning against the wall of the hallway, I could feel my foot bouncing up and down. It was a stupid, nervous habit, but I *was* nervous, and it felt like I couldn’t even control it. It felt like Cali and her mom had gone into the study hours ago, though realistically I knew it had only been five minutes or so.

Greyson was on the other side of the door, leaning against the wall, flexing his jaw so tightly that a vein was popping in and out.

I had no idea where the rest of the pack had gone, or who had yelled at them to keep it down, but it felt like the whole house had gone morgue-silent. There had been no noise from Cali or her mom since they’d gone into the study, and Greyson and I had been completely silent the whole time. It was like chilling in the world’s most awkward hospital waiting room. With zero magazines.

I blew out a frustrated breath. I just hoped to hell that Cali was okay. For the thousandth time, I wondered what the hell they were doing in there. I wondered if they’d actually managed to connect with Seluna, or if that tea Orla had made was just a bunch of random bullshit mixed into hot water.

But I knew there was no way to answer any of my questions. Not now, anyway. Best-case scenario, Cali would be able to contact Seluna, and when she walked out again, those creepy-ass handprints would be gone from her back, and none of us would ever have to see Lucian again. But—based on our collective track record for successes—I highly doubted that was going to be the case.

“Can you stop doing that?” Greyson snapped suddenly.

I looked over, surprised. “What?”

He gestured vaguely toward me. “Bouncing your leg, or whatever you’re doing. It’s driving me crazy.”

I could have stopped then, but I didn’t. “Trying to order me around again?”

Greyson heaved a heavy sigh. “I’m not *commanding* you to do anything. It’s just annoying. Can you just stop?”

I rolled my eyes, but I managed to stop myself from fidgeting. “You know,” I said, pushing off the wall and standing straight, “you don’t have to wait here if it’s making you nervous. You can run along. I’ll let you know when Cali’s awake.”

Greyson gave a laugh that sounded like a bark. “Right. I’m sure you will.” He shook his head. “I’m staying right here, thanks.”

“Go ahead,” I urged. “I’m sure you have other pressing pack matters to attend to.”

Greyson narrowed his eyes. “Cali’s the only pressing matter on my schedule.”

My eyebrows shot up in mock surprise. “Oh really. And what about the Vanguard pack? That’s not on your agenda, Alpha? They’re not posing a problem?”

He crossed his arms, his eyes smoldering with fury. “They’re not a problem unless they make themselves a problem.”

“Okay. Got it,” I said, though I made it clear I wasn’t convinced.

Greyson didn’t look pleased with my response. “In fact, I’ve been thinking we might need to get in touch with Lucian after all.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Think about it,” Greyson said. “We have no idea if this tea is going to do anything. And honestly, no offense to Orla, but I’m not holding out a lot of hope. It’s a Fae thing, and Seluna is supposed to be connected to wolves, right?”

“I guess,” I reluctantly agreed. I did agree, but I didn’t like that it was starting to sound like this was all Greyson’s idea. I’d definitely thought of this flaw in the Fae tea plan as well. It seemed clear to me that it was Cali’s connection to werewolves that had called Seluna to her, not her Fae heritage.

“Listen,” Greyson went on, “I don’t like being at the mercy of the Vanguards any more than you do, but at this point, we have to think of what’s best for Cali. You’ve seen her—she’s suffering with those handprints on her, and we have to do whatever we need to do to remove them. Even if it’s the last thing we *want* to do. Which means it’s probably time to just have Lucian do that ritual.”

I dug a hand through my hair. “Yeah, you’re probably right. Even though that’s probably what the Vanguard pack wants, anyway. They’re probably the ones doing this to her.”

“That’s possible,” Greyson agreed. “If they have a witch who could curse me on Aysel’s behalf, there’s no telling what else they could do to us.”

“That’s just fantastic,” I muttered.

“Xavier,” Greyson said, and I looked up at him. His grey eyes were intent on me. “I think we should both stay in the ritual room with Cali and Artemis.”

I stared back at him, surprised. “Really? I thought you wanted to go look for the witch.”

“I do,” Greyson said, “but I think this has to be about priorities. And with that second handprint appearing, I don’t trust a single thing the Vanguard pack does. I want to be there the whole time. I don’t want to give them an inch to do something to her.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I see that.”

Greyson shrugged. “And who knows? Maybe the witch will be there, too. Two birds, one stone.”

I sketched a grim smile. “Yeah, maybe.”

I had to admit that I was glad Greyson had changed his mind. I’d had my doubts about the previous plan, and staying in the room would allow me to keep an eye on things and protect Cali against any Vanguard threats. All the other shit—the Vanguard pack, the witch, their weird-ass beliefs about the moon—was just an afterthought for me.

Greyson and I lapsed into silence again, and I leaned back against the wall. What in the world could be taking this long? Why hadn’t Orla come out to tell me anything? Either the tea had worked, or it hadn’t, but I wished she would tell me one way or the other.

Without noticing it, I’d started bouncing my leg again, and Greyson glared at me. I ignored him at first, though I had to admit I was enjoying watching him growing more and more agitated. But just as it looked like he was about to explode, there was a cry from inside the room, and both of us turned toward the door, hackles raised.

It had been Cali’s voice, and it had sounded like she’d cried out in pain. Greyson reached for the door, but I beat him to it and yanked it open, all but pulling the door off its hinges.

I rushed into the room, followed by Greyson, and Orla looked up, startled by our sudden entrance.

“What’s going on?” Orla asked, looking unnerved.

I shot a look at Greyson, who looked questioningly back at me. “Uh, that was our question for you. What’s going on with Cali? How is she?”

I looked down at Cali, who was curled up in an armchair. She was pale, and—as I watched—she shifted a bit. She looked as though she’d collapsed into the chair, not like she’d fallen asleep while resting comfortably. Everything about the situation felt *off*, and it made me feel crazy with worry.

Heart beating hard, I dropped to my knees next to the chair and grasped her hand. “Cali? Cali, can you hear me? Are you there?”

Greyson was crouched next to her on the other side of the chair, and he looked as worried as I felt.

I didn’t like any of this. At all. I didn’t understand Fae magic. I got that it was powerful because I’d seen it in action, but it was strange and still a mystery to me. I didn’t understand the depths of it, and I didn’t know how to counteract it. And if there was one thing I absolutely hated, it was feeling helpless. Especially when it came to Cali. And that was *exactly* how I felt right now.

“Cali!” I called out again, squeezing her hand. “Cali, baby, can you hear me?”

“Cali! We’re here, open your eyes,” Greyson called, staring desperately into her blank face.

She didn’t answer either of us, but she did move, so suddenly and so violently that she jolted the chair. Greyson and I leaned forward, holding her hands tighter. I didn’t want to let go in case she started to have some kind of episode.

But then her eyes fluttered like she was waking up, and I felt a wave of relief crash over me. She was okay. She was awake.

“Thank god,” I heard Greyson mutter, and I knew exactly how he felt.

But as soon as Cali’s eyes were fully open, that brief sense of relief was replaced with cold, pulsing terror. Her eyes were open, but she wasn’t awake. They were hazy and fixed, and their beautiful depths were clouded over. And then, as we watched, her nose began to bleed.

**Episode 2295**

GREYSON

My panic levels were rising as I watched blood trickle down Cali’s face. Something was terribly wrong with her—that much was clear.

Behind me, Orla gasped and rushed forward. She pulled a tissue from her pocket and pressed it to Cali’s nose, trying to staunch the blood. “Cali? Sweetheart? Can you hear me?”

Cali didn’t respond to her mother’s voice. Her eyes were open, but she wasn’t awake. She wasn’t asleep, but her eyes were fixed and staring—she wasn’t responsive.

I looked up at Orla. “What’s happening to her?”

“I don’t know,” Orla whispered, her voice shaking.

“What was in that tea?” I growled.

“Herbs. Plants. Nothing that could have caused this!” she insisted. “I’ve never seen this happen before. I don’t know what’s causing it. Oh god, Cali!” she called again, sounding desperate.

I could see that the woman was panicking, and I couldn’t blame her. This was her daughter, after all, and Cali was clearly in distress. But Cali was my mate, and fear over whatever was happening to her was gripping me tight.

As I looked at Cali’s blank face and her clouded, expressionless eyes, a terrible question occurred to me: was she going to snap out of this?

Had the tea caused this? Did this have something to do with Seluna?

I gritted my teeth in frustration. There was just so much I didn’t know—everything felt out of my control, and I couldn’t stand that feeling.

“Someone get Torin!” I called. “Get a witch! Get all the witches! We have to do something!”

When I turned back to Cali, her eyelids were fluttering again, and as I watched, they started to close.

Oh god, were we losing her? I gripped her hand harder as the pain of that thought hit me like a gut punch.

“Someone get in here, dammit!” I snarled.

This had to be happening because of that damn tea. What was the other explanation? I never should have let her take it. We’d had no idea what the effect was going to be. Cali never should have been used as a test subject. I should have stopped it. I should have known it was a bad idea. But it went back even further than this stupid tea. I should never have let Cali go to the Vanguard party. I should never have let her get mixed up with that insane pack. I should have known that as the Alpha—I should have known it as Cali’s mate.

I should have protected her.

“Cali! Sweetie! It’s Mom. Can you hear me? Say something, Cali! Come back to us!” Orla called, her voice laced with sobs.

Crouched on the other side of the chair, Xavier sat still and silent, like a man in shock. I knew he was feeling the same panic that I was. I knew he hated to feel out of control, and it was tearing me up to know that something was happening to Cali that I couldn’t protect her from.

“What’s up?” Torin called breathlessly, sprinting in the room and looking around. “What’s going on?”

Big Mac and Kira were at his heels, and they looked at Cali’s still form with shocked expressions.

After a still moment, Torin sprang into action. “Back up, everyone,” he said, his voice calm and uncharacteristically commanding. “She needs air, and I’m going to need some room.”

Xavier, Orla, and I all did as he asked, and we watched as Torin knelt by Cali’s side. As he held his hands above her, they began to glow. Keeping his steady gaze on her, he moved his softly glowing hands over her—close to her body, but never touching her. He moved across her midsection and down her legs, all the way to the tips of her toes, and then back up again. He moved over every square inch of her, leaving nothing out.

I watched him carefully. I had no idea what the hell he was doing. Was it helping her? Was it going to heal her? She continued to shake beneath his hands, so it was hard to tell if what he was doing was having any effect. How was Torin supposed to heal someone when we didn’t even know *how* she’d been hurt?

Torin looked focused, and I wanted him to do his work without interruption, so I kept my questions to myself. He held his hands over her, and they continued to glow, the light waxing and waning as he worked.

After what felt like years, Cali finally stopped shaking and—with a sigh—her eyelids fluttered shut once again.

Even then, Torin didn’t stop. He was growing pale, and his own breathing had become labored, but his concentration didn’t falter. I could feel everyone holding their breath as they watched him, and then—finally—Cali’s eyes opened again.

She blinked and looked around, her beautiful eyes clear and lucid. She put a hand to her head, like it was hurting.

“What happened?” she asked, her poor voice rasping. Then she looked around and—seeing Torin—frowned. “Torin? What are you doing here? You weren’t in the dream.”

Torin didn’t answer her, just sat back with an exhausted sigh.

I stepped forward, and—as Cali looked up at me—my heart gave a painful, aching pulse. “Are you okay, love?”

Cali nodded and then stopped suddenly, going pale. “Oh my god, my head hurts so much,” she gasped. Then she frowned and touched her face. “And what’s this? Is this blood? Am I bleeding? What’s happening? Why do I have a bloody nose?” She looked around at all of us, her eyes wide. “What happened?”

I took her hand. “It’s okay,” I said soothingly. “It’s all okay. You’re back. It’s okay now.”

“Greyson,” she said, her voice shaking. “What *happened*?”

“You’re back. That’s what matters. Torin healed you. It’s all okay.”

Cali looked up, her gaze drifting to Xavier.

His eyes were filled with unspoken emotion, and he nodded. “You’re safe now.”

I could feel the tension in her body unwind as my brother spoke, and it made a flare of anger spark in my chest. But I tried to push that away. It wasn’t the time.

Orla stepped up to Cali and wrapped her arms around her daughter. “I’m so sorry, sweetheart. About all of it.” She shook her head as tears rolled down her face. “I should have known better.”

“It’s okay, Mom,” Cali said, but Orla shook her head.

“No, I should have known. You aren’t full Fae. I should have known something could go wrong.”

“Wrong?” Cali pulled back from her mom with a confused look. “What went wrong? It worked.”

Orla stared at her, clearly shocked. Xavier and I exchanged a look. Even Torin looked surprised.

“It *did*?” Orla asked.

“Did you see Seluna?” I asked.

Cali nodded. “No,” she corrected herself, “but there was someone else there. Another Fae.”

I looked at Orla, wondering if this was an expected outcome. It didn’t appear so, because Orla looked stunned.

“Who?” she asked. “What Fae?”

“My grandfather,” Cali said.

Orla’s expression suddenly turned sad. “You saw my father? *Innes?* That would mean…” She stopped herself, and her look of dreamy abstraction disappeared. It was replaced with laser focus as she looked at her daughter. “I need you to tell me everything that happened.”

Cali nodded, then winced in pain from the action.

I stepped toward her and cupped the back of her head, supporting it. “There’s plenty of time for that. I think Cali needs to lie down first.”

She breathed a sigh of obvious relief. “Yes, please.”

“I’ll help get you cleaned up,” Torin said, offering his hand. “You’ve still got some… blood. Let’s get you upstairs.”

“Thanks,” Cali said.

“I’ll come with you,” Orla said quickly.

Cali braced herself to stand, but I slipped my hands under her arms and helped her to her feet. I waited until Torin had her in a firm grip before I let her go. I watched as she leaned heavily on him, and then as he and Orla helped her out of the room. My heart ached seeing her that way.

Everything in me wanted to follow them and help get her settled upstairs, but I figured it might be better if Cali had some time to decompress and talk to her mom about what had happened. It was a lot for me to handle, so I could only imagine how she was feeling.

Glancing around, I could see how she might not want everyone’s watchful eyes on her when she was trying to recover from whatever had just happened to her. That was why she’d wanted to go to a separate room to drink the tea in the first place.

When Cali and her entourage were gone, the room was quiet with tension. Everyone was clearly wondering what was coming next, so I answered the unspoken question.

Turning to Xavier, I issued another order. “Go to Lucian. Tell him we’re coming early.”

**Episode 2296**

VIOLET

All eyes were on me, and I shifted under the weight of them. Charlie and his mom were staring at me, waiting for an answer about the holidays, and I had *no idea* what to say. I felt completely put on the spot. Did I *want* to go back to Minnesota and be among the hunters again after everything that had just happened? And in close proximity to Iris, who had been—in the past—somewhat less than cordial to me? I just wasn’t sure if they’d all be the warmest company.

I shot a look at Charlie. He hadn’t said as much, but I knew he’d love it if I came with him. He’d already asked me, and he’d been patiently waiting for my answer about it.

Looking back at Iris, I thought hard. This woman had fought alongside werewolves—that much was true. But what was also true was that she’d done it for her son, not for me. I was pretty sure that she and I were both clear on that point. Still, I couldn’t deny that she had helped me in the end.

I took a deep breath, and even as I did, I could feel anxiety rising up in my chest. I was taking too long. They were both still looking at me, and it was getting awkward. I swallowed hard. “Yes, I’ll be going with Charlie.”

Charlie’s expression lit up like a ray of sunlight. “Really? You will be? I mean, you’re coming?”

I felt my cheeks flush.

“Yeah, I’ll come,” I said again, trying to infuse my voice with some genuine enthusiasm. It was clear that Charlie was pumped about this, and I wanted to at least try to match his excitement.

Iris granted me a small smile. “Good,” she said crisply. “We look forward to having you.”

I nodded, but there was something in her tone that made me wonder if she’d been expecting me to say no to her invitation. Had she been hoping I’d refuse to come?

There was never any way to know anything for sure with Iris, but I was going to keep my guard up.

Charlie leaned over and kissed my cheek, still beaming. “I’m so excited!”

I nodded at Charlie and—to get out of talking about it further—reached down for a bag and started hauling it toward the front door.

When we’d gotten everything moved to go outside, I stood back as Charlie and his mother said goodbye.

“I’ll be seeing you soon,” Charlie said happily.

Iris nodded. “That’s right. You will.” She wrapped her arms around him, and as she pulled away, I saw her say something to him in a voice too low for me to hear.

I knew it was petty, but I wondered if Iris was saying something about me.

But I didn’t have time to speculate further, because Sophie walked over just then.

“Violet! It was great to see you. I can’t believe we have to say goodbye again,” she said.

“I know,” I agreed, then leaned in as she reached for a hug. It started weird—we both tried to go in the same way—but we worked it out in the end.

“Don’t be a stranger,” Sophie said, stepping away. “Text me whenever, okay?”

I grinned. “I will. Thanks. And thanks for everything you did here. You were kind of a badass,” I added, making Sophie laugh.

We heard a slap and looked over to see Charlie and Chad saying their goodbyes. The slap had been Chad’s hand on Charlie’s back, giving him a warm kind of bro hug.

Sophie shook her head, smiling. “You should have seen those two going at it when Charlie first got to camp. I never would’ve thought those two would end up friends.”

“Me neither,” I said quietly.

“Okay,” Iris called briskly. “Everyone out to the cars!”

Everyone picked up their bags and headed outside, toward the cars.

Sophie looked back at me. “That’s me, I guess. I’ll see you, Violet.”

I nodded. “I’ll be in touch soon.”

“You better,” she grinned, slinging a weapons bag onto her shoulder. She walked over to Charlie and gave him a hug, one that started and ended much less awkwardly than ours had.

I looked away quickly, inspecting the floor. I liked Sophie, but it was always slightly weird to see her with Charlie, considering how she’d felt about him at camp.

But then I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I looked up to see Sergeant Pepperdine outside, walking toward the cars. In front of him was a handcuffed Zachery, who was staring sullenly forward. Anther hunter was leading Shanna alongside them.

I felt a shiver of fear travel up my spine, but in an instant, Charlie was at my side. Together, we stood in the doorway of the house and watched the procession march toward the cars. I still felt cold, and I leaned closer to Charlie. He wrapped his arm tightly around me as we stood quietly, watching them without a word.

At the car, Pepperdine yanked open the door and shoved Zachery roughly into the back seat. I was scared as hell, but I held my head up high. That loser had tried to kill me—a few times. He had stalked me and terrorized me, but in the end, he hadn’t won. I had.

Shanna was put into a different car, and with the prisoners secure, the rest of the hunters loaded their bags and then themselves into the fleet.

Charlie and I stood watching as they started their cars and set off down the long drive toward the road, leaving the Redwood pack house behind. When they were completely out of sight, Charlie turned to me.

“Well—” I started, but Charlie surprised me by pulling me into a kiss.

The kiss caught me off-guard, but I sank into it, glad for it. His arms encircled me and held me close, and the kiss was warm and so completely filled with love, I nearly forgot everything else.

When he pulled away, I was still seeing stars.

“What was that for?” I asked, dazed.

He smiled down at me. “I’m really proud of you, Violet.”

“For what?” I asked bemusedly.

He grinned. “For being you.”

That made me laugh. “I’m working on it.”

He let me go, and we looked around, taking a last look around the house. The hunters had done a good job clearing themselves out. I walked into the living room and turned off a light they’d left on, but other than that, it didn’t look like there was much to do.

“Ready to head back?” Charlie asked,

I nodded, and we walked out to the porch, locking the door behind us.

Charlie shifted first and bounded off the porch. I took a deep breath of cold, crisp air, then leapt after him, shifting as I jumped.

As we headed into the woods toward Xavier’s house, something occurred to me. We were *free*. It was just Charlie and me, and there was no danger as we ran—*sprinted*—through the pines. Zachery had been captured, and we were safe now. The woods were a dark green blur as we ran through them, and they were ours again. They were hunter-free. Everything could start going to back to normal again. I laughed to myself, even as I thought that. Whatever it was that *normal* looked like.

But no matter what, I knew I had Charlie, and I was ready for whatever life was going to throw at me next. I was ready for whatever was waiting for us, past all this bad blood.

We were running neck and neck, but as we neared the pack house, Charlie tried to surge ahead.

There was no way I was letting him get away with that, so I put on a burst of speed and passed him.

I heard him grunt as he fought to keep up and burst out of the forest at a screaming pace.

Charlie was laughing as he shifted back to human. “I think you caught up to me there at the end, Violet.”

Just shifted back to human, I raised my eyebrows. “You think? Come on, Kim, I think we both know I kicked your ass.”

With a playful growl, he grabbed me around the waist and tickled my ribs. Still winded from the run, we were both gasping.

“Maybe we should head inside,” I said, pulling away. “I could use a shower.”

Charlie nodded. “And some food.”

We headed up the porch and into the house.

“Violet! There you are!”

I looked around. Marta was just coming down the stairs. “Hey. I just got back. Why were you looking for me? Is everything all right?”

Marta opened her mouth to speak, but then she stopped herself, looking up at Charlie.

He gave my arm a squeeze. “I’ll just head upstairs and get the shower warmed up for you, okay?”

“Thanks,” I said, smiling at him. He winked at me, and once he’d started upstairs, I turned back to Marta. “What’s up?”

“I need your help,” she said without preamble.

“Okay,” I said slowly. “With what?”

“Lilac. I want to connect him to his wolf again.”

**Episode 2297**

It was hard to know exactly where my feet were going. I knew they were moving, I just wasn’t sure in which direction. Besides that, I didn’t know what day it was. Or where I was. Or if I was right side up or upside down. I *suspected* right side up, but I couldn’t have sworn to it.

The feeling was like being super jetlagged after a killer international flight. The kind where you lost days, not just hours. Or rather, I *thought* that was what it might feel like. I’d never actually been out of the country. Maybe the feeling was more like one of those all-nighters Lola and I had pulled in college during finals. Just chemistry notes and straight espressos and by five a.m., neither of us had known our right hand from our left.

“I’m really fine,” I slurred, trying to look over at my mom, and then at Torin. “I appreciate your help, but I’m *fine*,” I said again, trying to take a step away from them to prove it.

“Cali—” my mom gasped, grabbing my arm and yanking me forward again, stopping me from stepping back.

My back foot floundered in empty space, and I realized I was at the top of the stairs. I had almost stepped backward down the stairs. Okay, so maybe I wasn’t *totally* fine.

I had almost fallen down the stairs, but it was hard to feel any actual fear. I felt almost slap-happy from the journey that Fae tea had sent me on. I felt so light and free that, dimly, I wondered if this was what enlightenment felt like.

We kept moving. A door opened, and I was ushered into a room. A moment later I was pushed down onto a bed. *My* bed, I realized, a belated second later.

“I’m really fine,” I said again, but my words sounded strange to my ears, like I couldn’t get my tongue around them. “Seriously.”

I sat up, but as I did, the room dipped and swirled and Torin’s worried face swam in front of my eyes.

“Okay, maybe I’m not so good,” I corrected myself.

I slowly lowered myself back down and curled up into a ball. My bed was *so* comfortable. It was the most comfortable bed in the whole world. It was so damn fluffy. It was like lying on a literal cloud. Had beds always felt this amazing? How had I been going to sleep on beds my whole life and just never noticed how *incredible* they were? Maybe I’d just never given it any thought, until now. Which was an absolute shame. I really hadn’t been giving bed the proper amount of appreciation it deserved.

“I’m sorry, bed,” I cooed, gently patting the mattress. “I’m going to tell you how beautiful you are every single day. Because that’s what you deserve, girl. Promise me you’re going to stop accepting less.”

“Wow. I’m going to go get you some water,” Torin said. “How does that sound? Maybe some tea?”

“No tea!” I shouted forcefully. “Tea is *banned*!”

“No tea,” my mom agreed. “But maybe some coffee? It might sober her up a little. But definitely some water. We need to hydrate her and flush the rest of the tea out of her.”

Torin nodded and headed out of the room.

A wave of fatigue washed over me, and I felt my eyes flutter closed. My body felt heavy, and I sank deeper into the bed. Distantly, I heard my mom putter into the bathroom and the water turn on. A moment later, the bed sank down, and I felt a warm cloth on my face, wiping away the dried sweat and blood.

I opened my eyes to see my mom’s face above mine. She wiped carefully, her hands gentle. When she was done, she put the cloth on the bedside table and brushed my hair out of my face.

“How do you feel?” she asked, her voice soft.

I closed my eyes again, basking in the warmth of my mom’s presence. It felt so nice to have her care for me—it made me feel like a kid again.

“I feel all right,” I said honestly. “Just really, really tired.”

My mom made a little humming sound. After a moment, she spoke. “Cali, can you tell me what you saw?”

“Not *what*,” I said, my eyes still closed. “*Who*. I saw Grandpa Innes.”

My mom’s hand stilled in my hair.

I opened my eyes and looked up at her. Her expression was frozen but unreadable. But something about her response felt… off.

She was quiet for a long moment. “Could you start at the beginning?” she finally asked. “Tell me everything you saw.”

“Um…” I started, trying to remember. It was hard to roll my memories back when my mind felt so fuzzy, but I tried. “It was the forest, but it wasn’t anywhere I’d ever been before. It wasn’t here. It was really warm, and there were wisps there, I think. It was definitely somewhere in the Fae world, or someplace that really looked like it.”

My mom nodded when I paused. “What else?”

“I saw some of my own memories play out,” I said, but I didn’t elaborate on what memories. I didn’t think my mom would want to know what I’d seen. Or some of the, uh, adult things I’d been involved in.

Her eyes went wide. “So it worked? That place really does exist?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I guess so. And it was so beautiful. It was strange—I knew I’d never been there before, but it still felt familiar somehow. Almost like going home.”

My mom shifted uncomfortably, and her gaze darted away from mine.

My alarm bells were ringing, and I pushed myself upright on the bed. The room spun a little as I sat up, but I felt better on the bed than I had downstairs in the chair.

“Mom,” I said, trying to catch her eyes. “What is it? Is something wrong?”

She didn’t meet my eyes. “So you didn’t see Seluna at all?”

I shook my head, carefully. “No, she wasn’t there. I told you, the only person I saw was Grandpa.”

My mom’s body was rigid with tension, and I frowned at her. I didn’t understand what the hell was going on.

“How did he look?” she asked, her voice tight.

I thought about it for a moment, unsure how to answer. “Like a grandfather. *And* like a general.”

My mom looked at me then, a small, broken smile on her face. My heart gave a lurch at the sight of it.

I took my mom’s hand. “I knew it was him, even *before* I knew it was him. You know? He looked like you, and he even had the Wrenthorn crest. He knew my Fae name—”

My mom looked at me quickly. “He did?” she asked, clearly shocked. “He knew you as Calliope?”

I stared at my mom. It was strange to hear the name come out of her mouth. I’d never heard her say it. Just the wisps. When I nodded, I saw my mom’s eyes go bright with unshed tears.

She put her hand over her mouth and choked back sobs as her tears started to fall.

“Mom,” I said, shocked. I reached for her and pulled her into a hug. “Mom, what is it? What’s wrong?”

My mom was shaking against me. “I didn’t know that he’d died,” she managed to get out.

I squeezed my eyes shut as this settled in. “Oh, Mom.”

“I knew he was out in the war, but no news was always better news than hearing the worst.” She took a deep, shaking sigh. “I always held out hope—even after I left for the human world—that my father was okay. That he was still alive somewhere, and that one day he’d come home from the war. But if you really saw him there, then it means he’s really gone.”

I hugged my mom tightly as sobs racked her body. Somehow, I felt stronger myself as I supported her, and we stayed like that for a long moment, my mom weeping on my shoulder.

My heart ached for her. Instinctively, I knew her loss was twofold—knowing that her father had died, and knowing that he’d died many years ago, and she just hadn’t known. It had to feel like losing him twice. As she leaned back and wiped the tears from her face, I could see the desolation in her eyes. They were wide, and the aching pain she felt was plain in them. And in an instant, I understood: that pain was the price she’d paid to come to the human world, to marry my father, and to have me.

“Oh, Mom, I’m so sorry,” I breathed.

She took a tissue from her pocket and wiped her eyes. Then she looked at me and cupped my face between her hands. “Do you know why you have a Fae name?”

I shook my head. “Not really.”

Mom smiled. “Do you want to know why I named you Calliope?”

**Episode 2298**

I looked up at my mom, surprised. Hearing that name from her shocked me, and I was intrigued by her question. All my life, I’d never heard the name Calliope as much as I had today. I’d always been curious about why the wisps called me that, and it was just today that Grandpa Innes had enlightened me about the concept of Fae names. All that had been interesting, but it hadn’t meant that much to me. There was a lot of weird stuff about the Fae world—I had figured this was more of it that I didn’t understand. But this development with my mom was new.

“Wait,” I said. “*You* chose my Fae name?”

My mom nodded. “I did.” When she saw the confused look on my face, she gave me a watery smile. “It’s your name, Cali. Where did you think it came from?”

“I—I don’t know, I guess,” I admitted. “I thought that it was magically assigned to every Fae baby, like a supernatural social security number?”

“Not quite,” my mom said, shaking her head. “It’s not assigned. When a Fae child is born, the parents choose a Fae name for them in secret. It’s something only they know. I never told you what your name was because, well…” She sighed. “I was trying to protect you from that world.”

“But what about after I found out?” I asked. “About being Fae and everything. Why didn’t you tell me then?”

My mom tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, looking tired. “I suppose I should have. It’s easy to see all the mistakes I made as I look back on them. I thought about it, of course, but there was already so much for you take in. It was enough to deal with, just understanding that you were half Fae. There was so much to tell you, and it was difficult to know where to start. It didn’t feel right to burden you with even more.”

She looked so worn and so sad, it made my heart ache for her.

“Don’t worry about it, Mom. I totally understand that. And you weren’t wrong. It *was* a lot to take in. It still is, sometimes,” I admitted.

My mom smiled, and I was glad to see it. “But I suppose now is as good a time as any to tell you what you need to know. Fae names are very important,” she said. “It’s the core of your magic, it’s the essence of who you are.”

“And you chose Calliope for me?”

My mom nodded. “Normally parents choose together, but had to choose alone, of course, because at the time, your father didn’t know that I was Fae. I chose it a few days after we brought you home from the hospital. Your dad had gone out for some diapers—we’d picked up the wrong size, somehow—and we were scrambling because we were almost out. So he wasn’t in, and it was just you and me at home.” Her gaze went to the window, and her tone softened. “We were sitting in the blue chair next to the window, you remember the one?”

I nodded. I knew exactly what she was talking about, and I could picture it exactly. A younger version of my mom, carefully holding her new baby.

My mom’s gaze was still far away. “You were so small, sweetheart. I hardly knew how to hold you. All I wanted to do was protect you.” Her eyes grew wet with tears. “I thought I’d lost Artemis, and I was beside myself, trying to do everything I could to keep you safe. And then the name just… came to me. *Calliope*.” She turned to look at me. “I knew I wanted you to be your own person. Despite everything else, I knew I wanted you to find your own voice in the world.”

My own throat felt tight as I looked into my mom’s eyes.

She squeezed my hand. “And you’ve definitely done that, sweetheart.”

Tears crowded at the corners of my own eyes and started to course down my cheeks. I’d had no idea about any of this, and I hadn’t even thought about how my mom had suffered, thinking she’d already lost a daughter.

“I’m so glad you’ve told me this,” I said, my voice catching.

“I’m just sorry it took me so long, Cali.” My mom took a shaking breath. “If the person you saw in the dream knew your name, it must have been your grandfather.”

“I thought so, but I also wondered…” I hesitated.

“Wondered what?” my mom asked.

“I wondered if the wisps could have told him my name. Calliope is what they call me, too.”

But my mom was already shaking her head. “No, sweetheart. That’s not how the wisps work. They can guide and lead, but they cannot speak another Fae name to someone else if the person doesn’t already know it.”

I took this information in. There was still so much to learn about this world that I was a part of, even if I’d rarely been there.

“What else happened while you were there?” my mom pressed. “What else did your grandfather say?”

“He was trying to help me with my magic,” I said. “He asked me if I knew how to use it defensively. He said something about the sword and the shield? I didn’t really follow—”

My mom’s expression brightened. “He didn’t!” she said, laughing. She shook her head. “He’s still pushing that old chestnut, even from beyond the grave. Did he say, ‘A strong shield is just as important as a sharp sword’?”

“Yes!” I shouted. “That was exactly what he said!”

She laughed again. “Some things never change. That was always what he told me when we trained together.” She sighed. “We didn’t always see eye to eye—it was hard when our magic was so different—but he was a good general. A good leader.”

“And a good father?” I asked hesitantly.

My mom’s smile gained a little sadness. “It was… complicated, but I loved my father very much.”

“I can see that,” I said, giving her hand a squeeze.

The quiet moment was interrupted when there was a knock on the door, and Torin opened it, peeking his head into the room. “I’ve got some drinks if anyone wants?”

“Come on in,” I said.

He pushed through the door and held up two mugs. “I wasn’t sure which you’d want, so I brought both—mocha and water.”

“Thanks, Torin,” I said gratefully.

He moved to set the mugs down on the bedside table, but his eyes went wide when he saw my mom wiping tears from her eyes. “Oh no.”

“Torin, it’s fine—”

“No, I totally interrupted something, didn’t I? You two were having a moment, and I’ve ruined it. I’m so sorry. I’ll see myself out.”

He set down the mugs and hurried for the door.

“Torin, it’s fine!” I called after him.

“Really, Torin, please come back!” my mom called.

But he was already gone, and the door clicked shut behind him.

My mom looked at me with a smile. “He’s such a sweet kid.”

“Yeah, he is,” I said, reaching for the mocha he’d left. I took a sip and felt the warm liquid sink into me, warming me from the inside out. The sugar and the caffeine made me feel less groggy—like I was finally coming back to life.

“So, did my father teach you to do anything with your magic?” my mom asked.

I swallowed a burning sip of mocha. “Well, sort of.” I thought hard, trying to remember what had happened. “He told me to blast him, then showed me the shield. Then he started to show me how to do it with my own magic.”

“Did it work?” my mom asked.

“Yeah, kind of,” I said slowly. “Until it didn’t.” I squinted, trying to remember the details. “The magic I created backfired, and it blasted against me and sent me flying. I hit a tree.” I put a hand to my head as it gave a throb.

“Oh, Cali,” my mom whispered.

“I *think* that’s what happened.” I shook my head. “It all went dark somewhere in there, and when I woke up, I was back in the study. I don’t know how I got there. It all went really fast and was really sudden.” A thought occurred to me that sent my heart plummeting downward. “And I didn’t even get a chance to say goodbye to him.”

“I’m sure he understood,” my mom said gently.

I nodded. “I hope so. I hope he understood what happened, and that he’s not worried about me, wherever he is.”

My mom nodded, clearly letting all this information settle in. Then she got to her feet. “Oh, he’ll worry in his own way. That’s why he wanted to be sure to teach you before your talk ended. Speaking of, you know what I think? I think I want you to show me exactly what my father taught you.”

**Episode 2299**

XAVIER

I was *fuming*. I was pacing the limited space of the den like a lunatic—back and forth—without stopping. I hadn’t been able to sit down, and I felt like I was crawling out of my skin. This was the second time that Greyson had commanded me to do something, and I was fucking livid.

It wasn’t like he didn’t know what he was doing. That bastard knew *exactly* what he was doing. He loved pulling the Alpha card at every opportunity, and it didn’t hurt that he was giving himself a chance at more alone time with Cali, either. God, he was so desperate to do anything to look like the fucking hero.

It wasn’t like I didn’t have eyes. Cali was in bad shape. The tea had done her no good, and even Torin hadn’t been able to do much to help her. I could see what needed to be done just as well as Greyson could, and I could have—and *would* have—told Greyson that we needed to talk to Lucian and the rest of the Vanguard pack, if he hadn’t beaten me to it. I didn’t need Greyson telling me how to help my mate. I didn’t need Greyson to tell me *anything*.

The den didn’t have enough pacing room for me, and when I nearly crashed into a wall for the tenth time, I left the room and headed down the hall toward the front door. I needed to burn off this excess energy. The worst part was that I knew I needed to do what Greyson had told me to do. Following his orders was the last thing I wanted, but I knew I had no choice. Apart from it being the right thing to do for Cali, I cared about the pack, and I wanted to keep it stable, and that meant that I had to fall in line.

It was infuriating, but I knew I’d set myself up for this when I’d pledged my loyalty to Greyson. This was a monster of my own making. If I didn’t follow his lead, I’d risk sending a message about insubordination and consequently sending the pack back into disorder. And that—I knew—would be blamed on me. I couldn’t take that risk. I had to be careful. I was running a long con here. If I wanted to challenge Greyson to a Lupo Finale—which I did—then I needed to keep the respect of the rest of the pack. And right now, that meant doing as I was told.

I supposed it was only fair. Following my orders was exactly what I would expect from Greyson, when the time came.

But still, that didn’t mean I had to like it.

“Fuck it,” I muttered to myself, stomping toward the door.

“Excuse me?” a voice called. Sage was sitting in one of the window seats that flanked the door, looking at her phone, and she looked up at me in surprise. “Where are you going?”  
 “I’m going to see the Vanguards. Greyson knows,” I snapped.

And without waiting for her to respond, I wrenched open the front door.

A blast of fresh, cold air hit me, and I took a deep breath, filling my lungs. It felt good to be outside, and I slammed the door behind me and headed down the steps. My muscles were already tingling. This was just what I needed. The woods were calling to me, and I wanted to run and burn off the anger surging inside me.

I was heading toward the trees and about to shift when a voice stopped me.

“Going somewhere?”

I turned to see Ava standing on the porch, looking down at me. Her arms were crossed over her chest, and she lifted an eyebrow as I looked back at her. “Everything okay?”

I responded with a guttural noise. Why did she always manage to show up seemingly out of thin air?

This seemed to answer her question. “Bad day?”

Cocking my head, I shot her a glare. “It’s worse now, thanks.”

I turned toward the woods and prepared to shift, but apparently Ava wasn’t done.

“It’s not good to keep your emotions bottled up this way, Xavier. You should let them out.”

“I’m so fucking sick of this,” I exploded, rounding on her. “I’m so done with your stupid meddling and your little double entendres.”

*I want you to fucking leave!* was on the tip of my tongue, but I bit it back. Every time I’d made this girl leave the pack house, she’d always come back to me. I kept trying to get rid of her, but she kept circling back like a fucking boomerang.

Ava narrowed her eyes. “Are you upset about what happened last night?”

I groaned. Like I needed to be reminded of that.

Ava looked pissed. “*You* called out to *me*, remember? I told you that. If there’s anyone to be mad at, it’s yourself—”

“For *what*?” I snapped.

“For denying what you know to be true,” she bit back.

I rolled my eyes. “Do me a favor and take your bullshit elsewhere today, would you? I’ve got enough shit to deal with today.”

And with that, my thoughts went to Cali, upstairs, still weak and pale from whatever that tea had done to her. Was she going to get better? I thought about those freaky handprints on her back. I was losing time standing here indulging Ava’s bullshit. I needed to get to Lucian and demand he fix this mess.

“Just get lost,” I growled. “I’ve got to go.”

“Why do you always think the worst of me?” Ava called after me.

I tried to hold back a laugh. “Do you even know what you’re asking me right now?”

Ava kept staring at me, her gaze defiant. “Since I’ve come back, haven’t I proven time and time again that I’m trying to be a better person, Xavier? I was involved with Silas, yes, but it was against my will, and since I got free of that, I haven’t stopped trying to prove myself to you.”

I shook my head. I was so tired of this.

“I made a promise to your mother, Xavier,” Ava said, her voice hard as steel. “I made a promise to Marlene—”

I flinched at the sound of my mother’s name coming out of Ava’s mouth.

“I promised I’d protect you,” she went on. “And I’ve upheld that promise. I have, haven’t I? Even you have to admit that.”

I stared at her as a cold, cruel wind blew around the house, lifting her dark hair and whipping it across her face. Part of me wondered how anyone could be so delusional, but there was another part of me—the part guided by the mate bond, no doubt—that whispered to me that she wasn’t wrong. Ava *had* saved me on a few occasions.

But—I reminded myself angrily—I’d saved her too. It was a two-way street.

Thinking that didn’t make me feel much better, however, because it just confirmed what she was telling me—that there was still something between us. I could feel it in the air as I looked at her. It made my whole body feel tense and edgy, but also *alive*. I didn’t know if it was the mate bond, or if it was something new between us. But I did know that I didn’t like it. Not one bit.

“The only thing you’ve continued to prove to me is that you’re fluent in lies and trickery.” I shook my head as frustration seethed through me. “You’ve always got an angle, don’t you?”

“Xavier—”

“You have one now. You had one when you showed up for the first time. It’s just who you are—I see that now. You’re never going to stop manipulating people to get what you want.” My heart was beating so hard I could feel the pulse of it in my ears and in my throat. “It was always part of you, I just didn’t want to see it, but now—”

I stopped myself and swallowed hard. My mouth tasted like blood, and I shook my head, disgusted.

“You know what? Forget it,” I spat. “You’re not worth it. Any of it.”

I turned and shifted into my wolf form, ready to leave Ava and all her bullshit drama far, far behind. I headed toward the trees in the direction of the Vanguard palace, where Lucian was waiting. That moon boy had better be there when I got there, and ready to help Cali, or—the way I was raging—I was going to rip him apart.

Charging into the woods, I had gone only about a half a mile when I heard the soft footsteps of something running behind me.

I looked to my right as Ava’s wolf caught up with me.

*Wherever you’re going*, she said, *you’re probably going to need backup.*

*Go to hell*, I snapped.

She didn’t even look at me. *I’m going with you.*

**Episode 2300**

“Mom, I’m not sure that using the magic Grandpa taught me is such a good idea.”

I didn’t remember all the details, but hitting that tree as a result of the final attempt in my vision quest seemed like a gigantic red flag—and I wasn’t exactly in a rush to knock myself out all over again.

*Does it count as knocking myself out when I was technically already unconscious?*

I wasn’t even sure I remembered *how* to use my magic the way my grandfather had told me to. I tried to force my mind to dredge up something useful from my dream, or vision, or whatever it had been.

*What did he teach me? Something about… something? Ugh, what was it…*

Then the memory locked into place. He’d told me to gather my magic, to put to use what I had. It sounded so simple—a lot simpler than it had actually been.

*Gather my magic and put it to use. Why didn’t I think of that before?* I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. *That sure would have come in handy when we were fighting for our lives against Silas and Letifer.*

The thing was, it wasn’t simple. If it had been, I doubted I would have blasted myself into that tree and ended up like this.

Mom squeezed my hand and gave me an encouraging smile. “Just try, sweetheart.”

“Okay…” I guessed it wouldn’t hurt to try.

I started to raise my hands, and Mom grabbed my wrist. “Not here!”

I blinked. “But you just said—”

“You have very powerful magic, Cali. And if something were to go wrong inside the house, it could be very dangerous for a lot of people. Not to mention how much it would be to repair any damages.” She released my wrist. “Maybe we should wait until you’re feeling strong enough to go outside?”

I mean, she had a point. We’d already had to ditch the lake house because of dangerous magic—I didn’t want to be the reason we couldn’t stick around Xavier’s pack house.

But I also wasn’t going to wait any longer to test these abilities out. If I waited too long, I’d probably forget what little I remembered. I needed to practice *now*, while it was still fresh in my memory—or at least not spoiled just yet.

If my grandfather had thought teaching me this technique was important enough to merit visiting me in a vision, then I wasn’t going to let myself forget it.

I pushed myself to my feet.

“Sweetheart, you should rest.”

I shook my head. “No, I need to practice. Besides, I’m feeling much better now.” That much was true. I really did feel much less wobbly than before.

“You’ve been through quite the ordeal; you don’t need to prove anything to me. Take your time.”

“Mom, I’m fine. Certainly well enough to go outside.”

I headed to the door, and my mom hurried behind me. I’d said I was fine, and she seemed inclined to believe it, but she still insisted on holding me by the arm as we walked down the stairs together—just in case. It seemed a bit like overkill, but I appreciated the support.

Downstairs, it seemed every inch of the house had been decorated to look just like Santa’s workshop. Torin really didn’t do things halfway.

*I wish Grandpa Innes could be here to see this, to celebrate Christmas with us. Or to celebrate whatever winter holiday the Fae celebrate.*

“Do you think Grandpa would have liked all of this?” I gestured at the decorations.

My mother’s lips turned up into a small smile. “Perhaps. Though he might have found the… level of enthusiasm we have here to be a bit much. He was always much more austere in his tastes.”

I smiled back. *I wish I’d had a chance to get to know him.* I’d never seen him outside of my vision, and I had a feeling that I wouldn’t see him again for a very long time. If ever.

“I still feel bad that I accidentally poofed away without saying goodbye,” I admitted.

“I’m sure he understands.” My mom patted my arm, still secure in her grip. “He’s probably so happy just to have talked to you, to have spent a few minutes together. Every second was a gift. I’d always hoped you’d get to meet him.”

She was still smiling, but there was a melancholy quality to it. I could only imagine how difficult this had to be—I’d had a chance to meet him, like she’d always hoped. But only because he was dead.

*I wish I could say something to help her feel better.*

My mom’s smile brightened. “Besides, you didn’t need to say goodbye at all. He’s probably watching over us right now.”

“I hope so.”

Maybe she was right. My grandfather seemed to know a lot about me already, even though we’d never met. He knew I was living with Xavier and Greyson, and that had to mean he’d been with me, even if I never knew it.

*And if he’s with me now, he might be able to guide me, to help me remember how to use my magic as a shield.*

We found a spot in the yard, far away from the house. If I caused any collateral damage, at least I wouldn’t be burning down the pack house or destroying another of Xavier’s cars.

“Okay, Cali. Let’s give it a shot.”

My stomach clenched with nervousness. I wiped my sweaty hands on my jeans and took a breath. *All right, Cali. You can do this.*

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine my magic hovering around me, always there, always available, even if I wasn’t using it. I pulled in another breath and imagined that magic bundling together between my hands.

I tilted sideways and had to snap my eyes open to keep from falling. Okay, maybe I wasn’t one hundred percent just yet. I closed my eyes again, focusing on the magic gathering between my hands, and pictured the way my grandfather had instructed me before. Pictured him watching me, encouraging me—

My mom gasped, and I opened my eyes. Floating light swirled between my hands. My jaw dropped. I’d made a shield! “I’m doing it!”

“*Cali?*” Artemis’s voice cut through the air, and my concentration shattered.

In a blur of light, the shield transformed into a fireball, flew out of my grasp, and collided with the shed, knocking the door loose and setting it on fire.

I raced over to put out the flames. “Oh shit! Now I’m pretty glad we didn’t do this inside.”

I stomped on the fallen door to put out the embers. I’d managed to avoid a full-on blaze, but there was no fixing the damage I’d already done.

Artemis jogged over. “What was that?”

I wiped the ash from my shoes onto the grass and sighed, slumping my shoulders. “It was *supposed* to be a shield.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself,” my mom said as she approached. “Harnessing such magic takes time and practice.”

My sister frowned. “Shouldn’t Cali be resting?”

“Why does everyone keep suggesting that? I’m fine! And I’m trying to practice a technique I learned while I was in tea land.”

“Oh?” Artemis’s expression shifted from concerned to excited. “Well, like our mother said, practice makes perfect. You should try again!”

I, on the other hand, wasn’t feeling quite so enthusiastic. “What’s Xavier going to say when he sees the shed? This is just one more project for Phil.”

“You don’t have to do anything if you’re not feeling up to it,” my mom began.

“No, I want to do it. I know I can do it.” I pulled in a deep breath. “Artemis, Mom, stand back.”

I concentrated again and went through the same visualization process—it went faster this time, and before I knew it, that power gathered and swirled outward in front of my hands.

Artemis’s eyes widened. “Amazing. I wonder how effective it is? Perhaps we should test it.”

Almost all of my focus was going into keeping the shield under control. I didn’t even look away from the magic as I asked, “How?”

She plucked a stone off the ground. “If it’s a shield, it should stop this.”

Without warning, she threw the stone right at me.

I screamed and ducked. The stone hit the shield, bounced off, and smashed through the shed’s window.

Artemis whistled. “Wow. When I get my magic back, you’re going to teach me.”

I carefully let the shield dissipate and then glared at her. “You threw a rock at me!”

She shrugged. “Better to test it here than in battle.”

“I think we’ve done enough practice for one day,” my mom said. “Let’s go inside.”

“Sounds good.” I heaved a sigh, suddenly even more tired than I’d been when I forced myself out of bed.

Artemis fell into step with us as we headed back to the house.

“How did you learn to make that shield, anyway?” she asked.

I explained my encounter with our grandfather in tea land. “He taught me.”

Artemis stopped short. “Did you ask him about Kadmos?”

**Episode 2301**

GREYSON

A loud *boom* echoed outside the pack house, and I rushed to the window. *What the hell?*

To my surprise, nothing seemed out of place, except the shed in the distance looked a little worse for wear. And where I’d been half-expecting to encounter complete chaos, I just saw Cali, Orla, and Artemis, heading toward the house. What had they done? The shed was still standing, so whatever it was it couldn’t have been too terrible, but even so I had to know what they were up to.

What was Cali doing outside, anyway? She was supposed to be resting. I scanned her face. She looked… tired. In more ways than one. My heart lurched, and I quickly scanned the faces of her mother—tension—and Artemis—who looked just plain pissed off.

I could hazard a guess at the reason for Cali’s fatigue, but beyond that, I was out of my depth.

I stopped them as they stepped into the house. “Cali, what were you doing out there? You’re supposed to be resting.”

“I was just trying out some magic. Before I forgot the technique I learned in tea land.”

I frowned. “I know using magic can make you feel weak—maybe it wasn’t the best idea to jump right into a practice session right after drinking that tea?”

Artemis gave Cali a pointed look and then headed upstairs without another word to me, or her sister and mother.

*What’s going on there?*

Orla cast a worried glance at Cali. “Speaking of tea, maybe you should have a cup of chamomile and get some rest?”

Cali grimaced. “No tea. I’ve had more than enough. And how many times do I have to say I’m feeling much better before you all believe me?”

She immediately burst into a set of jumping jacks, raising her brows at me as if to say, *See?*

“Okay, you’ve made your point.” I caught her arm. “Are you really feeling better? I was so worried about you, and I don’t want to take any chances.”

“I’m *fine*,” she said emphatically.

Orla glanced from my face to her daughter’s and cleared her throat. “I’m going to check on Tom. See if he needs anything.”

It was painfully obvious that Orla was making an excuse to leave so I’d be able to talk to Cali alone. As awkward as it was to watch her excuse herself from the conversation, I appreciated it. When I’d first met Orla, things between us hadn’t been so great.I was pretty sure she hadn’t trusted me as far as she could throw me, but that clearly wasn’t the case anymore. Pride swelled in my chest. Orla’s support boded well for the day Cali would choose me as her mate.

I turned my focus back to my mate, who still looked a hell of a lot more tired than I liked to see. I wanted to pull her into my arms, but I didn’t dare risk making her feel sick. The nausea I could deal with, but not the revulsion. Not from Cali.

I cleared my throat. “Now that your mom isn’t here, tell me the truth—are you really feeling better?”

She smiled. “I am. And I’m getting even better by the minute.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I want you to be one hundred percent when we go to see Lucian.”

“That’s not until tomorrow. That’s plenty of time to recover completely—”

“Not anymore.” I shook my head. “We’re going to see him today.”

“*What?* Why?”

“I’ve had enough of waiting for Lucian to do whatever he’s doing over there in that palace. We need answers—now—and we need to put an end to this curse business once and for all. It was bad enough when you had one handprint, but two?” I blew out a breath. “As far as I’m concerned, Lucian has a lot to answer for, and I intend to hold him accountable.”

Cali winced. “I get where you’re coming from, but you might want to work on your pitch. I’m not convinced that argument’s going to make Lucian want to help.”

“I don’t care. We’re grasping at straws. I mean, just look at what happened to you earlier.”

“We’re trying our best—”

“Exactly my point! ‘Our best’ is you drinking Fae drug tea and hoping for some kind of revelation. That’s not even remotely good enough. So, Lucian’s gonna get off his ass and fix this.”

“What about preparing for the ritual? He said he needed time, and the ritual had to take place beneath a new moon, and—”

“Screw Lucian’s preparation. Screw whatever moon cycle we’re in. You’re hurting, and that has to stop.” I gently took her by the shoulders, watching her face for anything resembling pain or disgust. “But you do have a choice here—we’ll only move forward with the ritual if you feel ready.”

“I-I-I’m not sure.” She shook her head. “I was trying to mentally prepare myself, and I thought I had another day to do that. But now you’re saying we need to go now… It’s all moving so fast.”

I sighed. I wanted nothing more than to kiss her, to assure her that everything would be okay and that she had nothing to worry about. But I didn’t want to risk triggering any more revulsion. I reluctantly let go of her shoulders and stepped back. “I’m waiting to hear from Xavier before making a final decision.”

She straightened, blinking up at me. “Xavier?”

“I sent him ahead to give Lucian a heads-up.”

Her brows lifted. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? I’m pretty sure Xavier hates Lucian. He can’t be thrilled to be making another house call.”

“Hating Lucian is an easy thing to do,” I conceded. “But I thought it would be best to at least pretend to show some respect, hence the notice that we’llbe coming to do the ritual today. Otherwise, we would have just shown up at his doorstep.”

“Well thank god we didn’t try that approach.” She rolled her eyes. “He never would have agreed to help me if we did that.”

I wasn’t so sure. Lucian seemed to have a soft spot for—or, more accurately, a certain fascination with—Cali. The so-called prince might take all the pleasure in the world in telling me and Xavier no, but I had a feeling he wouldn’t turn Cali away in her time of need.

In fact, I was betting on it.

I hated the way Lucian looked at her, but at least we could leverage that interest to get Cali the help she needed.

I forced a smile. “I hope you can trust me. I want to be able to put this curse stuff to rest. Why wait any longer?”

Her frown disappeared. “Of course I trust you. I didn’t expect we’d be dealing with it all today on top of everything else,” she said again.

“I know it’s a lot to deal with, but it’s too risky to wait any longer. So… will you come to the Vanguard palace with me? Are you ready to do the ritual?”

Cali hesitated at first, and I was terrified that we’d have to wait a whole additional day before getting her some help. Then, after taking a deep breath, she nodded. “Let’s do it—as long as Lucian says it’s okay.”

“Oh, he will.” I knew I could trust Xavier to make sure of that. He wouldn’t let Cali down.

I glanced out at the yard and then back at Cali. “Why were you practicing your magic? I hope it wasn’t because you plan on fighting the Vanguards?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t want to forget the technique my grandfather showed me. Everything from tea land is still pretty hazy, so I wanted to make sure I practiced it before I lost it. But now that you mention it,” she added, “a magic shield will come in handy if things with Lucian don’t go as planned.”

“Um, no. If things go sideways, you’re not fighting.”

“But I can—”

“I know you *can*, but I want you to leave the combat to the more experienced members of the group: Xavier, Artemis, and me.”

Her face fell. “I’m not sure if Artemis is going to want to come anymore.”

“Why not?”

“She’s upset because I didn’t ask our grandfather about Kadmos, Artemis’s father.” She sighed. “I would have, but I was still trying to process just being in that place and seeing my dead grandfather for the first time in my life, and I just wasn’t thinking clearly. It definitely wasn’t intentional.”

I nodded. “I’m sure it wasn’t. Artemis is probably just upset. She’s clearly been thinking a lot about her father lately, and she’s planning that trip to New Orleans to find her uncle. But I’m sure once she calms down, she’ll see you didn’t do anything to hurt her. Not on purpose.”

At least, I certainly *hoped* Artemis would see reason. I couldn’t afford to go into this thing with Lucian without her support.

“Maybe I should talk to her,” Cali mused.

“Why don’t you give her some space? You’ve still got to take care of you, remember?”

“I know.” She rubbed her face. “I haven’t been able to stop worrying.”

“About what?”

“Greyson, what if we can’t break the curse?”

I shook my head. “We’re not leaving that moon boy’s palace until those handprints are gone.”

“That’s not what I meant.” She swallowed roughly. “What if we can’t break the revulsion curse? How can we stay mated if we can’t stand to be with each other?”

**Episode 2302**

XAVIER

I raced through the woods in my wolf form, heading for the Vanguard palace. Despite my *many* objections, Ava ran right alongside me. She refused to be left behind.

I’d told her to fuck off, and I wanted her to stay at the pack house. Or, better yet, it’d be great if she’d crawl back into whatever dark hole she’d crawled out of and never show her face again.

But my wolf stirred inside me, savoring her nearness as we ran through the forest. He wanted her here. He still thought she was his mate in some twisted way.

And, just like that, the wolf inside me won this round.

If I didn’t win the next one, there would be hell to pay.

I mind linked with Ava. *Once we get to the palace, I’ll do all the talking. Since you’re still here, keep your mouth shut so we don’t make a bad situation even worse, got it?*

Her voice slipped through my mind, and my wolf nearly hummed in delight. *Yes, I understood the first two times you reminded me. Would it kill you to have a little faith in me?*

I scoffed. Ava talking about faith—now there was an oxymoron. It was laughable. Unless she was talking about bad faith, in which case she probably could have written a book on the subject. All the different ways to betray people, to lie and lie and lie until you’re physically incapable of telling the truth.

At least she was a good fighter. That was literally the only reason I was allowing her to come along—my wolf and its idiotic feelings for her aside. If things didn’t go well when I told Lucian we were moving the ritual up a day, at least Ava would have my back.

*Hell, maybe if I’m lucky, Ava will get killed in the fight.*

That would sure as shit make my life easier. No more old mate bond bullshit. Plus, my wolf and I could share a clear conscience for the first time in far too long.

And then I could put all of my focus on Cali—exactly where it belonged.

*While we’re on the topic of faith*, I added, *no matter what happens, we’re not going to fall under whatever spell or spiked drink the princeling used on us last time.*

I heard the surprise and amusement in her voice, and it made my teeth grind together.

*You mean when we kissed?* she asked. *Funny, we weren’t under the influence of any spell or drugged cocktail when you shoved your tongue down my throat back at the pack house. Or when you called me to your room last night.*

I flashed back to those heated moments with my former mate, and disgust and longing coursed through me in equal measure. My wolf was going to drive me up the goddamn wall. All of those close calls were his doing—not mine.

I didn’t want Ava, and clearly I’d have to do a hell of a much better job getting that point across. I’d keep my wolf in line, but one thing was certain: there would be no more close calls.

A short time later, the palace finally came into view.

*I’ll do the talking*, I reminded her again.

*Like I could possibly forget. You’re all talk, no action.*

My vision went red, but I didn’t have time to respond. Mostly because a group of wolves descended on us, and my top priority very quickly became survival.

Ava and I split the group up, each of us taking on two wolves at once. I ducked and wove and clawed and bit, doing my best to dodge each wolf’s blow and land a few hits of my own. A few feet away, a wolf cried out in pain—but it wasn’t Ava.

My own wolf was glowing with pride. I could practically hear him in my ear. *Look at my strong mate.*

*Keep it in your pants*, I snapped at my wolf. *She killed our mother, remember that?*

One of the wolves stepped back and shifted back to human. Clearly, he wanted to talk.

“You’re trespassing on Vanguard property,” he said. “You must either retreat now, or die.”

*Hard pass.* I glanced at the four guards and did a little mental math. It seemed to me there was a third option here—all of these guards could die instead. Fewer Vanguard pack members would make the world a much better place. On the other hand, it might piss Lucian off if we took out his guards, and we still needed the bastard to make good on his offer to help Cali.

*Looks like it’s their lucky day.*

I mind linked with Ava, who was ready to rip one of her attackers a new esophagus. *Stop. Don’t make a move. Not yet.*

Then a familiar voice cut through the forest. “Stand down.”

I recognized that voice. *Great. Now the whole fucking gang is here.*

Andrei strolled into sight in his human form, his hands tucked into his pockets. “I do have to wonder what these Redwoods are doing so far from home.” The bastard smirked. “Did you get lost?”

I released my attackers, and Ava did the same.

I shifted so I could speak. “We came to see Lucian.” I eyed the gigantic mansion, just beyond the tree line. “Is he around?”

Andrei shrugged. “I suppose that depends.”

*Fucking prick.*

I was done taking other people’s shit today. I’d already had more than my fair share—having Greyson order me here, having Ava tag along, facing down these guards, and now I had to deal with the princeling’s little general?

*Okay, maybe he’s not so little. But still.*

“I don’t have time to play games. I’m going to talk to Lucian, one way or another.”

“Then you should have called ahead,” Andrei said. “You guys do know what a phone is, right? You keep making all these uninvited house calls, like it’s the nineteenth century. If I hadn’t come, my guards might have killed you.”

I scoffed. “Right. I’m terrified. And if you don’t want us making house calls, next time you might consider giving up a single goddamn phone number. It’d make all of this so much easier.”

Andrei glanced at Ava. “Why are you here? You’re not his mate. You’re not even in his pack.”

My wolf growled at the slight, and Ava shifted to human and crossed her arms over her chest. “That’s what you think.”

“Enough,” I snapped at her. Then I turned to Andrei. “Take us to Lucian. Now.”

Finally, he seemed to get the message through his thick skull, and he led us up the sweeping staircase to the house and through the front door. Ava and I followed, passing through long hallway after long hallway until we reached what looked like a dining hall.

Lucian was seated at one end of a long table with formal place settings. A feast large enough to feed at least ten werewolves was spread out in front of him. Aysel was seated at the opposite end of the table, and her brows rose in curiosity as Andrei ushered us in.

“Xavier Evers and Ava Reed.” Lucian popped a grape into his mouth. “To what do we owe this pleasure? This… unannounced pleasure.”

I wanted nothing more than to rip the leg off of the huge turkey in the center of the table and beat the princeling with it, but I managed to contain myself.

I did, however, go for the blunt approach. “We’re not waiting for your ceremony. We want this Seluna stuff to stop.”

Lucian’s eyes narrowed as he seemed to mull over this change of plans.

Aysel frowned. “Why didn’t Greyson come?”

I bristled. I wasn’t about to admit that I was basically Greyson’s messenger boy. Besides, I wasn’t doing this for Greyson. I was doing it to help Cali. “He had pack matters to attend to first.”

“I don’t understand,” Lucian finally said. “We already agreed to hold the ceremony tomorrow. We’re still preparing for it.”

I laughed. “By stuffing your face?” Yeah, they looked *real* busy right now.

“It is lunchtime, is it not? I don’t know how you do things in the Redwood pack, but even monarchs must nourish themselves.”

“I don’t care.” I shrugged. “I came here to tell you. I’m not asking. I’ll be back with Cali tonight, and I expect you to do whatever you can to end this Seluna stuff.”

I half-expected him to throw some kind of temper tantrum at the lack of respect, but he just looked grave. “There is no guaranteed outcome. Ultimately, whatever does happen will be decided by Seluna herself.”

*Well, that sounds like a barrel of nonsense.*

But then again, *all* of this Seluna stuff sounded like nonsense. I wouldn’t have been here, wouldn’t have given two shits about it, if this magic hadn’t been affecting Cali.

“Sure, Seluna will decide. Whatever. But it’s happening *tonight*. I hope you don’t have a problem with that.” I narrowed my eyes. “So, can you do this or not?”

**Episode 2303**

Greyson looked like I’d just slapped him. My stomach clenched.

*I’m a terrible person.*

But I couldn’t *not* ask. I mean, if we were doomed to never be able to touch each other for the rest of our lives, what kind of future could we even have? I loved him, and he was my mate, but we couldn’t go on like this forever.

Would the curse outlast our mate bond?

He pulled in a breath and looked like he was going to reach for me before dropping his hands at his sides.

*Right. Now you get it.*

“Cali, you can’t think that way. Our mate bond has carried us through so much already. It’s stronger than any curse out there.”

He slowly reached out again and took my hand, watching my face. I did the same with him—touching hands seemed okay, but I worried that one day we wouldn’t even have that.

Greyson’s eyes bored into mine. “You have to believe that. You have to believe that our bond is strong enough to carry us through this. That whatever this curse is, our bond is stronger.”

I wanted to believe it—more than anything. But I couldn’t shake the terror, the dread. The revulsion was too strong to ignore. It wasn’t something we could just live with, so how could we possibly be together?

And yes, we’d tried to find a way around it, and… it had been fun. Exhilarating. Sexy in a way I’d never thought possible. But it wasn’t the same as actually being together. As actually getting to touch Greyson, to feel him against me and around me and inside me. And ever since we’d been struck by this damned curse, I’d felt the mate bond drawing me toward Greyson even more than usual. Like it was taunting me. Reminding me of everything I wanted but couldn’t have.

He lifted my chin. “I need you to imagine something for me.”

“Okay?”

“Imagine I’m kissing you,” he said softly, his voice low and thrumming with longing. “Imagine that the curse is gone. Think of all the times we’ve been together in the past—use those memories whenever you’re filled with doubt.”

A sea of memories washed over me—Greyson kissing me, touching me. Loving me, physically and otherwise. All the times he’d taken my breath away with his touch. All the times he’d proven just how much he cared about me, respected me. The memories were intoxicating, and they made me want him even more.

I stared into his eyes as realization set in. “You’re right. We’ve been through so much. I should never have doubted us.”

His eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled. His shoulders dipped in relief. “Good.”

“I wonder if the Vanguard pack has a witch… Maybe we can ask Lucian to summon her? Isn’t that what princes do? Summon people?”

“I’m not convinced he’s a prince, but if Aysel is using a witch, Lucian should know about it.” He twined our fingers together again. “But the first thing we need to focus on is you and the handprints. I know that’s going to be hard.”

“Understatement.” I scoffed. “I’ve never wanted to kiss you and be with you more than I do right now.”

Greyson gave me one of his classic sly smiles. “But just imagine what it’ll be like when we can finally be together.”

Heat rushed into my cheeks. Oh boy, could I imagine it. My mind ran wild from one scenario to the next, all of them starring Greyson and me and our determination to make up for lost time. In almost no time at all, my mind slipped from one toe-curling fantasy to the next, and Greyson had to squeeze my hand to pull me back to reality.

“Maybe you should rest, love.”

*Right. Like I can possibly rest right now! You get me all worked up and then expect me to just power nap or something?*

I shook my head, my cheeks still hot enough to warm the entire pack house. “I don’t need to rest. In fact, I couldn’t *possibly* rest right now. There’s so much going on. Plus, I really need to clear things up with Artemis.”

“Fair enough. Just… take it easy, okay?” He leaned in to kiss me and then stopped short. “Oops. I’d better leave before I accidentally make you sick. I’ll let you know the moment I hear back from Xavier.”

I nodded. “I hope he’s okay.”

I didn’t like the idea of anyone—any of us—going to the Vanguard palace. Way too many strange things had happened there. I wouldn’t even be going there at all if I had literally any other choice. The Fae tea had been our last non-Lucian hope, and look where that had gotten us.

Being able to make a shield was cool and all, but it didn’t put us any closer to solving this Seluna issue. Plus, it was now a reason for Artemis and me to be on the outs.

*Speaking of*…

I headed upstairs and found Artemis sitting on her bed, cleaning her crossbow with single-minded focus. Or maybe she just didn’t want to talk to me.

Well, if it was the latter, too bad. Because we were going to talk.

“Artemis, I’m sorry I didn’t think to ask Innes about Kadmos.” I didn’t bother with excuses. I knew there was no excuse that would be acceptable to her, that would make my oversight seem like less of a betrayal. “I know how important it is for you to learn about your father, and if I could do it all over again, I would ask Innes about Kadmos right away. I swear it.”

My sister didn’t say anything. She just kept polishing the sharp tip of a crossbow bolt.

I heaved a sigh and took a seat beside her. Okay, maybe this was gonna take more than an apology. “I really am sorry. I just… I wasn’t thinking straight. Clearly. Everything was so surreal in that trance, or whatever it was. I didn’t know what to do, what to think. And your questions about Kadmos, they just… They honestly didn’t occur to me. But I really wish they had. I wish I’d done better by you.”

She sniffed. “I should have known it was too much to expect you to think of me.”

“That’s not fair.” I frowned. “I *did* think of you. I even mentioned you to our grandfather. I told him that we were training together.”

She grunted. “Don’t worry about it. It’s fine.”

Except it really wasn’t. I knew from her tone that we were far from fine.

My sister could be a closed book when it suited her, and just now, the book had slammed shut.

An awkward silence filled the space between us before Artemis held up the unloaded crossbow and looked down the sight line. She pulled the trigger a few times. I wasn’t sure why.

“You’re going to have to teach me how to do that shield thing,” she finally said.

“I will!” I’d give her anything she asked for if it meant us not fighting anymore. “Or, at least, I’ll try. Obviously, there are a few kinks to iron out. I wonder what Xavier’s going to say about the shed.”

A soft knock sounded at the door, and our mother poked her head into the room. “Hey. I wanted to see how my girls were doing.”

“I’m fine.” Artemis stood up, scooping up a handful of crossbow bolts, and shouldered her bow. “I’m going to get in some target practice.”

She brushed past our mother and headed downstairs without another word to either of us.

My mom sighed then turned her gaze on me. “Are you doing all right? I thought you were resting?”

I blew out a breath. “Why does everyone keep telling me to rest? How am I ever going to prove myself as a fighter if all I do is lie around?”

My mom’s eyes widened, and immediately I was hit with a wave of guilt.

“I’m sorry. I’m just frustrated,” I said. “With what happened between me and Artemis, with the *due destini*, the handprints—all of it. I don’t want to rest. I want to fix things.”

She smiled and took a seat next to me on the edge of the mattress. “Artemis has a stubborn streak. She’ll come around when she’s ready—and not a single minute earlier.” She pulled me into a side hug. “I know you’re always trying to help.”

I shook my head. “This is different. I’m trying to fix myself. I’m so tired of being cursed.”

“I hope you don’t feel like you’re always cursed, because you’ve been nothing but a blessing to me.”

I smiled back at my mom.

My cellphone rang, breaking the moment. I checked the screen. An unknown number. Probably just a spam call.

But then I remembered—that was exactly what I’d thought when Steinar had called.

I accepted the call. “Steinar?”

“No. It’s me.” Xavier’s voice filled the line. “Lucian’s agreed to see us tonight.”

**Episode 2304**

ARTEMIS

I lined up the sights on my crossbow with one of the targets I’d placed in the yard, took a deep breath, and then pulled the trigger.

The bolt embedded itself in the target, four inches to the left of center. Like the six other bolts I’d sunk into the target, it had come close to the bullseye, but not close enough.

This was nowhere near the precision I was capable of—hell, the precision that I was practically known for. I’d built my reputation as a bounty hunter in the Fae world on my inability to miss a target. And after the battle against the rebel hunters, my reputation here in the human world was looking pretty stellar, too.

Except now I was blowing it all because I couldn’t land *one fucking hit*.

With a series of jerky movements, I pulled another bolt out of my quiver and jammed it into the crossbow, lifted the bow, glanced down the sight line, and pulled the trigger.

This time, the bolt didn’t even touch the target. It went flying out into the forest, landing gods only knew where.

“Shit,” I growled under my breath.

I’d thought target practice would help me feel better, but clearly I was too distracted. Now it was only pissing me off even more. At first, I’d been annoyed because Cali had allowed herself to just get swept away by Greyson, as usual, and we hadn’t been able to talk more about why she hadn’t asked our grandfather about Kadmos.

But just now, when we *had* talked, even that had fallen short. She’d basically just admitted that she wasn’t even thinking about my search, despite everything I was doing to find my father. To learn whether or not he was truly alive.

And she couldn’t even *ask*?

I grabbed another bolt, loaded it, and raised my bow. My hands were shaking with the force of my anger.

My finger rested on the trigger, but I didn’t pull. I just held it there for a moment. Breathing.

I lowered the bow.

The last time I was this upset, this disappointed, was when I’d lost my magic.

*And there’s just another example of a family member screwing me over.*

As soon as I thought it, guilt curdled in my stomach. No, that wasn’t right. My mother hadn’t been trying to hurt me, and I knew she was sorry. Just like Cali was sorry. Just like she hadn’t been trying to hurt me either.

I heaved another breath. Given how she’d described her trip to “tea land,” it truly sounded like the experience had been overwhelming for her. And perhaps I wouldn’t have maintained my focus either, had the tables been turned.

*But still! Cali knows how much any information about Kadmos means to me*.

If she’d just asked our grandfather if he knew whether or not Kadmos was dead, a simple yes or no, things would be so much simpler! Or whether Adair was in the human world—*something*. Just one tiny bit of useful, actionable information.

I disengaged the bolt, slid it back into my quiver, shouldered my crossbow, and headed to the target to gather the bolts. I didn’t bother looking for the one that had flown into the forest.

I headed back into the house and climbed the stairs. In the kitchen, Torin was doing some activity or another in preparation for Christmas, but nothing sounded worse than pretending to be cheerful right now.

Alone time would be good. Or, better yet, a chance to vent to Rishika. That was just what I needed.

As if my thoughts had conjured her, I passed Rishika on my way up the stairs. She was going down.

“Where are you headed?” I asked.

She brushed a kiss over my cheek. “Patrol.”

I sighed. “Really?”

Now that my girlfriend was right in front of me, snuggling up to her sounded like the perfect thing. Just what I needed to turn my mood around.

I tugged at the bottom of her shirt and offered my most pleading look. “Can’t you skip it?”

“Unfortunately not.” She laughed and gently pried my hands from the bottom of her shirt. “With Greyson trying to go to the Vanguard pack tonight, I’m in charge of the patrols and the house’s security.”

My brows raised. “Wow. Look at you!”

Rishika grinned, but the tension in her face told me she wasn’t nearly as at ease as she was pretending to be. She always seemed indestructible, unflappable, but I knew her well enough to tell when she was nervous and trying to hide it.

“You’ll do great,” I said with a smile. “Just like you always do. But come back as soon as you can, okay? I need love.”

She laughed again and moved to the step just below mine, cupping my face. “That, I can provide.”

Her lips descended on mine, plush and warm and demanding. Before I knew it, I was lost in the kiss, in the taste of her mouth, and my fingers started inching their way beneath her shirt.

She broke away with a happy sigh.

I groaned again. “Really?”

“As sexy as you are with a crossbow strapped to your back, I really do have to go.”

I sighed. “Just be careful, okay?”

“I’m always careful.”

As I watched her descend the stairs and walk out of the house, that old frustration itched just beneath my skin.

What the hell was I supposed to do now? I didn’t want to just mope around, but I wasn’t ready to go to sleep either. Restlessness pulsed through my limbs, urging me toward… something. I just didn’t know what.

I stalked up the stairs, heading to my room. I just couldn’t seem to shake the image of Cali meeting our grandfather. The idea that he might know whether or not Kadmos was alive. At this point, Fae tea and a visitation with the dead were our best leads.

*Can Cali go back to see him? To ask?*

I frowned. I doubted Cali would want to go back to “tea land.” Besides, she was probably busy preparing for the moon ritual. She needed to save her strength.

I stopped outside my bedroom door, my hand on the doorknob.

*I could do it. I could drink the tea and try to find out the truth for myself. Mom made plenty of that tea—certainly enough for me to have a cup. So what’s stopping me?*

*Nothing.*

I turned on my heel and rushed back downstairs, glancing around as I stepped into the kitchen.

Torin was moving around the kitchen counter, labeling each plate of cookies he’d made. They smelled delicious, but I wouldn’t let anything distract me.

“What happened to the Fae tea?” I asked.

He pointed to a small tea pot on the stove. “It’s there. Maybe we should just toss it, since Cali didn’t have the best reaction to it.”

“Cali’s fine now. She was outside practicing magic not too long ago. My mother asked me to save it,” I lied. I poured the remainder of the cold tea into a mug. “Thanks.”

Torin didn’t respond as I carried the tea upstairs. Even cold, it was aromatic, and it smelled pretty good.

*Hopefully it tastes as good as it smells.*

Once in my room, I closed the door behind me. Should I lock it? No, that might cause unnecessary alarm. Besides, visiting tea land wasn’t dangerous. And I was full Fae. Whatever reaction Cali had experienced probably wouldn’t affect me.

I sat down on the bed and took a deep breath. I didn’t have the slightest clue if this would work, but I couldn’t shake the question of who I would see if it did.

Cali had mentioned that I was training her, so Innes had to know I existed. *Did he say anything about me?*

*What if I see Kadmos? What will I ask him? If he’s dead… What can he really provide for me? Would he even want to meet me?*

I blew out a breath and shook my head. No more questions.

I chugged the tea down in one go and set the cup on my nightstand. It actually tasted pretty good—just with a slightly bitter aftertaste.

I lay back on my bed, trying to regulate my breathing. Almost immediately, I felt myself beginning to drift off. Thoughts of my father clung to my mind as I lost consciousness.

*I just want answers. Is that so much to ask? I need to make sense of everything…*

When I opened my eyes, I was in a dark, silent forest.

*Well, that worked.*

I shivered and looked up at the one source of light—the moon shining above.

“Hello?” I called out. “Is anyone there? Kadmos?”

Footsteps sounded behind me, and I turned around, reaching for the crossbow I no longer had. *Shit, maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.*

I cleared my throat, trying to peer through the darkness. “Is that you, Kadmos? It’s me, Artemis.”

A voice sounded behind me. “I know exactly who you are.”

**Episode 2305**

GREYSON

My pocket buzzed with a text from Xavier.

*Game on.*

I smiled. Fucking finally. *Finally*, we could deal with this moon priestess stuff. We could free Cali from whatever the hell Seluna was doing to her, break the curse, and move on with our lives.

*Thank god for Xavier.*

This wasn’t a thought I had often, and not that long ago, it had been a thought I never would’ve imagined myself capable of having. But I was glad I’d sent Xavier, that he’d gone even though he clearly hadn’t wanted to. Not that he didn’t want to help Cali, but there was no missing the dirty looks he threw my way every time I gave him anything resembling an order.

Still, he’d put all that resentment aside and convinced Lucian to move the ritual to tonight. I was starting to think my brother was a better guy than I gave him credit for.

Maybe it wouldn’t be so impossible for Xavier to stay here while I was Alpha, after all. He could be my second-in-command…

*Okay, that actually* is *a pipe dream.* I shook my head. If Cali’s well-being wasn’t hanging in the balance, I was almost certain my brother would have told me where I could stick my orders.

But if he didn’t like taking orders from me, that was tough. I was the Alpha here, and that was the way it had to be.

My phone pinged again. It was Xavier.

*By the way, Ava tagged along. Couldn’t stop her.*

Groaning, I pocketed my phone. Why had he not done something to make her stay away? Ava of all people was more a liability than an asset.

Not dwelling on it for now, I raced through the house looking for Cali. She’d mentioned going to talk to Artemis, but her sister’s bedroom door was closed, and there weren’t any sounds coming from inside, so she wasn’t there. I found Cali in her bedroom with her mother.

“Good timing,” she said with a smile. “Xavier called said Lucian agreed to see us today. They made him use this fancy, archaic phone for some reason.”

Orla frowned. “You’re going now?”

Cali stood. “We have to take care of this. But don’t worry—Artemis is coming too.”

This only seemed to make Orla worry *more*. Her eyes widened, and she turned to spear me with her gaze. “Wait, *both* of my daughters are going to the Vanguard palace? I thought you said that place was dangerous?”

“Mom, it’ll be fine. I promise. Lucian, the prince of the Vanguard pack—or whatever—knows we’re coming, and he’s okay with it. In fact, he’s agreed to help. We’re not under any kind of threat from the Vanguard pack or Lucian, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

Cali’s mother seemed somewhat comforted, but worry was still etched into the lines of her face.

I stepped forward. “Orla, I promise I won’t let anything happen to either of your daughters.”

Cali headed toward the door. “I need to find Artemis. Does she even know we’re going a day early?”

I shook my head. “I didn’t want to tell her until the plan was finalized.”

“Guess I get to be the bearer of urgent news.” Cali grimaced. “It’s not like we fought earlier, or anything…”

She disappeared down the hallway, and I was moving to follow her when Orla caught my arm.

“Greyson,” she said, her expression somber. “I’m going to hold you to your word. I know Cali’s your mate, but my daughters mean the world to me.”

I swallowed. I got the message, loud and clear. “Got it.”

I made it about four steps into the hallway before I ran smack into Cali, who was running back from Artemis’s room. Her eyes were wide, and her face was pale.

My heart began to race. “What happened?”

“There’s something wrong with Artemis!” She grabbed my arm and pulled me into her sister’s room.

Artemis was sprawled out across her bed, dead to the world. I leaned over and scanned her face. “I think she’s just sleeping.”

“That’s just it. I can’t wake her up!”

I frowned. And then I picked up a familiar scent. I could smell it on her breath, and elsewhere in the room. I followed the scent back to a mug on Artemis’s nightstand.

“Isn’t that the Fae tea your mom made for you?” I asked.

Cali rushed over and picked up the mug. She sniffed it and gasped. “Artemis drank the tea! We have to wake her up!”

She vaulted onto the bed, straddling her sister, then shook Artemis so hard I swore I could hear her teeth clacking together.

“Wake up, Artemis! You have to wake up! Don’t go to tea land!”

I sighed. Well, this was just fucking great. I wasn’t really worried about Artemis. From what I understood, the tea was basically Fae LSD. Artemis might not feel too good when she woke up, but she’d be fine.

Cali and me meeting Xavier at the Vanguard palace *without* Artemis coming along as backup? That, I was worried about.

*Shit. I should have told Artemis that we might be moving up the ritual. Then she wouldn’t have drunk that tea and we wouldn’t be in this mess.*

I’d literally just promised their mother I wouldn’t let anything happen to her daughters, and now one of them was down for the count and the other was going into a dangerous situation a man—or woman—short. I’d been counting on Artemis’s bounty hunting skills to help get us through this. Now what?

One thing was certain: if Artemis was skipping off to la-la Fae land, I would have to rely on Ava, who was already at the palace. I didn’t know if that was something I could do.

“Artemis!” Cali cried. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, and tears shone in her eyes. “WAKE. UP!”

She slapped her sister’s face, and the sound echoed through the room. Still, Artemis didn’t wake. She was down for the count. That stuff was strong.

I winced. “Okay, love, that’s enough.” I scooped Cali off her sister, tightening my grip so she wouldn’t slip away.

*I really hope this doesn’t trigger the curse.*

“Cali, you need to calm down. Artemis will be fine. She just needs to sleep it off—just like you did. This won’t hurt her, remember?”

She stopped fighting. “I can’t just leave her here like this. Greyson, why did she do this?”

I set her down on her feet. “I don’t know. But we can’t stick around to babysit her. Why don’t you ask your mom to keep an eye on her while we’re at the Vanguard palace?”

She looked up at me in shock and anger, like I’d just suggested some terrible thing. “We can’t go without her!”

“We can.”

“But what about taking someone with us?”

I grimaced. “Ava… Ava went along with Xavier.” *And we don’t really have a choice about it.* “Just… go get your mom, okay? I’ll figure out the rest. It’ll be okay, all right?”

Cali gulped, but she nodded. Then she rushed off to get her mother, and I started to wrack my brain for a solution. Going to the Vanguard palace was risky enough, but to go in shorthanded? That was just begging for the whole thing to turn into a disaster.

I tried to remember what Cali had said to comfort Orla—Lucian had agreed to help us, and he hadn’t threatened us recently. Certainly not in regard to this moon ritual. Maybe there was nothing to worry about.

*Yeah, right.* I scoffed. *I’m the Alpha. There will always be something to worry about. Especially when it comes to Cali.*

Orla rushed in and immediately went for the mug at Artemis’s bedside.

“Why would she do this?” she asked. “Drink it all by herself without telling any of us?”

Cali sighed. “I think she wanted to talk to Grandpa—or maybe even to try to see her father. I hope she’ll be okay.”

Orla took a seat on the edge of the mattress. “I’ll stay with her. I’m sure she’ll be happy to see a friendly face when she wakes.” She looked at me. “Are you still planning on going to see the prince or whatever he is?”

“Yes. We’re expected. The sooner we deal with the moon priestess stuff, the better for Cali.”

I took Cali’s hand. She was still staring at her sister, looking absolutely devastated. Hopefully we’d get the answers we needed from Lucian. Then we’d all have one less thing to worry about.

“We should go,” I said.

Orla caught Cali in a hug. “Please be careful. Artemis will be just fine, so don’t worry about her, okay?”

I took Cali’s hand and led her to the door again. We didn’t have any time to waste. “We’ll be back as soon as possible.” I left it unsaid that I had no idea when that would be.

Cali grabbed her coat, and I led her out of the house in time to meet Rishika, who was just coming in from patrol.

Cali glanced up at me. “I know we need to go, but someone should tell Rishika about Artemis.”

“I will. I’m putting her in charge while we’re gone.”

I stopped Rishika on her way to the stairs and tried to quickly explain the situation. I wasn’t sure she quite got everything I said, because as soon as she heard about Artemis, she dashed up the stairs.

Rishika was smart and strong. She wouldn’t let the pack down.

I led Cali outside.

“I’m going to shift—it’ll be the fastest way.” Plus, if we ran into any trouble, I’d be better equipped to handle it as a wolf.

I was about to shift when Cali stopped me. “What if I can’t hold on to you? What if the revulsion kicks in?”

“I guess we’ll know right away. And if it does, we’ll have to drive.”

I shifted, and Cali hesitated before touching my fur and climbing onto my back.

I paused for a moment to savor the gentle heat and weight of her body on my back—and to make sure we weren’t going to be hit with a debilitating wave of disgust.

“I feel a little queasy,” Cali admitted.

I did too. *Hang in there, love, I’ll get us there.*

Cali wrapped her arms around my neck.

*Hold on, love*, I mind linked.

I started off at a slow trot before speeding up.

Whatever happened at the palace, I wasn’t going to let Cali out of my sight.

**Episode 2306**

MARTA

I had been wracking my brain about the situation and what I might be able to do about it all afternoon. My conversation with Violet had been interrupted by some pack members who were having a toilet overflow crisis and pulled Violet away to help, so I wasn’t able to get her take on it.

My determination was as strong as ever—if there was a way to reunite Lilac and Plum, I was going to find it. And make it happen for him. It’d make Lilac so happy to be one with his wolf again.

After I’d emerged from Bert’s house of horrors into a world I didn’t recognize, Lilac had been there for me. In some ways because he *had* to be there, what with me being anchored to him and all. But he’d helped me find my place in this new world, he’d helped me find a new purpose, and the real Marta—the one I’d thought I’d lost to years of Bert’s abuse. He’d taught me to live again, and after everything he’d done for me, I couldn’t just leave this alone. I couldn’t *not* try to make him at least somewhere close to as happy as he’d made me.

I looked down at my bracelets. With these on, there wasn’t a lot I could do, magic-wise. My hands were literally tied. But that didn’t mean I wasn’t going to try. I couldn’t help but feel a little responsible for them being apart—I’d pulled Lilac back from the spirit world, but I’d never thought of Plum. If I’d known this was going to happen, maybe I could have done something to bring them back as one.

I really needed to talk to Violet. I figured by this point the toilet crisis had to be resolved, so I set off to find her. It didn’t take me long to find her in one of the downstairs studies, reading alone.

I knocked on the open door. “Violet? Can we talk?”

Looking up from her book, she nodded, and I walked into the room and shut the door behind me.

“I thought about what you said before,” she started. “Marta… I don’t know. I want Lilac and Plum to be reunited. But how do we know it’s even possible at this point to bring them back together to where Lilac can shift again?”

I sat in the armchair next to her. “I know it might be difficult. But I still want to do something.” I had thought and thought and tried to come up with a potential solution. As a bridge, my powers lately seemed more of the “life and death and killing all the plants” variety. Even if the bracelets weren’t dampening my magic and the witches hadn’t essentially grounded me from using magic until my mentor arrived, I still wasn’t convinced *I* could be the one to fix this. “Do you think Dani might be able to help?”

Violet shrugged. “How could Dani help? By blowing up more cars?”

That seemed like a gross oversimplification of Dani’s abilities, but I could see where Violet was coming from. If Dani’s powers were limited to amplifying existing abilities, then we were still shit out of luck if we couldn’t find someone with the ability to reunite Lilac and Plum.

“I don’t know.” I sighed. “But I’m not gonna leave any stone unturned. We have to figure this out for him.”

“Marta, I appreciate everything you’ve done for my brother, and how much you clearly care for him, but aren’t you on probation for using your magic illegally? I thought just talking about this could get you in trouble?”

I shrugged. “I suppose it could, but it doesn’t matter, because I can’t use my magic anyway. There might be, I don’t know, *intent* or whatever, but it’s not like I can act on it.”

“Do you think your mentor would be able to help?”

“It’s possible.” It was probably too much to hope for, that my mentor would be willing to help me fix Lilac and Plum, but it was a tempting thought. “Whoever my mentor is will have to be a witch. Witches know things. Maybe they’ll know how to fix this. Or at least maybe they’ll be willing to teach me so I can reunite Lilac and Plum once my probation is over.”

Violet nodded. “It seems like it’s worth asking, at least. Though I’d suggest you talk to Jay about how much witch magic costs before you make any deals.”

I winced. “Fair enough.” How far would I really be willing to go to reunite Lilac and Plum? Would that be worth losing an eye? I’d have to think about that.

*Would Lilac still love me if I had to start wearing an eyepatch? Would he still look the same if I saw him with one eye instead of two?*

“Well, whatever you want to do,” Violet said, “I’m in. I can’t imagine living without my wolf. Lilac puts on a brave face, and I know that, all things considered, he’s just lucky not to be dead anymore. But I have to assume that deep down, it’s hurting him to be apart from Plum.”

Guilt tugged at my stomach. I knew it wasn’t logical. I knew that Violet was right, and that I’d given Lilac an amazing gift by bringing him back, but I couldn’t help wishing I’d done a better job. If I could go back and do it all over again, I’d do whatever it took to make sure Plum and Lilac were together again.

“Actually, now that I think of it,” Violet added, “we should probably run all of this by my brother before you embark on some crazy scheme.”

“Why?”

“Well, what if we’re wrong about Lilac? Maybe he’d rather not have you risk anything. Maybe he’s content to just have Plum as a playmate.”

I frowned. Judging by the way Violet talked about her own wolf, I couldn’t imagine any werewolf being content to keep their wolf as a pet and playmate. “What’s it like being with your wolf?”

She seemed to ponder on this for a moment. “I’m not sure I can answer that.”

“Why? Is it too personal or something?”

She shook her head. “No, it’s not that. It’s just… I’ve always been with my wolf. Being without her would be like being without my body. We can’t exist apart.” She shuddered a little at the thought. “I don’t even want to imagine it, honestly.”

I tried to picture what it would be like to have half of my soul—that was meant to be safely inside me—walking around outside my body in animal form. The closest I could come was trying to imagine an organ donor seeing someone else walking around with their transplanted organ.

So, no. My imagination didn’t even come close.

“I’ve never even seen Lilac shift,” I admitted. As much as I felt like I’d known Lilac forever, I hadn’t known him before he’d died—back when he and his wolf had shared one body and everything had been exactly the way it was meant to be. “I wonder what it would be like to see that.”

“It can be a powerful thing to witness.”

“I hope I’ll be able to see it someday.”

Violet smiled. “Well, you can’t do that without Lilac. So go talk to him.”

I nodded, then paused to think. The last time I’d seen him, Lilac had seemed to be having the time of his life playing in the yard with Plum. I thought that made him happy, but now I suspected that was a far cry from being able to shift into Plum. From having both halves of his soul inside one body.

“Thanks, Violet.”

“For what?”

“For hearing me out.” I smiled. “And for not telling me I’m crazy to want to try.”

“You’re not crazy. And I appreciate how much you care for my brother. Besides,” she added, “after all that drama with hunting hunters, I could use something away from the realm of bloody battles to the death.”

“I’ll keep you in the loop—and if you have any brilliant ideas, let me know.”

I headed off to look for Lilac.

I stopped pack members on my way through the house. “Have you seen Lilac?”

Sage shrugged me off. Torin muttered something about gingerbread cookies—clearly, he hadn’t been listening to me at all. In the end, Ravi was the helpful one.

“I saw him going outside,” he said.

I grabbed my coat and stepped out onto the porch. Lilac was in the yard again, playing with Plum. Of course. I should have known. Lilac and Plum were inseparable, it seemed, just not in the way they were supposed to be.

As I watched the two of them play, I tried to imagine Lilac shifting into the powerful wolf in front of me. Would I be scared at first? It was hard to think so. Plum wasn’t a small creature by any means, but I could never be afraid of Lilac.

Sure, he could be annoying, but in a cute kind of way.

*Maybe I’ll talk to Cali about it. Ask what it was like for her when she saw Xavier or Greyson shift for the first time.*

“Marta!” Lilac jogged over, a grin plastered to his face. “Plum and I were just getting some exercise.”

He kissed me, and for a moment I didn’t give a damn about any wolves. Then Plum came running up and huffed at us, very much like a puppy who wasn’t done with playtime.

“Plum, don’t be a pest,” Lilac said.

I stepped back to give them both some space. “Is it hard being with Plum but not, you know, having him back?”

Lilac frowned. “He *is* back.”

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it.”

“I mean, sure, it’d be great to have Plum back, but it’s not like there’s anything we can do about it.”

I shook my head. “We don’t know that. We really haven’t had time to look into it with everything else going on.”

He grinned. “Do you mean you getting hauled in front of the witch council, or battling with Letifer?”

My boyfriend was a master at avoiding hard questions. “Come on, Lilac. Be honest with me. What if we could reunite you with Plum? Is that something you’d want?”

“I don’t really want to think about it, to be honest. If I do, I might get hopeful. And until I know for sure that I can get Plum back, I don’t want to take that risk.”

I took his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “If I could figure out a way to do it, would you want me to?”

**Episode 2307**

XAVIER

I stared at the gold-embroidered cuff on the suit jacket Lucian had given me to wear.

*Fucking prince.*

Apparently I “wasn’t suitable for the table,” and Lucian had requested that I change into something more fitting. I wished it had occurred to me to bring some clothes along. Of course the hoity-toity Vanguard pack would be expecting fancy dress. For all I knew, they were going to try to dress me in a toga for their special moon ritual.

But instead of dressing in something that fit me—both in size and personality—I was wearing this navy blue, gold-embroidered monstrosity. I felt like I was trapped at a fucking costume party, dressed as a Disney prince.

And since Lucian was technically doing us a favor by moving the ritual up—and not, you know, trying to kill me for trespassing and making demands—wearing this monstrosity didn’t seem like the hill to die on.

A glanced across the table at Ava. She’d fared much better. Aysel had given Ava an outfit made to order and, of course, she just had to look amazing in it. My wolf thought so too. Never in my life had I told my wolf to go fuck himself, but I was coming close.

Desperate times, and all that.

Ava mind linked, her eyes meeting mine. *You looked so sexy when you were acting all Alpha with Andrei earlier. You should do it more often. Perhaps you can try it on Greyson?*

I heard the teasing challenge in her voice, and my wolf was ready to jump through whatever hoop she threw at him, the spineless bastard.

I pinned my former mate with my gaze. *Fuck. Off.*

I drummed my fingers against the table while the princeling stuffed his face just a foot away, oblivious to the slow-simmering rage threatening to boil over inside me. Or maybe he did notice but just didn’t care. Neither option boded particularly well for him.

Watching him eat was absolutely fucking maddening. Taking his small, civilized bites, using his dainty little silverware—oh, and he never forgot to dab at his mouth in between bites.

*Greyson owes me for this. Big time.*

The tension in the room was heading for a new high. Nobody spoke. And, other than a few furtive glances here and there, nobody seemed to be so much as acknowledging the others in the room. I kept checking the gilded clock on the wall.

Where the hell were Cali, Artemis, and Greyson? The Redwood pack house wasn’t *that* far away. Shouldn’t they have arrived by now?

I sure as shit didn’t want to be here. And I really didn’t want Ava here. If I had to venture a guess, I would dare to say that neither Aysel nor Lucian wanted us here either.

*The sooner Cali, Artemis, and Greyson arrive, the better.*

Lucian dabbed his mouth with his napkin before setting it aside and clearing his throat. “Xavier, may I offer you some refreshments while you wait? Perhaps some wine?” He gestured to the uncorked bottle on the table. “This is a lovely, full-bodied red culled from the finest grapes and overseen by my master vintner.”

“No, thanks.” Everything was beautiful, extravagant, and dangerous. Oh, and, in my experience, at least, the food and drink were all drugged. I didn’t trust a single drop of wine to pass through my lips, especially with Ava here. The very last thing I wanted was a repeat of the last time she and I had been here together.

“Xavier.” Aysel interrupted the silence. “Walk with me, won’t you?”

I hesitated, glancing at Ava, and she mind linked to me. *Go for it. You might learn something.*

Wasn’t this the exact scenario I’d told Ava we couldn’t get into? Being separated and isolated from each other? At the mercy of the moon goddess gang?

Aysel was halfway to the door before she realized I hadn’t moved. Her brows rose. “Are you afraid of me?”

It was an obvious taunt, but an effective one. I stood up. “Do I have reason to be?”

“Not at all.” She smiled as she linked our arms. “Come with me. I’ll show you my garden.” She leaned in. “Believe it or not, it’s currently in bloom.”

Seeing as how it was December, I’d go with *not*.

Aysel led me out of the dining room and down yet another hallway I didn’t recognize. With all the time I’d spent at this palace lately, I should really have known my way around by now.

Suits of armor flanked each side of the hallway, an array of knights presenting multiple shields, swords, and coats of arms. It was like stepping into some old-world museum.

Aysel must have noticed my gaze lingering on the knights. “This hallway was my brother’s idea. He fancies himself a warrior, though I think he’s far better suited to lording over parties.” She gave me a feral smile, daring me to either agree with her insulting assessment or defend her brother.

Neither option appealed, so I stayed silent. This little field trip with Aysel was already turning into a minefield, and we hadn’t even gotten to her garden yet. *Did I make a mistake, leaving Ava with Lucian?*

I wasn’t worried about Ava so much as I was worried about Lucian. If Ava did something to piss him off—or even worse, decided to rip the princeling to shreds—how would we be able to help Cali? I liked to think Ava was smart enough to not tug on that thread, but she was unpredictable, and a hell of a lot more dangerous than she looked.

We stepped into a glass-ceilinged room that looked like one of those old-fashioned conservatories. Instantly, my senses were consumed by an array of floral fragrances.

I blinked in shock, taking in the garden. “You were right. The garden is indeed in bloom.” Definitely a feat in December, an accomplishment along the lines of the impossible. At least, if Aysel didn’t have access to magic.

I thought back to Ava's suggestion. Maybe I *could* find out something useful*.* We’d been wondering whether or not Aysel had used a witch to cast that revulsion curse on Cali and Greyson—was a witch to thank for this garden too?

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Aysel said.

“What’s your secret? Do you have a special gardener? Maybe a witch helped these flowers keep their blooms?”

Aysel laughed. “Could it be I’m just a natural green thumb? Plants flourish around me. Some say it’s a gift. I think it’s because Seluna favors me.”

I could *not* put up with this bullshit any longer. “Let’s cut the cute stuff. Did you bring me out here to seduce me?”

She laughed again. Way harder than was strictly necessary. “You’re cute. But you’re not my type.”

“And Greyson is? What did you do to my brother?”

Her expression was all innocence. “I would have thought you’d be happy. That you’d be thanking me. You can’t possibly enjoy sharing your mate, and I can’t picture either of you Evers as swingers.”

“Let me make one thing clear,” I growled. “I will be Cali’s only mate. That’s not in question. But I want her to make that choice on her own.”

“You’re very sure of yourself. That’s an admirable quality, but it’s also foolish. What matters is where you end up, not how you got there.”

“You’re wrong.”

She shrugged. “Then we’ll have to agree to disagree.”

I blinked. Holy hell. *This* was the woman who’d cursed my brother. Who wouldn’t take no for an answer. Clearly, she was delusional and had no intention of joining the rest of us in reality.

I could see why Greyson wanted to get the curse over with—it was a little bit like my still-living mate bond with Ava. But at least Ava and I had a past and had shared a genuine mate bond at one point. And Ava was like a bad penny with her persistence, but she didn’t strike me as crazy.

Aysel, on the other hand, was just plain obsessed. And full of crazy-ass mumbo jumbo moon stuff.

“We need to get back,” I said. “My brother and Cali should be arriving any minute.”

“Good idea. I want to be there to welcome Greyson when he arrives.”

*And I’m sure he’s going to love that.*

She led me back through the labyrinthine hallways to the dining area, where Ava and Lucian were sitting exactly as we’d left them. Thank god, she hadn’t killed him.

Ava mind linked. *Did you learn anything?*

*Only that she’s obsessed with my brother. Which isn’t exactly news. Clearly she’s got poor taste.*

“Did you have a pleasant walk?” Lucian asked Aysel.

She took her seat. “It was very informative.”

“Very,” I agreed, though I privately thought the whole thing had been a huge waste of time.

*Where the hell is Greyson? I’m not sure how much more of this faux politeness I can tolerate.*

“Ava and I were just discussing Seluna,” Lucian said. “Apparently she is not a topic of discussion among the packs.”

“Why would she be?” I asked.

“It’s a pity, that’s all. The moon goddess can offer so much and yet ask for so little in return.”

I was spared the task of asking him to elaborate when a guard came in. “Prince Lucian, your guests are approaching the estate.”

*THANK GOD.*

Lucian stood, his eyes locked on the guard. “Make sure they receive the special welcome we’ve prepared for them.”

**Episode 2308**

ARTEMIS

I spun around to face whoever was standing behind me—

But there was no one there. Another chill ripped down my spine, and I turned on my heel, spinning in a slow circle in the dark, eerily silent forest.

I was all alone. And yet… I wasn’t. Because someone had just spoken to me. Someone who knew me.

Their voice had tugged at my mind with familiarity, but I couldn’t place it.

*Who was that? Could it be Kadmos?*

But… no. It couldn’t be him, right? I’d never even met my father, so how could I recognize his voice?

That meant it probably wasn’t Innes, either. So there went my plan of quizzing my dead grandfather on just how many of my other relatives were dead.

In the end—because standing here in the forest with no one around wasn’t exactly an insightful experience or a worthwhile use of my time—I headed in the direction I’d heard the voice come from.

Nobody was talking to me now, and the forest was still silent in the way that a forest never should be. No birds, no insects, no small creatures crawling about.

Another chill slipped down my spine.

I was entirely alone out here. The only sounds I heard now were the ones I made myself—mainly my footsteps, crunching on the forest floor. Even my breaths, which I tried to keep quiet, seemed deafening in the silence.

A breeze lifted my hair, and the sound of rustling leaves echoed around me. Some of the tension slipped out of my shoulders. Even the slight sound the breeze made offered a small dose of comfort. Made me feel not quite so alone out here.

Something small and fast swirled ahead of me, and after a moment I realized it was more leaves. They swirled in the breeze and began to glow faintly, gliding on the air until they joined together to form a figure. A person. And then another.

More leaves swirled in, adding to the picture until an entire scene began to play out before me. A woman screamed out in pain, and I recognized the voice before I saw her face glowing in the leaves.

It was my mother.

And she was giving birth.

Three midwives gathered around her, one pressing a cool cloth to her forehead, one holding her hand, and the other hunched between her legs.

“I need you to push for me, Orla,” one of the midwives said.

Sweat caked my mother’s hair to her brow. Her chest rose and fell, and her face was bright red. She looked exhausted, but still she pulled in a deep breath and pushed with all her might.

One of the midwives left her side to join the other between my mother’s legs. They were grabbing a baby. My mother’s eyes rolled back, and she slumped back onto the bed. Had she just passed out?

While one midwife wrapped the baby up and rubbed its back, the others rushed around my mother. Another midwife hurried in.

My gaze was riveted to the baby. Realization kicked me in the gut.

It was me. That baby was me.

The new midwife, with raven-dark hair cascading down her back, held out her arms. “Give the baby to me.”

I stared at the Fae woman’s face with wide eyes. Her eyes were crystal clear, and a pendant hung around her neck. She took the baby from the other midwife and seemed to be trying to get the baby—to get *me*—to breathe.

“This baby is stillborn,” the Fae woman said. “I’ll take her. No mother should have to see this.”

She rushed out of the room, leaving the three other midwives to care for my mother. I tried to run after her.

“No! I wasn’t stillborn! I’m alive!”

But she couldn’t hear me. Of course, she couldn’t hear me.

All I could do was watch as the woman stepped outside, into a raging blizzard. The baby opened her eyes and cried out, but the woman didn’t stop.

Then the leaves crumbled to the ground, the scene faded away, and I was left standing in the dark, silent forest once more.

I fell to my knees, breathing heavily. *Was that the woman who kidnapped me?*

Something about her face seemed so familiar, almost haunting. Like I knew her, like I’d always known her, but I’d forced myself to forget about her.

My fingers dug into the cold earth as I heaved another breath. Shock burned away, and fury poured in. My mother had been *right there*. She’d gone through so much. Clearly the labor hadn’t gone well. And that Fae bitch had just… taken me? Just grabbed me and made up some lie about my being stillborn and walked out with no explanation?

I couldn’t believe what I’d just seen happen. Why had that woman done that? Why take me from my mother the moment I was born? And for what? To abandon me as an orphan? Was it because of my parents? Because I was the daughter of two powerful Fae on opposing sides of the war?

Tears pricked my eyes. For the first time, I had a glimmer of understanding of what my mother must have endured when she’d woken up and been told her daughter was dead. And then had to spend the next twenty-three years believing that lie.

I’d thought I understood anger, but it was nothing compared to this, compared to the pure, white-hot fury that seared through me.

I looked around the forest. It was dark and silent once more.

“So that’s all you have to show me?” I called out.

Laughter sounded nearby. And just like that first voice, it was familiar. All the fine hairs on my skin rose to attention.

I knew, deep in my bones, that I wasn’t safe here. Not anymore.

*Was it like this for Cali too?*

I rose to my feet and stalked through the forest in the direction of the moon. If I followed the light, at least I’d have a better chance of seeing someone coming than if I stayed in the dark depths of the forest.

The wind shifted, and the moon began to shine even brighter in the sky, illuminating the foliage around me and the leaves that began to swirl through the air and glow once more.

This time, the scene they made was one I remembered. One I’d lived through, though I wished, deep in my bones, that I could forget it.

Through the magic of the leaves, I watched my own possessed self fighting Rishika. It had happened when I was possessed by Letifer, not so long ago.

*Why am I seeing this?*

Fear curdled in my stomach, and I couldn’t stop myself from flinching when possessed-Artemis struck a blow to the woman I loved. And Rishika… She was getting tired. I could see it in her face, in the way she fought with small, defensive moments designed to conserve energy, to endure, rather than to defeat.

“I remember this,” I whispered. I’d fought against Letifer with everything I had, but he’d been so loud in my head. I crumpled to my knees again. “Why are you showing me this?”

If watching my infant self being stolen had been painful, then this was agonizing. I hated to see myself like that—so weak, a dark, twisted thing trying to kill one of the people I loved most in the world. A sharp pain lanced through my skull, a muscle memory of what it had felt like to have Letifer digging around in my mind.

I covered my face with my hands, fighting off tears. This place wasn’t at all what I’d expected. This wasn’t what Cali had described. If only I’d known…

“You always were pathetic, weren’t you?”

That familiar voice echoed above me, and when I looked up, my muscles locked into place.

I did know that voice. I would never forget its owner, or all the marks he’d left on my soul.

The Kollector sneered down at me. “Why the long face?”

I stumbled back. *No! How is he here? Cali got to see our grandfather. Why would the tea show me the Kollector of all people?*

He stepped forward, closing that tiny bit of space I’d put between us. “Isn’t it funny how even when we die, we don’t really? I’ve seen what you’ve been doing, Artemis, and you’re still that same ruthless bounty hunter I raised you to be.”

I shook my head. “No. I’m not. I’m different. I’ve changed. I’ve found my family. I’ve found love.”

He threw back his head and laughed and laughed and laughed. So loudly it boomed in my ears and seemed to fill every inch of the forest.

“As if anyone could actually love you. I know what kind of person you are. The longer you’re around these people, the sooner they’ll see who you really are. You’re a cold-blooded killer at heart. You really think they’ll accept you for who you are? You’re useful to them, just like you were to me, but when they’re done with you, you’ll be alone again.”

“You’re wrong—”

He shook his head. “I’m not, though. Want to know why? Because I’ve seen it time and time again.”

I rushed him, fueled by desperate, helpless anger. To my shock, my hands made contact with his chest. He was really here. Right in front of me.

I rammed him into a tree, so upset I knew I could kill him right here and now. Cali had killed him before, but wasn’t that supposed to be my kill? I’d earned it.

The Kollector smiled. “Thinking about killing me? You’re just like me.”

“I’m not!” I hissed, and I slammed him against the tree again.

He wheezed out another laugh. “You can feel the anger, can’t you? Well? What are you waiting for?”

**Episode 2309**

I tightened my grip on Greyson’s neck as the Vanguard estate loomed nearer.

*Here it comes… The moment of truth. Can Lucian help me? Can we break the curse Aysel cast on us? Or are we doomed?*

Either way, I wasn’t exactly thrilled to be here, even if Lucian was perhaps the only person who could help me now. The Vanguard palace was their territory, full of magic and twists and turns. We’d spent so much time here lately, it felt a bit like we couldn’t escape.

I buried my face in Greyson’s fur and breathed in his scent. This was the closest we’d been since that stupid curse had been cast on us. I hated that this was the best we could do right now. The best we could seem to hope for.

*Just breathe, Cali.* I pulled in one deep breath after another, trying to have something resembling a moment of calm with my mate before whatever was about to happen happened.

Greyson stopped when we reached the gate, and I dismounted. He shifted back to human, and as if on cue, a guard stepped away from the gate and bowed.

“We’ve been expecting you,” the guard intoned. “Come right this way.”

Nerves fluttered in my stomach, and I pulled in another deep breath. Greyson gave me a comforting smile and took my hand, then we followed the guard up the winding road to the giant house.

“Are you all right, love?” he asked. “You have a choice. If you’re afraid, or if you no longer want to be here…”

I appreciated the sentiment, but I didn’t have a choice. Not really. We had to see this through, even if we hated the Vanguard pack. Even if it was dangerous. It was still our best chance of getting Seluna off my back and breaking Aysel’s curse.

I nodded. “So far so good.”

As we stepped into the house, we were immediately greeted by Andrei.

“Long time no see,” he joked.

Greyson’s eyes narrowed. “Too soon.”

Andrei smirked and turned on his heel. “Follow me. Everyone’s waiting.”

With every step we took down the decorated, labyrinthine hallways of the Vanguard palace, anxiety tightened in my stomach. Honestly, I wasn’t convinced that I was ready for this step. For whatever would come next.

I knew that Greyson and Xavier wouldn’t leave me, but what if I couldn’t do this ritual? What if it was too intense? Or what if I somehow ended up with three handprints? Like, maybe the ritual would piss Seluna off even worse? What if something went wrong and somehow Xavier, Greyson, or I ended up hurt?

*Take a breath, Cali. It’s going to be okay. You have to believe it. Just remember everything Greyson told you to imagine… The two of you together. No curse. No handprints.*

I was breathing deeply the way I’d learned in a yoga class as we reached a set of grand, elaborately carved double doors. Andrei clapped his hands, and the two guards stationed on either side of the doors opened them.

Lucian’s smooth voice drifted out into the hallway. “Welcome, Caliana.”

The room was just as opulent as the doors had led me to believe. A long table was set for a meal, while three separate chandeliers hung above it, illuminating the entire room. My heart skipped a beat when I saw Xavier sitting in one of the high-back chairs at the table.

He was okay. He looked completely unharmed, if a little annoyed. I wanted to run over to him and throw my arms around his neck and—

*Wait. What if I do that and I’m repulsed by him too? What if Aysel put a curse on Xavier as well while he was here waiting for Greyson and me?* I breathed deep. *Don’t panic, Cali. You have no reason to assume that’s what’s going on here.*

I met Xavier’s eyes and blurted out, “What are you wearing?”

He rolled his eyes and tugged irritably at the cuff of his dark blue, gold-embroidered jacket.

*He looks like a Disney prince.*

I smothered the giggle that rose up my throat. Needless to say, it was not his style at all. He looked absolutely miserable, and pissed off. It must have been torture for him to wait for us all this time in Lucian and Aysel’s company.

I mind linked to him. *Thank you for doing this for me. It means a lot.*

His voice slipped through my mind, warm and loving. *Anything for you.*

A small smile tugged at my lips, but it disappeared as my gaze moved to the other people in the room. Namely Ava. I knew she would be here, but that didn’t stop the unpleasant feeling that seeing her always brought up in me. I made a point not to react, not wanting to give her the satisfaction.

Xavier stood and walked over to Greyson and me. “Where’s Artemis?”

Greyson glanced at me quickly before answering. “She was… indisposed. Nice jacket.”

Xavier glared.

Ava sauntered over in a dress that looked like it had been made for her. “So it’s a good thing I’m here, then.”

*It’s never a good thing when Ava’s around*, I thought. *And why the hell is she dressed like that? Why does she have to look like a freaking knockout in every single thing she wears?*

Lucian cleared his throat. Loudly. Pointedly. So that we all stopped talking and turned to look at him. “I have a special welcoming surprise for you, Caliana.”

On either side of me, both Greyson and Xavier tensed.

*This can’t be good.*

Lucian snapped his fingers, and a servant strode in, carrying an elaborate, jeweled box. Lucian flipped open the lid with a flourish to reveal a blood-red velvet interior. And on the velvet was the most beautiful pearl necklace I’d ever seen.

Multiple strings of pearls were strung together and fastened in place with white gold to create a layered, draped ensemble of pearls.

I blinked. “It’s… stunning.”

“As are you.” Lucian smiled indulgently. “I’m glad you like it. It’s for the ceremony.”

My brows rose, but before I could question it, several attendants flooded into the room.

“You will be brought to the bathing room and adorned properly,” Lucian explained.

One of the attendants held out a hand for me to take, but Greyson stepped in the way. “I’m going with her.”

Xavier stepped up next to him. “I’m going too.”

Lucian shrugged. “As you wish.”

I allowed the attendant to lead me out of the dining room with Greyson and Xavier following behind us. Unfortunately, Ava followed behind *them*.

*Ugh… This is already getting weird.*

I was brought to a gorgeous bathing room, all marble tile and soft lighting. It was nicer than the bathroom of any hotel I’d ever stayed at. But then again, that wasn’t so surprising. The Vanguards had the nicest versions of everything.

I barely had a moment to take it all in before the attendants started stripping away my clothing. My shirt was halfway over my head before I tugged it back down. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. This wasn’t what I agreed to.” Being stripped by a stranger in front of Greyson and Xavier was awkward enough, but did Ava really have to be here too?

“My lady,” one of the attendants explained. “We must dress you in the ceremonial garments.”

I crossed my arms in front of my chest. “And what, pray tell, are those?”

Another attendant stepped forward, holding a very slinky, moon-white dress. I instantly knew that it would hug every curve and leave absolutely nothing to the imagination.

My jaw dropped. “Seriously?”

I should have known Lucian would put me in something like this.

I shook my head. “I’m not wearing this. There’s gotta be something else. A robe, maybe?”

Then I noticed another pair of attendants pressing white, shapeless fabric into Greyson and Xavier’s hands. I pointed at it. “Yes! Something like that!”

The attendants all shook their heads.

The attendant holding my dress stepped forward. “My lady, these are the garments you’re meant to wear.”

I sighed. “Fine. But be quick about it.”

From there, I was undressed and subjected to the strangest pampering ritual I’d ever experienced. While the attendants washed and pampered and dressed me, I caught Xavier and Greyson glaring at each other.

Finally, the attendants slipped the dress onto me and added even more pearls, in addition to the necklace Lucian had already shown me. I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror, and my breath caught. I looked like a moon goddess myself.

The attendants escorted me to a room with a circular pool in it, but the water was opaque and white. It looked like milk.

Above the pool, a giant skylight was open wide to reveal the starry night sky. There was something about all of this that did feel a little magical. Greyson, Xavier, and Ava waited at the side of the pool, and tucked farther away from them was Aysel.

Lucian waited for me at the steps leading into the pool, dressed in all white as well. Like my costume, his was accented with pearls.

He held out a hand. “Are you ready to begin?”

I nodded and, with a shaky breath, took Lucian’s hand and stepped into the bath.

**Episode 2310**

I stepped into the pool, the dress rising to the surface around my ankles, and gasped. I’d been expecting a pleasant warmth, much like stepping into a normal bath. But instead, it was almost too hot.

Immediately, I leapt back up onto the steps. “*Ow!* Why is it so hot? Are you trying to make a chowder?”

Lucian frowned. “It’s the temperature it has to be.”

“Are you trying to cook us alive in this milk?”

He slowly shook his head, looking genuinely confused. “Well, to start with, it’s not milk. And I understand it may come as a shock, but the bath must be at this temperature. The heat, as extreme as it may seem, will allow us to connect with Seluna. It won’t burn you, Caliana. I assure you, you will not be harmed.”

I looked back at Greyson and Xavier, standing at the edge of the pool in their matching white robes. They looked uncomfortable, worried—exactly how I felt.

Greyson mind linked, *I’m here, love. Remember, we can stop this at any time.*

I almost wished he hadn’t said it. Because now all I wanted to do was climb out of this pool, rip off this dress, and run out the door, never to return. Screw the handprints, screw the curse. We had four witches/magic users back at the Redwood pack house. Surely we could figure out a solution to all of this that didn’t involve being cooked alive.

I tried to focus on my breathing again, even as anxiety knotted and tightened in my belly. It was a comfort to have Greyson and Xavier close by, but part of me wished they weren’t here. I didn’t want them to see this. To see me stepping into what was essentially a gigantic bathtub with Lucian. It reminded me way too much of the dream I’d had.

I cleared my throat. “So… I have to get into this bath… with *you*? And it’s going to help us connect to Seluna?”

“And this required over forty-eight hours of preparation?” I heard Xavier mutter.

I looked back at my mates. Greyson didn’t say anything, but his raised eyebrow showed that he agreed with Xavier’s assessment.

Neither one of them looked particularly impressed.

Lucian sighed and cupped a hand to gather some of the water and hold it up for inspection. “I can understand how this may seem… ostentatious, perhaps, to the layperson. But I assure you that these preparations were not made lightly. Preparing the water for this pool is a special task all on its own—some of the ingredients must be steeped together beforehand. It’s an art.”

“It sure looks like it,” Greyson muttered.

“And we are all quite fortunate that we were able to speed things along to accommodate Caliana tonight,” Lucian said pointedly, his brow raising. He gave each of my mates a pointed look, perhaps reminding them exactly who was in charge here.

Then the Vanguard prince turned to me, and his expression softened. He held out his hand again.

“Come, Caliana,” he said. “Let us continue the ceremony so that we can commune with Seluna and find out what has been ailing you. You’ll get used to the water—quite quickly, I think—and I’ll go over everything that’s to come. Step by step. You are not facing this task alone. I’m here for you and will be at your side throughout the entire ritual.”

I knew he meant to comfort me, but his words were anything but.

I looked back at my mates. Ava had inched closed to Xavier. *Of course. She’s probably hoping I’ll be boiled alive and served as an appetizer.*

I swallowed roughly and looked back at Lucian. To his credit, he didn’t seem annoyed or in a hurry. His hand still hung in the air between us, waiting for me to allow him to lead me into the bath. This had all seemed like a good idea up until now…

*But what choice do I have? We’re here. The ritual is happening. And how else am I supposed to get rid of these handprints?*

I knew one thing for sure: I was never going to put milk in my coffee again.

I took Lucian’s hand and slowly stepped into the bath. Instantly, my skin began to tingle from the intense heat, but I breathed through the sensation and allowed Lucian to guide me to the center of the pool, which was deep enough for the water to rise to my chest. Lucian was right—the water was hot, but it didn’t burn me, and I acclimated to it a little more with every second I spent in the pool.

Lucian smiled at me, a kind one. “I told you you’d get used to it. You are stronger than you think, Caliana.”

He gestured for me to stand across from him, with only a foot or so of milky water separating us.

As I took my place, I realized with a lurch of horror that my white dress, clingy and alluring when dry, clung to me even more when wet. And it was *sheer*. I could see my own nipples peaked and visible through the thin, wet fabric.

*Oh my god.*

Quickly, I crossed my arms over my chest, suddenly thankful that the milky water hid the rest of my body. For now. When I stepped out of the pool at the end of the ceremony, it would be a completely different story. Everyone would get an eyeful.

“Caliana, try to relax.”

I looked up from my own body and realized that Lucian was just as exposed as I was. His shirt clung to the planes of his chest, hugging every muscle and ridge. It took all my willpower to not follow the fabric down, to not try to glimpse him below the surface of the water.

Heat rushed into my cheeks, and it had nothing to do with the temperature of the water. Lucian’s shimmering, exposed body so close to my own, my two mates standing by and watching… Suddenly, this was all too much for me.

*I can’t do this.*

Lucian held out his hand again. “Come closer. I promise I won’t bite.”

Again, his voice was smooth, kind. A balm for my ragged nerves. I took his hand again, ignoring the spark of heat that flared through me at the simple touch. Lucian had said this ritual could be sensual, and now I understood exactly what he meant.

He guided me toward him, and I realized I was on my tiptoes. The water was slightly deeper, closer to him.

“Relax,” he breathed. “You will not be harmed, Caliana.”

Maybe not physically. But I had a feeling that if things kept going this way, I’d be scarred for life. I let out a breath and slowly allowed my feet to touch the bottom of the pool. The water was still just this side of too hot, but there was a soothing quality to it as the water rose to just below my collarbones.

And then the water reached my shoulders.

The handprints *burned*, and I winced.

Both Xavier and Greyson lunged toward me, but the pain stopped as fast as it appeared. I blew out a breath and held up my hand to stop them. “It’s okay!”

They froze.

“I’m sorry for any discomfort you might have experienced, but the worst of it is over,” Lucian said. “I’m sure you will enjoy the rest of the ritual considerably more.”

What, exactly, was that supposed to mean? I was already uncomfortable. I felt like a boiled potato, and I was standing nearly naked next to a werewolf “prince” while my two mates watched—along with Ava.

No, there was no way in hell I was going to enjoy any of this.

I met Lucian’s gaze. His eyes were bi-colored, and the blue one looked almost grey in the light. Almost like Greyson’s eyes.

Lucian pulled me closer. “We will bask under the moonlight and connect with Seluna, our bodies intertwined together.”

My mouth went dry. “Um, what?”

I could see Xavier, Greyson, and Ava standing behind Lucian, staring at me. My mates’ expressions changed—and not for the better.

*I’m starting to not feel one hundred percent about this…*

Lucian continued. “We will call Seluna to us and learn more about your connection to her. We will witness her together and discover why she continues to call to you, Caliana.”

*Okay, this sounds more like what I signed up for—instead of this milk bath and see-through clothing situation.*

The water was nice though. Now that I’d gotten used to it, it was helping me relax.

Lucian leaned close, his breath washing over my face. “Caliana, don’t be afraid.”

I swallowed. “*Should* I be afraid?”

“Seluna has chosen to speak to you for a reason, as she speaks to all of us for a reason. I’m honored to be your guide to her today.” He lifted my wet hand from the water and pressed a kiss to my knuckles.

My cheeks heated again. *I really wish Xavier and Greyson didn’t have front-row seats to this… But maybe the worst part is over.*

Lucian smiled. “Let us begin.”

Then he leaned forward and caught my mouth in a kiss.

**Episode 2311**

“*Caliana… Caliana…*” I heard a woman’s voice calling out to me from somewhere far away. I couldn’t tell whose voice it was, and it almost felt like I was lost in another strange dream.

*Who is that? Why is she calling my name?*

I felt someone kissing me, but I knew that the lips didn’t belong to Greyson or Xavier. No—these lips felt strange. *Something’s not right about this.* I felt repulsed, only this time it wasn’t because of any curse. The voice suddenly disappeared, and then there was only a weighty silence. A moment later, I realized that the lips kissing me belonged to Lucian. The strange haze in my head cleared, and I saw him standing right in front of me, practically naked!

*What? Why is he kissing me like this in front of my mates?*

It was all coming back to me—the Seluna ceremony! *Duh.* The voice had somehow temporarily drawn me out of the present.

Lucian and I had been standing in the hot, milky water, trying to reach out to Seluna, and he’d kissed me. I hadn’t ever kissed anyone besides my mates—and Alex, but that didn’t count. The kiss Alex and I had shared, if it could even be called that, had been awkward and hardly romantic. This kiss was something else altogether—strange, unwanted, and awkward.

*Who the hell does Lucian think he is?!*

It felt like everything was happening in slow motion. I shoved Lucian and slapped him, wincing at the sting in my hand. Lucian looked unfazed, if a little surprised—or maybe it was annoyance that flashed across his face before his expression reverted to smug and unaffected. Suddenly feeling exposed and more than a little embarrassed, I covered myself with my arms and sank low into the opaque water to hide.

There was a blur of motion behind Lucian and then a struggle as Xavier and Greyson lunged toward me, dragging a couple of guards with them.

“Get your hands off of her!” Xavier boomed as he fought to twist out of the guards’ hold. His toes were inches from the edge of the bath, and the guards were wrenching him backward so that he couldn’t come into the water to grab me.

A trio of guards piled on top of Greyson and dragged him to the ground before he exploded back up to his feet, knocking them off-balance. Greyson grabbed one of the guards by the shirt and tossed him headfirst into a wall—the same wall that Ava was leaning against with a smirk on her face. She was clearly enjoying the show.

Xavier had managed to break free and was heading for the water again when a guard came out of nowhere and tackled him. Greyson jumped in to try to pry the guard off Xavier, and then, with a splash, they all tumbled into the bath. I shrieked and was nearly thrown off my feet as a fierce fight erupted in the water. Fists, arms, feet, and elbows were flying in every direction. I had to duck and move to avoid getting hit or knocked over.

“Cali! Watch out!” Greyson yelled. My mates were trying their hardest to detangle themselves from the guards and get to Lucian, who turned to face them with a bored expression on his face. He clapped his hands loudly, and the guards instantly released Xavier and Greyson and both men shot to the surface, their eyes wild with anger.

“Get away from her!” Greyson shouted at Lucian. “Don’t you fucking take one more step toward her, or I swear I’ll drown you.”

“Get out of the water, Cali!” Xavier said.

I started to back up, shaken and bewildered by how fast everything had escalated. One moment I’d been in a dream world with a woman calling my name while Lucian had been kissing me, and the next moment the bath had turned into a boxing ring. My head was spinning.

“Calm down, everyone!” Lucian barked.

“*Calm down?*” Xavier burst out. “How do you expect us to calm down? You set this whole elaborate bullshit moon priestess scheme in motion just so you could kiss my mate?”

“Our mate!” Greyson cut in. “And Xavier’s right. I’ve heard of desperate, but going through all this just to kiss Cali? It’s disgusting.”

Lucian sighed. “I guess I should’ve given you all a heads-up.”

“You think? You can’t just kiss me like that! What were you thinking?” I was still stooped low in the water so that only my head was visible. There was no way I wanted to address Lucian, my mates, Ava, and a room full of guards in my current state. This whole thing was awkward enough without adding my all but naked body to the equation.

“I wasn’t kissing *you*, Caliana,” Lucian said with a smirk, as if he’d just said the most obvious thing in the world.

“Um, excuse me? I was there, and you were definitely kissing me!”

“Yes, yes, those wereyour lips, Caliana, but they were merely the vessel I used to communicate with Seluna.” Lucian shrugged, as if we all should have known that Seluna’s favorite way to be contacted was via my lips.

“Oh, give me a fucking break.” Xavier scoffed. “Now I’ve heard it all.” Xavier drifted closer to me, as if to block me from Lucian. “Next you’ll tell us that you need to take her to bed to cap off your little ceremony.”

Lucian arched his eyebrows and smirked. “Please, Xavier, don’t be ridiculous. This is all a misunderstanding. Surely you don’t think I would ever kiss someone else’s mate—at least not right in front of them!” Lucian was indignant. “I respect all of you—I would never have kissed Cali if it wasn’t absolutely *vital* to the success of the ceremony.”

“But what the hell does kissing me have to do with all of this?”

“I assure you, Caliana, it has everything to do with it. In order to speak to Seluna—which all of you requested that we do, by the way—we have to perform this ritual as part of the ceremony. I thought you all understood that.”

“Yeah, well, it seems to me that you left out a few important details,” Greyson said. “Like that you needed to engage in a half-naked milky lip lock with my mate to get it done.”

“Our mate!” Xavier hissed.

Greyson’s jaw was tight. “*Our* mate, my mistake. The point is, you should have told us about the kiss first so we could decide if we were willing—and to make sure that Cali would be prepared for it!”

Lucian gave an apologetic nod. “I’m sorry. Please believe me when I say that I meant no disrespect, but the kiss is—”

“Not going to happen again,” Xavier interrupted.

Lucian shrugged. He had that bored look on his face again, and I realized that Lucian was the type who was so used to being in control that not much really ruffled his feathers. “Well, that’s entirely up to you, but I can’t continue the ceremony without it. Perhaps we should leave this decision up to Caliana?” Lucian shifted his gaze to rest squarely on me.

I’d already had enough of Lucian and his hot milk baths and unwelcome kisses, and the thought of having him kiss me again in front of everyone—especially a smirking Ava—was just too much. I was about to call the whole thing off when Greyson’s voice came to me through our mind link.

*I’m not going to tell you what to do, Cali, but I want to help you stop having these Seluna dreams, and we have to put a stop to her leaving those handprints on your body. I don’t like Lucian—or this entire weird setup—but I want you to make your decision without worrying about me or Xavier.*

I looked at my mates. Greyson’s eyes were on me, and Xavier was staring daggers at Lucian. I worried that if I did decide to go through with the ceremony, Xavier wouldn’t take it very well. But like Greyson had said, it was my decision. I was torn, and not really sure that I wanted to go through with it—it was all just a little too weird.

Still, I wanted the Seluna nightmares to end more than anyone else in this room, and here I was standing in a milky bath with a self-proclaimed prince in order to do just that. We’d already come so far—wouldn’t it be silly to call it off now? On the other hand, Xavier looked like he was seconds away from killing Lucian. If Lucian kissed me again, there was no doubt in my mind that this milk bath would turn into a bloodbath. I’d never forgive myself if Xavier lost his cool and he and Greyson got hurt in the process, and in the end, I still wouldn’t be rid of the dreams, or these damned handprints.

Lucian turned to look at me, his intense stare nailing me to the spot. “So, Caliana, do you want to proceed?”

**Episode 2312**

I hesitated as everyone turned to look right at me, waiting for my answer. At that moment, all I wanted was to disappear.

*How did this whole thing come down to me deciding whether or not to make out with Lucian in front of my mates?*

My heart was hammering away at the thought of having to make this decision so quickly—and in front of an audience, no less. I shot Ava a look. I could tell that she was loving this. Ugh! Why did she have to be here right now, of all times? I took a deep breath and tried to calm down. Greyson had already told me that he would abide by whatever decision I made, and I trusted him on that. Honestly, it would almost have been easier if he’d forbidden me to do it. This was one moment in my life where I really wished that someone else could make my decisions for me.

I glanced at Xavier. He still looked like he was ready to kill if Lucian made even the slightest move. It was obvious that Xavier was looking for any excuse to go toe to toe with Lucian, and I didn’t blame him. Nothing was ever straightforward when it came to the Vanguards, and though I wasn’t mad enough to hurt Lucian like Xavier was, I was over his princely games. The last thing I wanted was to push Xavier to the edge.

*If I continue with the ceremony and Lucian kisses me again, will Xavier forgive me? Will he somehow think that I* wanted *to kiss Lucian?*

I tried to put myself in Xavier’s shoes. How would I feel if I had to watch Xavier make out with another woman right in front of my face?I wouldn’t like it, but I imagined that I would accept it if the stakes were the same as these.

I tried not to think about Ava standing there.

But what if the ritual was just a pretense? A way for Lucian to get one over on my mates? On me?

Lucian had made it clear that he was interested in me, but this all seemed a bit elaborate just to get a milky kiss. Maybe this was just step one in Lucian’s plan to try and sleep with me. Hadn’t he boasted about how Lunas always came to him? How they just couldn’t resist him?

I wasn’t a Luna, and the only reason I’d come to him was because I needed answers and help. Hooking up with him couldn’t have been further from my mind, and I felt like I’d made that clear enough when I slapped him. Then there were the handprints. They were real. There was no way Lucian had put them there. And what about that strange voice I’d heard during the kiss? I poked my fingertips into my temples. I couldn’t decide what to do, but one thing was for sure—I needed to get both my mates’ approval before I could do anything.

I reached out to Xavier via mind link. *Xavier,* *what do you think I should do?*

Xavier responded quickly. *Step back, and I’ll put an end to this!*

I could tell by the set of his jaw that he was itching to do just that. *Xavier, I don’t want you to attack Lucian; you know as well as I do that that will only start another pack war. We don’t need that.*

I could see Xavier thinking it over before he finally responded. *You’re right. I won’t attack him. I know you love me, Cali. Do what you gotta do. But don’t linger.*

*I absolutely will not be, I promise.*

It would be an easy promise to keep. I had *no* desire to kiss Lucian again, but if it was the price to pay for clarity on this whole Seluna thing, I didn’t really have a choice.

*And if he pulls any more surprises*, Xavier added, *I’ll turn this water into a Lucian stew.*

I nodded at Xavier, knowing that he wasn’t kidding.

I turned to face Lucian and let out a deep sigh. “We can keep going.”

“We can’t,” Lucian shot back.

“What? I don’t get it; you said it was up to me!” It was just like Lucian to play these types of games, to get everyone in a tizzy and then drop a bomb.

“No, what I mean is that we have to start over.” Lucian shot a sharp glance at Xavier and Greyson. “You can’t just interrupt a ceremony of this caliber and then just pick up where you left off. It doesn’t work that way. For starters, you two need to step out of the sacred bath before we can continue.” Lucian raised his chin and plied Xavier and Greyson with a defiant stare.

I tensed up. I knew that neither of my mates liked taking orders from Lucian, but to my relief, it didn’t turn into another brawl. Greyson stepped out, followed begrudgingly by Xavier.

“No more surprises,” Xavier said to Lucian. I could tell that he wanted to add a threat to the end of that sentence but had decided not to—probably for my sake.

“It’s never up to me, Xavier. None of this is up to me, as much as you’d like to believe that I have some grand scheme up my sleeve. Seluna is unpredictable. It’s never wise to tell a goddess what to do.” Lucian flashed Xavier a haughty look before he returned his attention to me.

I could read the tension in Xavier’s eyes.

*I’ll be okay*, I mind linked to him. *At least now I have some idea of what to expect.*

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Aysel move toward Greyson with a towel in her hand. Anger bubbled inside me as she attempted to dry him off.

Greyson snatched the towel from her hands. “I can do it myself,” he snapped.

“Come closer,” Lucian said. I did as he asked while avoiding eye contact with my mates. I just wanted to get this whole thing over with. “Stop grimacing, Caliana. Surely you can bear the touch of my royal lips one more time?” Lucian said with a small smile.

I took a deep breath and tried to relax. I was looking right at Lucian, but I was trying my hardest to picture Xavier in his place. It wasn’t working. No matter how much I concentrated, I couldn’t shake Lucian’s image standing right there before me, his strange eyes boring into mine. I tried to picture Greyson instead, and I conjured up the memory of our first kiss… But that didn’t work, either.

*Guess I’m stuck with Lucian.*

Lucian leaned forward, and our lips touched. I closed my eyes and did my best to relax. *I’m doing this for a good reason*, I repeated over and over in my head as Lucian’s lips moved against mine and I kept them tightly shut. At least I was prepared this time and didn’t feel quite as repulsed as before. While we kissed, I listened, wondering what had happened to the voice I’d heard before. The handprints began to tingle, and I felt Lucian embrace my shoulders.

*Maybe it’s not going to work? How much longer do I have to kiss him? This feels like an eternity!*

The water began to cool, and the floor beneath me suddenly gave way. I broke away from Lucian and sank down under the water. I lingered in the bright white nothingness for a split second before I kicked my way back toward the surface. *What’s happening?*

As I emerged from the water, coughing and sputtering and trying to catch my breath, I realized that I was no longer in the bath—or in the palace, for that matter. I was now in a cave, in a grotto. It was dark, but there was just enough light for me to make out the craggy walls around me and the swell of the ocean beyond.

*How did I get here?*

“Don’t be afraid, Caliana.”

I turned to see Lucian floating in the water beside me. Oddly enough, I *didn’t* feel afraid. I was more confused than anything. “What are we supposed to do now?”

“We wait.”

For how long?I was treading water and wasn’t sure how much longer I’d be able to do it. *I would hate to drown in here.*

“*Caliana…*” It was the woman’s voice, calling out to me again.

The handprints began to tingle more intensely. Lucian placed his hands on my shoulders and gently turned me around to face the opening of the cave. A cloud drifted by, allowing a beam of moonlight to illuminate the water. Seconds later, a figure appeared within it. I stopped treading water when I realized that it was no longer necessary, since I was now suspended in place. The serene feeling I’d had before grew stronger as the figure took shape into a beautiful woman in a shimmering silver robe, floating just above the water.

I held my hand up to shield my eyes from the bright, luminescent reflection radiating from the water as I looked up at her. “Are you Seluna?”

**Episode 2313**

GREYSON

I’d told Cali that I would be okay with whatever she decided, but seeing the smug prince boy kiss my mate was giving me second thoughts. It might not have been so bad if I didn’t suspect that Lucian was enjoying it. He’d been after Cali from the moment he’d laid eyes on her, after all.

Cali was putting on a brave face and taking this latest curveball in stride for the sake of doing what needed to be done, but I’d seen the look in her eye as she’d agreed to continue with the ceremony. It was clear that she didn’t want this, and the sight of her putting herself through this disgusting lip lock to get the answers she needed pulled at my soul. It was one thing to have to put up with Xavier kissing Cali, but this pretentious royal? It was nearly too much to take.

I was using every ounce of self-control I possessed to keep from flying into the water and tearing them apart. I still wasn’t convinced that the guy was anything more than a snake. I took a quick look at Aysel and almost recoiled. She was standing way too close to me. Why the hell wouldn’t she take a hint?It was enough that I had to deal with Lucian, but Aysel, too?

I looked at my brother, and I could sense his anger. “How much longer are they going to have to kiss?”

I’d already asked myself that question a million times since this sham of a ceremony had started again. It felt like it had already been an eternity, and I wanted it to be over. Now.

A strange mist began to rise up from the bath, growing denser by the second until it formed a dome around Cali and Lucian.

“Shit,” I said, stepping forward and peering through the thickening fog. *This is such bullshit! It’s already hard enough to keep an eye on Cali without it turning into a steam bath!*

My instinct was to jump into the hazy mess and pull her out of there, ceremony be damned. We’d just have to find another way to get the answers we needed from Seluna. As soon as I stepped toward the bath, though, Aysel placed a firm hand on my arm and stopped me. She wasn’t looking at me anymore. Her eyes were now fixed on the misty dome, and she had a wistful, almost serene look on her face.

“Can you see her?” Xavier whispered to me. “I can’t see her.”

I shook my head. I could barely make Cali out through the mist. She was nothing more than a shadowy figure, and to be honest, I couldn’t be sure that was even her.

*Is Lucian still there? Are they still kissing? Is she okay?*

The light was refracting in the mist and making it difficult to be sure of anything. It was disorienting, to say the least, and I couldn’t help but think that was by design.

*Stay calm, Greyson*, I told myself. *Lucian’s still there, and so is Cali… somewhere in that watery, foggy dome. If she needs me, I’ll still be able to get to her. I’ll fucking break it down.*

“Do not disturb them,” Aysel hissed, as if sensing my desire to lunge toward the water again. Her grip tightened on my arm, and she pulled me so that I was forced to take a few steps back.

“Is this normal? All this steam and stuff?” I asked her.

“I’ve heard about it,” Aysel said. “But I’ve never seen it before.”

I wished that were comforting, but it wasn’t. The uneasiness in my stomach increased as the mist grew thicker. It seemed that Lucian hadn’t thought it necessary to tell us that he and Cali would be completely enshrouded for most of the ceremony, either.

“Caliana should be honored. Up until now, Lucian has been the only one who’s communicated with Seluna,” Aysel said, her voice laced with awe.

“How do we know that Cali is safe? What if this is some sort of witch spell?” Xavier asked.

Aysel shook her head quickly. “No. The Vanguards are werewolves. What you’re seeing is all Seluna.”

I wasn’t sure that I believed her, and I’d had enough of dancing around the subject.

“Funny that you claim there’s no witch involved here when I know that you two used a witch to try to keep me and Cali apart.” I wanted her to know that I was well aware of what she was up to, and that I wasn’t going to stand for it.

“Not true. I’ve never used a witch in my life. Perhaps your relationship with Cali is just taking its natural course?” She shot me a sly smile.

“There’s nothing natural about it!” I snapped. I pulled out the tarot card and held it in front of her face. “I felt this as soon as we put these clothes on. How do you explain this?”

Aysel smiled, clearly pleased. “The Lovers. You kept it. I’m flattered, Greyson.”

“I tried not to,” I muttered. “There’s nothing to be flattered about. Lie all you want, Aysel—I know that this is all part of a witch’s curse, and you know it too.”

“I repeat, I’ve never used a witch in my life.” Aysel placed a hand on my shoulder. “Why would I?”

“I don’t believe you.”

I decided right then that as soon as this Lucian crap was over and I knew that Cali was safe, I was going to get answers from Aysel, no matter what it took. I was tired of her games—and that was exactly what they were, no matter how much she tried to deny it. I was so over feeling like I’d lost the upper hand whenever I was around her or her brother.

“How long is this going to take?” Xavier growled. “I feel like we’ve been here for hours.”

“I was just wondering the same thing,” I said.

Aysel shrugged. “I don’t know, boys. As long as Seluna wants, I guess? If you’re bored, Greyson, I’m sure we can find some way to entertain ourselves.” She licked her lips with so much suggestion that I nearly flinched.

I shrugged her hand off. “I’m not going anywhere. Not until Cali is back safely.”

“Agreed,” Xavier said.

“That’s very admirable of you both, but it might not work that way. Remember what my dear brother said—Seluna works in mysterious ways.” Aysel crossed her arms over her chest and returned her attention to the steamy dome.

“I don’t care how Seluna works. Cali is my mate. How do I know that Lucian isn’t doing way more than kissing her?” I demanded.

Images of Cali fighting against Lucian’s advances snaked through my mind, causing my heart rate to quicken. I squinted into the mist, completely unsettled that I couldn’t even see a hint of Cali’s shadow anymore. For all I knew, she was gone.

Aysel chuckled. “You two really don’t understand my brother, do you? He wouldn’t do anything to Cali that wasn’t part of the ceremony.”

“Forgive me if I’m not as trusting of your brother as you are,” I muttered.

I closed my eyes and attempted to mind link with Cali, just wanting to make sure that she was okay. *Cali, can you hear me? Are you okay? Do you need me?*

I waited for an answer, but none came.

*Cali, it’s me. Just tell me if you can hear me.* Still nothing.

I leaned in close to Xavier. “I can’t reach Cali, can you?”

A few seconds passed, and then Xavier shook his head. “No, I can’t get her either.”

*It has to be the dome blocking us*, I thought. I didn’t care anymore if the ceremony was ruined—I needed to see Cali right now.

I started toward the dome, preparing to break up the ceremony and drag Cali out of there. I’d given Lucian enough time to make good on his promise to help us, and I was no longer interested in doing things his way. I could’ve kicked myself for falling into another one of his traps.

“Just so you know, if you disturb them now, it could be problematic,” Aysel said with her eyes narrowed.

“Problematic? In what way?” I stopped in my tracks.

“If you interfere with the ceremony during this stage, it won’t be the little hiccup that it was the first time. Cali and Lucian could be taken by Seluna, unable to return. Is that what you want? To lose your precious Cali forever?”

I hesitated, wanting to call her bluff but uncertain of whether or not she was telling the truth. I didn’t know her very well, and she definitely wasn’t the most straightforward person I’d ever met, but she looked pretty serious to me.

“Enough of this!” Xavier growled. He stomped off toward the bath, but then he stopped short when the water began to glow, casting the entire room in a strange, eerie light. “What the hell?”

“What’s happening?” I asked as panic spiked in my gut.

Aysel looked between me and Xavier. “That means it’s time for us to go.”

**Episode 2314**

MARTA

“So, what do you think, Lilac? Do you want me to help reunite you with your wolf?”

Lilac just stared at me in silence with a blank look on his face. Clearly, he was content to leave me hanging. He looked away and stared off into the distance, almost like he was trying to figure out how to let me down easy.

I hadn’t been nervous before about asking him, but now I was wondering if I’d overstepped somehow.

*What the hell is going through his mind right now? Does he not want me to do it? Why isn’t he saying anything?*

After the silence stretched on for too long, I decided to ask again.

“So… Do you want me to do it?” I asked slowly. “Because I think it could be great, and I really don’t mind. You and Plum are so good together, and the only way you two could get any better is if you were one again. So, let me help you make that happen. What do you think? You want me to help you do it?” I figured that asking one more time couldn’t hurt.

Lilac ran a hand down his face and sighed. “Yes… I do…”

“That’s good! We can—”

“But I also don’t want you to be the one doing it. There are other witches here. Why do you have to be the one to do it?” He paused, reacting to the less than pleased look I probably had on my face. “It’s not that I don’t think you’re capable or anything like that, it’s just… I don’t want you to get in trouble again. You just got *out* of trouble with the witch council, and you’ve got a mentor coming. It’s just all too risky. I’m just happy that I have Plum with me at all—and yeah, he’s not *inside* me, but it’s all fine.” Lilac gave me a wan smile, and I could tell that he wanted nothing more than for me to drop this, but I couldn’t. I had to make things right for him.

“Nice try, Lilac, but the word ‘fine’ is just a way of saying ‘I don’t want to talk about it.’ It doesn’t actually mean that things are anywhere near fine.”

Lilac laughed. “Would it be better if I said that it’s all good? That everything is great, and better than I ever could have imagined? What do I have to do to convince you that I’m happy enough just having Plum around?”

“If you’re really trying to convince me that you’re all good, saying things like ‘happy enough’ isn’t helping. All I hear when you say stuff like that is that you could be happier. If you and Plum were joined together again, I feel like you’d really be happy.”I sighed. “I know you don’t want me to worry, but I talked to Violet and she told me that she couldn’t imagine living without her wolf—so how can you? I mean, the way Violet had described it made it sound like losing her wolf would be like losing your head.”

Lilac looked thoughtful. “I once thought that, too. Ask any werewolf and they’ll give the same response. But after you come back from the spirit world without your wolf, you have a different perspective. In my case, I realized that I was just happy to be alive, and it didn’t matter so much if everything wasn’t *just* like it had been before I died. Besides, it’s not so bad, really! I may not be completely reunited with my wolf, but I have you.” Lilac ran the back of his hand gently down the side of my face, then cupped my chin.

Heat rose to my cheeks, and I knew I was probably blushing like crazy. “That’s really sweet, Lilac, but you already admitted that you’d like to be reunited with your wolf.”

“I know I did, but it’s really not your problem. Why are you so hell-bent on doing this, anyway?”

“Because I feel responsible, Lilac! Leave it to me to bring you back, but to do it without your wolf intact!”

“Marta, please stop being so hard on yourself,” he said. “The only thing you should feel responsible for is saving me and bringing me back from the spirit world. You literally brought me back to life, Marta. When I died, I thought that was it. It was awful and lonely and scary. Then I met you, and I wasn’t alone or afraid anymore. Then you brought me back and gave me another chance to live my life. So my wolf isn’t enmeshed with me like it used to be—who cares? I’m here, in real flesh and blood. That’s more than enough, trust me.”

“No, it’s not, Lilac. You’re my boyfriend, and I want to look out for you and take care of you.”

Lilac smiled and pulled me close. “I like it when you say stuff like that. Say it again.”

Flustered, I pushed away and put my hands on my hips. “Stop flirting! This is serious.”

“I don’t see why I should.” Lilac moved to kiss me.

I splayed a hand on his chest, stopping him. “Stop trying to change the subject!”

He fake pouted. “What, you don’t want to kiss me?”

“No, not right now. Right now, I want to help you get your wolf back. I don’t know why you’re making this so hard.”

Lilac sighed. “Because! My wolf *is* back—want me to bring him over here so you can touch him again and see for yourself that he’s alive and well?”

I was starting to get frustrated. “That’s not what I meant, Lilac. Of course I know that Plum is alive, but he’s not inside you like he should be! I want you to feel like yourself again!”

“Hey, do you know what a werewolf is without his wolf?”

“What?”

Lilac grinned. “Just a hot guy.” He lifted both his arms and flexed his muscles.

I groaned. “Why won’t you take this seriously?” I was offering him at least a chance to explore the possibility that he could reunite with his wolf, and he couldn’t be bothered to even consider it. Why was he being so stubborn?

“I *am* taking it seriously! I’ve said my piece, and I’ve heard enough. Let’s get something to eat. I don’t know about you, but I’m in the mood for one of those big sandwiches that are so stacked that they need a toothpick to hold them together. Only I want one even bigger than that. I’ll use a knife on it. You know I like a challenge.” He waggled his eyebrows.

“I don’t know if I’m in the mood to eat, Lilac. Too much on my mind.”

“Aw, come on! Eating well improves the mind, you know. Feed the bod, feed the mind!” Lilac turned toward the door.

“I’m not hungry,” I said as I watched him disappear into the house.

I kicked at the ground, frustrated and confused. Why was he refusing to let me do this for him?Didn’t he want to feel like his old self again? He’d admitted that he wanted his wolf back, and if he didn’t want to do anything about it, that was fine by me. I was still going to find out if it was even possible and, if so, how to do it. Then I’d see how he responded once it was more than idea, but a real possibility.

I finally made my way into the house, figuring that I should probably check in on Dani to see how she was doing. I wondered if Big Mac or Kira had thought any more about who our mentor might be.

I recalled asking Big Mac once before about how to get Lilac’s wolf back, and she’d warned me that it would require powerful magic.

*But that’s just one witch’s opinion. Maybe it’s time to see what Kira thinks.* *After all, I can’t get in trouble with the witch council just for asking, right?*

Besides, even if I did want to use my magic to somehow reunite Lilac and his wolf, I wouldn’t be able to anyway with these damned bracelets.

How could Big Mac be right? It shouldn’t involve a ton of magic—all the ingredients were there, namely Lilac and Plum. What more could we need? They both wanted to be reunited—Lilac had admitted as much, and it was obvious that Plum adored him. Maybe Big Mac was wrong, maybe it didn’t even have to involve any magic—perhaps there was some kind of spiritual glue that could bind them together.

I came upon Kira in the kitchen, startling her where she sat hunched over a cup of tea. She was absently swirling the leaves around in her cup.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Kira—am I interrupting something?”

Kira looked up at me. She seemed a little flustered. “Uh, no—I just brewed the tea too long. How are you doing?”

“Good… But I need some help.”

“Yeah? What’s up?”

“Do you happen to know if there’s any way to reunite Lilac and Plum? I don’t want to know if it’s dangerous or difficult, or even whether you recommend it. I just want to know… do you think it’s possible?”

**Episode 2315**

XAVIER

“Fuck no! I’m not going anywhere. There’s no way I’m leaving Cali alone here for even a second.” I looked at Greyson. “We agreed on this, brother.”

“He’s right,” Greyson said. “She might need us, and there’s no way we’re going to leave her behind.”

“You two just don’t get it. You don’t get a say in this. You have to leave.” Aysel started toward the door and beckoned for us to follow.

I stayed right where I was. Having to leave Cali behind was yet another part of the ceremony neither Lucian nor Aysel had thought it necessary to prepare us for—and it was the worst twist yet. “You don’t get it—we’re not going. Not until we know that she’s okay. For all we know, this is all part of your brother’s sick plan to get Cali all to himself.”

Aysel rolled her eyes and laughed. “Please. Lucian would never do anything like that. Besides, he doesn’t need to trick anyone into being with him—most women come to him all on their own.”

“Well Cali’s not most women!” I shouted.

Ava came and put a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry, Xavier, I’ll stay.”

“NO!” Greyson and I said in unison. Why would Ava think that I trusted her any more than I trusted Aysel and Lucian? For all I knew, the three of them were in cahoots. It was really strange how Ava just didn’t seem to understand how little faith I had in her intentions, even though I tried to tell her exactly that at every turn.

“Everyone has to go. Including me,” Aysel said. “No one can stay behind. I don’t know how much clearer I can be about this.”

Greyson stopped Aysel as she continued toward the door. “I’m not leaving Cali. That wasn’t part of the deal.”

“I’m sorry to say that you don’t have a choice in the matter, Greyson. The ceremony has begun. Lucian and Caliana have made their connection with Seluna. If we don’t leave now, the connection could be severed, and all of this would have been for nothing. I already warned you that if you interfered, Caliana and my brother could end up in there permanently. I must admit that I wouldn’t mind being rid of Caliana for good, but that’s not worth losing my brother in the process. So, for the last time, let’s go. We need to honor the sacred ritual and complete the ceremony.” Aysel whirled around, flung the door open, and motioned for us to leave.

I still didn’t move. “Your brother told us that there would be no more surprises, and this feels like a surprise to me.”

“I assure you, Xavier, my brother’s intentions are honorable. He did warn you that Seluna was unpredictable, did he not? You do know what unpredictable means?” Aysel flashed a mock pleasant smile.

“How do you even know that we need to leave?” I asked.

“Because I can feel Seluna’s wishes, and she wishes for us to go. Now!”

I turned to Greyson. “I don’t like this. What do you think? Stay and argue with the damn goddess ourselves?”

It was rare for me to go to my brother for guidance, but I was at a loss and willing to hear him out if he had any ideas about how to avoid abandoning Cali to whatever Lucian had up his sleeve.

Greyson stepped up to Aysel. “How do we know if any of what you’re saying is true?”

“I swear on my life. If something happens to Caliana, you can sacrifice me to Seluna. How about that?”

“I wouldn’t mind doing that right now,” I growled.

Aysel’s smile turned cold. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re insufferable?”

“Probably not as many times as you’ve been told the same thing,” I shot back.

Aysel’s exasperation was palpable. “Whatever beef you have with me and my brother is irrelevant. Either way, you still have to choose. If we stay even another minute, we’ll be endangering Caliana. If something happens to her, it will be your fault and no one else’s. But if we go now, you’ll all get what you wanted out of the ceremony.”

I had no idea what to do. If we stayed, we might ruin everything, and if we left, we wouldn’t be on hand if Cali needed us. It was an awful position to be in.

*You should go*, Ava mind linked.

I laughed. *Of course you want us to go, Ava. Anything to put Cali at a disadvantage.*

Knowing Ava, she’d probably jump into the bath and drown Cali the moment we left.

*No, that’s not what this is, Xavier. I’m only trying to look out for Cali. You heard what Aysel said, and if she’s right, staying here will only endanger her. You don’t want there to even be a chance of that happening, right? If we go with Aysel, maybe it will give us a chance to find out more about the tarot card curse.*

She had a point, but I wasn’t going to tell her that.

*Think rationally, Xavier*, she continued. *Why would the Vanguard pack hurt Cali? Why would Lucian go to all this trouble? Surely a man with his unlimited resources would have way more efficient ways of getting to Cali if he really wanted to hurt her.*

She was right about that, too, but the last thing I wanted was advice from Ava.

“Shit, get out of my head, Ava!” I hissed.

What made it worse was that my wolf had stirred to life the moment she’d invaded my mind with her unwelcome suggestions. Now wasn’t the time for that. I had to keep a clear head so that I could protect Cali.

I grabbed Greyson. “Let’s go. But if we suspect anything, we won’t hesitate, we won’t ask questions, we’ll just get Cali the fuck out of here.”

“I’m with you on that,” Greyson said.

We followed Aysel out, and I took one last look at the misty dome before the door drifted shut behind us. I only hoped that we were making the right decision.

“This way,” Aysel said, leading us down the hallway.

I followed her for a few paces before I stopped and planted my feet. “This is far enough. I’m not going any further from the bath than I have to. I need to be nearby so I can hear Cali if she calls out for me.”

“Are you sure? They might be there for a while. Wouldn’t you all be more comfortable in the sitting room?”

I hesitated, unsure if I was overreacting, or if I should trust the apprehension coursing through every inch of my body.

“It’s just down the hall, not much farther at all.” Aysel walked to a door a few feet away and opened it. “It’s right here, see? So, shall we?”

I took another look back at the door to the baths. It was only a short distance away, just like Aysel had promised. If anything happened—anything at all—Greyson and I could be back in a flash.

Clearly not pleased, Greyson followed Aysel inside.

“Come on, Xavier, she’ll be fine,” Ava prodded as she followed Greyson in.

I sighed and finally joined them inside. I was surprised by the lush room that greeted us. There was a hot tub, pillowy sofas, sparkling chandeliers, and plush carpet that created a fancy yet comfortable atmosphere. Right smack in the middle of the room sat a huge aquarium, stocked with what looked like sharks. *Nice. This is definitely my type of luxury.*

“I assume you find this more comfortable than standing around in the hall?” Aysel said. “Make yourselves at home.”

“I prefer to stand.”

“Me too,” Greyson said.

“Oh, are you both competing to see who can be the most stubborn Alpha? You two will turn anything into a competition, I’ve noticed,” Aysel said.

“Knock it off. We’re only here to help Cali; we don’t need to feel like we’re at home,” Greyson sneered.

“Very well.” Aysel walked over to the aquarium and placed her fingers on the glass as she peered inside. “I couldn’t help but notice you two admiring the aquarium. Beautiful, isn’t it? It was a gift from a former suitor.” She turned her attention to Greyson. “A poorly veiled attempt to win me over. My brother had him served to the sharks.”

“Sounds like a bunch of nonsense,” I muttered. I didn’t know if she was trying to threaten us with that little anecdote, but I was unimpressed.

Aysel turned her attention to Ava and smiled. “You seem like the sensible type. Let me show you something.”

I didn’t like the idea of the two of them being alone together, but then I remembered what Ava had said about learning more about the tarot card curse. I watched as Aysel led Ava to a side room and closed the door behind them.

I looked at Greyson, and I could tell by the look in his eye that he didn’t trust the two of them together, either.

“Fuck this.” I approached the door, straining to listen. I could just make out Aysel’s voice on the other side.

“I know there’s a mate bond between you and Xavier,” she said, “and I can help make him yours.”

**Episode 2316**

LOLA

Jay and I were sitting together on the couch, completely stuffed with cookies.

“It’s Torin’s fault for making them so damn good. I literally couldn’t stop eating them,” Jay said.

“Totally his fault,” I said. I didn’t even really need to eat as much human food anymore, but with the variety of delicious food that Torin and Mr. Hart were making, it was hard not to want to eat all of it just for the taste alone. Still, no matter how good the food was in the pack house, it couldn’t curb the need for blood that nagged deep down inside me. “You know, I haven’t seen Jacs all day. Wonder where she’s disappeared to.”

“I saw her earlier, lurking about as usual. She was in one of the studies,” Jay said.

“Oh?” I was a little surprised to hear that, but I didn’t think too much about it. Maybe she’d been trying to find a quiet place to relax. After everything that the pack had been through, a quiet day at the pack house was what most of us needed. Although Cali and the Alphas were gone…

“What do you think is happening with that whole ritual thing at the Vanguards’?” I asked.

Jay shrugged. “I have no idea. Maybe they’re all just doing the moonwalk across the room, and whoever impresses the goddess the most wins.”

I gave Jay a look. “Are you drunk off those cookies or something? That’s not at all what they’re trying to do with this thing.”

Jay snuggled into me. “Oh, they’ll handle themselves. I’m sure they’ll be fine. They always are.” He started to doze off, and I poked him. “Let me sleep,” he whined.

“Jay! Come on! We should be brainstorming what to do for Xavier.”

Jay jumped on top of me and pinned me to the couch. “No way is my brain capable of storming anything with how much sugar I’ve just eaten. I’m not supposed to know anything about Xavier’s plans here, anyway.”

“But Xavier knows that you know, and he already talked to you about it!”

Jay groaned and kissed me on the neck. “I would much rather do more of this and not talk about Xavier—and also maybe never see another cookie for a long, long time.”

Jay straddled me and feathered a trail of kisses down my neck, then back up to my lips. He gave me a slow, sensual kiss as he cradled my head in his palm.

I relaxed and let him have his way for a bit before I pushed him away again.

“Jay! What’s gotten into you?” I teased, liking what had gotten into him.

“What do you mean? I’m just feeling a little hungry for something other than food. Come on, Lola. Don’t you want to occupy our time with something a tad more… intimate?”

“Yeah? Like what?” I felt the smallest tinge of vampire heat sparking to life inside me.

“Oh, I think you know.” He kissed me again and ran a hand through my hair. “We should forget about Xavier and Cali and Greyson for the moment and do a little moonwalking of our own up to the bedroom.”

“Really? Moonwalk up to the bedroom? Together? How would that work, exactly?”

Jay laughed and covered my mouth with his. “Oh, I don’t know,” he said between kisses. “I’m sure we’d figure it out. Or maybe we can just walk upstairs normally and have a little dance competition in our bed. Naked. First prize goes to the one who finishes first.”

“That sounds like a competition that I can’t wait to win…” I lifted my head from the couch and kissed him hard. I was just about to give him a head start in the competition when Lilac burst into the room.

Jay and I scrambled upright and tried to look like we were just doing a little innocent snuggling.

“Hey, I thought I might find you two in here.” Lilac barely seemed to notice that anything had been going on. “Jay, do you think we have salami?”

“Um… I think so…” Jay mumbled, his brow knitted in confusion—or was that frustration? “I think I’m going to head upstairs to our room.” He stood up, a bit awkwardly.

“Jay, you okay?” I asked.

He shot me a look.

*Oh… He must have gotten a little turned on from the kissing.*

I smiled at him, feeling as proud as ever about the effect I had on him. I got up, too, and we all went into the kitchen where Jay, helpful as ever, fished a roll of salami out of the refrigerator and set it on the counter.

“Thanks, man,” Lilac said as he jumped back into making a very elaborate layered sandwich.

“No problem. By the way, that’s going to be a hell of a sandwich.” Jay looked genuinely impressed. “So, I’m going to go shower and then head to bed. Cookie coma,” he joked. “Goodnight, Lilac—enjoy the salami.”

“Goodnight. I will!” Lilac said distractedly.

“Night, Lilac,” I said as Jay and I went upstairs.

I’d hoped that we were going to pick right up where we’d left off on the couch, but as soon as we got to our room, Jay actually did go right into the bathroom to shower. Pouting, I hopped onto the bed and took out my phone. There were no texts from Cali or anything—which I hoped was a good sign. I decided to send one.

*Hope everything’s okay on the moon!*

I laughed as I hit send.

I absentmindedly began to scroll through Facebook, checking out updates and posts from some of my old high school friends, and a few from people I knew from college. It was all the usual stuff—including a million cryptic posts from a girl who always posted too much about her relationship; the good, the bad, and the ugly. I kept scrolling, taking in engagement announcements, new baby posts, and a bunch of selfies.

*Why am I even friends with any of these people on here?*

I didn’t even really talk to most of them in real life, so it felt weird reading all about their personal moments and milestones on social media.

*I wonder if I can find any posts from Samara pack members on here?*

It couldn’t hurt to look. Maybe if I did, it would help us get Ava back to her pack where she belonged so she could stop hanging around the Redwoods and driving everyone crazy—especially Xavier and Cali.

I did a few searches and landed on Ava’s old page.

*Ugh, what a Myspace pic of her!*

I poked around Ava’s friends list and scrolled through it slowly. Dead. Dead. Pretty sure dead. Who was that? No clue. Then I stopped on a picture of a girl named Perrie that I somewhat recognized, but I wasn’t sure. I was squinting at the photo when Jay came out of the bathroom dried off and umm… naked? I threw my phone down on the bed.

“Now that’s something I can stare at for hours,” I said.

Jay smiled and hopped into bed beside me. “Well why don’t you undress so we can both enjoy the view?”

I undid the top few buttons of my blouse and laid back on the bed. “Is that good enough, or do you want more?”

“More,” he said hungrily.

I popped open a few more until my shirt was completely open, exposing my lacy black bra. “How about that?”

“C’mon, Lola, meet me halfway.”

I laughed and unclasped my bra, and Jay inhaled sharply.

“Now I’m halfway, right?” I teased.

“Hell yes!”

With Jay awake and ready to have some fun, I started to think that Facebooking the Samara pack could wait for the moment. I threw my bra across the room and reached out to touch Jay’s taut chest. He scooted close to me and buried his face in my hair while my hands continued to explore his body.

“Come closer.” He pulled me tight to him so that my breasts were smashed against him, then he planted a series of soft kisses down my neck to where the swell of my breasts began.

The vampire heat surged within me once more as he dropped his head lower and ran the tip of his tongue down between my breasts. I rolled over onto my back, and he helped me out of my jeans but left my panties on. He stared me right in the eye as he ran his fingers down the fluttering warmth between my thighs.

“These panties are my favorite,” he said. “I can feel you through them. There’s something sexy about that.”

“You’re telling me,” I moaned.

I sat up and brought his face close to mine, then kissed him. I nudged my tongue into his mouth and pushed him over onto his back. I straddled him as his warm, strong hands explored my body before trailing down my thighs and coming to rest between my legs again. I sighed when he used his thumb to gently stroke me through the silky fabric of my panties.

“So, about that competition we talked about downstairs,” I said. “The one where whoever finishes first wins?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, if you keep that up, you’re going to lose in no time.”

“I have to say that this is one competition I’m happy to lose.”

I giggled as he threw the covers back with a flourish. We’d just slid underneath them when the door burst open and Jacs rushed in.

“Oh my god! Knock!” I yelled, yanking the covers up to my chin.

Jay plunged his head under the covers to hide.

Jacqueline looked super freaked out, and not because she’d just walked in on us. “Jay! Lola! I think I may have lost my daylight item!”

**Episode 2317**

“Caliana! Don’t speak directly to Seluna unless spoken to!” Lucian whispered harshly. He flashed an apologetic glance at the woman.

“Oh, um… Sorry?”

*That doesn’t make any sense. How can you talk to someone without speaking? Maybe I should mind link?* I looked up at the woman. She was still hovering above us, and her sparkling eyes were fixed right on me. I definitely recognized her. It was the same woman from my dreams.

“Is that really her?” I asked Lucian.

“Yes, it’s the goddess herself,” Lucian confirmed.

I looked up at her. It all just seemed so… eerie and surreal. *Is any of this real? Or am I dreaming again?*

“What are we supposed to do?” I asked Lucian without taking my eyes off the floating goddess.

Seluna suddenly spoke. “You have called on me.”

Lucian bowed. “And we thank you, oh gracious goddess, for answering us.”

“I always answer my most devoted followers,” Seluna replied, her voice echoing around us. The water seemed to ripple in time with her words, which was unsettling to say the least.

“We requested your presence, my goddess, because Caliana seeks your help.”

“I know why you are here,” Seluna said. She trained her piercing gaze on me. “The human must make amends.”

I blinked. “Amends? What could I possibly have done to offend you? I barely knew of your existence until a few days ago.”

My heart began to race. If she thought I’d slighted her in some way, what was she going to do to me? I was essentially at her mercy here, and I didn’t even know where I was, exactly. Could Xavier or Greyson even get to me if something went terribly wrong?Technically, I supposed I was still in the baths in the palace, but right now it seemed like we were millions of miles away from there. We could have teleported to somewhere else altogether for all I knew.

Seluna drifted closer to me, breaking me out of my thoughts. “You are the *due destini*. You have two mates. You are not a Luna, yet you came to the Moon Favor ceremony using witch magic to pretend that you were a double Luna. That sort of deceit cannot go unchecked.”

I grew uneasy. *How am I going to squirm out of this?* “I did… my goddess… but I only did that because I wanted the Vanguards to respect my pack.”

The water turned cold.

“So you confess that you lied to me?” Seluna hissed. The icy water began to churn.

“I—I didn’t lie to you, Seluna. I wasn’t even sure that you existed!” That probably wasn’t the best thing to admit to an all-powerful goddess. The water temperature continued to drop, and I started to shiver uncontrollably.

*Is she planning on freezing me to death? Just because I impersonated a Luna?*

Lucian cleared his throat. “Seluna, if I may… Caliana made an error in trying to deceive you. But she is only human—or at least part human. Have mercy on her. If she’d known you as I do, she would’ve shown more respect. She was simply ignorant.”

*Ignorant? How dare he call me ignorant?* I was glaring daggers at him, but he was too enraptured by Seluna to notice.

“I’m not sure if that excuse is valid,” Seluna said.

I was getting a little annoyed with this whole thing, and I wasn’t too keen on being talked about like I wasn’t there. Lucian might have been trying to help, but I didn’t need his assistance. I was more than capable of speaking for myself.

Trying to keep my teeth from chattering, I launched into explaining myself.

“Seluna.” I bowed slightly, trying to take Lucian’s lead and show respect, even though she was trying to turn me into a human icicle. “I only faked the Luna marks because Lucian insisted that I attend the ceremony. I was afraid that if I showed up and the Vanguards didn’t think I was a Luna, they wouldn’t respect me and my mates, and I didn’t want to cause trouble for our pack. Please believe me when I say that I had no intention of insulting a goddess! I have nothing but the utmost respect for goddesses. Besides, I think I’ve paid enough for my mistake already. Things are all out of whack. Every time I close my eyes, you’re the guest star in my dreams, I’m being cursed left and right, my shoulders have these weird handprints on them, this water is freezing, and I have no idea where my mates are… Or where I am, for that matter! Everything is just spiraling out of control, and I don’t know what to do about it!”

Seluna raised her hand, and the water warmed. I breathed a sigh of relief as the blood began to flow back to my legs. *How the hell can a moon goddess do that?*

“Show me the handprints,” Seluna demanded.

I bit my lip and hesitated. “I’m not sure that I want to do that—”

I hadn’t even finished my sentence when Lucian reached over and slid the strap of my dress off my shoulder, exposing the handprints—and nearly exposing my breasts. I scrambled to hold my dress up over my chest while I kept my attention on Seluna.

Seluna studied the handprints for a moment before a pleased smile spread across her face. “Ah, I see. You have been marked as deceitful. It will serve as a warning to others.”

“What? There’s no way I’m just going to live the rest of my life with two handprint tattoos on my back! I never asked for these! Remove them, right now!”

Lucian gasped, and his eyes went wide. “Don’t you dare raise your voice to the moon goddess!” Lucian looked like he was about to pass out from disbelief.

I didn’t care. He was the one who’d sworn some sort of fealty to this woman, not me. I wasn’t about to be tampered with just because she didn’t like the way I’d conducted myself at his weird party.

“I don’t care about being polite—moon goddess or not! I came here in good faith to get help, and all I’m getting is insulted, ridiculed, and abused. I’ve had enough! I want to go back to my mates!”

Seluna considered me closely, her expression unreadable. “Help? What kind of help do you seek from me?”

“I thought a goddess like yourself would know that without having to ask,” I huffed.

“I’m warning you, Caliana, show more restraint—and respect!” Lucian snapped. “I never would have brought you here if I’d known you were going to be so… so… *untoward* to our wonderful goddess Seluna!”

It was kind of amusing to see Lucian acting so deferential. He usually walked around like he could do no wrong, daring anyone to defy him.

I ignored him and pointed at the handprints. “For starters, Seluna, remove these. You’re supposed to be a goddess, so act like one! For instance, did you really need me to stand in a hot tub and kiss your prince before you’d show yourself? Can’t you just do some goddess magic for that?”

Lucian ducked his head and clasped his hands in front of his face, as if in prayer. “Goddess Seluna, I’m so sorry for her insolence. If I’d had any idea—”

Seluna held up a hand. “Silence! I want to hear what Caliana has to say.”

Lucian nodded and looked away, completely cowed.

It was amazing to watch. I wished that my mates could’ve been here to see Lucian get talked to like a disobedient child. I was sure that it would make their day as much as it was making mine—even under these circumstances.

*I wish Aysel were here so I could see her get taken down a few pegs, too.*

“I’m sorry, Seluna, if I offended you,” I said. “That was not my intention. But I would really, really appreciate it if you removed the handprints and stopped invading my dreams.”

I wanted my life back. Ever since the handprints had appeared, I’d felt like I was no longer in control of my life—which was saying a lot, since *due destini* had already done quite a number on me. I just wanted things to go back to normal again. Well, as normal as they could be when it came to the Redwood pack.

Seluna smiled, and a sense of dread fell over me. The smile wasn’t benevolent—in fact, it was the very opposite. “Caliana, I can do all of what you ask.”

I sighed as a wave of relief washed over me. On the other hand, Lucian looked like he was about to collapse in shock.

*Great. Maybe I’ve finally started to make some progress with the lunar goddess.*

The water temperature had climbed even further, and it felt like I was relaxing in a nice, comfortable bath. The calm, serene feeling I’d had when we’d first arrived in this strange place returned. I was starting to appreciate Seluna a bit—anyone who could keep Lucian in check was all right by me.

“I can grant all that you ask, Caliana. But first, I have a question for you. What will you do to win back my favor?”

**Episode 2318**

XAVIER

I was beyond pissed off. Not only was Aysel trying to meddle in Greyson and Cali’s relationship, but now she was trying to tamper with mine by dangling some offer to Ava? I gritted my teeth for a moment, stifling the urge to burst into the room and confront them.

*That’s the last thing you should do, with Cali’s safety on the line.*

I stood there, not moving a muscle, wondering whether either of the devious wolves on the other side of the door could smell how close I was. I wasn’t sure, since the place absolutely reeked of hot tub chlorine. I decided to take my chances and waited for Ava’s answer. I pressed myself as close as I could to the door, straining my ears for even the slightest whisper that could have passed between them.

Ava lowered her voice, but I could *just* make out what she said. “What do you mean, you can make him mine?”

“I mean exactly that. I’ve seen the connection that you and Xavier have—I saw you two kiss during our party. It was obvious that you two have a real connection—one greater than the shabby one he has with Caliana. That, I know for sure.”

“How do you know that we kissed? You weren’t there,” Ava asked, clearly surprised.

Aysel laughed like some kind of movie villain. “We have eyes everywhere. I also heard from the drunk Blue Blood Alpha that you and Xavier used to be mated before you died… But clearly that didn’t stick.” She let a moment of silence pass before continuing. “Let me help you. You can get your mate back. Through Seluna, all things are possible. You can achieve your wildest dreams with her influence, I promise you. Xavier was your mate first before Caliana came along, right? Why should you be without him while someone undeserving gets to enjoy the man who rightfully belongs to you? I can show you how to get Xavier and make him yours. Don’t you want that? Then we can both have the brother we desire—the brother we deserve.”

Ava was quiet for a moment before she asked, “What would I have to do?”

My emotions spun into a flurry. I’d expected her answer, but it was still shitty to hear it—to know that she would team up with someone who was pretty much our enemy just to get me back. I didn’t know why I was even a little surprised by her answer, since I knew that she would stop at nothing to keep me mated to her. It would have been a hell of a lot more surprising if she’d turned Aysel down. I was furious, but I knew I needed to keep a calm head. I couldn’t do anything that would put Cali at further risk.

I turned back to Greyson, who was watching me, probably wondering what had me so shaken.

“What’s the matter with you?” he asked.

I considered keeping this latest discovery to myself, but I’d agreed to help Greyson overcome this stupid curse.

“There’s more trouble ahead with Aysel,” I said.

“What? How much more trouble can that woman cause?”

“Lots. Believe me. I just overheard her talking to Ava. She just presented Ava with an offer to help… get me back.”

“Shit. Of course. How would Aysel know exactly what to offer Ava to earn her allegiance?”

“According to Aysel, she saw Ava and me at the party because she has ‘eyes everywhere.’ I’m so tired of her and her creepy brother. I can’t wait to get the hell out of here.”

“You and me both. Thanks for telling me, Xavier.” Greyson hesitated, as if deciding whether to say whatever else he had on his mind. “You know I’m not one to say I told you so… but I did tell you to send Ava packing. I’ve told you that a hundred times by now, actually. You should have listened to me.”

*Does he practice being a dick in the mirror or something?*

“Do you think I need that from you right now? You know as well as I do that I’ve tried to send Ava packing more times than I can count. She’s like a fucking barnacle! What do you want me to do?”

“Okay, okay, point taken. This news is concerning, but we’re going to have to deal with Ava and Aysel later. Cali’s our focus right now.”

“You think I don’t know that?” I snarled.

I was so tired of him being so self-righteous. I was about to tell him where to shove his lame attitude when Aysel and Ava came back into the room.

“How much longer is this going to be, Aysel?” I demanded. “I want to check on Cali.”

Aysel sighed and rolled her eyes. “For the last time, that’s not possible. We must wait until Lucian and Cali return on their own.”

“How do we even know that Cali is still okay? I’m going to take a look—I won’t go in, I won’t say anything, but I need to see for myself that they’re still under that dome,” Greyson said.

Aysel pondered this. “Fine. I’ll allow it, but only *one* of you can go.”

“And that’ll be me,” I said.

“No. Greyson can go, and I will go with him.”

“What? Why Greyson? Because you want to play grab ass with him on your way? News flash, he’s not into you,” I spat, still reeling from the little offer she’d given Ava.

Aysel laughed. “You two sure are feisty. Like rabid dogs!” She gave Ava a look. “There *is* something endearing about your passion, even if you are both a little overzealous at times.”

Greyson scowled at Aysel and then shot me a look. “Xavier, it’s fine. I’ll go check in on her and come right back and let you know what I saw. This isn’t worth fighting over.”

I considered telling him to shut his face and stand back, but I knew he was right. I was just going to have to trust him on this one.

Greyson started toward the door.

“Wait,” Aysel said. “You can’t go alone. I must be with you at all times.”

She hooked her arm through his, and they headed out.

Once they were gone, I turned away and trained my gaze on the aquarium, trying to calm down and keep my head clear. I had no idea what Aysel had in mind for Greyson, but I didn’t care as long as it didn’t negatively affect Cali. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ava slip out of her robe and step into the hot tub.

“Are you in the mood for a soak, Xavier?”

Despite every instinct I had, my wolf stirred at the sight of her. “How about I throw a lamp in there to soak with you?”

Ava rolled her eyes. “I wish you’d stop. You’re such a stick in the mud sometimes. Relax. Enjoy yourself for once, without spending all your time panting over Cali. We don’t even know how long we’re going to be here. Why not have a little fun while we wait?”

“Just what makes you think that getting in there with you would relax me? I’m here because of Cali. Period.” Despite my words, my wolf was howling like crazy, urging me to get closer to Ava.

*Stop it! I’m Cali’s mate. The only reason I even got you back is because of Cali. Keep your eyes on the prize, and stop getting distracted by that naked backstabber!*

Reasoning with my wolf was new to me, but so was my wolf acting bonkers over Ava, of all people.

Unfazed, Ava splashed me. “Oh, come on, Xavier. I promise you’ll love it in here. It’s very soothing, and you look pretty damn tense.”

I wiped the water droplets from my face, unable to ignore the sight of Ava’s glistening skin in my peripheral vision. My wolf hadn’t listened to a single thing I’d said. It was only getting more worked up.

“Xavier, just how many times are we going to go through this little game you’re playing? We kiss, and then you fight to stop it. We kiss again—same thing. You call me to your bed in the middle of the night, and still, you deny the obvious. Stop fighting it. You want it. I want it. Come join me.”

“Enough! There’s no way in hell I’m going to do anything with you! Stop pretending that you can read my mind.”

“Oh, but I can, Xavier, and you should stop pretending that you don’t want me. Actions speak louder than words—but I’m sure you know that already.”

“Why would I want you? I know exactly what kind of person you are.”

“Oh, and what kind of person am I, Xavier?”

“You’re the type of person who’d bargain with the devil if it meant you’d get your way. I heard you and Aysel talking back there. I know exactly the type of deals you’d make. What do you have to say about that?”

**Episode 2319**

GREYSON

“I assure you, Greyson, there’s nothing for you to worry about. Cali is fine,” Aysel said as we made our way back to the baths.

I said nothing. I was thinking about Xavier and Ava, hoping that this latest turn of events wouldn’t throw another monkey wrench into our lives.

I really wished that I could’ve brought Artemis. She was an actual asset, and I wouldn’t have needed to be constantly looking over my shoulder. It was no secret thatI didn’t trust Ava—I never had—and now that I knew she’d aligned herself with Aysel, it was just one more reason not to trust her. Ava never missed a chance to show how duplicitous and self-serving she was. I only hoped that Xavier would be able to handle her while I was gone. She wasn’t my problem, anyway. It was funny—Xavier prided himself on being such a strong leader, an imposing, capable person, but he couldn’t even get one woman to leave him and the pack alone.

We reached the bath, and I moved to open the door, but Aysel placed a hand on my arm to stop me. “You can’t go in, I’m afraid.”

I was instantly annoyed. “What kind of nonsense is this? You bring me here, and now I can’t go in? Didn’t you hear me back there? I want to look in on Cali to make sure that she’s okay, and I need to see her to be able to do that. You *said* that I could check on her.”

“I said you could, and I meant it.”

I unhooked her arm from mine. “Fuck this, I’m going in.”

I yanked on the knob. The door was locked tight.

“I’m sick of this shit!” I reared back and rammed by body into the door as hard as I could. It must have been reinforced or something, because it wasn’t budging. “Cali! Cali! Can you hear me? I’m coming to get you!”

I smacked my hands against the heavy mahogany, hoping that she’d be able to hear me, if nothing else.

“Stop it, Greyson! Calm yourself! I didn’t mean that you couldn’t see Cali, only that you can’t open the door! Only a member of the Vanguard pack is able to do that.” She opened the door with ease. “I’m warning you, though—you can’t cross the threshold. Look, but don’t touch.”

I pushed her aside, careful to follow her instructions about staying clear of the threshold. There was nothing that I wanted more than to run in and grab Cali, but I didn’t want to risk putting her in danger. I peered into the room. There it was—the dome, just as we’d left it. I could see the vague shadows that I assumed were Cali and Lucian.

“Satisfied?” Aysel asked me, her eyebrows arched.

“No, not entirely, but I know this is as far as I can take it, so I guess I have no choice but to accept it.”

I focused on the dome and attempted to reach out to Cali via mind link. *Cali, I’m here. I just want you to know that. If you hear me, just let me know that you’re okay.*

I waited, but there was no reply. I turned to Aysel, who was watching me closely, her expression cryptic.

“Why can’t I reach Cali via mind link?” I asked.

Aysel shooed me out of the way and pulled the door shut. “Mind linking, or any exterior communication, is forbidden during the ceremony.”

I gritted my teeth, trying hard to hold back my frustration. “I don’t understand why you and Lucian are so willing to accept all of this. It’s like you’re ruled by Seluna. You two do whatever she wants, no questions asked. Is it worth it?”

“What *I* don’t understand is why you insist on disrespecting Seluna!” Aysel snapped. “The three of you come in here all high and mighty, treating us like the bad guys when really, you’re the disrespectful ones. We’ve been nothing but hospitable to you each and every time you’ve come here.”

I begged to differ on that, but I wasn’t interested in arguing with her at the moment. “Aysel, I’m not trying to disrespect anyone. I’d never even heard of Seluna until I got mixed up with you and your pack. I’m just trying to understand the hold this… goddess… has over you and Lucian.”

“My family has a long tradition of worshipping Seluna. My brother and I are only carrying on that tradition. Take a look around you. Seluna has brought our family great power and wealth.”

“I can’t argue with that.” The place wasn’t my style, but it was impressive by anyone’s standards. “But who’s to say that you and your family wouldn’t have prospered without a belief in a deity that nobody else has even heard of? I don’t know, maybe your family just made a couple of good moves in the stock market, or made some good investments in real estate or something. Having wealth doesn’t prove that Seluna has granted you all this favor you keep talking about.”

Aysel shook her head. “I feel sorry for you. Do you need to *see* something to believe in its existence? Do you search for hard proof for every bit of fortune or goodwill that you see around you?”

I paused, wanting to argue, but I couldn’t really disagree with her on that. Begrudgingly, I gave her a stiff nod. “Okay, I see your point.”

“Not everyone believes in magic, yet we know it’s real, do we not?”

“Yes, that’s right. I know that magic exists. There’s no question about that,” I said. “But in this case, I have proof.” I showed her the tarot card.

“I’m sorry about that card,” Aysel said.

I scoffed. “If you were really sorry, you’d just get rid of it.”

“I would, Greyson, but if I did, you would miss out on the truth.” Aysel turned her back on me and gazed down one of the long hallways into the dim recesses of the house.

“Oh yeah, and what truth is that?”

She turned back around to face me. “The truth that’s right in front of your face, Greyson, but that you’re too blind to see. You’re just so… *fixated* on Cali that you haven’t even stopped to consider your other options. The card was a way of waking you up.”

“I don’t think you understand, Aysel. Cali is my *mate*. Nothing you can do—no card, no goddess, no amount of seduction—can change that.”

“That might be so, but I think you’re blaming me for something that I didn’t do!”

“Really? Is that what I’m doing? Because I’m pretty sure you made it so me and my mate are repulsed by each other! Who else should I blame?”

Thinking about the state of things between me and Cali was enough to send me over the edge. I wanted to touch her, be near her, kiss her… and do other things. But I couldn’t, all because the Vanguards wouldn’t mind their own business.

“But I’m not forcing you to be attracted to me with this ‘curse,’ am I? At least give me that much credit! If I wanted that, believe me, a simple love potion would do the trick. But where’s the fun in that?” Aysel sighed. “I just want you to fulfill Seluna’s prophecy.”

I was weary of hearing prophecies, and I felt a little uncertain. “Prophecy? What did Seluna tell you?”

“Don’t you get it yet, Greyson? Seluna wants us to be together. The problem with you is that you’re stuck in a cycle that won’t end until you manage to break the *due destini*. And by then, there won’t be anything left of you. Nothing you’ll recognize, anyway. You’re consumed by Cali, so much so that I don’t even know if you see how lost you are.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, and I don’t have a problem, in any case. Even if the *due destini* didn’t exist, even if Cali weren’t my mate, I’d still love her. We’re meant to be together—that’s the part you don’t get. You think I’m under some sort of obligation to be with Cali, but that’s not it at all. I love her, Aysel. She’s my mate, my lover, and everything in between. She makes me happy, I feel complete with her by my side, and there’s no one else in the entire world that I would rather be with.”

Aysel shook her head solemnly. “I respectfully disagree, Greyson. It’s the cycle—you just can’t see it because you’re blind to the reality of things. But you can be delivered from the cycle. And with Seluna’s blessing, you can be free to choose who you want without fear.”

“And I suppose that would be you, Aysel?” It always came back to this. Aysel and her obsession with me—and her obsession with eliminating Cali from the equation so that she could finally get her claws into me.

She stepped close to me and put her hands on my shoulders. “Don’t we deserve a chance to find out?”

**Episode 2320**

ARTEMIS

I looked deep into the Kollector’s eyes. *He’s laughing at me!* I’d seen that look a thousand times. He was amused by me. Unthreatened. He knew that he had the upper hand—which had so often been the case before—but why should he now? He was dead. There was nothing for me to fear from him.

“What are you waiting for?” the Kollector repeated. “Kill me, Artemis.” His lips curved up into a sneer. “You know you want to. Do it.”

I didn’t know what I was waiting for. I was overwhelmed and consumed by the desire to kill him. I wanted to do it more than anything, but wasn’t he already dead? I struggled for a moment, torn between my longing to kill him and my confusion about what was actually going on here. If I took that step and put him out of his misery, what effect would it have in this strange place? Would it mean anything at all? There was no question about whether I would’ve killed him in the real world, given the chance. If anyone deserved to kill him, it was me. But what exactly would happen if I went through with it here?

I pressed my thumbs down hard into his windpipe.

“You aren’t worth it,” I said, letting each word roll slow and harsh off my tongue. “In fact, you’re not worth anything anymore.”

I shoved him away and looked around.

*How do I get out of here? Why did I have to see the Kollector, of all people? Cali got to spar with our grandfather, and what do I get? A reunion with the man who made my life a living hell.*

I turned back to find that the Kollector had slid down to the ground. His hands were wrapped around his neck as he gasped, trying to catch his breath. He didn’t look so smug anymore. *Good.* I didn’t know much about this place, but if I’d hurt him, I was glad of it. I couldn’t stop the feeling of absolute murderous hate I had for him, no matter how wrong it might be.

“Why am I seeing you, anyway?” I demanded. “I want to see my father!”

The Kollector grinned up at me. “Aren’t you?”

My breath caught in my throat. *What is he implying? No, there’s no way!*

“Shut up, you bastard!” I rushed toward him and stopped short, crying out as I gave him a swift kick in the stomach. I bent down so that my face was mere inches from his. “You are not my father!”

If there was even one thing I was sure of, it was that this man leering up at me with hate in his eyes was not my father. I felt no connection to him but one of pure disgust.

The Kollector struggled to sit upright as he brushed a hand across his bloodied lip. “You’re seeing me for a reason, Artemis. What do you think that reason is?”

I shook my head slowly, my head spinning as the implications of it all flooded my stomach, making me light-headed. *It can’t be. I don’t believe it.* He was trying to make me uncertain and confused, but I was too strong to fall for his games now. I shook my head in frustration.This place was supposed to give me clarity, guidance, advice. The Kollector was the last person in the world who would be able to give me any of those things. I’d never needed anything from him except to get as far away from him as I could. But his question was valid. Why was I seeing him here at all?

“Well? Do you have an answer? Why am I here, Artemis? Remember, I didn’t call you here,” he said. “You called me.”

*That can’t be right. The Kollector is the last person in the world I’d call on for anything. Hell, I’d call Letifer here before I’d call him.* But he *was* here, and I needed to find out why.

“Be useful for once in your miserable life and tell me what I need to know! Is my father alive?”

The Kollector fell silent, and for once, he wasn’t smiling.

“Tell me! Is my father Kadmos alive?” I repeated. I stepped close to him, ready to beat the information out of him if I had to.

The Kollector’s head shot up at the sound of my father’s name. “Kadmos?”

A sliver of hope sprouted inside me. I nodded. “Yes, Kadmos. Do you know him?”

“Kadmos is your father?” He was looking at me differently now, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on why that might be.

I was tired of this. I bent down and lifted him up by his shirt. “Cut the shit and tell me where he is! Is he here in this world with you? Is he alive?”

I needed to know so badly that I felt like I was losing my mind. My entire body was shaking, and I felt like the wrong answer would break me and send me spiraling. I was so close to finding out what I needed to know that I could taste it. I just needed to get him talking.

The Kollector hacked, coughing up blood and spitting it onto the ground. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” He threw his head back and cackled.

I shoved him against a tree and held him pinned there. “Yes, I would.” I grabbed his shirt tighter, lifting it so the collar cut against his neck and put pressure on his windpipe once more. “Tell me! Now!”

“Or what? What’s the worst you can truly do? I’m dead already, and not even by your hand. I suppose that eats away at you, doesn’t it? That your own personal justice was never truly served?”

I hissed in his face and then reared back in surprise when the Kollector snapped his fingers and disappeared from my grasp. He reappeared behind me, no longer bloodied, and in perfect shape, as though I hadn’t laid a finger on him.

“You’ll have to try harder to discover what you truly seek,” he said.

“NO! Tell me! Tell me now! Where is my father? Where is he?”

I rushed at him, but in a flash, he disappeared only to materialize behind me once more. He had the upper hand once again.

“What I will tell you, Artemis, is that the Fae who took you from your precious family? She’s alive. Her name is Taleena.”

I woke up with a start and shot bolt upright. The Kollector’s words echoed over and over again in my mind as I shook my head. The last thing I wanted to hear right now was the sound of his voice. Sweat was pouring down my face and back, and it took me a moment to orient myself. I could hear voices, but they all sounded distant, as if they were coming to me from underwater. Then I saw Rishika’s face in front of me, and everything began to get clearer.

“Hey, Artemis! Finally, you’re up. Are you okay?”

I nodded, still trying to catch my breath.

Rishika pulled me into a tight hug. “We were so worried about you!”

She rocked me back and forth, and I relaxed against her, relieved that she was the first thing I was seeing after an experience like that.

“We?” I asked as I twisted to see Orla standing beside the bed, her eyes wide with worry.

“What were you thinking, Artemis? Drinking that tea without telling anyone or warning anyone! What if you’d been hurt?” She looked majorly pissed, but she had no right to be.

“I drank the tea because I wanted to talk to Kadmos. I figured that if I could just meet him through the tea, then I would finally know whether he was dead or not, and then I’d get some kind of closure.”

“But I thought we already had a plan for that. What about New Orleans? Your uncle?” Rishika asked.

“What about it?” I snapped. “Even if I find Adair, which I might not, he still might not have the information I need about Kadmos.”

“What you did was reckless!” Orla said, her eyes flashing.

“No, what I did was smart! You just don’t want to admit it because you’re afraid to know the answer.”

Orla looked stung for a moment, and she went silent before she quietly asked, “Did you see him?”

I shook my head. “No. I didn’t see him, which means that he could still be alive. But I did see someone much worse.” *Much, much worse.* I looked at Orla. “Do you know what happened to me after I was born?”

Orla looked surprised by the question. “What do you mean? I was told that you died…”

I shook my head. “I know that, but do you know the truth of what happened to me?”

Orla shook her head, clearly puzzled.

The rage grew within me as I asked, “Do you know someone named Taleena?”

**Episode 2321**

XAVIER

I crossed my arms over my chest, interested to see how Ava was going to talk herself out of this one. Would she cop to it, or was she going to make up some elaborate excuse in an effort to throw me off track? It wouldn’t work. I knew exactly what I’d heard, and there was no question that Ava had agreed to work with Aysel. But unsurprisingly, Ava had a total poker face.

“You know, I have to hand it to you, Ava. I at least thought you’d show a sliver of shock.” I smirked. “But of course that’s not happening. You’re the best at lying, aren’t you? You’re the damn MVP.”

“I haven’t said a word, Xavier, so how can I be lying?” She smiled innocently as her fingers danced around in the water. She really looked like she was enjoying herself in there.

“I already know what you’re going to say. You’re going say that I misunderstood, that you didn’t agree to work with Aysel, that I’ve got you all wrong.”

“I’m not going to say any of that, because you’re right,” Ava said simply. “I’ve been bad. I haven’t been honest with you.”

It was my turn to keep the shock from my face. Ava was nothing if not disarming. “So you made a deal with the little moon princess?”

Ava pouted. “I couldn’t help it. She offered me a chance to have you back as my mate—how could I turn it down? It’s not like you’re ever going to quit fighting our bond. I figured I could use all the help I could get.”

“I don’t want to hear any more of this, Ava. I’m done. All you had to do was tell her no, and you didn’t do that. You told me that you were here to help me and Cali, but as usual, you’re only interested in helping yourself. Did you really think that you would fool me?”

I started pacing back and forth, pleased with myself. I had her backed into a corner, and this time, I was going to tell her to get out of my life once and for all. This latest betrayal was the final straw. But I stopped short as Ava burst into laughter. I couldn’t imagine what she thought was so funny. Honestly, it was making me a bit uneasy.

She looked like she really was enjoying this. “I did fool you, didn’t I?” She splashed me again and tossed her head back to laugh some more.

“What?” *Fooled me? What’s she trying to pull?*

“Because you’re always so damn sure of yourself. You always think you have it all figured out. But this time? You’re dead wrong.”

“I don’t think so. I heard you. I heard you agree to what she offered.”

“I’m not denying that I agreed to help Aysel, but I only did it so that I could find out about the witch she’s using. That was the plan, right? Learn more about the curse? Once I find out what I need to know about the witch, I have no intention of fulfilling my part of the bargain.” Ava fluttered her eyelashes at me.

*Sure, that’s what you want me to think.* “Why should I believe anything you say? Just because you say that you were planning to double cross her doesn’t mean that you had any intention of actually doing it. Or maybe you planned to find out about the witch *and* take Aysel up on her offer. The two aren’t mutually exclusive.”

Ava shrugged and sank lower into the bubbling hot tub. “Why would I go through all this to betray you, Xavier? Think of all that I’ve risked to help you. Think about my devotion to you no matter how many times you shun me, the lengths that I go to to protect you, to support you when no one else does. Would Cali do even a fraction of this for you? Nope, she’s too busy getting herself into trouble to actually *help* you with anything.”

I clenched my jaw, bristling at her audacity. “Don’t compare yourself to Cali. You know I hate it when you do that. The two of you couldn’t be more different—she’s in a different league altogether.”

Ava looked up at me, the swirling water barely hiding her naked body. “Yeah, yeah, I don’t dare compare myself to your beloved Caliana; I don’t even deserve to breathe the same rarified air as her. Got it.” Ava rolled her eyes theatrically. “But you still haven’t answered my question.”

Suddenly, she stood up, the water streaming down her bare skin, her hair plastered down her neck and covering her breasts.

My wolf stirred. It wanted Ava. Badly.

Ava leaned over the edge of the tub, practically purring. “Can Cali do all the things that I’ve done for you? I know you want to answer that with all the confidence in the world to prove me wrong by telling me that she would. But really think about it. Can she?”

I flashed back to being here in the Vanguard palace with Ava, and how her lips had felt pressed against mine. Then I recalled the dream I’d had, where I’d apparently called out for her. Then, no matter how much I tried to fight it, I thought about all the other close calls we’d had since she’d come back from the dead.

My head and my heart kept thinking of Cali, but my wolf had other ideas, and it was growling to be heard. As much as I didn’t want it to be true, I had to face the facts—my wolf’s desires were overcoming mine and starting to take over. My wolf was winning.

Ava was right there in front of me, so damn close that I could reach out and touch her.

*It would be so easy. Just take her right now. You want her, Xavier. Have her.*

“Stop fighting it, Xavier. I can see the struggle in your eyes. I know you. I can read you like a book, and I know what you’re thinking,” Ava whispered. “You’re an Alpha. Big, strong, dominant, capable. You should be with someone like me—someone who appreciates what an Alpha is, who knows how to serve one. Someone who knows how to obey.”

Ava reached for me, ever so slowly. I was frozen to the spot, fighting my wolf and working overtime to keep my mind where it belonged: on Cali and getting her out of here safe.

Ava slipped, and without thinking, I caught her in my arms. Her face was pressed against my chest, and she looked up at me as a smile broke across her face.

“I knew you’d catch me. You can’t help it.”

The shock of catching her, of feeling her body pressed against mine… She was so close, and it was disrupting every effort I made to fight against her pull. I curled my lip, my mind and heart gaining purchase and bringing me back to reality.

“You’re right, I can’t help it,” I said.

Then I shoved her back into the tub and stepped back, bracing myself for a venomous response.

Ava resurfaced, but instead of attacking me or lashing out with her sharp tongue, she rose slowly out of the water, like Venus rising from the ocean. She was completely unruffled. She smoothed her long, thick hair back out of her face as the water flowed down her body.

I couldn’t pull my eyes away from her, no matter how hard I tried. My breath caught in my throat at the sight of it. My wolf was going wild, champing at the bit, demanding that I pay attention, demanding that I do even more than that. I took one faltering step forward. I couldn’t stop myself from unabashedly checking her out, from head to toe. I knew I was betraying myself, even as I kept my gaze riveted to her so that I could take in every single exposed inch of her glistening flesh.

Ava stepped out of the tub, dripping. “So, are you going to push me again?”

“No,” I rasped. “Not if you tell me what Aysel said to you.”

She smiled up at me and reached up to run a wet hand through my hair. “Aysel wants to do something similar to what she did to Greyson and Cali, but for *you* and Cali. She alleges that it will open up your mind and show you the possibilities that exist for you beyond the *due destini*. According to Aysel, it could free all three of you. Cali, too.”

“I don’t believe you,” I said. “What did you agree to do in exchange? Don’t act like it was all Aysel.”

Ava blew a strand of hair out of her eye and licked her lips before puckering them. “Nothing. I asked Aysel for more information about how she’d go about doing something like that, and honestly, the princess seemed happy to provide it.”

Ava had a self-satisfied smile on her face, and she was edging so close to me that I could feel the heat rolling off her skin.

I raised an eyebrow. “And you’re telling me this why? To be a double agent? To get me to *trust you*?”

“*You* might not trust me yet, Xavier, but tell me—what does your wolf say?”

**Episode 2322**

I stared at the lady. Goddess. Goddess-lady.

“You want me to win your favor back?” I asked slowly.

“Obviously,” she deadpanned.

“I didn’t even know you existed before I met Lucian, so I’m not sure what—”

“Ahem.” Lucian cleared his throat before seriously telling me, “I advise you to refrain from further insulting the goddess by continuously denying her magnificent existence.”

I stared at Lucian. “That’s not what I meant. I’m not denying her existence—I just didn’t know anything about her!” I looked between them. “I’m not a werewolf, I’m not steeped in werewolf lore or traditions—I didn’t even know werewolves existed up until a few months ago. I’m still learning as I go along, so—”

I had barely finished my sentence when the water started getting very hot again—soup-like hot.

“Oh my god,” I choked out, feeling light-headed. “Are you seriously going to boil me just because I didn’t know who you were?”

Seluna ignored me, her expression that of a bored cat. “I see no reason to help, Lucian. I’ve been disrespected.”

“I’m not trying to disrespect you—if anything, I hold you in high regard!” I said.

That gave Seluna pause. “Continue.”

“In my dreams, you kept mentioning that Lucian is the key.” I pointed at the man’s self-satisfied expression. “I came here, went through all this to find out what that’s supposed to mean. I took you seriously, because I thought you were telling the truth. Because you are a goddess. Was all that a waste of my time?”

Seluna wrinkled her nose. “I’m under no obligation to answer your questions, Caliana.”

She started to rise, as if getting ready to leave, and I called out, “Wait!”

She raised an eyebrow. “Yes?”

“I would really like to have the handprints removed,” I said, as politely as possible.

Seluna sniffed at me in derision again, and I’d had enough.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this! I won’t just sit here and be boiled alive!” I turned to Lucian. “I’m going to find Xavier and Greyson and leave.”

Lucian placed his hands on my shoulders and squeezed. The handprints heated up. “Caliana, one moment please.” He turned to Seluna. “Oh, mighty goddess, please listen to us,” he said, and literally thrust me toward Seluna like I was an offering.

Probably a bowl of idiot stew, at this point.

I tried to slip from his grip, but Lucian just squeezed my wrists to keep me in place, and told Seluna, “I dare speak on Caliana’s behalf, because I believe she deserves a chance. She was smart enough to recognize your superior powers, after all, and she came here to seek your help.”

Seluna huffed, shooting me a look. “That she did.”

“And she is a *due destini* mate!” Lucian said happily, talking about me as if I weren’t even there. If the whole kidnapping thing hadn’t already made me hate the guy, his behavior right now would’ve absolutely done the truck.

Nevertheless, Seluna’s expression turned from haughty contempt to intrigue. I wasn’t sure if that was necessarily a good thing for me. She tilted her head to the side, squinting at me. “A *due destini* mate, huh? In that case, perhaps there *is* something useful about Caliana.”

I didn’t like the sound of that.

“What do you mean?” I asked nervously.

Seluna slid down gracefully—of course—and caressed my cheek with the back of her hand. My skin turned hot at her touch, much like the marks.

*Oh my god, I’d better not end up with handprints on my face!*

“How interesting,” Seluna said, staring at me as if she hadn’t heard my question. She shot a look at Lucian. “There *is* something… special about this one, isn’t there?”

Lucian nodded, offering a wicked smile that sent a chill down my spine.

“Can someone please explain to me what’s happening right now?” I asked, looking between them. “Am I special because I’m a… a moon priestess?”

Seluna raised a perfectly groomed brow. She chuckled. “A priestess?”

Okay, this was insulting.

“Would that be *that* far-fetched?” I asked, trying not to seem as annoyed as I felt. “I imagine a priestess is someone who possesses great knowledge and can perform certain rituals—I can learn whatever it is that priestesses have to do.” I thrust my chin upward in defiance. “And it wasn’t even my idea—Aysel was the one who first mentioned it.”

Seluna looked weirdly amused as she looked at me. She made me feel like I was a curiosity—some sort of pet. It was unsettling, but I’d take it over her turning me into a stew.

“Oh, Caliana,” she said. “You’re not a priestess, but you could be something much more powerful.”

I swallowed. “Um, powerful? Is that really the word you wanna use?”

Because I wasn’t sure if power was a good thing when I was sandwiched between those two beautiful, potentially sinister magical meddlers.

“Ah, I knew it,” Lucian said, clearly pleased, which was yet another reason why I didn’t like any of this. “I knew Caliana had it in her.”

“Had what in me?” I asked the two of them, but Seluna just gave Lucian a fond look.

“You were wise to bring Caliana to me, my dear prince.”

Lucian preened like a peacock, and I had no idea what to do other than to ask, “Wait, so are you going to help me?”

Lucian patted my shoulder and eyed Seluna imploringly. “Oh goddess, that would be most helpful! It is all I am asking.”

Lucian was totally overselling this. You’d have thought that he was on commission.

*Oh my god… I actually don’t know what Lucian’s getting out of all this, do I?*

The thought was unsettling, but I didn’t dwell on it, because then Seluna said, “I shall consider helping Caliana. That’s all I can say for now.”

She started to rise again, looking glorious and all that, but I wasn’t gonna be distracted by how aesthetically pleasing she was again. Frowning, I asked, “Wait, why can’t you help me right now?”

“Goddess, do not abandon us in our time of need!” Lucian said dramatically, moving past me and reaching out to Seluna, imploring. The goddess continued to rise up, though, through the night, fading majestically into the moonlight. Everything around us was entirely silent.

“Well,” I said dryly. “That was a big waste of time.” I splashed some water toward Lucian. “You made me go through all of this, and I still have the handprints!”

Lucian sighed, forlorn in a way that I’d never seen before. “I had hoped that this time would be different…”

I squinted at him, confused. “This time? You’ve done this before?”

Lucian rubbed his forehead, shaking his head. “We should complete the ritual.”

“I’ll say,” I said, huffing. “I’m being steamed alive, and I’ve had enough of it.” I tried to walk away, but I couldn’t exactly walk—I had to swim. I scowled, looking around. “Where even is the palace?”

Lucian gripped my arm gently, turning me around. He looked apologetic when he faced me. It was weird to see him looking so… human.

“Apologies that you didn’t get the answers you wanted right away, but don’t despair. The moon goddess will make her intentions clear, though we do have to finish the ritual to appease her.”

I sighed, mentally exhausted. “What else do we have to do?” I wagged a finger at him. “I’m not going to kiss you again, if that’s what you’re planning.”

Lucian smirked, looking all dazzling, the bastard. “It’s how it needs to be done. A kiss to summon Seluna, and a kiss to send her off.”

“Is this for real?” I huffed.

“It is necessary, Caliana,” he said softly.

I fought to see through the fog, but nobody and nothing was around. Neither of my mates were going to be thrilled to see me kiss Lucian again, and I wasn’t either. But the sooner we got this over with, the sooner I could be back with Xavier and Greyson.

“Fine,” I grumbled, stepping closer to Lucian.

I was mentally preparing myself for the smooch when Lucian said, “Hold on.”

And then he took off his clothing.

I gasped, looking anywhere but his… Well, his bare body. Fuck!

“Hey, I didn’t sign on for this, Mr. Exhibitionist!” I said.

Lucian gave me a serious look. “Oh, Caliana—that’s the ritual. There must be no barrier between us when we send Seluna off.” He slid closer, his form hulking over me, and okay, he was really really really hot, but I didn’t care about that.

I did not want to kiss him. AGAIN!

He reached forward, dragging the strap of my dress down, his fingers long and elegant. I shook my head instantly, getting all flustered. “Hah, I’m gonna be doing that on my own, thanks very much.”

He shrugged. “As you wish.”

Grumbling about the creepiness of it all, I took the thing off, grateful for the water that covered my nudity. If this was how I had to get back to Greyson and Xavier, so be it. I would do whatever it took. Lucian was just lucky that neither of my mates could see any of this.

“It’s time,” Lucian said softly, when I dropped the garment.

His voice made me shiver.

He stepped closer, leaning forward. Holding my breath, I braced myself as his lips—soft and full—brushed over mine. Suddenly, the water began to cool again, and there was an out-of-the-blue breeze. At the same time, I felt like I was sinking underwater, vanishing slowly, being sucked into nothing.

*Don’t panic, Cali. DON’T PANIC!*

Before I could freak out, my feet touched the tiled floor of the bath. The cave was gone, and I was back in the palace. I took in a shaky breath, and Lucian let me go gently.

“There,” he said in a low tone. “We’re back.”

He stepped away, completely fucking naked—*oh my god*—and I instantly looked around for my dress.

I squeaked. “Where’s my dress?” I demanded. With flailing motions, I covered my boobs and lower body with my hands, turning toward Xavier and Greyson, ready to explain this fucking madness, but—

They were gone.

I gaped.

*Where the hell are my mates?*

**Episode 2323**

GREYSON

I brushed Aysel’s hand off my shoulder. I felt disgusted—probably as disgusted as I felt whenever the curse Aysel had placed on Cali and me activated. This woman had a *lot* of fucking nerve.

“Hell no,” I said, and she flinched. “There’s nothing here for me to find out.” I pointed at her, glaring. “I’ve made it clear, Aysel—I’m in love with Cali. She’s the only one I’ve ever wanted my entire damn life. Do you understand that?”

Her eyes were wide, hurt. “But—”

I waved a hand. “You can talk all you want about prophecies, but I know my destiny, and it leads to Cali.”

Saying the word *destiny* made me remember the three witches—how they’d offered me the opportunity to change my future. I sure as fuck hadn’t turned my life upside down to be with the likes of Aysel.

She had fallen shockingly silent, staring down at her hands as if she couldn’t even comprehend the idea of someone rejecting her. The funny thing was that I’d rejected her a hundred times now, so I couldn’t understand how this could *still* be a surprise to her.

Seriously, what the fuck was wrong with her?

“Well…” She sniffed, wiping the corner of her eye. Shaking her head like she wanted to clear it, she looked up at me and smiled a little. “I suppose that’s what you think.”

My eye twitched. “It’s not what I *think*. It’s what it *is*.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, dear, you’re so terribly stubborn. But if you prefer to take things slowly, I will try to show more patience.”

I blinked. It was like having a conversation with a wall. She was like a stubborn, spoiled toddler, refusing to accept that her mommy wouldn’t let her eat five ice creams a day. Only Aysel wasn’t a child—she was a grown-ass woman, so that made her dangerous.

“For the millionth time, Aysel,” I said sharply, “I don’t care how much you pout and scheme—I am not going to change my mind. Ever. Sorry to disappoint, but we’re done here.”

Sneering, I turned my back on her, ready to leave the sitting room, when she called, “Stop!”

I had to laugh. Could she have *been* any more of a psychopathic, petulant brat?

“I’m an Alpha, Aysel. I don’t take well to taking orders. From other pack members or from princesses who won’t take no for an answer,” I said.

Before I could leave, though, she slid in front of me and literally blocked my way. Where the hell was she finding all this mental stamina? Seriously, I knew I was good-looking, but she was taking her obsession with me to a whole other level.

“I’ll ignore your tone, Greyson, because I know that your judgment is clouded,” she said, in the most patronizing way possible. “You’ve been so entrenched in the struggle of being part of a *due destini* that you can’t possibly imagine what it would be like to have one true mate who would never be shared, never waver from the one she serves.”

“I will have that with Cali soon enough. And she won’t *serve* me—we’re equals,” I told her. “That’s what love is. Not some sort of fucked-up fantasy where you treat someone like a shiny object that you want to acquire. I’m not your toy, Aysel.”

She gasped. “I’d never see you as a toy! You’re an Alpha.”

“Then drop this. You’ll have to do it anyway, once we get out of here,” I said, looking over my shoulder at the room with the bath. “Speaking of, how much longer is this ritual going to be?”

She raised her eyebrows. “Oh, Greyson, a watched pot never boils. Perhaps the time would pass more quickly if you took your mind off the ritual…”

I scoffed. “I’m not going to do that. Not as long as Cali is with Lucian.”

She scowled. “My goodness, you really are stubborn.” With a huff, she flipped her hair over her shoulder and walked in the other direction. I’d been ready to get the hell away from her only moments ago, but suddenly I was worried about what she’d do if I let her out of my sight. Probably cast another curse on Cali and me. Attach a bomb to my car. Poison my Earl Grey.

Yeah, better to keep an eye on her.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“Follow me,” she said, pausing by the second room exit. “I’d like to show you something.”

I eyed her suspiciously. “I don’t need any more surprises, Aysel. Let’s just wait here.”

She gave me an innocent look. “I thought you wanted to know more about Lucian’s and my family history?”

I had never felt more baited in my entire life. “Is this another trick? Another creepy seduction attempt?”

She huffed. “I’m not creepy.”

I squinted at her. “I think it’s a family trait.”

She snorted. “Oh, Greyson, you are too funny.”

Seriously, what did I need to tell to this woman to make her give up on me? Maybe I had to tell her that I thought she was ugly? She’d probably go off the deep end and murder me if I did that, so maybe not.

“Come on,” she said, waving at me as she walked out. Huffing, I followed, watching as she walked down the hallway and to another door. “I’m taking you to the family library.”

“Books aren’t going to seduce me, Aysel.”

“It worked in *Beauty and the Beast*, didn’t it?” she asked innocently.

“You’re lucky I can’t kill you,” I muttered.

She laughed. “You’re hilarious!”

I really wasn’t going to escape her, was I?

Grumbling much like Xavier would have, I followed the malevolent schemer into the study. It was smaller, filled with bookcases and a large desk.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, glaring at her. “I’m not interested in checking out any of these books, unless there’s one that can shed some light on the tarot card curse. I want us to go back to the bath.”

Aysel tsked. “That would be foolish, dear. You’d not only be endangering yourself, but also Cali.”

“That’s what you say,” I snapped. “And I don’t believe a word of it.”

She sighed. “Look at you, worried sick over a woman you know you can’t truly have. Is this the life you really want? You can’t even take care of your pack properly without worrying about a mate who won’t ever be a worthy companion to you.”

I’d had enough.

“You’d better watch your mouth,” I snarled, pushing her up against the wall, pinning her hands against it before she could try to touch me. “Never, *ever* talk about Cali that way.”

Aysel’s breathing had grown erratic. Her eyes were greedy as she moved them from my arms to my chest, then up my face. She wasn’t fighting back. Was she…

She was fucking *enjoying* this.

“I can see why you’re the Redwood Alpha,” she murmured throatily. “Determined and beautiful and dominant.” She tilted her head to the side. “And doesn’t the Redwood pack deserve a Luna who lives up to the title, who is worthy of such a strong Alpha?”

I made a sound of disgust, letting her go and taking several steps back. “I will never want you, Aysel. The sooner you realize that, the better.”

She barely flinched at my words. Another woman would’ve felt humiliated, but she just shrugged.

“Anyhow,” she said, “I’d like to talk to you about this painting.”

She pointed at the picture of a royal who bore a resemblance to the Prince of Creepiness, Lucian.

“This is our great-grandfather,” she said. And then she pointed to a royal who looked like her. “And this is my great-grandfather’s Luna. They were the unquestioned leaders of the Vanguard pack. He was never challenged to a Lupo Finale. It was rumored that everyone was too afraid, and not because of my great-grandfather. Though he was a mighty warrior, it was my great-grandmother they feared.”

I offered a long-suffering sigh. “As thrilled as I am to learn about your ancestors, will you kindly explain the point?”

“I’m only showing you that I can be a fearsome Luna, Greyson,” she said, her eyes flashing with what had to be… desire? Obsession? I didn’t want to find out.

“Well, if anyone is going to be my Luna, it’s Cali,” I said with a sharp smile. “I feel like I’m repeating myself here. Do you like being rejected over and over? Is that some sort of kink you have?”

Aysel chuckled—all my sarcasm didn’t bother her, apparently—and drifted over to me, flaring out the skirt of her royal dress, or whatever. “I’m insisting, because I know your judgement is clouded by the *due destini* curse, and you are making the wrong choice, Greyson. Cali is weak. She cannot protect herself, which means that one day, you’re going to have to choose between your pack and your so-called mate.” She stared deep into my eyes. “Will you be capable of making the right choice?”

**Episode 2324**

I looked around, freaking out.

“Oh my god, where are Greyson and Xavier?” I asked, starting to shake. I was literally naked here, with a messed-up, not-so-little prince, and I was not in the mood to run around this stupid palace trying to look for my mates.

“They’re fine, Caliana,” Lucian told me in a voice I assumed he considered soothing, but mostly sounded patronizing. “Guards, Cali’s mates are allowed to come back in now that the ritual is over. Alert them.”

The two men did some sort of weird salute and exited the room. I whirled around to look at Lucian, still covering my boobs and downstairs area, feeling pretty good that I’d shaved my legs last night. It wasn’t like he could see me clearly—I was still under the water—but still.

Just as I was about to ask him where the hell my dress was, I noticed that Lucian’s face had fallen, all that controlled suaveness gone.

“Okay, what is your problem?” I asked impatiently. “Please don’t tell me it was the kiss—it’s not like I put any passion into it. I’ll have you know that I’m normally a very good kisser—when I actually *want* to kiss the other person.”

Lucian sighed, brooding even more. “It’s not that. Also, the kiss was great.”

I blushed despite myself. “So why are you pouting? If anyone should be disappointed, it’s me—I still have the marks on my shoulders, I can feel them burning on my freaking back, and we have no idea if Seluna is ever going to do anything about them!”

Lucian brushed off all my outrage. “It’s just that whenever I leave the presence of the moon goddess, I’m saddened. How can I not be?” His face got this weird, dreamy look as he rambled on. “She’s a glorious star made of light and magic, a pure divine royal, her blood as blue as the dark night sky and the deep sea, her existence a vast universe of secrets and cherished thoughts and prayers, all things that we mortals could never understand, even if—”

“Okay, Mr. Purple Prose, we get it,” I said wryly, cutting him off. “Now that you mention it, how many times have you actually done this ritual?”

He looked shifty all of a sudden. “Every time is as if it’s the first, Caliana.”

Lucian was avoiding my eyes, and I was entirely sure that there was something he wasn’t telling me.

“Anyhow, good talk,” he said, tapping on the tile as if we’d just chatted about the weather, and then he got out of the bath and walked straight to the door.

“Excuse me?” I called. “Do you even realize we’re naked? Where’s my dress?”

Lucian looked unfazed. Freaking nudity-friendly werewolves. He snapped his fingers at one of the soldiers hovering by the door. “Guard, towel!”

I dared steal a glance down at myself—yeah, I’d shaved my legs, but my stretch marks looked much redder than usual, the heat making the blood rush to the surface and creating an effect that I wasn’t exactly super cool with. I’d thought I’d gotten over all these body image issues, but apparently that wasn’t the case—and apparently I had to realize that in a freaking prince’s palace.

*UGH!*

I needed to get dressed ASAP and get out of this bath, because if I stayed in any longer, I was going to turn into a prune.

“Lucian!” I called as he checked himself out in the mirror. “Can you at least find my dress for me? Or can I get a towel too at least?!”

Lucian ordered one of the other guards to find my dress—how many *were* there?—and when the towel-carrying guard arrived, he tossed one in my direction.

*Rude! He could be a bit of a better host since he made me get naked with him in a milk bath. Then again, he did kidnap me, so perhaps I’m expecting a lot*, I thought, getting out of the pool.

Just as I was fighting to put my sticky-wet dress on, Greyson walked in.

I was so relieved to see his beautiful face.

“Greyson!” I called breathlessly.

“Cali!” He rushed forward to meet me. “Are you okay? Do you still have the marks?” I was about to speak when I noticed that Aysel had immediately followed Greyson into the room, and a second later, Xavier and Ava arrived.

I looked between all four of them, a twinge of jealousy and whole lot of fury coursing through me. What kind of weird pairing-up situation was going on here? Were the Vanguards trying to break up me and my mates?

I remembered both Seluna and Lucian mentioning that I was a *due destini* mate, with a level of interest that really worried me. I knew that Greyson and Xavier were here for me, though, because they cared about me and loved me. But still, seeing them so close to these women made me feel shaken and angry.

Both women were extremely dangerous—Ava with all her manipulations and Aysel with her fucked-up magic stuff—and both of them were after my mates. Also, they both looked unhappy about the fact that I was still alive and not beef stew.

*I am* not *going to let them win!*

“Cali?” Greyson pressed. “Seriously, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Xavier said. “Wait, why are you both naked? What the hell happened?”

“I’m not naked,” I said huffily, still trying my best to put the dress on like it was nothing. I wasn’t fully dry, which made the whole thing very difficult. The fabric was sticking to my skin, leaving very little to the imagination.

Meanwhile, Lucian was using a towel to dry his hair, as casual as anything.

“There was nothing scandalous going on,” Lucian said. “Your mate was hardly despoiled at my hands.”

“Cali, is that true?” Xavier asked sharply.

“Xavier, it’s fine. Nothing happened,” I said earnestly.

In the meantime, Greyson was helping with the back of my dress as I towel-dried my hair.

“Are you really okay?” he said in a lower voice, his gaze imploring.

“I am,” I said.

“Cali, if that asshole tried anything…” Xavier said, looking at me up and down, as if to make sure that I wasn’t melting or something.

“Xavier, it’s fine,” I repeated yet again, but he still examined me.

“Did you learn anything about the marks?” Greyson asked.

He’d seen that they were still on my back.

“No, just that I can’t seem to get rid of them,” I muttered, and I turned for Xavier to see.

Xavier gritted his teeth. He faced Lucian, his voice loud. “If the marks are still there, what the fuck was the point of all this?”

I was wondering the same thing.

“Is Seluna even real?” Xavier went on.

Before he could get himself in trouble with an ancient deity and make things worse, I rushed to say, “I spoke with Seluna. It didn’t go well.”

“What? Why?” Greyson asked, looking frustrated too.

“She’s angry that I pretended to be a Luna,” I explained. “She wants me to do something to make up for it.”

It was Greyson’s turn to glare at Lucian. “What the hell is that supposed to mean? I’m warning you, Lucian—I’m *not* going to allow the Vanguards to make up more reasons to keep Cali around.”

Lucian exhaled in a long-suffering kind of way, buttoning up his shirt—it had frilly sleeves and all. “I understand your frustration, Alpha, but goddesses cannot be rushed.”

Aysel came up to her brother’s side, crossing her arms over her chest like a petulant child. “Did you not appease the moon goddess?”

Lucian glared at her. “Of course I did—I know how to speak to her. And of course there is no doubt that Seluna will bless us with another visit.”

Xavier’s voice was a growl. “*When?*”

There was a bizarre kind of sadness in Lucian’s voice. “That is entirely up to the goddess.”

Greyson’s expression was thunderous. He was clearly losing his patience, and that was a bad thing. Like, Xavier being pissed off was normal, but now that Greyson had lost his cool, I knew that if Lucian made one wrong move, things would go down.

*Shit, I hope we don’t have to fight our way out of here. Again.*

“That’s all fine and dandy,” Greyson said, deadpan, “but it’s time to go home. We’ve all had enough.”

Surprisingly, Lucian waved a dismissive hand. “You are free to go.” He then stared at me, his bi-colored eyes pinning me in place. “Of course, I shall require Caliana’s presence again so we can initiate the connection.”

“Absolutely the fuck not,” Xavier snarled.

*Tell them, Xavier!* I thought, bristling. I had a flash of kissing Lucian—I’d kind of blocked it while it had happened, refusing to actually feel it, but it was just… there.

*Ugh!*

Lucian’s voice lowered, his expression darkening. “We really don’t have a choice.” He walked up to me, ignoring my mates standing on either side of me. His gaze held mine intensely, his expression almost overwhelming. “Caliana, please,” he said, taking my hand. His grip was warm, firm. “Seluna has paired us, and we are now bound under her. Do you understand how important that is?”

I paused.

*Paired? BOUND?*

What the hell did those words even mean in this context? My stomach dropped so low that I suddenly felt like I was about to puke.

*No no NO! This can’t be true. CAN IT?*

Wide-eyed, I looked at Lucian. “Are you saying that we’re freaking *married*?”

**Episode 2325**

ARTEMIS

I watched my mother’s face grow pale at the sound of the name “Taleena.” She quickly shook her head, looking away. “No,” she said, clearing her throat. “That name means nothing to me.”

My heart felt tight. I’d learned early on how to tell when someone was lying, or covering up the truth—it was a necessary skill for a bounty hunter. But I hadn’t expected my own mother to lie to me. Not over something so important.

“What are you doing?” I asked, shaking my head. “I know you’re lying to me. Right to my face, at that.”

Orla pressed her lips together. “Artemis—”

“No,” I said firmly, “I can understand that bringing up the past—especially when it involves something so dark—can be upsetting, but I deserve to know anything and everything that will help me figure things out about my father. Why wouldn’t you want to be part of that journey for me?”

My mother squeezed my shoulder, sighing. “I do want to help you, Artemis, of course I do, but there’s nothing to be gained by bringing up Taleena.”

“Why?” I asked, not budging.

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. “It’s too painful.”

I swallowed thickly. I didn’t want to ignore my mother’s pain, but I couldn’t just stay in limbo forever. Besides, staying hung up on the past wouldn’t do her any good.

“Memories,” I said quietly, gently resting my hand on her forearm, “no matter how painful, are only memories. They happened, and talking about them isn’t going to make them come back.”

“But talking about that woman isn’t going to help you in your search for Kadmos,” my mom said.

I shook my head, my voice becoming louder. “I need to know the truth, don’t you see? After everything I went through as a kid, I should be the one who decides what’s useful or not.”

My mom stood up, shaking her head again and again, her eyes more watery than ever. She was clearly upset—more than upset. She seemed broken and terrified, and I hated to see her like this, but what about…

What about *me*?

Why did I always have to be in the dark?

Anger rose up inside me, but I told myself not to be selfish. I told myself that my mother was hurting, and I needed to follow Cali’s eternal advice and talk things out with her.

Before she could leave, I took her hand and gently tugged, urging her to sit down with me again.

I tried to be as honest as possible, hoping I could reach her.

“I know this is hard for you,” I said earnestly, “but I really need your help. I need you to give this to me for all the years…” I swallowed. “For all the years I lost without you.”

Orla made a sound that resembled a quiet sob. She pulled me into a hug, and I held her back. She didn’t start crying, but I felt like she was on the verge.

When the hug ended, she didn’t make eye contact, but she did keep my hand in hers. Her voice low, her eyes downcast, she muttered, “I did know Taleena. I’m sorry I lied. It was cowardice on my part.”

I swallowed. “I don’t think of you as a coward. I just think that you were very badly hurt. Was she your friend?”

Orla wiped the corners of her eyes, sighing. “We were more than that. Taleena was employed by our family’s household, but I always treated her like my sister. My mother brought Taleena’s parents to work for us when she was pregnant with me, only to discover that they were expecting a child as well.” My mother’s expression turned wistful. “We were born only days apart, grew up together, played together. Taleena eventually started working for us, and then…”

“What?” I asked.

“Our friendship was occasionally strained by this, but I never saw her as my servant, but as my friend.” She met my gaze, her own cautious. “Why are you asking about her?”

I paused. I had no idea if my mother knew this part, or if it was entirely true. But I still had to say what I’d seen out loud. No more secrets.

“When I was under the power of the tea, I was told that Taleena was the one who stole me at birth.”

Orla gasped. “No. That can’t be true, Artemis. Who told you such a cruel lie?”

The memory made me wince. “It was someone I knew in the Fae world. Someone I worked for,” I said. “But it was a memory too. I saw it all before me, I just didn’t have her name until I was told it.”

She shook her head again. “It can’t be true. Whoever said that knows nothing about what we went through.”

I had my reasons to doubt the Kollector’s word, but I’d also seen the memory, so I didn’t know what to believe. I could also see where Orla was maybe a bit naïve. She may have thought that she and Taleena were friends, but Orla’s family—my family—was stations above hers. I certainly resented the Kollector, who had me “employed” in a worse way, but still. There was a power imbalance.

“Like I said, I saw a flashback of what happened, Mom,” I murmured. “The tea made it look very real.”

Orla exhaled sharply. I didn’t see surprise in her face—mostly hurt. “That can’t be…”

“Why is it so painful for you to talk about Taleena, then? What happened between the two of you that made you so unwilling to bring her up?” I asked.

She pressed her lips together. “Artemis…”

“I mean it, Mom. If you two were friends, shouldn’t you be happy to talk about her? Shouldn’t your time with her be made up of happy memories?”

My mom let out a sound like a laugh, but it carried hurt. “All those happy memories were tarnished on the day that I was told that my precious firstborn had died at birth. And then I lost my best friend.”

I frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Orla took a deep breath. “My mother was so devastated to lose a grandchild that she could offer little comfort. My father tried to comfort me, but I really wanted Taleena by my side. She’d been with me throughout the entire pregnancy, and when I needed her to help me get through the aftermath… she was gone.”

My head was throbbing, and my voice came out throaty. “Gone?”

My mom nodded. She wiped her eyes again. This time, there had been tears at the corners. “She was my best friend, and she didn’t visit me, not once. She never even offered a word of sympathy.”

No wonder my mother was devastated. Her best friend had turned into a ghost and left her when she’d needed her the most.

“I used to think there was some reason, some explanation that I could use to forgive her,” Orla said softly. “But in the years since, my hope for forgiveness has hardened into anger—and despair.”

I wondered if Taleena’s disappearance meant that the Kollector had been truthful. Because if Taleena had been responsible for stealing me, it would’ve made sense for her to distance herself from my mother. Not exactly like you could stay on good terms after something like that.

“While you were under the tea’s influence,” my mom said, “did your informant offer any explanation as to why Taleena would have done such a horrible thing?”

The Kollector’s face popped up in my mind. He’d just disappeared afterward, offering me nothing else. Everything about him had been taunting and sinister, much like he’d been in real life. Of course, he could’ve been lying about all this—even in death, he would have remained rotten to the core.

But if he’d been truthful, what would that mean for my mother and the friend who’d caused her such tremendous harm?

“Was Taleena ever jealous of you?” I asked my mother quietly.

The rest of my questions were unspoken: could a feeling as petty as jealousy justify Taleena’s actions? Working as a servant despite her friendship with my mother must’ve stirred up anger and resentment, but what kind of person would complete the despicable act of stealing and abandoning a baby? Could someone have offered Taleena money?

“I don’t know if I can keep talking about this,” my mom whispered, fresh tears brewing in her eyes. I gave her a tissue to wipe her wet eyes and then hugged her tight. I needed to comfort her right now. To hold her close, like I hadn’t been able to do for years.

As for my questions, I hoped that once I got to New Orleans, I would be able to find some answers.

“I’m sorry for not being upfront with you,” Orla said, facing me. “I was protecting myself, and you as well.”

“Me?”

She shook her head. “I lied to myself. I should’ve remembered that my oldest daughter is strong and would never shy away from facing hard truths.”

I was moved by her words. I loved this closeness between us. This kind of soft, motherly, familial love that I hadn’t experienced in years upon years. My mother’s best friend had irrevocably harmed us both, forcing me into an empty, poisoned life where I had no idea of my mother’s existence, or my sister’s. I had so many mysteries to solve when it came to my past, but I was determined to figure everything out.

One thing I already knew, though.

If I ever found Taleena, I was going to kill her.

**Episode 2326**

MARTA

“It doesn’t matter if it’s possible to reunite Lilac with Plum,” Kira said. “It’s not something I should even be discussing with you right now.”

I wasn’t going to let that be the final word on the matter. “Why not? I think I deserve to know if it’s at least a possibility.”

Kira scoffed. “Don’t give me that innocent look. I can see right through you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh my god, I’m being serious here, Kira! I’m not asking you to do anything, I promise.”

She squinted at me. “What about you?”

This woman was so beyond suspicious and imposing, I didn’t even know how to deal with her without flailing. “I never said—”

She raised an index finger. “How do I know that you won’t do something rash, just because you’re totally besotted with a soft-haired pretty boy that looks like that one singer whose name I can’t remember?”

I was distracted now. “Wait, what singer?”

“The only with the fluffy curly hair!” Kira exclaimed.

I shook my head. “Lilac’s hair isn’t fluffy.”

“My god,” Kira said, wrinkling her nose. “Love really does blind people.”

I blushed profusely. “Can you please just answer my question?”

“There is no simple answer,” Kira declared. “And what I’m seeing right now is a girl about to do something reckless, just for her boyfriend’s sake.”

“That’s not what this is!”

Kira scoffed. “Oh, but it is. You’ve already gotten into trouble by using your magic to mess with the spirit world. I’m not going to be your accomplice and have you get caught again.” She raised an eyebrow. “Actually, you should talk to Big Mac about this. I bet she’ll be able to terrify you into reconsidering.”

I didn’t doubt that for one second. But Kira was definitely overreacting here.

“Oh come on,” I said. “I’ve already asked Big Mac—I’m talking to you now. I thought we were friends.”

“I don’t have any friends,” Kira said coldly.

Ouch. Unexpected.

Kira huffed. “Okay, fine, we’re friends. But why are you even obsessing over this? What’s so important about Lilac and his wolf? They seem to be happy enough as is.”

I shook my head. “That’s what he says, but I know he’s not as happy as he pretends to be, and I…” I swallowed nervously. “I want him to be happy. Is that so bad?”

“Yes,” Kira deadpanned.

I huffed. “Come on, haven’t you ever cared deeply for someone? Weren’t you married?”

She sighed deeply. “I was, but Geoff was a vampire. He didn’t have a wolf.”

“I know,” I said. “But you loved him, right?”

Kira paused. Her stern expression softened, to a shocking degree. Her voice lowered wistfully. “With all of my cold, dark heart.”

Well. I needed to exploit this bout of sentimentality before Kira started yelling at me again.

“Imagine that Geoff was in trouble, or suffering—wouldn’t you have done anything to help him?”

“Of course I would!” Kira exclaimed.

“That’s what I’m talking about—I want to help Lilac.”

Kira scoffed. “And here I thought you weren’t going to do anything.”

I shook my head, holding up the bracelets. “Look—even if I wanted to do anything, my hands are kinda tied. Literally.”

Kira scowled. She stared between my face and the bracelets. “So, if I give you some information, you promise you won’t race off and do something supremely stupid with it?”

I swallowed, making sure not to give her a direct answer. I’d learned that witches were great at giving indirect answers, and I was trying my hand at that. “I just want to know if it can be done.”

Kira offered a long-suffering sigh. “Okay. But the answer might not be the one that you want to hear.”

I slumped back. “So it can’t be done?”

Kira stared at me intensely. “I didn’t say that. Only that the answer is far from straightforward, not so black and white. There are so many steps involved.”

I could see that Kira was doing the indirect non-answer thing herself. Whatever—it wasn’t like I had another choice. And either way, I was feeling more hopeful now.

“So there *is* a possibility of fixing things for Lilac, right?” I asked, wanting to make sure.

“There are so many steps involved—and if even one of them went wrong…” She huffed, pausing as she shook her head. “I can’t tell you the details. It’s too dangerous.”

“You’re stalling,” I said, frustrated.

Kira gave me a shifty look. “How much do you know about the spirit world?”

I paused, thinking. “I’ve always been able to talk to spirits, but it’s not like they chatter on about what their world is like. They always seem more interested in speaking to their loved ones.”

Kira stared at me curiously. “So Lilac hasn’t spoken to you about it?”

“A little,” I admitted. “But not in any great detail.”

“That’s probably for the best,” Kira said. “It’s not a place that a mortal would ever wish to see.”

Kira’s tone of voice—the low and scratchy quality to it, the sense of threat—sent a shudder down my spine.

“But *you* know about it,” I said quietly.

“Most witches do,” she said. “It’s a dark and dreary place where the dead go before they move on. In some ways, it mirrors our world, but leeched of warmth and color. It shows itself differently to everyone, though, so there’s no predicting what it could look like if you ever went there.”

I swallowed audibly. “Damn.”

“Damn, indeed,” Kira said. “What’s for sure is that there are things in the spirit realm that no one fully understands—dangers that could affect a soul, maybe even rip it apart. It’s not a place to enter lightly.”

A lump formed in my throat as I imagined Lilac caught in the spirit world, fighting to return to the land of the living. Perhaps I’d broken all the rules when I’d pulled him back, but I would do it all again, given the chance.

Just to help him.

“I can tell you’re trying to scare me about the spirit realm,” I told Kira seriously.

Her voice was, as ever, deadpan. “I would never.”

“Stop it,” I said, huffing. “What does all this even have to do with Plum?”

“The two are connected, and therefore linked forever,” Kira said.

“You mean Lilac and Plum, right?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “I mean that Lilac and Plum were separated in the spirit world, so their reuniting must be linked to it too.”

I paused for a moment, processing. “Does that happen to all werewolves who die?”

Kira shrugged. “Not sure. Perhaps every life and death is different. I know that Lilac died in a tragic, horrible way. Perhaps that has something to do with it, but I can’t be sure.”

I stared at her. “Can you be sure about anything at all? Ever?”

She snorted. “Obviously not. There are so many things the living don’t know—and that includes witches like myself. I’m not all-knowing.”

I rubbed my forehead, taking a deep breath.

Kira squeezed my shoulder. “I wish I could provide you with more definitive answers, but when it comes to the dead, despite the knowledge of our two worlds, there will always be far more that we *don’t* know about the spirit world.”

“Any chance of Lilac and Plum being reunited would have to involve the spirit world, though, right?” I asked. “That’s what you meant.”

Kira gave me a cautious look. “It’s true. If a reconnection between Lilac and Plum were to be occur, it would have to take place in the spirit world.”

My heart was thumping now. “So you’re saying that it *can* be done?”

“I’ve told you that it would be dangerous a million times now, and yet that’s the question you want to ask?” Kira was annoyed. “Aren’t you scared?”

I *was* scared. Deep down, I was so scared of many things, and one of them was for Lilac to grow to resent me because I’d resurrected him but hadn’t been able to make him whole. There was part of him that was missing, and I couldn’t even imagine how traumatizing that was. He hadn’t said anything, but the idea of his happy-go-lucky attitude changing to something sour, something less than what he was, made me ache.

Lilac was like a beacon of light and tenderness and want in my life—all softness and playfulness and so many amazing things, and just thinking about how much he meant to me made me want to cry. He did his best for me, always, and I needed to do my best for him.

“Can it be done, Kira?” I asked, for what felt like the hundredth time. “Can we reunite Lilac with his wolf? I don’t know how many times I need to ask you to get a clear answer.”

Kira looked cautious. Uncomfortable in a way that I’d rarely seen her permit herself. “That’s the point. There is no clear answer. And this is precisely why I didn’t want to tell you. The only way to find out more about this would involve Lilac going back to the spirit world.”

**Episode 2327**

LOLA

Jay and I, now unfortunately fully dressed, sat on the bed as Jacs paced back and forth.

I eyed her warily. “How the hell could you lose something like your daylight item? It’s beyond important. Like, you’ll die without it.”

Jacs was flailing around in a way that was *so* not her. “Did you really need to remind me of that? Because I already know! If I don’t get that thing back, I’m going to get fried alive!”

Now that was a mental image I didn’t need.

“And it’ll be much worse than the time I used a tanning bed,” Jacs added, fanning herself, no longer a calm, cool, and collected vampire.

Jay seemed to be sharing my thoughts. “Okay, Jacqueline, I need you to take a deep breath and think.”

“I can’t think!” She huffed. My god, she was a drama queen! I bet I never made such a fuss about anything, ever. At least I hoped I didn’t.

“I know thinking is hard, but you gotta try,” Jay said patiently, as if he were talking to a toddler. “When was the last time you remember having it?”

Jacs paused walking. “I don’t remember *not* having it—it’s a part of me, like my head. I never go anywhere without it.”

I refrained from telling her that I doubted that, seeing as Jacs didn’t exactly have the best head on her shoulders, but anyway. I was being nice right now—I’d decided I would try to be helpful, if for no other reason than because Jacs had helped me in the past. And also, I wasn’t sure if we’d ever be able to remove the stench of fried vampire from the house, and I didn’t want to deal with Xavier or Greyson complaining about that.

“It has to be in the house somewhere,” I told her. “But the house is massive, so…”

Of course Jacs would have to lose it in a house as big as this one.

“It’s like looking for a needle in a haystack. It could be anywhere,” I said to a frowning Jay.

Jacs checked her watch, almost hyperventilating. “We only have so many hours until sunlight. In the meantime, I think everyone should close their curtains. Literally everyone in this house, and that’s a whole lot of people, so we should let them know right now!”

The slight edge of hysteria in her tone wasn’t helping. I was about to stand up and smack her across the face—I felt like that would help—but Jay beat me to it.

Instead of smacking her, though, he walked up to her and said in an even tone, “Lola and I are here to help you, so I need you to focus and not let emotion overwhelm you. Can you do that for me?”

I felt tingly at the sound of Jay’s voice—very much gentle dom vibes, and I was totally into it. The urge to tell Jacs to leave just so we could get down to business was a big one, but I was trying not to be a selfish brat.

Either way, his tone seemed to calm the vampire down.

“Okay,” she said, nodding sharply, determined.

“I need you to retrace your steps,” Jay said. “Where were you last?”

She paused to think. “In my bedroom.”

“That’s as a good place as any to start,” Jay said.

Jacs bit her lip. “You think so?”

I rolled my eyes. “Can you chill? It has to be here; we’re going to find it.”

“We have to!” she said, her volume escalating again.

*Isn’t she being a little too much of a drama queen over this?* I mind linked to Jay.

He shrugged, which I also considered hot, just because.

“Let’s go,” Jacs said urgently, leading us to her room. “I remember waking up with it this morning.”

Jay and I were starting to look around when Jacs blurted, “My goodness, we’re just wasting time now. I’ve already searched my room twice.”

I stared at her. “Then why the hell did you tell us to search in here?”

She flailed. “I don’t know! Like I said, I’m panicking over here.”

I rolled my eyes as Jay asked, “Where were you before the bedroom?”

“Is it really that big a deal if we can’t find it?” I asked. “It’s bound to turn up somewhere, and in the meantime, why not ask Big Mac or Kira to make another?”

Jacs started fanning herself all over again, this time focusing on her face, like she was fighting away tears. “Oh my god, what do you mean ‘if we can’t find it’? We have to!”

“Okay!” I barked, grabbing Jacs by the arms. “Take it easy—I promise you’ll survive. Big Mac’s magic is super powerful—if she makes an amulet, it’ll definitely work.”

Jacs shook her head, still looking like she wanted to cry. “You don’t understand—the daylight item is irreplaceable. It’s not some rando jewelry, it belonged to my—” She choked. “It belonged to my mom.”

I was stunned. Was Jacs really talking about her biological mother? She’d never spoken about her human life since I’d known her—not even once.

“Jacs, that’s…” I was at loss for words.

“It’s the only thing I have that connects me to my mom,” Jacs said, sniffling.

Well, damn. Jacs was getting me feeling some type of way too. I hugged her, patting her shoulder. “Don’t worry—we’ll find it, even if we have to turn the whole house upside down.”

“She’s right,” Jay added.

Jacs looked between us. “Thank you,” she said with a sniff.

“But just to be safe—in case it takes longer than a few hours to find it—you should go talk to Big Mac about getting a temporary one,” I said.

Jacs rubbed her forehead, sighing. “Do I need to ask a witch for a favor? I heard what happened to Jay.” She pointed at my mate. “And yeah, he’s still super hot, but I’m really attached to both my eyes.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Okay, but that was a special situation—Big Mac usually doesn't ask for *that* much. Maybe she’ll be in a good mood and only want some vampire blood or saliva or something.”

“Hopefully she won’t ask for my soul,” Jacs said darkly, walking out the room to go find Big Mac.

Jay took a deep breath, taking my hand. “Damn. I hope Jacqueline calms down.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think that’s gonna happen unless she finds the item.”

Jay winced. “I’ve seen what happens to vampires who aren’t protected from the sun—it’s not a pretty sight. Kinda like fried calamari.”

I shuddered. “Oh my god, stop!” Maybe Jacs and I weren’t BFFs, but the thought of her being “ashed” was too much.

“What did you think about the part about her mother?” I asked Jay.

“It was… interesting,” he said, his expression thoughtful.

I tried to picture a young Jacqueline receiving the item. Had she received it from her mom directly, or was it an heirloom? Had she even ever met her mother? Could she have come across the piece of jewelry and treasured it ever since?

“How old is Jacqueline, anyway?” Jay asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Like, really, really old. I wonder if she’s had the item for decades? Eons?”

“Yeah, that’d explain why she wants to find it so badly,” Jay said.

I swallowed nervously. I couldn’t imagine how I would feel if I ever found anything that belonged to my biological mom. Not that there was any chance of that, but I’d probably want to hold on to it.

“What are you thinking?” Jay asked.

I sighed, shaking my head. “Nothing. Just, I never expected to feel bad for Jacs.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” Jay said, like the sexy wise man he was.

We walked out of Jacs’s bedroom, and Jay started toward ours, pulling me with him.

I raised my eyebrows. “Wait, what are you doing?”

Jay shot me a smirk. “Do I need to remind you of what we were doing when Jacqueline interrupted? I thought we could pick up where we left off...”

I scoffed, stopping before he could pull me into the bedroom. “That ship has sailed. Somehow having a screechy, panicked vamp worrying about her daylight item isn’t exactly the biggest turn on, and besides, we should help her—with your assistance, of course.”

Jay groaned, rolling his eye. “She’ll get an amulet from Big Mac, won’t she? It’s not like this is a life-or-death matter.”

“Still,” I said. “We said we’d do this with her.”

Jay pulled me closer, his arms around my waist. He raised an eyebrow. “I can’t believe you’re passing up a chance for the two of us to be alone in order to help Jacqueline.”

I snorted. “Jacs and I have had our share of disagreements, but we’re the only two vampires in the house—we need to support each other. I’m going to start looking in the living room.”

Jay pouted. “Fine.”

I grinned and gave him a small kiss. “I’ll make it up to you later.”

That perked him up all right.

As I headed toward the stairs, I heard a door slam. Artemis came stomping down the hallway. The door burst open, then, and Rishika appeared.

“Artemis, wait!” she called. “Come back!”

“What is—”

A stormy Artemis cut me off before I could finish my sentence, literally brushing past Jay and me as she headed downstairs.

I raised my eyebrows, turning to Jay. “What the hell was *that* all about?”

**Episode 2328**

Lucian laughed, while I scowled.

“What’s so funny?” I demanded. By the looks of it, Xavier and Greyson weren’t amused either.

In fact, they both looked murderous.

“We’re not married, beautiful Caliana,” Lucian said, in that sleazy-suave way of his. “Though I am truly flattered that you would consider me.”

*Listen to this asshole!* I thought, ready to argue that I would *never* “consider” him, but he cut me off.

“While we’re not married,” he added, “we *are* connected now.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Xavier demanded.

“It sounds like a reason to start a pack war,” Greyson said darkly.

Lucian rolled his eyes. “Calm yourselves, Alphas. I’m only saying that Caliana and I have experienced the moon ceremony together. We were blessed with Seluna’s extraordinary presence, and therefore we are bound together in the goddess’s eyes.”

*Okay! That sounds—horrible, but also far less horrible than I originally imagined? At least we’re not fucking married.*

I wasn’t exactly feeling relief, here, but I’d take what I could get. The idea of being connected to Lucian made my skin crawl, though. Especially since I—still—had no idea what that could potentially involve for both of us in the future.

“What does being connected under Seluna even mean, though?” I asked him.

“Just what it sounds like,” Lucian said pleasantly.

“We’re leaving,” Xavier declared, grabbing me by the arm, clearly ready to caveman his way out of here. Not that I minded, at this point.

“Might as well,” Lucian said casually. “But, Caliana, don’t forget that Seluna is still considering whether or not to help you. Which means that she will be visiting you again in your dreams.”

I groaned loudly, irritated. “Why does she have to drop by in my freaking head? Can’t she just come in person?”

“That is her way. Do not doubt it.” Lucian stared at me. “Seluna will appear to you to invite you back, and when she does, you should let me know.”

“Why?”

“Because when that happens, you must return to the bath and perform the ceremony again!” Lucian said happily. Why the fuck was he so happy? “It’s the only way to speak to the goddess.” He raised an eyebrow. “I thought you understood that.”

“Please refrain from patronizing my mate, Lucian,” Greyson said sharply. “I’m sure Seluna would expect better manners from you.”

That made Lucian look weirdly shocked-slash-kinda guilty. This man was so weird.

“We’re done here,” Xavier snapped. “We’ll have to think about whether or not Cali will come back to this place, anyway.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, as Xavier led me away. “This wasn’t helpful at all.”

Entirely ignoring my hostile tone, Lucian called, “I can have my driver take you back.”

Greyson scoffed, so loudly that it echoed. “No, thanks, we’ll get home on our own,” he said, rushing to walk on my other side as Xavier took the lead.

As we passed a frowning Andrei, I saw him staring at Aysel, while Aysel followed Greyson like a dangerous, horny wasp.

“Greyson!” she said loudly. “Don’t forget, your opportunity is still here for the taking!”

Greyson looked like he wanted to bang his head against the wall, or bite someone’s head off. Maybe both at once.

“What was all that about?” I asked as we headed out.

Greyson’s laugh was humorless. “I wonder if this is what it’s like being a woman. I’ve never had a stalker before—it’s fucking exhausting.”

I wasn’t surprised by Greyson’s observation—he was thoughtful like that. I reached out, taking his hand. I fucking hated Aysel for doing this to him—to us. Artemis’s suggestion to fight the woman was becoming more appealing day by day. And to make things worse, Ava was still hovering by us, at Xavier’s side—of course.

But he only had eyes for me.

“Are you really okay, though?” he asked, looking at me up and down for what felt like the hundredth time. “Are you hurting anywhere?”

I shook my head. “I’m fine. The whole thing was bizarre and unsettling, but I’m okay.”

Xavier turned to Greyson. “The sooner we get back to the pack, the better.”

As we passed a few guards, I could see the tension on my mates’ faces. I hoped there wasn’t going to be any fighting—I was *exhausted*. Greyson seemed to sense it. He stroked my arm. His tone was softer now, his eyes searching. “I’m gonna shift, and you can climb on my back, okay?”

I nodded as he shifted, and Xavier glowered. “She can come with me, actually.”

They’d both shifted now, their wolves eyeing each other. But before I could be annoyed by the whole possessiveness thing—as usual—I heard Ava’s voice.

“So what *really* happened during the ceremony?” She crossed her arms. “After all, we did find you naked with the prince.”

I bristled at her insinuation. *How fucking dare she?* “Nothing happened. Don’t stir things up.”

Ava smiled mockingly. “I’d never do that. Especially because I know that you would *never* cheat on your mates.” She raised an eyebrow. “They, on the other hand, seem to have wandering eyes…”

I gasped, my fury rising. I charged at her. “What the hell did you just—”

Before I could smack this horrid pathetic hyena, she shifted into her admittedly massive wolf.

“You’d better watch the way you talk to me if you don’t want to be blasted into a million pieces,” I told her angrily.

Her wolf snapped her teeth at me, but then Xavier growled, followed by Greyson, and she backed off. I looked over at my mates, first at Greyson.

*I’m going to ride with Xavier*, I told him. *Ava’s being an asshole, and I need to keep an eye on him*. *I’m sorry.*

Greyson huffed, clearly unhappy, but nodded.

*I love you*, I mind linked.

He nodded again. *I love you too.*

I climbed onto Xavier’s back, and we started toward the pack house. I watched Ava the entire time. I couldn’t believe I’d taken Lola’s foolish advice. It did make sense in a Lola kind of way, but whenever I saw Ava anywhere near Xavier, I felt like blowing her up like a firework.

*I’m sorry you had to go through all that*, Xavier mind linked.

*Me too*, I replied. *And I still have these stupid handprints.*

Meanwhile, Ava glared at me. I glanced over at Greyson’s wolf as he led the charge home. The situation with him was no better. He hadn’t said anything about the revulsion spell, and the way Aysel had been hovering around him was also blast-worthy.

I wish we’d never, fucking ever, encountered the Vanguards.

By the time we reached the pack house, I was afraid to let either of my mates out of my sight.

Ava, naked post-shifting, walked up to Xavier, all fluttery eyelashes. “Xavier, can I ask you something?”

“No,” Xavier said bluntly, turning his back on her to head to the kitchen.

I smirked, raising an eyebrow at her. *Take that!*

She looked at me with what had to be hatred. So that was fun.

“Cali!” my mom blocked my line of sight, pulling me into a hug. “Did everything go all right?”

I tried to keep up a brave face, but it was hard. “Not really,” I mumbled. “I still have the handprints. I’ll have to go back to Lucian. If anything, things feel worse.”

My mom frowned, squeezing my shoulder. “Oh, honey. Should I make you some tea? Regular tea, I mean.”

I snorted. “I’ve had enough tea to last me for quite a while, I think.”

Sage and Ravi and a few others hovered around me and started to ask questions about the Vanguard pack, but Greyson stepped forward. “We can all can talk about this in the morning. Let Cali rest.”

He paused beside me, not touching. I could feel him staring at me, all that longing making my stomach drop. We both knew we couldn’t do anything about it until the revulsion curse was broken. My heart ached with love and desire and everything in between.

“I’ll see you later, okay?” he muttered.

I nodded, and he gave me a hug. I returned it, hugging him tightly, ignoring the lump in my throat. I watched him as he climbed the stairs.

“Are you ready to get out of here?” Xavier asked.

I was confused. “To go where? That’s—”

Xavier scooped me up before I could finish my sentence, and I gasped. He carried me upstairs, smirking, and I couldn’t help but chuckle. He walked straight past my room and into his.

I wrapped my arms around his neck. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Xavier opened the door with one hand and walked into his room. His face was serious now. “I hated seeing you naked with Lucian.”

He kicked the door shut and threw me onto the bed a little too harshly, bouncing mattress and all. My heart pounding, I looked up at him. “So you were jealous?”

“Of course,” he said, scowling.

I raised an eyebrow. The fact that I didn’t make jealous scenes often didn’t mean that I was having a fucking great time here.

“Well, I didn’t like that Ava came along,” I said. “So I guess that makes us even.”

Something dangerous flashed through Xavier’s eyes. I swallowed roughly. He stood over me, still naked, and very much, uh, manly. Extremely manly. He leaned down slightly, his gaze dark. “I don’t think that makes us even. Lucian believes that the two of you are connected, so—”

“But you *are* connected to Ava,” I said. “Why should it matter that I’m connected to Lucian because of this weird ceremony?” My tone was slightly biting, and Xavier clenched his jaw.

He tilted his head to the side slowly, leaning down. “Then maybe I need to reconnect with you instead…”

Before I could say another word, he captured my mouth in a searing kiss.

**Episode 2329**

XAVIER

The kiss was rougher than I had meant it to be. The need to reassert my Alpha claim on Cali and reinforce the mate bond between us burned throughout my body, settling in my gut and pounding heart. Seeing Lucian around her, kissing her, had stirred my wolf in the right direction—he needed to remember that Ava was the one who’d betrayed us, and Cali was the one who’d brought him back to me.

Cali was the only reason why I could shift and be myself.

Ava had broken me.

Cali had put me back together.

I needed to purge Ava from my system, make my wolf see that it was my love for Cali that was real, a good thing instead of a sickness. My claim on her needed to be fierce, always, to satisfy the animal in me that knew, deep down, that my mate bond with Cali was the most important thing in my life.

It was.

It had to be.

I should *never* fucking doubt my destiny.

It was Cali.

“Xavier,” she whispered against my mouth, shaking.

I pushed her back onto the bed, tearing off that dumb fucking dress Lucian had given her. The thought of him anywhere near her made my wolf roar.

*That’s it. Remember that she’s ours.*

Cali was mine, and she needed to know it. To feel it. She yelped when I tossed the torn fabric away, her eyes wide, her cheeks flushed, whole body quivering. “Oh my god, you ripped it to shreds! Xavier—”

“Say my name.” My voice was low, more of a growl when I pinned her arms over her head. She swallowed roughly, her lips parted, her pupils dilated with desire. She was made of excitement and need, her legs spread wide for me to move in between. She choked out my name when I rubbed myself between her legs, so hard where she was soft and wet, open for me already, just because she wanted me.

“Feel that?” I asked in her ear, kissing and nibbling at the pale column of her neck. I gripped myself and rubbed the hard tip between her legs, sinking in only slightly, making her cry out and arch up toward me. “Feel how much I want you? I’d fucking lose my mind without you.”

She whimpered. “Xavier…”

“That’s right, say my name.”

She said it again and again—when I slammed into her, my hips setting a harsh rhythm as my mouth devoured hers. She clung to me, arms and legs wrapped around me, her every move meeting my thrusts eagerly, like she couldn’t get enough. I angled my movements to hit the perfect spot inside her, over and over and over, until her body clenched around me, shuddering, heat and warmth and everything my wolf needed to thrive.

Pulsating under me, Cali bit at my neck like she wanted to mark me too, setting me off right away. I spilled inside her, jerky and trembling, her name the only thing I could breathe out.

“*Cali*…”

My wolf howled in satisfaction.

Cali was the only woman I would ever want.

Only her. Nobody else.

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Afterward, Cali lay on my chest, her warm hand trailing over my skin. She was so stunning in the afterglow that looking at her made my heart feel full.

“You look much better without the veins…” She trailed off.

I snorted. “I sure hope so.” I reached up to cup her cheek. “I hope that Greyson is right and the curse is broken. I know you’re not ready to make your choice yet, but still.”

Cali nodded quietly. In my head, of course, I was certain that when she did choose, she’d choose me.

The kiss with Lucian popped into my mind.

“You look like you just ate something sour,” Cali observed.

I huffed. “Fucking Lucian.”

She smirked. “You’re on that again?”

I huffed. “I can’t just let it go. You gotta give me the play-by-play.”

Cali pressed her lips together. “It’s kinda hard to explain…”

“Please try.”

Cali gave me a quick, wacky summary of what had happened, and I shut up and listened. At the end, Cali said, “I couldn't help but think that Lucian wanted something else. That this wasn’t about helping me as much as it was him needing something that he ultimately didn’t get.”

I glowered. “For Lucian’s sake, that ‘something’ had better not be you.”

She shook her head. “I thought it might be that, but I believe it was something that Lucian wants from Seluna.” She eyed me carefully. “It feels like he was using me to get what he wants. Does that make sense?”

I nodded seriously. “I wouldn't put it past Lucian. Which is why I don’t want you to go back there again. We did his little ceremony, and you still have the handprints. None of it matters if you can’t get rid of what’s been bothering you.”

She sighed, shaking her head. “True.” She gave me a look. “I hope you know that I didn’t enjoy kissing Lucian. I did it only because I had to.”

My stomach twitched. I knew that she was telling the truth, but it still bothered me. “Right.”

She snorted.

“What?” I grunted.

She raised an eyebrow. “I get that you were jealous,” she said, tracing her hand across my chest. “That’s how I feel when you’re around Ava. Especially because I know you’ve kissed her in the past while actually wanting to.”

I felt gut-punched. “Cali, I fucking hate this. You know I do. I don’t want her—it’s only me and you here, I promise.” I gripped her hand, squeezing, and stared into her eyes.

She took a deep breath. “I know how difficult and messed up this must be for you. But even with the mate bond wreaking havoc on you, I do believe I can trust you fully.”

Her voice was soft, her eyes so expressive. I felt her warmth, her kindness, and I felt so grateful for everything that she could give me. I needed her trust, but—

But right then, I was hit by the memory of my wolf yearning and screaming for Ava. How she’d stood there at the hot tub, inviting me to join her, trying to get me to admit the truth about my wolf desiring her. It was as if she’d fucking *known*.

The shame I felt made me feel nauseated.

For a brief moment, I’d wanted to give in, to let my wolf win and to be able to lay the blame at his paws. Cali had told me I could pursue it—she’d been listening to Lola’s fucked-up advice, but still. Either way, I could’ve justified being with Ava to her if I wanted to. But I had kept thinking of Cali, of my love for her, of our bond.

I had chosen to lie to Ava, to tell her that my wolf had no interest in anyone but Cali.

I’d seen the flash of hurt in Ava’s eyes, but it had needed to be said. I’d taken no pleasure in lying to her, which had shocked me. Seeing Ava in pain had been one of my simple pleasures ever since she’d betrayed me—ever since she’d killed my mother.

How could my wolf be so sick as to try to hold on to her when she’d done something so unforgivable?

“I…” I swallowed, stroking Cali’s cheek. “I can handle Ava.”

Cali didn’t say anything. Didn’t doubt me. I appreciated that, though I also felt a responsibility not to betray her over bullshit.

“I get if it gets to be too much, though…” Cali said in a low voice. “I’ve been dealing with the *due destini*. I know what it’s like to be pulled between two people.”

My heart started drumming uncomfortably. “What’s going on with Ava is different, because I have no desire to be with her. I know she’s a horrible person. And as much as I hate to hear it, I know that you want to be with both me and Greyson.”

She sniffed. “Xavier—”

“No, listen to me,” I said throatily. “Someday things will be different. I’m sorry that I pressured you. I hate to admit it, but I understand what you’ve been going through more now.”

Cali nestled closer to me, and I held her tight. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Her soft body was warm against mine, so welcoming, and I was overwhelmed by her closeness, her sweetness. I relaxed with her in my arms.

I loved Cali. She loved me. Everything would be okay. That was what I needed to believe. I took a deep breath, her scent engulfing my senses, the feeling of my mate like this making me feel at peace.

She closed her eyes, her form melting into mine as she fell asleep.

Smiling to myself, I closed my eyes as well.

The second I did, I was hit by images of Ava.

*No.*

My wolf wasn’t listening, though. He was stirring, the images going through my head like a slideshow—Ava naked, Ava smiling at me, Ava saying she believed in me, Ava beckoning me in, her arms and legs and mouth wide for me to fill, to make her complete, just like she needed.

It was what my wolf needed too.

When I opened my eyes, my heart was pounding, the shame so overwhelming I was shaking. Cali was asleep, gorgeous and sweet against me.

The feeling of being unworthy of her made me choke.

It made me realize that I hadn’t been telling Cali the whole truth.

*What if my pull toward Ava never goes away, and I can’t fully love Cali the way she deserves ever again?*

**Episode 2330**

GREYSON

I wished the hot water of the shower could wash away the image of Lucian and Cali together. But it felt like it had been seared into my brain, a mad throbbing picture that wouldn’t get the fuck out.

I knew that Cali didn’t want Lucian, I knew that my claim hadn’t really been threatened, but still. For an Alpha, it was hard to see your mate be cornered that way. I needed to go to bed, preferably with Cali in my arms, but I knew that the pack had questions about what had happened, and I had to check in with Rishika to see how things had gone while the three of us were away.

I knew that we hadn’t been gone for that long, but it seemed like there was always something going on whenever I turned my attention elsewhere for even five minutes. Nothing would’ve surprised me at this point—flesh-eating bacteria? Rabies-infested puppies? Lizard people deciding to attack? I expected it all, and I had to keep Rishika—my unofficial number two—alert as well.

When I went downstairs, I instantly noticed that Cali and Xavier weren’t around. Fuck. I felt that familiar sting in my chest, but I’d gotten better at dealing with the jealousy. Of course, I still didn’t like it—there was nothing about it to like—but I’d learned to live with it.

That was my brother. Kinda like a fly that would never leave you alone.

Anyway, the point was, I was fucking dealing or whatever, but now with the curse, I couldn’t even be with Cali—not really. We couldn’t kiss, couldn’t fuck, or tenderly make love. I couldn’t even kiss her cheek.

What kind of fucking psychopath wouldn’t let me kiss my mate’s *cheek*?

I wished I’d been able to force Aysel to break the curse, but she’d been evasive about the whole thing. Admitting she’d done it, but not taking any action to correct it. If I hadn’t been worried about Cali the whole time, things would have gone down a very different route at the moon palace. I wouldn’t have beaten around the bush—I would have threatened Aysel. But honestly, perhaps even threatening wouldn’t have been enough.

The woman thought I wouldn’t hurt her—that much was plain obvious.

She and her brother considered themselves untouchable. And if she was telling the truth about not using a witch, how had she cast the curse? It was all bullshit. Big Mac had said the signature was from a witch, anyway, and I was definitely gonna believe my mom’s fiancée over my soul-sucking, silver-haired stalker.

Something was off.

Maybe I should just return to the palace and pounce on Aysel. Though that would probably be seen as an aggressive act that could potentially trigger a full-on pack war, which nobody wanted after both the Letifer fight and the hunter fight. The pack needed a break, and I—

I needed to put the pack first.

I greeted those who noticed me as I walked around the house, more thoughts twisting around inside my head. The Vanguards weren’t like other packs—Lucian lacked an Alpha’s typical directness. Everything he and his people did was shrouded in mystery and mysticism.

I needed to find Rishika.

“She’s outside,” Sage told me when I asked.

I found that weird—why hadn’t she come inside yet?—but didn’t comment further, just walked into the yard and scented the air to track her. She was at the edge of the woods, sitting all alone on a fallen tree trunk.

She didn’t even seem to hear my footsteps, which was pretty weird for a fighter of her caliber. Had something happened when I was away? My stomach was hit with a pang of guilt. Both Xavier and I had left the pack today—I could rationalize that I’d been dealing with the Vanguards as a pack problem, but I knew that I’d really gone because of Cali.

Aysel’s words echoed through my head.

*Will you be capable of making the right choice when you’re forced to pick between your pack and your mate, Greyson?*

Or some bullshit of the sort. That had been the gist of what she’d said, and I knew the answer. Anyone who was an Alpha knew the answer. The pack always came first. But no other pack had someone as amazing as Cali. No other Alpha would ever have to make the choice that I had to make.

Aysel was wrong in so many ways, and that included the part about Cali being a part-time mate. She would always belong to me, and the revulsion curse didn’t change that fact.

“Greyson?” Rishika’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts. We eyed each other, and she swallowed roughly. “Sorry, didn’t see you there.”

I focused on the matter at hand. I needed to help Rishika—to be there for her. That was what an Alpha was for. “What’s going on with you? Did something happen to the pack while I was gone?”

Rishika’s tone was wry. “The pack is fine. I’m having some personal issues.”

I walked over and sat down next to her on the tree trunk. “Want to talk about it?”

Rishika eyed me. “You sure you want to hear this?”

“Of course,” I said, nudging her. “Don’t know if I’m any good at advice, but I’m a great listener.”

It seemed like that was all that Rishika needed to open up. “Artemis and I got into a fight. She’s hell-bent on finding her father, remember?”

I nodded. “Yeah.” Though I hoped to hell I never came across my father again. Two resurrections were enough, thanks—I had other things to deal with. “Wait, why are you mad at her about that, though?”

“I have no problem with her looking for Kadmos or Adair,” Rishika said. “And I’d stand by Artemis through thick and thin, but…”

“What?”

“Artemis also wants revenge,” Rishika said, shifting her feet in the dirt, staring at them. “She’s twisted that into the need to find her father. I understand revenge—but that’s different than actually planning to kill someone.”

“I think it’s kind of the same thing,” I said. “And it’s not always bad—not when it’s retribution, when it restores the balance.”

Rishika shook her head vehemently. “It’s not like that in Artemis’s case. She wants to kill a Fae named Taleena. But we don’t even know for sure if Taleena is the one who stole her from Orla as a baby. Artemis is blinded by rage, and she doesn’t have all the info.”

Well that certainly did sound like a predicament.

“Like you said, there’s a difference between revenge and retribution,” Rishika said. “Retribution has to do with justice. I am all for justice—I wanted to kill Ryker, and that was for justice. He had hurt so many people, so many packs. He had to be taken care of, and when you dealt with him…” Rishika met my gaze. There was a rare softness in her face. “That was when I knew I could follow you as Alpha. When I knew that you could tell right from wrong.”

I swallowed, feeling something warm in my chest. That kind of acceptance was very important to an Alpha, especially coming from someone with Rishika’s power. As for Artemis…

“Artemis is a true hunter,” I said. “She’s capable of extracting revenge in many violent ways. She’s always lived in a world where justice exists in a grey zone, so her reaction matches her usual demeanor about most things.”

Rishika pressed her lips together. “That’s true. I hate fighting with her, but right now, she… She worries me, you know? I don’t want her to get hurt—emotionally or otherwise.”

“I’ve always gotten along with Artemis for some reason neither of us can name,” I said as casually as possible. Rishika snorted while I went on. “Bottom line, I could talk to her on your behalf if you want.”

Rishika stared at me with wide eyes. “I don’t want to drag you into this.”

I shook my head. “I’m not being dragged. I’d never do anything that I didn’t wanna do, and also, I’m the Alpha—it comes with the territory. I want you two to be good with each other. I should deal with this, because it looks like Artemis is feeling a little—”

“Violent?” Rishika said wryly.

“Definitely that,” I said. “But try to give her a bit more benefit of the doubt. Maybe she’s just saying all of this because she’s processing. The Artemis I know is pretty rational and will want the facts too. She’s not someone to be out for blood for the sake of it. She’d want justice on the right person.”

“That’s true. Thanks, Greyson,” she said earnestly. “By the way, how did things go with the Vanguard pack?”

I huffed. “Could’ve been better. I still have a lot of questions. I don’t trust them.”

Rishika snorted. “I’ll say. I don’t trust them either.”

We chatted about what had happened for a bit longer before I headed back into the house. I scented the air, eager to go find Cali. I wanted to hold her, touch her, watch her touch herself like the other night, but—

I knew it just wouldn’t be enough.

The revulsion curse had us trapped. Could I ask Big Mac about it again? But no—she’d made it clear that it was too complicated to simply sort out, so I was going to have to rely on myself to solve this.

Like an Alpha.

Thoughts started twisting in my head, and then I realized—

If Aysel wanted to play games, I would just have to change the rules.

**Episode 2331**

AVA

It was late, but I couldn’t sleep. Most of the pack was already in bed—I could hear the house getting quieter and quieter with every passing moment.

Today had been exhausting. More so than usual.

The entire time we’d been at the Vanguard palace, I had desperately hoped that Xavier’s wolf would make him realize that I was his true mate. I’d been there long before Cali had ever shown up with her *due destini*. Whatever mistakes I’d made in the past—huge, horrible mistakes—I had repented for, and I needed nothing more than his forgiveness.

His acceptance.

His love.

I had no idea who I was without him, these days.

I’d been Silas’s cruel experiment, but now that I was alive again, the only thing giving me a sense of identity was my wolf, and my wolf needed Xavier. I’d really felt like I’d been making some progress, too—that his own wolf had been winning over Xavier’s resistance.

I’d practically thrown myself at him in the hot tub, even pretending to fall, and he’d caught me, but little else had been accomplished. Once again, I’d failed. How much more failure could I endure? How much more pathetic could I feel? Humiliation burned hot at the back of my throat as I looked at the ceiling, as I thought about Xavier with…

*Cali*.

I used to blame Cali for everything, really. But this was a problem that didn’t truly involve her. Even if I took her out of the picture—and I’d thought of the idea of murder many, many times, with sheer delight—I still wasn’t convinced that Xavier would choose me.

He was furious at me.

He hadn’t forgiven me.

He was stuck in the past, while I wanted to move forward, to the future.

Under other circumstances, that sort of thinking might have prompted me to do something, to take drastic action. But right now, I was just tired. I wanted Xavier back—I always did, despite his disdain and abusive comments and all that bullshit that I knew came from a place of hurt instead of hatred.

But was this really the right way to go about it?

I’d already lost him multiple times by trying to seduce him, only for it to all go wrong, over and over again. I needed to reevaluate my approach—maybe Aysel had the right idea, and it would be better if we worked together. I didn’t trust her, of course—she was kind of like a deranged version of me. One who had no real love for or history with Greyson, who just saw him as a toy.

I’d never seen Xavier as a toy.

He was my mate, and our wolves knew that.

All these thoughts had my brain spinning. How the hell was I supposed to sleep now? I needed a drink—something harsh, with a burn, to help me pass out into a dreamless heap. I was such a sad excuse for a… whatever it was that I was. A werewolf? A mortal? A zombie, only pretty and with nice skin?

My wolf loved Xavier, but sometimes I hated him.

Sometimes, I wondered if I was nothing but a shell of a person for fixating on someone else while having nothing else going on in my life. I felt so low and dejected—unworthy of the only thing I needed, good or bad—that when I got into the kitchen, it took me a second to realize that I wasn’t alone.

Xavier was there, of all people.

He was sitting at the table, bottle in hand.

A lump formed in my throat. I didn’t need any more of his insults right now. I didn’t need his rejection, his sneers, his obvious disgust. I knew I’d killed his mother—I regretted it, I’d been trapped, it had been beyond my control—but having the one person you loved treat you like shit was the worst punishment you could endure.

It wasn’t the kind of war I had the power to fight for much longer.

I was making a move to leave, to leave him alone like he’d asked a million times, when he breathed, “Ava.”

His smoky, husky voice sent a chill down my spine. My skin instantly prickled with desire, my mouth drying up. I turned around to face him, and he gestured at the bottle. “Grab a glass. We need to talk.”

His blue eyes looked dark, endless, and the pit of my stomach throbbed. I wished I could walk up to him freely, get down on my knees, reach into his sweats and pleasure him with my mouth before I climbed onto his lap. I wished he could kiss me and look at me like he loved me, not like I was a disease he couldn’t get rid of.

I wished that things were different, because right now, I was worried.

He rarely ever wanted to talk, and the few times he had, it was usually because he was angry with me.

“I think I’ve been sufficiently humiliated for the day,” I told him coldly. “No need for any more of your lectures about how much you hate me.”

Xavier snorted, looking down at his glass. His gorgeous face turned bitter. “I promise I won’t bite this time.”

I swallowed roughly, sitting across from him after grabbing a glass. He poured the whiskey. I could feel my wolf stirring already just at seeing Xavier, the mate bond between us throbbing in sync with my body. I wanted him—I always did—but these days, it was getting unbearable.

Right now, in the dark, I could only feel need.

“It’s not like I’m happy to treat you like shit day in and out, you know,” he said gruffly. “I’m not a fucking sadist.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” I said.

Xavier glared.

“What?” I asked. “This isn’t some sort of act on my behalf, Xavier. I’ve made my feelings perfectly clear.”

“If it’s not an act, then it’s a seduction game,” he said sharply. “And I need it to stop. I just can’t… I can’t fucking deal with it anymore. Do you understand?”

He seemed angry, as ever, but there was a weariness to him that gave me pause.

“Have I worn you down?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “Are my so-called games working, then? Are you ready to surrender?”

He looked down at his glass. I expected him to glare some more, snap at me, maybe grab and shake me like he usually did, while my skin was set on fire by his touch.

Instead, he just shrugged. He downed his drink. “I can’t imagine all of this is fun for you. I know the mate bond is there. I started to think about it, how it pushes and pulls at you—either away from someone or toward someone. It’s the nature of wolves. We can’t…” He took a deep, dejected breath, looking at his empty glass. “We can’t help it.”

I was stunned to silence. Was… Was Xavier being open and honest instead of sarcastic and mean?

“This is weird,” I said wryly. “You’re talking to me like I’m a human being instead of a nuisance. Where’s this coming from?”

His voice was quiet in a way that I’d never heard before. “You asked about my wolf, didn’t you?” When he looked up at me, his gaze made my mouth water. “I lied to you. My wolf does want you.”

My heart skipped a beat, hopeful.

But he shook his head. “But that doesn’t make it right. Nor does it change how I feel about Caliana.”

At the sound of her name, I bit my tongue until I drew blood. I let the reaction die there, though. Before tonight, I would have pulled out all the stops, doing everything in my power to draw Xavier’s wolf out, but seeing him so honest made me feel a different type of way, too.

I wanted to… respect his wishes.

Or blow them out.

“What should we do about this?” Xavier asked. It sounded like he was talking to himself, mostly.

“What do you want to do about it?” I asked cautiously.

He didn’t answer. Just poured himself more whiskey.

“Do you even remember when we were mates? Do you ever think about those days?” I asked.

He nodded curtly. “Yeah. But things are very different now.”

I winced. “I know a lot has happened between us. Some horrible things that I’ll regret until I die—again. But despite everything, our mate bond is not only back, it’s growing stronger. I can feel it every day. What does that mean?”

Xavier stayed silent, staring at his glass. He was so beautiful in the half-light, the sharp angles of his cheekbones and jaw so pronounced that I wanted to reach out and touch his skin.

I didn’t dare.

But I did say, “If I’ve been too forceful toward you, that’s why. I want you so badly sometimes that I’m—” I shook my head, taking a deep breath. I didn’t have any shame left. “It’s true need, Xavier. That’s why.”

He nodded slowly. “So you blame the mate bond for what you’re doing.”

I shook my head. “Even without the mate bond, my wolf and I would still desire you. You’re strong and steady and handsome and loyal. You’re a man, Xavier. An Alpha. The mate bond only intensifies what I feel.”

The silence was deafening.

My heart pounded.

“I appreciate your honesty.” He glanced up at me, snorting. “I’ll admit, I was expecting you to invite me up to your room.”

That had never worked. But I couldn’t stop myself from asking at this point. “If I asked you to come with me, though, would you even do it?”

**Episode 2332**

MARTA

When I woke up the next morning, Lilac’s side of the bed was cold. I felt a little guilty for not telling him about my conversation with Kira. I’d tell him soon, of course—I hated keeping secrets from him—but not until I had more information to share.

Kira had said that Lilac would have to go back to the spirit world in order to even flirt with the possibility of reuniting with Plum. That meant that he would have to die again—or at least that was what it sounded like. It was freaking horrifying.

I wondered, though, if there could be a way to do the reunion without Lilac having to literally perish. Maybe the portal I’d used to pull him from the spirit world would allow him to pass through without any serious consequences. That was a huge maybe, but I couldn’t help but hope. I was getting ahead of myself here, but the idea of Lilac and Plum as one again was too important to ignore.

I nodded, determined—what I needed to do was learn everything there was to know about the spirit world. I realized that if I didn’t have these bracelets, I’d be able to use my medium powers to interview all kinds of spirits. I did still have a living spirit to talk to, though.

My boyfriend.

Would Lilac be willing to talk to me about his experience, though? And how could I bring it up without making him suspicious? I pondered that for a bit and realized that if I could get him to talk, it would be for his benefit, not mine. It would be good for him, a chance to open up and let go of some of the things that might be haunting him.

He seemed too cheery to be haunted, but still, I didn’t want to underestimate the trauma he’d been through and accidentally blow everything up. I remembered what it had been like for me to be able to talk about my life with Bert—how freeing it had felt, like relief. Lilac needed that, even if he didn’t know it.

I would have to be careful and seek out advice.

Preferably from someone who’d known Lilac all his life.

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“Hey!” I called, looking between Violet and Charlie. They’d just come back from a run. “What are you two up to?”

“Just trying to stay in shape,” Violet said with a shrug.

“I actually miss the workouts I used to have in school when I was on the lacrosse team,” Charlie said sheepishly. “And even the drills we did at hunter camp.”

Violet patted his shoulder. “You can keep running around without me, then.”

Charlie chuckled, leaning in to brush his lips over her cheek. They were so sweet, but before they could get too distracted by each other, I needed to gain Violet’s attention.

“Violet, sorry, but do you have a minute to talk?” I asked.

Her attention flickering away from Charlie, she faced me. She looked curious. “Sure.”

A few minutes later, Charlie waved us off from the porch as if we were going really far away instead of the front yard—he was definitely overly attached to Violet.

When he was out of sight, Violet turned to me. “Okay, what’s all this secrecy about?”

I quickly went through my conversation with Kira as Violet started at me with an intrigued expression.

“Wait, wait, wait,” she said, curiosity turning into shock and awe and maybe a bit of fear. I wasn’t sure. “Are you really suggesting that you’re going to book a trip to the spirit world? That’s a *terrible* idea.”

Her voice sounded slightly panicked, so I gripped her shoulder to soothe her. “Calm down, now. I’m not going anywhere.”

Violet exhaled in relief. “That’s great. Because Lilac would be devastated.”

I blushed.

“Like, destroyed,” Violet said. “He’d be so heartbroken over you going anywhere without telling him, that—”

“I never said I was going to go right now,” I clarified. “I’d need to do some research first anyway.”

Violet blinked slowly. “*Right…*”

“Speaking of research, here’s my first question—has Lilac ever talked to you about the spirit world?”

Violet paused to think. “Hmm… Honestly, my brother is more of an upbeat kind of guy, doesn’t like to think about dark things. It took a lot of prying from me to get to the truth.”

“What did he say?” I asked.

“That he disliked it, that it creeped him out. It wasn’t a good thing, not by a long shot,” Violet said in a lower tone.

“Do you think he’d talk to me about it?”

Violet nodded. “He might. After all, he loves you a lot.”

My body warmed at her words. I rarely felt soothed, and the way Lilac made me feel was one of the few things that made me experience comfort in that way.

“Where is he right now?” I asked. “I woke up, and he was gone.”

She gestured behind her, at the woods. “Charlie and I saw him out with Plum earlier.”

I swallowed nervously. “Any advice?”

Violet’s face was kind. “Be honest with him. But also don’t get any ideas about going to the spirit world.”

“Thank you for everything,” I said. “I promise, I’m only doing some investigating.”

I walked toward the edge of the woods after Violet headed back into the house, eager to meet up with Lilac and learn more. I just hoped he wouldn’t be unwilling to talk.

I spotted him a few feet away, cupping his hands, calling, “Plum!”

My god, he looked so cute. And handsome. And hot. My cheeks flushed, my skin warming up at the thought of last night. At the thought of every night, really. Lilac and I clicked together perfectly these days, and I adored every second of it. I’d never had such a great time with a partner.

Lilac was, truly, the best boyfriend ever.

He deserved everything that was good in this life, and that included his wolf. If he reunited with Plum, he wouldn’t have to go out into the cold morning and call for him.

“Hey,” I said softly, walking up to him. “What’s going on with Plum?”

He smiled when he saw me. “Oh, hi,” he said, reaching out to take my hand. “Hope I didn’t wake you when I got up early.”

I shook my head. “All good. What are you up to?”

He raked a hand through his hair. “Plum wanted to play, only now he’s run off. He probably spotted a squirrel.”

“Does that make you sad?” I asked cautiously.

He raised an eyebrow. “Plum’s obsession with squirrels and other fluffy things?”

I shook my head, squeezing his hand. “Come on. You know what I mean.”

He sighed. “I’m not sure if I’m sad so much as disappointed. I have to admit that every once in a while, I wish my wolf and I were reunited.”

My heart pounded at his words. This was it! Now all I needed was more information.

“Did you miss your wolf when you were in the spirit world?” I asked.

“Of course,” Lilac said. Then he cupped his hands in front of his mouth again, and shouted, “Plum, you insolent brat, come back here!” He turned to be seriously. “I can call him whatever I want, by the way—he never gets offended.”

I had to suppress a laugh. “Where did he even go? Were you serious about the squirrel?”

Lilac shrugged. “It’s that or he picked up the scent of something and ran off to check it out.”

“What was it like?” I asked. “When you lost him in the spirit world, I mean.”

Lilac grimaced before sighing. “It sucked. I don’t remember all that much—it’s almost like a fragment of a dream. But I know that I missed Plum, and I missed my sister…” He gave me a look, pulling me closer after gently gripping my wrist. “And then, when I was tethered to you, I used to think about you all the time.” He glanced at my mouth. “Mostly what you’d taste like if I kissed you.”

I smiled, my cheeks heating up at the compliment. I recalled how annoying I’d found him at first, and how quickly I’d begun to enjoy having him around. And I’d always found him attractive anyway, even when he’d been a huge pain in the ass.

“In fact, I think I should kiss you right now…” He leaned in, his gaze making me shiver.

But then suddenly, he flinched back.

“Wait,” he whispered, looking around. “Did you hear that?”

I listened closely. “It’s something moving… Coming toward us, through the woods?”

Lilac grinned. “It must be Plum!”

His handsome face lit up, so happy, and it warmed me from the inside out. I really, really needed to reunite them.

“Oy, Plum!” Lilac called, stepping forward toward the rustling. “Where did you go, you rascal? I—”

The thing that emerged from the trees was not Plum.

It was a massive bear that growled at Lilac, lashing out at him with sharp claws. I gasped in fear, and Lilac, stepping back slowly, hissed, “Oh, shit!”

“Don’t make any sudden movements,” I pleaded. “They don’t like—”

It was too late. The bear rushed toward Lilac, snarling while I screamed.

**Episode 2333**

When I woke up, it was slowly and peacefully, like gently rising to the surface of water. I opened my eyes with a smile on my face. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d slept so well, or so deeply. There had been no nightmares, no voices, and no terrifying visitations from Seluna.

I closed my eyes again and stretched long in my bed, savoring the warm, comfortable feeling, and wondered how long my nights of peaceful sleep were going to last.

I turned onto my side to ask Xavier what he thought, but—to my surprise—he was gone.

Frowning, I got to my feet and padded over to the bathroom, but he wasn’t in there either.

I stepped into the bathroom and turned, craning to see the handprints in the mirror. Seluna might not have appeared in my dreams, but the marks on my body were a constant reminder that my troubles were far from over.

With a sigh, I grabbed my robe from the back of the bathroom door and pulled it on as I headed downstairs. The house was still quiet, but at the bottom of the stairs I passed Ava, who was heading up. She looked a mess—her long hair was disheveled, and she looked exhausted. She stepped slightly to the side to avoid crashing into me, but she didn’t acknowledge me otherwise.

I glanced over my shoulder at her as she headed up. Was she avoiding me? I mean, if she was, that was fine by me. Perfect, in fact. We could avoid each other for the rest of time, for all I cared.

Downstairs, I looked around for Xavier. When I found him in the den, I stopped, shocked. Instead of looking fresh and rested—the way I felt—he looked exhausted, and every bit as rumpled as Ava. He was slumped in a chair, looking half-asleep.

I looked at him for a long moment. Where had he been this morning? And last night?

Was it just a coincidence that both Xavier and Ava were awake at this hour, looking like hell?

My blood ran cold as a terrible though occurred to me: had Xavier followed through on Lola’s dumbass idea? Had he slept with Ava?

My hands curled into fists, and I was immediately furious with myself for ever having suggested it. Desperately, I tried to remind myself that Xavier had sworn it would never happen.

Still…

I looked at him. He was zoned-out but not asleep. He looked lost in thought and hadn’t even noticed me coming in. I hesitated, not sure what to do. I didn’t want to jump to any conclusions, but… where had he been this morning? What time had he left the bed?

The last thing I remembered was peacefully falling asleep on his chest.

I needed some answers, and I had just stepped forward to get Xavier’s attention when Torin appeared at my side.

“Cali? Can I talk to you for a second?” he asked quietly.

“What? Oh, sure,” I said distractedly. “I guess.” I let him pull me into the hallway. “What’s up?”

“I just wanted to let you know that I’ve taken care of everything,” he said mysteriously.

“What?” I asked. “Taken care of what?”

“The Secret Santa problem. I’ve dealt with it, so you don’t have to do anything,” he explained.

“Oh, right. Okay,” I said, trying to catch up.

Damn it, had I really forgotten? I felt bad. I’d clearly gotten caught up in, well… everything Alpha, like always, and neglected to help him.

“Are you sure you don’t need me to do anything?” I asked. “I’m sorry you had to figure it out yourself.”

“It’s okay! The only thing I’m concerned about is… well… I’m not sure how secret it’s going to be anymore. At least for you,” he clarified. “You’re going to be responsible for each of your mates, and they’ll each be responsible for you.”

I frowned. “Wait. Didn’t you say that that would break the rules?”

He sighed. “Well, just between you and me, it does. But I gave it a lot of thought, and I just felt like it would be better to do it this way. But don’t tell anyone, okay?”

“I won’t, I promise,” I told him.

“Do you think Greyson and Xavier are going to be mad at me?” Torin asked, looking suddenly nervous.

“I can’t imagine why they would be. They know about the *due destini* situation. Trust me, it’s not a surprise to any of us. They might not love it, but they know it wouldn’t be fair to exclude one of them. They’d be angry if you tried.”

“Okay. Good.” Torin nodded, looking satisfied.

“Good,” I repeated, then turned back toward Xavier.

“Do you know anything about building houses?”

I turned to Torin. “*What?* Houses? Do I know anything about building *houses*?”  
 “Yeah.”

I shook my head. “No, Torin. I don’t know anything about that.”

Torin looked disappointed.

“Why in the world would you ask? Do you want to build a house?” I asked incredulously.

“Sage mentioned something,” he mumbled.

“About building houses?”

Torin nodded. “Gingerbread houses. But I’ve never even heard of them. Sage seemed really excited about it, but I don’t know. It just doesn’t seem like we’re going to have the time to build a whole house before Christmas. Especially out of gingerbread. That doesn’t seem like a stable building material,” he said, looking miserable.

I tried not to laugh. “Okay, Torin, calm down. Sage isn’t talking about building a real house. Gingerbread houses are small. Like, this big,” I said, indicating with my hands. “Out of cookies and candy.”

I remembered constructing the elaborate houses with my mom and dad at Christmastime when I was a little girl. At first, they’d just been an excuse for me to eat candy, but over time I’d gotten really into them. The three of us were always coming up with new ideas—shredded wheat for a thatched roof, frosting made into icicles, melted hard candy to make stained-glass windows…

Torin’s eyes lit up. “Oh! That sounds like fun. Maybe we should have a competition!”

“Um, I’m not sure about that,” I said hesitantly. I couldn’t help but think of how competitive things already were between my mates. Gingerbread houses did sound like fun, but would a baking battle only make things worse? “Maybe you should ask around, see if the pack is into the idea?”

Torin nodded. “That’s a good idea. I’ll do that.” He glanced down at his watch. “I need to check my bread.”

When I followed Torin into the kitchen, Greyson was standing at the counter. As I walked in, he slipped something into his pocket and smiled at me.

“Good morning.”

“Morning,” I said warily.

Greyson poured coffee into a mug and handed it to me. “How are you feeling this morning?”

He was acting oddly, but then again, he was probably just trying to avoid getting too close, which felt odd. The revulsion curse was still with us—at least I assumed it was. In any case, I’d just woken up and was feeling good for the first time in a long time, and I didn’t want to test it out and end up feeling like I was going to puke.

“I had a good night,” I said, taking the cup. I felt a stab of guilt, thinking of how I’d spent it with Xavier. Though, how *much* I’d actually spent with Xavier was still in question.

We stood at the counter for a moment, and the silence between us grew a little strained. It was hard to not wrap my arms around him. I wanted to thank him for trying to help with the Vanguard pack last night, but I kept my hands to myself.

“How are the handprints?” he finally asked.

I slipped my robe off my shoulder to show him. “Still there,” I said ruefully.

He sighed. “I’m sorry, love.”

“Have you thought any more about the revulsion curse?” I asked. “I know things got a little weird at the palace last night.”

Greyson nodded. “I didn’t want to press Aysel too hard. You were vulnerable there, and I wasn’t sure what she was going to do. But now that you’re safely out of there, I think it’s time to take matters into my own hands.”

I wondered what the hell that meant and was about to ask when Greyson’s stormy eyes narrowed at something over my shoulder. I turned around to see that Xavier had walked in.

Greyson tipped his chin up in greeting, and Xavier did the same. The bare minimum from both of them.

Then Greyson cleared his throat. “I’m glad you’re here,” he said gruffly.

I was surprised to hear that from Greyson, and I doubted the feeling was mutual, given Xavier’s answering glare.

“Why?” Xavier growled.

“I wanted to talk to you. I plan to break Aysel’s curse, and I wanted to go over some details with you.”

He reached into his pocket, but before anyone could do or say anything else, we all froze when we heard a blood-curdling scream from outside.

**Episode 2334**

GREYSON

Hearing the scream, I rushed outside. Was it possible that the Vanguards were back, and on the offensive? Were there more rogue hunters? A million possibilities raced through my head.

Xavier was at my side, and Cali was close behind us both.

I leapt off the back porch and looked around, scanning the grounds.

“There!” Cali shouted, pointing.

I followed the direction she indicated and saw Marta at the edge of the woods. She must’ve been the one screaming. She wasn’t screaming anymore, just standing frozen. In front of her, rearing up on its hind legs, was a massive black bear. But it wasn’t looking at Marta. It had its eyes on Lilac, who was on the ground, though he was scuttling back, trying to get away. The bear was snarling and moving toward him, and even from a distance I could see the lethally sharp teeth.

A sense of relief flowed through me. Thank god it was only a bear and not something supernatural. I could handle a bear. That was straightforward. An attack from the Vanguard pack or the hunters or some other unknown enemy would be anything but.

I shifted midstride as I ran toward the group. I was trying to get into the bear’s eyeline, hoping that seeing me would scare it away. In my experience, black bears had little interest in engaging with werewolves. And why was it so close to the house anyway? Bears had a decent sense of smell and usually stayed away. I killed wild animals when I had to, but I didn’t relish the thought of starting my morning by killing a bear.

Over my shoulder, there was a flash, and I felt a pulse of energy zip by me. I glanced back to see Cali with her hands up, her eyes on the bear. She was trying to blast it, but she was doing it as she ran, and her aim was off.

*Don’t worry, love. I’ve got this.*

Xavier had also shifted, and he was gaining on me. As we drew closer, I could see the scene more clearly, along with the fear on Lilac’s face. Then—suddenly—Rishika’s wolf leapt out, appearing as if from nowhere.

She stationed herself between Lilac and Marta and the bear. She had her fangs bared, and she was snarling. The bear advanced on her, but Rishika stood her ground and howled at the bear. It hesitated for an uncertain moment, then turned and lumbered back into the darkness of the woods.

The moment it disappeared, Marta rushed to Lilac and dropped down to her knees beside him. “Are you okay?” she asked breathlessly.

Xavier and I shifted back as we approached. Cali was right beside me. I was relieved to see that Lilac looked unhurt. Fucking terrified, but unhurt. There was no blood, and he was moving as if all his bones were intact.

Rishika shifted back. “Well, that was… certainly something.”

“Rishika, you were amazing!” Marta said, her eyes bright with tears. “How can we ever thank you?”

“Yeah, that was great timing,” Xavier said. “Nicely done.”

“Thanks, Rishika. That was incredible,” Cali said.

Rishika waved away the thanks, and Marta helped an unsteady Lilac to his feet.

He looked around nervously. “Where’s Plum? Has anyone seen him? I don’t want him running into that bear.”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” I assured him. “I don’t think that bear’s going to try to tangle with a wolf. Everyone okay?”

Marta nodded. “I think so. Thank you for rushing out.”

“Sure.” I looked over at Cali and Xavier, then tipped my head toward the house. “Let’s go.”

As we headed back, I bent to retrieve the tattered remains of my jeans, and the letter in the pocket.

“I’m going to get dressed,” I said as we walked back into the kitchen. “Let’s meet in the front study when we’re ready.”

They nodded, and I headed upstairs. As I got dressed again, I thought about the eventful morning. I also thought about Xavier, who looked like he’d had an eventful night.

Why did he look so wrecked this morning? As I pulled a shirt over my head, I let out a frustrated sigh. I just hoped Xavier would be able to snap out of whatever funk he was in. I was going to need him to watch over the pack for a short while. But if he couldn’t get his shit together, I knew I could always ask Rishika. She had proven more than once that I could rely on her.

Dressed, I headed downstairs. Cali was waiting for me in the study, and she looked up as I walked in. Xavier was with her. He was standing at the window, his gaze on the trees, but he looked distracted.

“So, what I was going to say before the bear was that I’m going over to the Vanguard palace to deliver this letter,” I said, holding up the paper.

Cali looked at it, then at me, her gaze uneasy. I so wished I could wrap my arms around her and comfort her without making her want to puke.

But that was the whole reason I was going to the palace. I needed to find a way to end this damn curse without getting into some drawn-out shadow conflict with the Vanguard pack.

“I’m going to keep it simple,” I explained. “I’m going to go in there and find Aysel. I’m sure she’ll find me soon enough. Then I’m just going to play along with whatever fiction she’s created about us, try to win her confidence, make her think I’m interested in her so I can hopefully find out who cast this damn curse.”

“Wait,” Cali said, frowning. “What exactly do you mean, you’re going to *play along*? What does that mean?”

Xavier looked over, giving his first smile of the day. “Yeah, I was kind of wondering the same thing.”

I bit back an angry retort. “It means I’m going to make Aysel think she’s got her hooks in me, but I’m not going to *do* anything.” A spear of irritation shot through me when Xavier smirked. “This letter is an invitation for Aysel to meet me.”

Cali looked unhappy. “Do you really have to go to the Vanguard palace?” she asked. “I hate that we have to keep going back to that god-awful place.”

“I have a feeling that Aysel will appreciate the effort of a letter,” I pointed out. It wasn’t so much a feeling as a knot in the pit of my stomach, but I was pretty sure I was right.

Forcing myself to take a deep breath, I turned to Xavier. I needed something from him, so I didn’t want to antagonize him by ordering him to do it.

“I’m not going to be gone long,” I said, “but I’d still like you to keep an eye on everything while I’m away.”

Cali looked even more upset at this. “Are you planning on going right now?”

“I’m hoping I’ll be able to meet her this afternoon, but I have to wait for her to reply to this,” I said, waving the letter. “Also, we need to keep this to ourselves. I know we can trust the pack, but I just feel like the fewer people who know about this, the better. I can’t risk Aysel finding anything out.”

“Fine,” Xavier said, almost a grunt. He headed out the door without another word.

Cali watched him leave, then looked up at me. “You’re sure you want to do this?” she asked. “Maybe there’s some other way? I hate to think of you over there alone.”

“There’s nothing to worry about, love,” I said.

I stepped toward her and pulled her to her feet, and then into a hug. The gesture was so automatic, I’d moved before I’d finished thinking about it, and when I realized what I’d done, I almost stepped back.

But, to my immense relief, there was no revulsion. Hugs were still okay. But there was tension—I could feel it in both of us. The automatic bracing for it. The fear of it.

I sighed. *That* was why I had to go. I had to break this damn curse.

I pulled away and looked down at Cali’s beautiful face. Her eyes were wide, and her lips were still puffy from sleep. “I’ll come find you the minute I get back, okay?

She nodded, and I resisted the urge to kiss her. I pocketed the letter and headed toward the door.

“Are you going out?”

I turned to see Torin walking toward me. I held up the car keys and gave them a little shake. “Yep.”

“What for?” he asked conversationally.

Torin was a good guy, and I didn’t think he’d ever do anything to hurt anyone, but he was a bit of a gossip, so I thought fast.

“Just picking up a few things.”

“Oh. Can you get eggnog?”

“Eggnog?”

Torin nodded. “I think that’s what it’s called. Eggnog. Am I saying it right?”

“Yeah, that’s what it’s called. I’ll get it,” I said, then headed outside before he could ask for anything else.

In the car, I put the letter on the passenger seat. As I headed down the long driveway and toward the road, my eyes kept drifting over to it.

I wasn’t sure what was coming next. I only hoped I wasn’t getting in over my head.

**Episode 2335**

XAVIER

I stood at the window in the small office near the front of the house and watched as Greyson drove down the driveway, then disappeared down the road. His Vanguard plan was either the most brilliant idea I’d ever heard, or the stupidest.

I wasn’t sure which I’d prefer. It would be pretty amazing to see Greyson fail in a truly spectacular way. But on the other hand, I knew this revulsion curse was making Cali really unhappy, and I didn’t want the guilt she felt over it to influence her decision to choose me, when the time came. I wanted her to do it freely—not because being with Greyson made her sick.

As I looked out on the empty driveway, there was something else bothering me, and it took me a moment to figure it out. There was a small thorn of jealousy in my thoughts. Greyson seemed to have an extraordinary amount of influence over Aysel, and there wasn’t much she wouldn’t to do to please him, so it seemed possible he might succeed in getting her to give him the information on the witch who’d cast the curse. Which would solve his problem.

*My* problem, however—namely, Ava—wasn’t going anywhere. It was time I did something about it.

“Xavier?”

I looked over. Cali was standing in the doorway, her expression worried.

“Are you okay?”

I held out my hand to her. “Get over here.”

She stepped forward and into my arms.

I wrapped them tight around her and pressed a kiss to her hair. “I’m sorry I left last night. I had trouble sleeping.”

Cali was quiet for a moment. Then she leaned back so she could look up at me. “Were you with Ava?”

I stared at her, surprised. Why would she think that? Had she seen us together?

When I answered, I was cautious. I didn’t want to lie—I had promised her I’d tell her the truth about Ava. “We were talking. For most of the night.”

She raised an eyebrow. “*Just* talking?”

I opened my mouth to answer, then paused, remembering the look on Ava’s face when she’d asked me to come up to her room.

“I promise that was all we did,” I assured Cali.

She didn’t look fully satisfied by this. “What did you talk about?”

I sighed. “The mate bond,” I admitted. “And the pull between us that I’ve been fighting. It was actually really good. I think it was the most open we’ve ever been with each other, since we first became mates.”

The corners of Cali’s mouth turned down into a frown, and I leaned forward and pressed a kiss to each of them.

“I know that look, but I’m telling the truth,” I said quietly, holding her close. “That’s why I’m so tired this morning.”

“I was… worried,” Cali said haltingly. “That you had slept with her.”

“*What?*”

Cali didn’t meet my eyes. “I saw her this morning just before I found you. She looked really tired, you looked really tired…” She trailed off and shook her head. “But I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions.”

I put a finger beneath her chin and guided it upward, so she would meet my eyes. “I understand why you’re feeling worried, Cali. And it’s hard sometimes, to keep my wolf at bay. But I love *you*. And I’m going to try to never worry you again. Okay?”

Cali gave me a small smile and nodded. “Okay. Thank you.” She reached up on tiptoe and kissed me.

I kissed her back, and then stifled a yawn, which made Cali laugh.

I needed to wake up. That meant either a cold shower, a shit-ton of caffeine, or hitting the sheets for a couple of hours. Greyson had asked me to keep an eye on the pack house, but that didn’t mean I had to be awake the whole time. And anyway—how the hell long could it take to drop off a stupid letter?

“I’m going to head upstairs,” I said through another yawn.

Cali nodded and laced her fingers through mine. “I’m going to get dressed,” she said, indicating her robe, “and then I told Torin I’d help him organize some winter activities.”

When we got upstairs, Cali disappeared into her own room. As I headed to mine, I noticed that Ava’s door was shut. She was probably sleeping. It had been a long night for her, too.

I flopped down onto my bed with a tired groan. My body was exhausted, but my mind was still working. I thought back to what Ava had told me last night. I’d expected her to want me to come to her room—to want me to spend the night with her—so *that* hadn’t surprised me. She’d offered that option plenty of times in the past. Most recently at the palace. But when I’d refused, she’d surprised me. She’d said she was glad I’d said no. She’d told me that she wasn’t a one-night-stand option for me. That I couldn’t just fuck her once to get her out of my system. She’d said she wasn’t going to allow that—that she wouldn’t be used that way.

We had talked some more after that, but she’d stuck to her guns. I’d been a little surprised. She’d shown integrity—something I’d always felt was in fairly short supply where she was concerned.

The good news was that I didn’t have to hurt Cali by admitting that Ava and I had slept together—because that hadn’t happened, and it wasn’t going to. The bad news was that nothing between Ava and me had been resolved. Ava was still in the house, and my wolf was still lusting after her. And now I knew that Ava had no plans to ever give up on me.

I closed my eyes. I was too tired to think any of this shit through. I had to think like Greyson—to figure out a way to get Ava to just back the hell off.

There was still the hope that rebuilding the Samara pack might be the key to it all. That thought helped my jaw to unclench, and I let my shoulders relax.

I was almost completely asleep when a loud knock at my door jolted me awake. I was on my feet and at the door in an instant.

“*Torin?*”

“I’m so sorry to wake you, Xavier,” Torin said, looking excited, “but a bunch of us are going ice skating, and I wondered if you wanted to join us.”

I stared at him for a moment as my sleepy brain caught up. “That same place where Violet fell through the ice?”

Torin blinked. “Well not the *exact* spot, but the pond is… yeah, okay, it’s basically the same spot. But there aren’t any murderous hunters out stalking us this time.”

I made a guttural noise and looked back at my bed. There probably wasn’t much chance of getting any real rest if I was in charge of this madhouse for the morning. Still, I didn’t know if I wanted to go ice skating. I was about to turn Torin down when something stopped me. If everyone went skating and I stayed behind, then I’d be left alone in the house with Ava.

No fucking thanks.

“Who’s going?” I yawned, running a hand through my hair.

“Oh, the usual suspects,” Torin said breezily. “Sage, Zainab, Marta, Lilac, Violet, Charlie, Kira, Cali—”

“I’ll go,” I said quickly. “I’m just going to change.”

In a fresh pair of jeans and a sweater, I headed downstairs. Big Mac and Mrs. Smith were in the living room, and Big Mac looked irritated.

“You’ll have fun,” Mrs. Smith said, her voice a teasing singsong. “You’ll like ice skating.”

I shook my head. If Mrs. Smith was trying to convince Big Mac to go, she had her work cut out for her.

In the kitchen, Sage and Zainab were standing by the door, holding their skates. Cali was at the table with a mug of mocha in front of her, and she smiled as I walked in.

“I’m so glad you’re coming,” she said.

“I have to. You need someone to keep you on your feet,” I said with a grin.

Her smile disappeared, and she rolled her eyes. “Um, I’m from *Minnesota*, remember? I was skating before I was walking.”

“Let’s go!” Torin called to the crowd, leading what looked like the entire pack outside.

I held Cali’s hand as we tromped across the lawn and then into the trees. The pond wasn’t far, but the undergrowth in the woods was thick, and I broke a path for her as we went.

When we got to the pond, everyone sat on fallen logs to lace up their skates, and I sat next to Cali, feeling pretty good. It was great being outside in the cold air, and I felt better just being with Cali. And with Greyson off chasing Aysel, I had her all to myself.

As everyone took to the ice, it became clear that Torin was not great at skating.

“I’ve never tried it before!” he yelled happily, getting to his feet after falling for the tenth time. But he was a fast learner, and pretty soon he was circling the pond with everyone else.

Cali—on the other hand—hadn’t been joking about being a good skater. She was fast and smooth and moved gracefully across the ice. She caught me watching her and, with a smirk, skated a few backward figure-eights.

“How about a race around the pond?” she said, skating toward me and stopping herself with a spray of shaved ice. She gestured with a mittened hand. “Full perimeter.”

I grinned back. “You’re on.”

Cali was good, but I figured I had the strength advantage to overtake her. I skated next to her, then let her pull ahead, watching her body move as she skated past me.

Then she came to a stop so sudden I plowed right into her, unable to stop. I grabbed for her, catching her before she fell.

“*Cali!* What are you doing?” I demanded.

She pointed over our heads. “Look!”

A silvery looking thing was hovering above us.

“What is that?” I asked.

“A wisp,” Cali said quietly, her eyes fixed on it. “It must be doing this for a reason. What does it want?”

**Episode 2336**

ARTEMIS

I knew I owed Rishika an apology. It was a tense situation, but after I’d thought about it, I’d realized I’d been unfair yesterday—not listening to Rishika and leaving in a huff. I’d meant to find her this morning to speak to her, but when I’d gone looking for her, Sage had told me she’d been busy—taking on a bear to save Lilac.

Which was *classic* Rishika. Now, I watched as she glided across the ice. I was proud of her—she was so strong and didn’t even hesitate to jump into a fight—but things had been awkward since we’d arrived at the pond. She’d given me a thin smile before she’d skated off, and now—with practically the whole pack here skating—it was hard to find the right moment for a private talk.

With her usual effortless athletic grace, she made her way onto the snowbank. She sat down on the frozen ground and tugged at her skate for a moment, and I took the opportunity and skated toward her.

I was surprised by how much I liked skating. I’d never done it before, but it felt so easy and peaceful.

I pulled to a stop at the edge of the pond. “Hey.”

Rishika looked up. “Hey.”

“Are you mad at me?”

Rishika looked surprised. “I thought *you* were mad at *me*.”

“Why would you think that?” I asked.

“Maybe it was how you stormed off last night.”

Yeah, she had a point.

Uneasy, I looked down at the ice beneath my feet. Talking about this had felt easier in my head. It had never been easy for me to open up about what I was feeling—though it did feel easier with Rishika than it ever had with anyone else.

I took a deep breath and looked back up. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to run off like that. I just got so caught up in my quest to find my father that I…” I trailed off, shaking my head. “I acted like an ass.”

“Yeah,” Rishika said quietly. “You did.” Then a smile broke over her face. “It’s okay.”

“It is?” I asked hesitantly.

Rishika thought for a moment. “I guess all that talk about killing Taleena was upsetting, because the only information you’re working from is a vision, which you don’t know is a hundred percent true.”

I thought about this for a moment.

“If I’d found Taleena outside last night, I would have killed her on the spot,” I admitted quietly. “But I’ve had some time to think and cool down, and I think you’re right. I would like to know if what I saw was true. The Kollector was there, and he’s not to be trusted, obviously. Even dead. I think I just went with my gut last night. I’m a bounty hunter, and my instincts tell me to hunt someone down when they’ve wronged me. But I want to find the truth, and my anger made me forget that.”

Rishika stood up. “And if it is true, I’ll be there to back you up. I can promise you that.”

With that, she stepped back onto the ice—and slipped. She tumbled forward and fell into my arms. Laughing, I wrapped my arms around her, and she hugged me back.

Almost instantly, I felt better. Calmer, happier, and filled with renewed strength and confidence. It was amazing how Rishika could do this to me.

“Thanks for catching me,” Rishika said, steadying herself.

She slipped her hand into mine as we headed back into the crush of people on the ice, skating side by side.

“I get why you’re impatient to find Adair. I know you’re looking for any clues you can find about your dad. I wish we could just drop everything and go to New Orleans right now. But it’s only a few more days,” Rishika reminded me. ‘And we need to make sure we’re approaching this whole thing rationally and carefully. With our heads on straight.”

“You’re right,” I said. She was, of course, and I appreciated her support. And her understanding. It was a rare gift. “I’m just worried that if we don’t act on this lead about Adair, it might go cold. You know how these things are.”

“That lead is only a rumor,” she said.

“And if it’s no good, then we’ll try Las Vegas,” I said quickly.

Rishika grinned. “Let’s plan just one trip at a time, okay?” The smile faded. “And I hope you’re not planning to take any more unnecessary trips—like the one you went on after drinking that damn tea.”

“I was just frustrated. I was hoping I’d see my father—or even my grandfather, like Cali did—but all I ended up with was the Kollector,” I said bitterly. “And then, to top that off, I wasn’t able to go with Cali to the Vanguard palace like I promised I would. I feel really bad about that.”

Before Rishika could respond to that, Torin skated around Sage and came barreling into us.

“Torin!” Rishika said, helping him to his feet. “Watch where you’re going!”

“Sorry,” Torin gasped, looking embarrassed. “I don’t know how to stop when I skate backwards. All I do is fall over, and that can’t be right.”

Rishika laughed. “It’s like this,” she said, and demonstrated for him, angling the blade of her skate on the ice to act as a brake.

“I think I got it,” Torin said, still slipping and sliding across the ice.

“Rishika!” Lilac skated over. “I wanted to thank you for this morning, with that bear. I was too shell-shocked in the moment, and maybe a little embarrassed that Marta saw me like that, but you were incredible.”

“You don’t need to be embarrassed,” Rishika assured him. “I’m sure Marta is just glad you’re safe—and in one piece.”

Lilac nodded. “Anyway, thanks,” he said, and skated away, back toward Marta.

I watched him go. “I think I’d feel the same way.”

“What do you mean?” Rishika asked.

“If you saw me helpless in that kind of a situation. I think I’d be embarrassed, too. I get how he feels.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“I never want you to think of me as weak,” I admitted.

“I would never think that,” Rishika said. “I know how strong you are. You’re the bravest person I know.”

My throat went tight, and I smiled at her, unable to speak. It was incredible to have this kind of support. I’d never had anyone like her in my life before. Rishika saw my expression and put her arm around my shoulders, drawing me close and pulling me into a kiss.

I sank into it, feeling the pressure of her lips and her hands and her body against mine, and all the tension in my shoulders seemed to drain away.

But then there was a wild scream, and two bodies skated past us at full speed, whipping around us.

Rishika clung to me as her skates slipped beneath her, but I wasn’t much better off. We looked around to see Xavier and Cali racing around the pond.

Rishika looked up at me. “I think we should get a little revenge, don’t you?”

“Absolutely.”

We skated toward them, but just before we reached them, Cali skidded to a sudden stop, and Xavier crashed into her. Her eyes were on the air above her, and as I followed her gaze, I saw what they were looking at.

It was a wisp, hovering just over her head.

“What does it want?” Cali asked. “What does it want from me?”

“It’s not here for you,” I said, almost without thinking. “It’s here for me.”

I couldn’t say how I knew this; I just did. It was only a feeling, but I was certain.

The wisp began to move, angling toward the trees surrounding the pond. I skated to the edge of the pond and scrambled up onto the bank. It was hard to keep up with a wisp in the best of circumstances, but with ice skates on, it was almost impossible.

Rishika appeared by my side and took my hand, and we stumbled after the wisp. It had stopped and was hovering above us at the tree line.

“What’s it doing here?” I wondered aloud.

“What is that thing?” Rishika asked, confused.

“It’s a wisp,” I explained. “They’re of the Fae. They usually don’t show themselves to non-Fae.”

Rishika took this in. “So what do we do?”

I watched the wisp as it bobbed on the cold breeze. I actually hadn’t dealt with a wisp in a long time, so I was struggling to remember what I was supposed to do.

“What do you want?” I asked it.

There was no answer for a moment, and then the breeze kicked up again. But this didn’t feel like a winter wind. It was barely a breeze at all, and words whispered around me, swirling in the air.

“*If you continue down this path, you will be surrounded by the dead*.”

**Episode 2337**

I was good on skates—provided I was *on* the ice. Trying to follow Rishika and Artemis as they tailed the wisp into the woods was almost impossible. I kept tripping over roots and fallen branches, and by the time I finally reached them, the wisp was gone.

Which was probably for the best, because my stamina was also gone. I stood gasping for air as Artemis and Rishika looked at each other.

“—I don’t think it would have,” Rishika was saying, shaking her head.

“I think we should stay on this path,” Artemis said. “Let’s just keep going.”

God, I hoped they wouldn’t. My feet were already killing me. Ice skates were *not* hiking boots.

“What did the wisp want?” I asked breathlessly.

Artemis looked over at me. “It said that if I stayed on this path, I would be surrounded by the dead.”

I felt the blood drain from my face. “Are you serious?”

Artemis nodded.

“God, haven’t we had enough with the dead people already?” I demanded. “*More* dead people? You already got a chance to live that fantasy with Letifer. Can’t we just ever get a prophecy about hanging out with the living?”

Artemis frowned. “I’m not totally sure what the wisp meant, though,” she said, looking around. “It mentioned ‘the path’—but which one? This one?”

The path Artemis pointed down led deeper into the trees.

Rishika shrugged. “I don’t know anything about wisps. This was the first I’ve heard of them. But…” She thought for a moment. “New Orleans has a storied history with ghosts and the dead. Could this be a warning about searching for Adair?”

I gave an involuntary shudder, just thinking about the idea. Haunted houses—even the fake kind—freaked me out. And, after seeing Letifer’s revenants rising from their graves, I wasn’t too keen on graveyards either.

“What’s all this about the dead?”

I turned to see Xavier walking toward us.

“It’s nothing,” Artemis said, shaking her head. “The wisp mentioned something, but I don’t even know what it meant, and I’m not planning on changing my plans on the whim of one possibly paranoid wisp that should mind its own business.”

She looked around for a moment. The woods were quiet. Even the birds had stopped singing.

She shook her head. “I think the excitement is over. We should get back to the pond.”

Artemis and Rishika turned, but I hesitated and looked down at my feet. They were throbbing already, and I wasn’t looking forward to the walk back in my skates.

Xavier cocked an eyebrow, then bent and swept me up in his arms.

As we headed back to the pond, I buried my face in his shoulder. I could feel my cheeks burning. It was slightly embarrassing, but I had to admit that I was enjoying Xavier’s attention.

He carefully set me down on the ice. “Should we try to race again?” he asked with a grin.

I smiled back. He’d been like a storm cloud this morning, but now he was at his teasing best. I liked to see him so light-hearted.

Glancing around, I saw Rishika and Artemis skating side by side, their heads bent close together. Artemis hadn’t seemed too concerned about the wisp’s warning, but I was. It was nice to be with Xavier, but my stomach had felt tight ever since I’d seen the thing hovering over my head. I was nervous about what its words meant.

*Had* the warning been about New Orleans?

If so, and if we ran into trouble down there, I was going to need to do a lot better with my magic then I had this morning, when my blast hadn’t even come within shouting distance of that damn bear. And that bear had been huge! How could I have missed it? It was like missing the side of a barn.

I sighed as I thought about it. I’d *thought* I was getting better. And maybe I was, when I used my magic during practice. But in the heat of battle, my aim was a little off. And there was still the question of the efficacy of my shield power. I thought back to learning it for the first time. I wished I could have spent more time with Grandpa Innes. I felt like I could have learned so much more with him.

“Cali?” Xavier asked. “Where’d you go? You look like you were on a different planet for a second.”

I looked over at him. “I’m sorry. I was just thinking.” Then a thought hit me. “Hey, would you mind if I practiced my magic?”

He laughed. “Is this because you missed that bear this morning?”

“Hey!” I said in mock outrage. I tried to slap his arm, but the movement made me unsteady, and I slipped. I caught myself and crossed my arms over my chest. “I’m being serious.”

“Okay,” he said, still laughing at the scene I’d made.

“I want to work on everything, but especially my shield power. It might come in handy in New Orleans.” I thought back to something I’d often heard Rishika say during training. “Sometimes it’s better to play defense than offense. And, besides running away, the shield power is the only defense I have. So why not get better at it?”

“That’s true,” Xavier agreed. He smirked. “Defense is good… sometimes. In my opinion, the best defense is a killer offense.”

I rolled my eyes. Xavier had to be the cockiest guy I’d ever met. I looked around at the trees surrounding the pond. “Where should we go? Last time I tried to practice at the house, I accidentally blasted the shed into splinters.”

Xavier frowned. “That was you? I’ve been blaming Ravi for that.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I was trying to block a stone.”

Xavier stared at me for a long moment. “Okay, well, let’s just get you away from everyone else, then,” he said, grabbing my arm and tugging me across the ice. “Just in case. Somewhere where there are no sheds to get in your way.”

I glared at him as I glided but didn’t argue.

We headed toward the far end of the pond, where the ice narrowed down to a thin gap between the banks. It was no good for skating, so no one else was near us.

“Okay,” Xavier said, looking around, “I think this is safe enough. What do you have to do?”

I thought back to what my grandfather had told me. I took a deep breath of the cold winter air and closed my eyes. I tried to block out the laughing and yelling coming from the pack and concentrate on the air around me. I moved my fingers, trying to feel the energy in the damp air. And then—there it was. Pulsing against my skin.

And then it was gone again.

I sighed. I knew what I had to do. I had to gather my magic and build it into a shield. It sounded simple, but it had proven to be far more difficult.

Xavier had bent down at the pond’s edge and was gathering snow and packing it into balls.

“What are you doing?” I asked warily.

“Well, you have to have something to shield against, right? I thought I could toss a snowball at you,” he reasoned. “That way you’ll know if the shield works. If we don’t know that, what’s the point?”

“I don’t know about this,” I said doubtfully, watching as Xavier packed the snowball with what looked like shards of ice. “I know how hard you can throw.”

Xavier rolled his eyes but grinned. “I promise I’ll be gentle.” He winked.

“*Xavier*.”  
 He laughed. “We can build up to a harder throw as you get better with the shield.”

“Okay,” I said, though that last part made me nervous. I took another breath and tried to concentrate, but seeing Xavier packing a mountain of snowballs out of the corner of my eye made it hard. Frustrated with myself, I shifted a little so I couldn’t see him and tried again. I tried to focus on everything around me this time—the voices of the pack, the cold of the wind on my face, and the slickness of the ice beneath my skates. When I felt the energy in the air again, I tried to do as my grandfather had instructed and draw it toward me. I reached out with my mind—and all my might—and drew it closer and closer.

Suddenly, there was a sphere forming just in front of me. It shimmered like gold in the weak morning sun, and it hung just in front of me.

My stomach was a riot of nerves, but I tried to keep calm and focus steadily on the glittering mass.

“Are you ready?” Xavier called to me, though his voice sounded a little distant.

I nodded. “Ready.”

But just as Xavier swung his arm back to throw the snowball, my feet slid out from under me. I lost my focus, and the sphere went shooting off into the bushes growing at the tree line.

For half a second, I was relieved that I hadn’t been blasted back, but then there was a heart-stopping scream, and Lola flew up into the air.

**Episode 2338**

GREYSON

As I got out of the car and stepped into the cold winter air, I looked up at the Vanguard palace. The place was massive, and the estate was sprawling, but from what I could see, it looked quiet. I was just glad I’d made it here without any problems. I parked outside the gate and walked over to the guard’s booth. The guy was sitting on his chair, head tipped back, arms crossed over his chest—asleep.

Great security these royal idiots had.

I knocked on the half-open window, but the guy just snorted and shifted in his sleep. I rolled my eyes and reached in. There was an electronic console next to a TV that displayed the security camera feed, and I pressed the button, opening the gate myself.

The guard didn’t even stir as the gate rattled open.

I walked up the long drive toward the house. Even as winter was starting to wrap itself around us, the driveway was perfectly manicured, the box hedges lining it perfectly groomed. Lucian had to be allocating half his pack to palace maintenance. As I walked, I kept my eyes out for guards or any kind of patrol, but I didn’t see anyone. No wonder, considering they had such shit security. I walked up the massive steps and slid the letter through the small gap beneath the door. My heart was pounding as I straightened.

As I turned back toward my car, I knew there was nothing else to do. I’d dropped off the letter, and now I just had to wait for everything to grind into action. I was just relieved that I hadn’t run into Lucian or Aysel or any of the other Vanguard gang, but as I neared my car, I slowed my pace.

I’d spoken too soon. Someone was leaning against my car.

As I drew closer, I saw that it was Andrei’s bulk leaning against my door. In an instant, I remembered how pissed off he’d been when he’d first noticed Aysel’s interest in me, and then how I’d had to figure out how to play the guy—make it seem like I was his ally. Given all that, I could only imagine what Andrei’s reaction was going to be, seeing me now.

But there was a big part of me that just didn’t care. I wasn’t going to take any shit from Andrei. The Redwood pack already had too much deal with at the moment, and I wasn’t going to waste my time with Andrei’s hurt feelings. I was fed up with the Vanguard pack’s bullshit.

He was leaning against the driver’s side of my car, blocking my door. He had his arms crossed across his barrel chest, and as he saw me approaching, his eyes narrowed.

“You need a ride?” I asked. “I’m not going your way, but you can always call an Uber, man.”

Andrei’s eyes grew colder. He didn’t appear to like my joke, and he didn’t move away from the car. “I was just standing here wondering why you came back. You forget something?”

I gave him a cool look. “I’m not sure that’s any of your business. What I’m doing here doesn’t concern you.”

“I’m going to have to disagree with you there,” he countered. “If it’s palace business, it’s my business.”

“Well, it’s not palace business, so you can stand down. Now, are you going to step aside, or am I going to have to throw you off my car?” I asked, my voice edged with menace.

Andrei seemed to hear it, and his eyes narrowed to slits. “You’d be wise not to get too cocky, Alpha.”

I sized up Andrei in an instant. The guy was big, even by my standards. But *big* and *skilled* weren’t often packaged together. Still, I hadn’t come here to fight.

I held up my keys and gave them a little shake. “You want to drive? I have to go to the grocery store for eggnog. Maybe you can help me shop.”

Andrei stepped toward me, every one of his movements a threat. “I know why you came back here.”

I didn’t move. I was pretty sure this was a bluff. There was no way he *could* know. No one knew, except for Cali and Xavier, and I was sure they hadn’t told anyone.

“Yeah? And why is that?” I asked.

“It’s simple,” Andrei growled. “You’ve come back to see Aysel.”

“Is that right?” I asked, keeping my voice steady.

“You think I’m an idiot?”

He’d teed it up, but in the interest of peace, I decided not to respond to that question.

“You think I don’t know that you’ve been lying this whole time about not being interested in her?”

“I’ve been lying?” I asked.

“Your Luna was *fake*,” Andrei spat, looking furious. “Maybe your mate bond with that Caliana girl is fake, too. You want to know what I think?” he asked, taking another step toward me.

“What?”

“I think you’ve been playing me this whole time.”

I forced myself not to tell him that he was right. I needed to think. Apart from the fact that I *had* been playing him for the fool that he was, he was wrong about everything else. But maybe I could still use Andrei to my advantage. I certainly couldn’t tell him the truth—that I wasn’t here to play him, but to play Aysel. But I could stick to the lie that I’d put in the letter—that I *did* want Aysel. That fit into my plan and would give the act even more credence.

The only obvious downside was that Andrei was clearly in love with Aysel, and my confessing to the same was bound to rub him the wrong way.

“Come on, man,” Andrei growled, growing impatient with me. “Don’t you have some bullshit lie to tell me?”

“You’re right,” I finally said. “I’m not going to lie. You’re right about all of it.”

Andrei bared his teeth like he was about to attack. “So everything you told me was bullshit?”

“No,” I corrected. “But I have changed my mind. I thought I could resist Aysel—I tried—but I just couldn’t do it. The pull between us was just too strong. I couldn’t ignore it any longer.”

I was laying it on pretty thick, but why the hell not? As long as I was doing this, I might as well go all in.

Andrei’s eyes flashed dangerously. “I’m warning you, keep away from Aysel.”

“Sorry, man,” I said, shaking my head. “I can’t do that.”

Andrei took a step closer, and his whole body was tense. “I guess I’m just going to have to explain this to you in a way you’ll understand.”

I knew what was coming. As a fighter, I’d seen it in the ring a thousand times. At the start of every fight I’d ever been in, there was always a certain look in my opponent’s eyes that told me they were about to throw their first punch.

And Andrei had that look.

I dodged as he let fly, barely moving my head as I avoided Andrei’s fist. I threw a punch back, and it landed, snapping his head back.

In an instant, we were locked into a full-scale battle. Andrei landed two hits to my ribs, but I managed to get another shot in, too, this one to the side of his head. It must have made his ears ring because he shook his head, like he was trying to rid himself of the sound. And while he was distracted, I landed a hard blow to his kidney, which made him groan.

In a second, he was back at it, and I caught a glancing blow off my jaw.

I was fast in a fight and able to avoid most of his worst hits, but I had to admit that the guy was a good fighter. He was one of the best I’d faced—in the ring or out of it. And he was *huge*, so every punch had about a thousand pounds of force behind it. I could feel the power of them as I ducked out of the way of a haymaker. I knew if I wasn’t fast enough and caught one of his full-force punches, it could cause me some real problems.

With an angry yell, Andrei ran at me like a charging bull. He plowed me into my car, and we tumbled to the ground. We both fought for control as we rolled on the frozen ground.

“*Enough!*” an angry voice shouted.

An instant later there was a hand at my shoulder, shoving me away from Andrei. Then a hand appeared at Andrei’s neck, forcing him to his feet and yanking him backward.

I looked around to see Lucian standing with us, his pale face flushed with anger. He was always so perfectly in control, it was strange to see the prince looking so royally pissed off.

He glared at Andrei, then turned to me, his eyes still flashing with anger. “To what do we owe this unexpected visit, Greyson Evers?”

**Episode 2339**

I gasped as Lola flew through the air, then watched in horror as she fell back to earth. What the hell had just happened? Had I just *killed* my best friend?

I raced off the pond and into the bushes, just in time to see Lola get slowly and unsteadily to her feet.

She gave her head a little shake and looked over me, her eyes flashing. “What the hell was that for?”

“Lola, I’m *so* sorry,” I gushed. “It was an accident! Are you okay?”

She glared at me. “Why? You want to try it again?”  
 “I slipped and lost my focus. I was practicing my magic,” I tried to explain.

“Yeah, well, it seems like you could use practice. And lots of it,” she spat.

Xavier joined me.

“Hey, Lola, are you okay? What were you doing back here?” he asked, looking around.

Lola huffed. “I was looking for a daylight item, for your information. Not that I should have to explain what I’m doing.”

“What’s it look like?” Xavier asked.

She huffed. “It’s a bracelet. It’s super old and really elegant, I guess.”

“Do you need one of those?” I asked, worried. Then, “Probably not, right, since you’re not burning up in the sunlight.”

“I wouldn’t burn up, anyway,” she snapped. “I’m part werewolf and technically alive. I don’t need one. It’s Jacqueline’s. She can’t look for it, of course, so I am. I’ve searched the house, and I couldn’t find it, so now I’m retracing her steps.”

“I could help,” I offered.

“I think you’ve done quite enough already,” Lola said, shutting me down.

“I’m really sorry,” I said again. “You know I’d never intentionally try to hurt you—”

“You should try to be more careful,” Lola shot back, turning away from me to keep scanning the ground.

My heart sank. How many times would magic or magical circumstances lead Lola and me to almost hurt each other? She was my friend; I wanted her to be safe. I hated that any of my actions could harm her.

Still, she didn’t have a right to be totally pissed. She’d definitely chomped on my neck a few times at this point.

“Maybe we should find a better place to practice,” Xavier suggested.

“I don’t know if we should bother,” I said, feeling defeated. “I’ve already taken out your shed, and now this,” I said, gesturing at Lola.

“It’s supposed to be a defensive maneuver,” Xavier reminded me, “but you keep using it like a weapon. Until you can really master it, it’s going to be dangerous. Which is all the more reason to keep practicing.”

I saw his point and nodded. “Okay. Let’s go.”

He led me deeper into the woods, away from the pond.

I didn’t want to take any chances, so I walked around the small clearing, making sure there were no more surprises hiding in the bushes.

Xavier picked up a thick branch and easily broke it in half across his knee. “I’m going to toss this.”

I sighed. My feet were throbbing again, and I was starting to lose any hope of creating a workable shield. But Xavier was trying to help me, and I wanted to show him that I could do it. So I nodded. “Okay.”

I took a deep breath and tried to concentrate. I tried to tune into the world around me and feel the pulse of energy in the air. The sphere appeared in front of me and, as I focused on it, it took on a clearer shape.

“Three, two, one!” Xavier yelled, and lobbed the stick at me.

My hands were shaking as I focused all my energy on the sphere and then—*BAM!*

The stick hit the sphere and bounced back, landing on the forest floor at Xavier’s feet.

I stared at it, wide-eyed. “Oh my god,” I breathed. “I did it!”

Carefully, I eased up on my concentration, and the sphere dissolved. Xavier rushed forward and wrapped his arms around me.   
 “That was incredible,” he said, grinning down at me. “I knew you could do it! Now I want you to do it again.”

Buoyed by my first success, I nodded. “Yeah, of course.”

I was tired, but I felt ten feet tall. I felt like I could do anything.

We went through it again and again. I concentrated, and the sphere appeared and blocked whatever Xavier threw at me.

We did it three more times, and I was able to produce a functioning shield each time.

“*Yes!*” Xavier called, after he’d lobbed a heavy stone in my direction and it had bounced back at him with enough force that he’d had to duck. “You got another one in you?”

I winced. Using my powers like this was draining. I was exhausted, and my feet had reached their limit.

I shook my head and looked down. “I need to get out of my skates,” I said. “Fast.”

Xavier nodded. “Got it. You want a lift?” he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“Yes!” I said, and wrapped an arm around his neck as he lifted me into his arms.

When I pressed a kiss to his cheek, Xavier smiled.

“I kind of like being your personal chauffeur,” he said.

By the time we got back to the pond, it looked like most everyone was getting ready to leave. People were taking off their skates, or doing one last lap on the ice.

Xavier set me down on the log near my shoes and unlaced my skates.

Torin dropped down next to me, looking red-cheeked and happy.

“Have a good time?” I asked.

“Great!” he enthused. “I learned how to skate a figure-eight. Next time I’m going to try for a jump.”

I laughed, and then groaned as I slid my aching feet out of my skates. It was heaven to put them into shoes again.

As we headed back to the house, everyone was talking and laughing, and Torin was taking lunch orders.

The skating pond was situated in the woods so that, coming back, we approached the house from the front, and as we did, I saw Greyson’s car pulling up.

I was relieved to see him returning. I’d been thinking about him since he’d left, and I wondered how his trip to the Vanguard palace had gone. I wanted to run over to ask him, but I stopped myself. Xavier and I had just had such a good time together, and I didn’t want to make him jealous.

“Oh! Greyson’s back!” Torin turned to the group. “Now I have just the thing to warm everyone up. Eggnog!”

He hurried over as Greyson stepped out of the car.

“Did you get it?”

Greyson sighed. “No, I’m sorry, man. I totally forgot. I got caught up in a bunch of other stuff.”

“Oh,” Torin said, looking instantly deflated. All his happy cheer from the skating pond faded instantly. “That’s okay. I know how things can come up. It’s not like eggnog is the most important thing in the world, or like I’m…” He tried for a smile. “It’s fine. I wanted to try it, but… it’s fine.”

Torin looked pretty shaken up over eggnog, but there had been a lot of extremes with him lately. I watched him as he walked slowly up the porch steps to the front door.

I walked over to Greyson, who was still looking after Torin. “You’re back. Are you okay? What things came up? Did anything go wrong at the Vanguard palace?”

Greyson looked over at me. His eyes were a little unfocused, and he looked a little unsettled. He passed a hand through his hair. “Yeah, a lot went wrong.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“I got into a fight with Andrei, and Lucian had to break it up.”

“*What?*” I gasped.

He shook his head, dismissing my freaked-out expression. “It was fine. More annoying than anything, and I was able to leave the letter behind.”

“Greyson, are you okay?” I asked, looking him over.

Greyson gave me a small smile. “I’m fine. A lot went wrong, but something went right. I delivered the letter, and I think my story’s going to hold up. The only question now is whether Aysel will take the bait.”

My heart felt lighter than it had in a long time. Maybe we’d be able to break this stupid curse after all. “Fingers crossed.”

“Exactly,” Greyson said. He threw an arm around my shoulders. “You look freezing. Let’s get inside.”

Inside the house, everyone had gathered in the kitchen, and they were trying to cheer Torin up.

“We can go to the store after lunch,” Ravi said. “We’ll get the eggnog then.”

“Greyson and I could go,” I offered. I was disturbed to see Torin looking so down. I knew he’d been feeling a little out of sorts, and I didn’t want him feeling left out.

Greyson didn’t say anything, but he pulled out his phone. I glanced down at his screen and saw him ordering eggnog. He slipped the phone back into his pocket and looked up. “I’m having groceries delivered. It’ll be here tonight. All the eggnog you can drink.”

Torin’s face lit up again. “Really? Oh yay! Thank you!”

I smiled up at Greyson. “Thank you,” I said quietly. “That was really sweet of you.”

Greyson smiled back and shrugged. “No problem.” His phone rang, and he pulled it out again. I couldn’t see what the display said, but he frowned. And when he answered, there was a cautious edge to his voice. “Hello?”

He listened for a moment, then held the phone against his chest and looked over at me.

“It’s Aysel,” he said.

**Episode 2340**

MARTA

I’d just walked through the front door when Lilac grabbed my arm.

“Can I talk to you for a second?” he asked.

His expression was tense, and my stomach automatically tightened.

“Sure,” I said, and let him lead me into the small office next to the front door. “What’s up?”

He looked around nervously, then over at me. “I just wanted to tell you that I’m sorry about what happened with the bear this morning.”

I frowned at him. “Why are you sorry? What do you have to apologize for?”

“I’m just… embarrassed,” he admitted. “If I had my wolf back, that never would have happened. Hell, if my wolf had even been in the vicinity, the bear wouldn’t have been able to scare us like that.” He shook his head. “I forget that I’m more like a human right now. I’m vulnerable to so many things that I never had to worry about before.”

“Lilac—” I started.

He looked down at his feet. “I want to protect you, Marta, but I feel like I can’t even protect myself.”

“I don’t need you to protect me,” I told him.

“I *want* to,” Lilac shot back. “But that’s going to be hard unless I’m reunited with Plum. I’m just glad that Plum finally came back from the woods.”

I gritted my teeth. The more I heard from Lilac, the more determined I was to reunite him with Plum. He hadn’t asked me about it, but it was clear how much he missed having his wolf. And what if the bear had attacked him? He wouldn’t have been able to defend himself against it. If anything happened to Lilac, I would always blame myself for bringing him back to the human world defenseless.

“Anyway,” Lilac was saying, “I’m cold. I want to get some of Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mocha. You want some?”

I nodded, and we headed toward the kitchen. Everyone was gathered, eating snacks and drinking hot chocolate and talking about eggnog for some reason.

As I listened, I realized that Torin was sad about not having any, and everyone else was trying to cheer him up. Which made me smile. It was nice to see the pack coming together like that. It was something I really appreciated about the Redwoods—their sense of camaraderie. Lilac was a member of the pack, but this was a *werewolf* pack—which meant that Lilac was going to need to get back with his wolf.

Lilac handed me a cup of mocha, and I thought about what Kira had said—about Lilac having to go back to the spirit world in order to get his wolf back.

My hands tightened around the mug as I thought of that. I hated the idea of it. I just didn’t know enough about the spirit world to feel comfortable with it. If someone were to go back there, how would they return to the land of the living? It just seemed so risky. *Too* risky.

And Lilac had actually been dead, once. Would that add even more danger? Would the spirit world sense this about him and want to take him back?

Whatever I did, I knew I was going to have to do it on the sly. When I was first looking into bringing Lilac back, I’d done some of my research on Rain’s blog. That seemed like a pretty good place to start—especially considering I couldn’t think of any other options.

I swallowed the rest of my mocha, whispered to Lilac that I was going to run upstairs to change my socks, and slipped out of the kitchen. Upstairs in my room, I opened the laptop and stared at it, trying to remember Lilac’s instructions on how to use it.

It took a couple of false starts—and I may have accidentally bought a bag of gummy bears on Lilac’s Amazon account—but I found my way to the blog. I found the little magnifying glass, which I remembered Lilac telling me to use to search for something, and entered *spirit world*.

A page of results came up for that, and I scanned through them.

Then I tried *land of the dead*.

My search was pretty broad, but I read through dozens of posts, and I was able to piece together at least one working theory: the spirit world was one hell of an unpredictable place. There were some accounts of those who had returned from it, but their stories differed greatly. Some described a beautiful paradise of peace and love, and others talked about a burning hell filled with despair and torment.

I took a deep breath, trying to keep my sprits up. I entered *returning from spirit world*.

Portals. That was the result of that search. *Portals*.

I shuddered, remembering the portal that had opened during our battle with Letifer. The portal where I’d almost lost Lilac for good.

But I scanned through those posts anyway, gritting my teeth against the shivers that ran up my spine.

I opened another post titled “Mirrors” and began to read. This one was about how reflective surfaces could act as a conduit between the mortal realm and the spirit realm, allowing visitors to pass through, unscathed, in either direction.

My heart beat fast as I read. That could work. It looked relatively low risk, and it didn’t involve an unstable portal.

But, as I read on, my hopes took a sudden and complete dive. The use of mirrors did require the one thing that I couldn’t use—*magic*.

And not just any magic—this required some kind of special magic.

I took a frustrated breath. How the hell could I use my magic when I wasn’t supposed to? And what kind of special magic did this need? Wasn’t *all* magic special?

I looked up at the ceiling of my room, thinking hard. Maybe working with Dani could make my magic special enough.

But it was a moot point. I wasn’t even capable of using my magic. Not with the bracelets on.

Still, at least I knew there might be a way. That was something. Well. It was better than nothing.

I shut the laptop and went back downstairs. I needed to talk to Violet. I found her in the living room, watching Charlie juggling Christmas ornaments.

“Can I talk to you for a second?” I whispered.

“Sure,” Violet said, and we stepped out into the hall. “What’s going on?”

“So, I was just doing some research, and it looks like there might be a way to return Lilac to the spirit world, which might reunite him with his wolf. And it’s a way that might not be that dangerous.”

“Oh! That’s great!” Violet said, looking amazed. “How do we do it?”

“Well, that’s the tricky part,” I explained. “We need to find a magical mirror.”

Violet frowned. “But how do you know if a mirror is magical?”

“I have no idea,” I admitted. “Maybe there’s some way to tell. I wonder if they have some kind of special look to them.”

Cali—who was coming out of the bathroom—stopped and looked at us curiously. “Did I hear something about magic mirrors?”

“Um…” I could feel myself starting to sweat under Cali’s gaze. “I was researching them because I just find them fascinating. Don’t you? They’re like a portal you can take with you. A portable portal.”

Cali’s eyebrows drew down. “Are you talking about traveling to another world?”

“Um…”

She shook her head. “I think that sounds like a really bad idea.”

Her response piqued my interest. “Have you ever seen one of these mirrors?” I asked curiously.

Cali nodded. “Yeah, Big Mac had one. She hid in it to protect herself from Silas.” Her eyes went wide for a moment. “Wow, that feels like it was so long ago somehow.”

“She hid herself, though?” Violet asked. “How?”

“I actually have no idea.” Cali shrugged. “But it worked, that much I know. I remember it at least; it was a floor-length mirror. It had survived after Silas trashed her house.”

“Do you know where that mirror is?” I asked, my heart suddenly beating fast. I glanced over at Violet and saw that she was suddenly looking at Cali with avid interest as well.

Cali thought for a moment. “I suppose Big Mac still has it. It might be at her old house, but I know she definitely migrated some stuff from that house when she moved in with Mrs. Smith. But I don’t know for sure if she brought that mirror,” she said, “so I wouldn’t get your hopes up.”

“But she *might* have, right?” I asked.

Cali shrugged. “Yeah, she might have. But keep in mind who we’re talking about. Even if she does have it with her, you know she’ll never let you use it. Whatever you guys are doing, maybe it’s best if you take a step back for a second.”

“That’s probably true,” I said slowly. *But maybe we don’t need her permission.*

**Episode 2341**

XAVIER

I looked across the kitchen to see Greyson on his phone. He looked tense, even as Cali came back into the room and put a hand on his shoulder. Whatever was going on, they seemed to be going through something together, and I didn’t like to see that, so I headed over.   
 Apart from wanting to break up their cozy-looking moment, I also wanted to know what had happened at the Vanguard palace. And I wanted some more information on why Greyson had been so adamant about sending Aysel that letter.

Greyson ended the call as I walked over and looked at me. “I’m glad you’re here.” He glanced around the crowded kitchen. “Let’s go somewhere we can all talk privately.”

The three of us walked into the den, and Greyson shut the door.

“What’s up?” Cali asked.

“Aysel went for my invitation,” he said grimly. “That’s why she called. She wants to see me.”

I shot a look at Cali, figuring she wasn’t going to be thrilled to hear this. We all knew how desperate Aysel was for Greyson. Hearing that they were going out would be like me announcing I had plans to go on a date with Ava. Awful, basically.

Cali didn’t look happy about this, and—too bad for Greyson—he couldn’t kiss her and make everything better. I tried to keep my smirk to myself as I thought about it. As long as this revulsion curse lasted, I was just going to have to be the only one kissing Cali.

Not that I minded.

“What does that mean?” Cali asked, looking uneasy.

“It means everything’s going as planned,” Greyson said.

Cali rolled her eyes. “But what does it *mean*? When are you doing to have to see her?”

Greyson shrugged. “She was a little vague about the details. She just said she was glad I’d finally realized I couldn’t stay away from her.”

Cali’s face twisted into a frown.

“But she didn’t set a time or a place or anything.”

“So what are you supposed to do?” Cali asked.

“She said she’d text me the details at some point.”

I thought about this for a moment. “I wonder if she’s on to you,” I said, leaning against the back of the couch.

“What do you mean?” Greyson asked.

“What if she figures out that you’re lying?” I shrugged. “Given how emotionally stable she isn’t, I can’t imagine that would end well.”

Greyson’s mouth pressed into a thin line. “I guess that’s a possibility, but it’s a risk I’m going to have to take. Whatever ends up happening,” he said with a look at Cali, “at least you won’t be involved.”

Cali looked unhappy about this, but I was thrilled, and I let myself spend a moment imagining what would happen if Aysel killed Greyson. That wouldn’t be *my* fault, so I wouldn’t have to feel any guilt about it, and then I’d be there to comfort Cali.

“Anyway,” Greyson was saying, “I’ll keep you both informed about what’s going on.”

He looked at Cali and made to move toward her, but he stopped himself. I could see the longing in his eyes, and I could see that he wanted to go to her. To comfort her.

But before I could decide how much that bothered, me, I was distracted as the door opened and Lola stuck her head into the room.

“Can you all come out to the living room? I have an announcement to make. It’s important.”

When we’d gathered in the living room with the rest of the pack, Lola looked around.

“Okay, as some of you already know, I’ve been searching high and low for Jacqueline’s daylight item, which has gone missing. It keeps Jacqueline safe in the sun, and if we don’t find it, she’ll burn up in the sunlight and/or murder me, because she’s angsty without it and blaming me for every damn thing. Jacs is already driving me nuts and has basically barricaded herself in her room because she’s afraid of stepping outside into the sunlight, and I’m just not sure how much longer I can put up with it,” Lola ranted, really getting into a rhythm. “It’s hard enough being that girl’s friend without *this*.”

“Lola’s really not kidding about that,” Jay added. “That vampire can be a real pain in the ass.”

“And I’m thinking,” Lola continued, “that if we get a whole pack of wolves together looking for it, we can find it. So I want everyone looking for it. Jacs thinks she lost it here at the house, so it *has* to be somewhere nearby.”

Everyone was nodding, and I almost smiled. It was funny to think about—a pack of werewolves looking for something that would protect a vampire. It was ironic, but whatever. These were strange times.

“So, everyone needs to start looking,” she commanded, and the pack started to stream out of the room.

“Hang on!” I called out. “Maybe it would help if you described the damn thing, Lola. No one has any idea what they’re looking for.”

“It’s a bracelet—an antique, and apparently really fancy.” Lola shrugged. “Does that help?”

Torin poked his head into the room. “Hang on,” he said hesitantly. “Does it have a tiny diamond in the clasp?”

Lola nodded. “Yeah, I think it does. How did you know?”

Torin blushed beet red. “Oops.”

“What does *that* mean?” Lola demanded.

Torin walked over to the Christmas tree and removed an ornament. He handed it to Lola, and her eyes went wide as platters.

“How did it end up *there*?” she demanded.

Torin looked sheepish. “I found it wedged between the sofa cushions. It was so pretty and sparkly, I just assumed it was an ornament for the tree.”

Sage laughed, and Ravi cheered, causing everyone else to cheer, too.

“Great solve!” Zainab said, punching Torin in the shoulder. “And so fast, too!”

But Lola didn’t look pleased. “Do you have any idea how hellish it’s been dealing with Jacs about this?”

Torin’s face flushed. “I’m really sorry. I didn’t know what it was.”

“Why would he?” I asked. “He found a random bracelet shoved into the side of the couch. Why the hell should he have told you about it, Lola?”

She rolled her eyes, but before she could tear into the guy again, I continued.

“Besides, it was probably as safe as it could have been on the tree. Hell of a lot safer than in the couch,” I snapped. I didn’t like to see anyone yelling at Torin. He was a good guy, and he’d just lost his closest friend. Astrid hadn’t died all that long ago, and we should’ve been giving him a break, not raking him over the coals for stupid shit.

Lola seemed to realize this too, and she nodded. “I’m sorry, Torin. You’re right, you couldn’t have known. Thanks for finding it. I just want to give it back to Jacqueline before I accidentally murder her.”  
 She headed out of the living room and, as the rest of the pack dispersed, I saw Torin leave too, his head down.

“Ugh, I feel so bad for Torin. Things just don’t seem to be going right for him,” Cali said, watching his retreat. “I wonder if there’s something we can do to cheer him up.”

“No idea,” I admitted. But I had to agree with her. I wished there was something we could do.

“Maybe we should just go *ask* him if there’s anything we could do,” Artemis said. She had just walked over in time to hear Cali’s comment.

“Worth a shot,” Cali said, and led the way toward the kitchen.

When we walked in, Torin was sitting on a stool at the counter. He had his head in his hands and looked pretty dejected.  
 “Hey, Torin, I hope you’re not upset about that,” Cali started, going over to him and putting a comforting hand on his shoulder. “It was just a misunderstanding. You shouldn’t take it so personally. Lola just gets weird when she’s tense.”

He nodded. “Okay,” he said without looking up.  
 Cali shot a look at Artemis and me, then back at Torin. “Is there anything we can do to cheer you up? To make today up to you?”

“No, that’s okay. I’m fine,” he said quietly.

“I just want you to know how much the pack appreciates everything you do around here,” Cali went on. “And we’d love to do something for you. Anything.”

Torin glanced up. “I suppose we can’t go to the North Pole?”

I chuckled before I could stop myself. “I’m really hoping you’re not serious about that.” It was hard to tell.

Torin gave me a weak smile in return, but then something clicked behind his eyes, and he jumped to his feet. “Wait a minute! I’ve got it!”

“What is it?” Artemis asked, looking alarmed at his sudden mood change.

Torin climbed onto the counter and yelled so he could be heard throughout the first floor of the house. “I want everyone to join me in the official Redwood Pack Gingerbread Baking Competition!”

**Episode 2342**

I grinned up at Torin, giving him my most supportive and enthusiastic face. Even though I’d kind of shot down the idea earlier, a gingerbread competition did sound like fun. Who didn’t like making gingerbread houses… or eating them?

But when I glanced over at Xavier, I wondered if I had found the answer to that question. He didn’t look at all pleased. And neither did Greyson. Some of my wariness from before returned. The last thing I wanted was for some friendly gingerbread competition to erupt into all-out inter-pack warfare.

I rolled my eyes. “Are you two going to be a couple of grinches about this?”

Neither of them answered, which made me wonder if the answer was yes.

I shoved a finger into Greyson’s chest. “You’re the one who forgot the eggnog, pal, so you’d better be the first to sign up to make a house.”

Greyson heaved a deep sigh. “Fine,” he muttered.

Grimly satisfied, I turned to Xavier. “Well?”

“Yeah, okay,” he said, though his reluctance was clear.

I sighed.

“Okay, okay,” Rishika called out. “But if there’s going to be a competition, we need rules. Otherwise people are just going to eat each other alive in addition to the houses.”

Zainab whooped at this.

“Are we doing this individually, or is this a team thing?” Rishika went on.

“Every man for himself!” Ravi called out.

“Teams!” Sage countered, with a glance at Zainab.

“I don’t care either way; I can’t make a house,” Lola cut in.

“Why not?” Torin asked.

“I have to go get Jacs out of her room.” Lola rolled her eyes. “She’s currently not opening the door.”

Torin—still standing on the table—frowned. “I guess I hadn’t thought about rules. I’ve never actually organized a competition like this.”

“For starters, I think we should break into teams,” my dad called out. I hadn’t noticed him entering the kitchen, but now he stepped toward the table. “There’s only so much space in here. I’m obviously going to be on a team with Orla,” he said with a smile, stretching a hand out to my mom.

Suddenly, I felt an arm drape over my shoulder. Followed almost immediately by another from my other side. I glanced to my left at Greyson, then to my right at Xavier.

It looked like the three of us were going to be Team *Due Destini*.

All around, it was pandemonium as everyone scrambled for a partner. My mom and dad were paired up, of course. Artemis and Rishika stepped close to each other. Mrs. Smith and Big Mac pulled Kira toward them to form a team. Then we had Zainab and Sage, Marta and Lilac, and Violet and Charlie.

Ava stood against the wall near the door leading to the laundry room. She was watching the chaos but not stepping into it. I hadn’t noticed her before, and I wondered when she’d arrived.

Ravi had stepped back as teams had started to be picked, and now he was standing near the door leading to the hallway.

“Ravi!” Torin called, waving him in.

Ravi shook his head. “I think I might sit this one out.”

Torin frowned. “No way. This is a total team effort, which means everyone has to participate.” He looked around for a moment, then pointed at Dani.

Her eyes got big, and she put up her hands defensively. “Oh, don’t look at me. I’m happy enough to watch.”

Torin sighed. “Fine. But since I’m going to be a judge…” He pointed one finger at Ravi and another at Ava. “You two! You’re a team!”

Ava shrugged and headed over toward Ravi. But I noticed that she never took her eyes off Xavier.

“So how are we doing this?” Big Mac asked, rolling up her sleeves. “It’s been a hell of a long time since I made gingerbread. Do we get a recipe?”

My dad frowned. “I think having everyone making their own dough is going to be problematic. Maybe it would make more sense to make one huge batch for everyone. And we can assign everyone time to use the oven. That’ll give every team time to plan out the decorations.”

“What can we use to decorate?” Jay asked.

“Only candy, cookies, and frosting,” Torin said decidedly.

“And no actual building materials,” my dad put in. “All houses have to be held up with frosting or sugar syrup. No glue!”

“Royal icing or buttercream?” Big Mac asked, to everyone’s surprise.

“Whichever you want to use,” Torin said.

Big Mac snorted as she looked back at her teammates. “Only an idiot would use buttercream. Royal icing is as good as wallpaper plaster,” she muttered.

As everyone else was talking to their teams or partners and excitedly deciding on decorating strategy, I looked up at Torin. He was still on the table, and he was looking around at everyone, beaming with happiness.

I gave a sigh of deep relief. It was so good to see him looking joyful. Maybe this would be the Christmas event that would bring the whole pack together. Maybe it would become a permanent pack tradition, and we’d still be doing it years from now.

Torin caught my eyes and jumped off the table. “Hey, Cali, can I talk to you for a second?” He glanced around at the crowded room. “Alone?”

He looked nervous, which made me feel nervous.

“Is everything okay?” I asked. Just a second ago he’d been alight with joy, and now he was chewing on his lip nervously. What could have happened?

Torin nodded toward the hallway, and we stepped out of the over-stuffed kitchen.

He turned to look at me, nervously twisting his hands. “Cali, I just found out about gingerbread houses *today*—how am I supposed to judge them? And if everyone’s using the same dough, won’t they all taste the same? I don’t know how I’m going to make any of this work.”

I managed to keep myself from smiling at his misery.

“Torin,” I said gently. “You don’t actually *eat* the gingerbread houses.”

“You don’t?” he asked, baffled.

I shook my head. “Not until after you judge them for how they look. What really matters is how people decorate them and how creative they get. We can all chomp on them after you’ve crowned the winner.”

“Oh,” he said, still looking confused.

“If you just pick the house that you like the best, that’s going to be good enough,” I told him.

“Okay,” he said slowly, and smiled again. “I can do that. Maybe I can do a little research while the teams bake their houses. Find out what’s happening in the world of gingerbread.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said.

Torin skipped off to research gingerbread innovations, and I went back to the kitchen. There, I found Greyson and Xavier with their phones out, each with an elaborate gingerbread house design pulled up—arguing.

“If we do a chewing gum roof we’re going to be laughed out of the place,” Xavier snapped. “I’m not doing it.”

“That castle is going to take weeks to build,” Greyson argued back. “We try to do something like that and it’s going to end up looking half-assed. We need to go smaller and put all our time into detail. Mid-century is the way to go—”

“Give me a break.” Xavier rolled his eyes.

I took a step back and turned to the counter to help my dad with the gingerbread dough. Greyson and Xavier could work this out for themselves.

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Three hours later, I started to doubt that was ever going to happen.

The individual pieces of everyone’s houses had been shaped and baked, and now we were in our taped-off sections—some on the table, some on the counter—and putting them all together.

Xavier and Greyson had spent every second of their time arguing over this stupid gingerbread house. We’d finally agreed on a traditional Tudor-style house, but now they were disagreeing over the color of the icing.

“I think stark white is going to look stupid,” Greyson hissed. “We want to color it so it’s the same brown as the gingerbread. It’ll look more like an actual house.”

“It’s *not* an actual house,” Xavier shot back. “It’s a fucking gingerbread house, and it’s supposed to look like one. If you want to build an actual house, go be a fucking architect and leave the gingerbread to us.”

But this was only the latest skirmish. They’d also argued over the number of windows, the slope of the roof, construction integrity—literally *every* aspect of the damn house was a matter for ferocious debate. I was sticky with candy, exhausted by the whole competition, and fed up with both of them.

But slowly, our house came together.

“And that’s time!” Torin called, walking through the kitchen with a stopwatch around his neck. “I’m ready to start the judging.”

I sat back with a sigh and wiped frosting off my hands onto my apron. My neck and hands were stiff—I’d been in charge of creating delicate frosting icicles on the steep gables of the house, but as I looked at the house we’d created, I was impressed. It was impeccably made—every corner neat and precise. And it had the perfect amount of candy to look jolly, but not over the top.

I looked over at Violet and Charlie’s house, which had so much candy loaded on it, it looked like the witch’s cottage from *Hansel and Gretel*. But it was still impressive. All the houses were. The kitchen was a complete disaster, but the houses looked incredible.

Torin sat at the head of the kitchen table, looking somber. “All right, each team will present their house. Cali, Xavier, and Greyson—why don’t you start?”

Both Xavier and Greyson reached for the house at the same time.

“Careful,” I warned. The house was well made, but it wasn’t going to withstand an Alpha earthquake. “Just let me take it.”

I lifted the baking sheet we’d used as a foundation into my arms, and I stumbled a little under its weight. It was a lot heavier than I’d thought it would be, and we had the spot farthest from Torin’s place at the table. I struggled over to Torin, and I’d almost made it when I felt a strong hand suddenly clamp down on each of my shoulders.

I gasped, then stumbled, and the gingerbread house flew from my arms and crashed squarely into Torin.

**Episode 2343**

LOLA

Escaping the chaos of the kitchen and the gingerbread house competition felt a little like getting a pardon from the president. I headed upstairs—away from the noise—relieved that I wasn’t going to have to make anything out of frosting, and knocked on Jacqueline’s door.

I *had* to try to talk to her again. I’d tried to return the daylight bracelet as soon as I’d gotten it back from its little vacation as a Christmas tree ornament, but I hadn’t been able to. The door had been locked, and Jacs hadn’t responded, even after I pounded on the door, yelling at her to let me in. I’d told her I had the bracelet. I’d yelled the words *daylight* and *bracelet* over and over, but no luck.

There was definitely something going on, and I had a feeling it wasn’t good. Ever since she’d lost the bracelet, she’d been off. Not at all like her usual obnoxious self.

I had even tried to slip the bracelet beneath the door, but it hadn’t fit.

So I was going to have to try again. I took a deep breath and knocked until my knuckles hurt.

No response.

It was hard not to feel anxious. Had something happened to her? Had she accidentally walked into a beam of weak winter sunlight and burst into a thousand pieces of dust?

“Jacs!” I yelled through the door. “Are you in there? Knock once for yes, twice for no.”

Finally I heard a shuffling noise from inside the room and a small voice. “What do you want, Lola?”

I rolled my eyes. “Are you going to let me in?”

“No,” she said. “I don’t want to take any chances. It’s still daylight hours, and I’m barricading myself in here until nighttime, just to be safe.”

“But I have your bracelet!” I yelled.

For a moment, it was quiet behind the door, but then I heard the lock click, and the door opened just a sliver.

“If you’re joking, I’ll totally drain your pretty wolfy mate,” she said.

“Not a joke, I swear.” And to my relief, she opened the door.

I slipped in through the cracked door, and Jacs shut it quickly after me. The room was almost pitch black, and as my eyes adjusted to the gloom, I could see that she’d managed it by tacking heavy sheets over the windows to block out all the light.

“You have my bracelet?” Jacs said, her voice shaking slightly.

I pulled it out of my pocket and held it out to her.

She was still for a long moment, just staring at the bracelet in my hand. Even in the dim light, I could see the tears welling in her eyes. It was clear how important this object was to Jacs, and I was filled with a rush of gratitude that I wasn’t a full vampire. I was lucky to be a werewolf-vamp hybrid, because if I had to be in charge of keeping track of a bracelet all the time, I’d for sure have lost it and been fried to a crisp by now.

Jacs took the bracelet from me and slid it over her shaking hand. “It’s all I have left of her. My mom,” she whispered. “She’s dead.”

My heart gave a pulse of pain. I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to outlive your whole family. I’d been surrounded by vampires at Tottenville, and I knew they were immortal beings, but I guess I’d never really considered what it would *feel* like.

I looked at Jacqueline with fresh eyes. I could hear the pain in her voice—maybe *that* was the reason why she showed such a tough exterior. Inside, she was just a marshmallow. Or maybe not a marshmallow. Maybe more like nougat. A little soft, a little crunchy.

“Your mom died of old age?” I asked gently. “Was that a long time ago?”

Jacs gave me a furtive look, then shook her head. “It’s doesn’t matter. She’s gone. It’s all in the past.”

“At least you knew your mom,” I said. “I don’t even have a memory of mine.” When Jacs gave me a confused look, I explained. “I was adopted as a baby.”

She nodded and slid the bracelet around her wrist. “I have lots of memories of my mom—but that’s all. Just memories. And this bracelet.”

“Do you have any other family around? Brothers or sisters, uncles, cousins, aunts? Anyone?”  
 Jacs looked toward the heavily covered windows and shook her head. “No. It’s just me. I’m the only one left.”

I stared at her. “Um, I don’t know if there’s, like, vampire etiquette about this, but how did you get turned? Has it been a long time? Can you even remember?”

Jacs shot me a look. “There *is* etiquette, and it’s *not* to ask.” She sighed. “It was a long time ago. Almost sixty years. I’ve met some who’ve been around for hundreds of years, but I’ve never met anyone who didn’t remember how it had happened.”

“So what happened to you?” I asked quietly.

She took a moment before answering. “It was my senior year of college—” Her voice caught, and she stopped.

“You don’t have to talk about it,” I said quickly. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

But she didn’t even seem to hear me. “I was coming back from a night class. It was an elective. I didn’t need it for my major—art history. But it was a philosophy class, and I loved philosophy. This one was taught by a science professor, and it was about searching for life in the universe.” She took a shuddering breath. “I was attacked. As I was walking in the darkness, someone came up behind me and put a hand over my mouth. He dragged me into the bushes. I thought I was going to die. I was crying, pleading. I screamed for my mother.”

“Oh, Jacs,” I breathed.

“Maybe the vampire felt sorry for me, maybe he wanted to curse me—I’ve never known which—but he fed me some of his blood. My life ended and began that same night.”

I chill shivered up my spine. I wanted to ask more questions, but I didn’t. Something told me that this was all Jacs was going to give. And I had the feeling that it was more than she’d ever told anyone before.

Jacqueline gave a shaking laugh and wiped a tear from her eye as she looked over at me. “I’ll bet you didn’t know my life was such a mess.” She held up her wrist and gave the bracelet a little shake. “Thank you for finding this.”

“It’s an early Christmas present,” I said. “In every sense, actually. Torin found it, but he thought it was an ornament and hung it on the tree. He only gave it to me when I said you’d lost it.”

She looked at the bracelet thoughtfully for a moment, then up at me. “Are you going to see your dads for the holiday? Don’t they miss you?”

“They do, and I miss them, but I’m in kind of a tight spot with them,” I admitted.

“What do you mean?”

“They think I’ve been taking online courses—and I meant to, I really did—but then I got kind of sidetracked with the revenants and all. You know? It just kind of spiraled, and I dropped the classes,” I said, feeling like an idiot.

Jacs looked thoughtful. “You’re lucky. I always wished I’d gone back to school. I was only one semester shy of graduation when I was turned.”

“So why didn’t you?” I asked curiously. “It’s not like you didn’t have the time.”

She smirked. “I meant to. I’ve come close a few times. But then I ended up at Tottenville, and that seemed like the place for me.” She frowned. “At least it did until everyone started turning into zombies.”

I dropped to sit down on the corner of her bed. “You know, the awful truth is I’m not all that into the idea of going back to school. Not that I can tell my dads that. They would freak out if they heard me talking like that. But with everything going on here all the time, it just doesn’t seem worth it to me anymore.”

“I don’t know,” Jacs said slowly. “I liked school. I loved sitting in classes with other people who were there to learn. I always liked learning new things. And wouldn’t it be cool to have a diploma?”  
 “I guess so,” I admitted, playing with a loose thread on the duvet. “But I’m not convinced.”

“But your dads think you’re still taking classes?”

I nodded. “Yeah. That’s what makes it hard.”

She looked dubious. “How much longer do you think you can keep lying to them about this?”

I winced. “I don’t know. I hate lying to them. It makes me feel like such an awful person. But what else can I do?”

Jacs shrugged. “I don’t know.”

I laughed. “It’s too bad you can’t go in my place.”

Her eyes went wide, and even in the dimness I could see them sparkling with excitement. “Wait! Why can’t I?”

**Episode 2344**

GREYSON

Torin jumped back in shock. He was absolutely covered in gingerbread house building materials—cookie crumbs, icing, powdered sugar, sprinkles… He even had a little icing-covered gumdrop stuck to the right side of his chest, right about where his nipple would be.

Cali was frozen in shock, still clutching the tray that had held our gingerbread house. It was empty now, of course—save for crumbs, a smear of icing, and a few flecks of powdered sugar. Xavier and I met each other’s eyes over Cali’s head.

My lips twitched. His did the same. I pressed my fingertips to my lips and looked away from Torin as I stifled a laugh. Xavier coughed forcefully and covered his mouth with his hand, clearly suppressing his own laughter.

In our defense, if a Christmas treat-caked Torin wasn’t quite the most hilarious thing I’d ever seen, then Cali’s expression of pure horror took the cake.

Or would it be the gingerbread house, in this case?

*This is awful. And yet… kind of perfect?*

Xavier and I had bickered the entire time, from the texture of the icing on the roof down to the number of gumdrops we used for the walkway leading to the front door. We’d been as competitive with each other as we’d been with the rest of the gingerbread house-decorating teams, constantly trying to be the smartest, best candy house designer in the room.

And now, after all that effort, we’d just watched it literally fall apart.

*This feels like poetic justice. But at least we can laugh about it.* I glanced at Cali, who still looked shell-shocked. *Well… Xavier and I can laugh about it. Not sure how Cali’s taking it.*

If anyone deserved a win, it was her. She was the one who’d been stuck in the middle of all that bickering, after all.

“Okay… Team *Due Destini* is disqualified.” Torin peeled the icing-smeared gumdrop off his chest and popped it in his mouth. “But this does taste pretty good.”

That seemed fair. We no longer had anything worth judging, and we’d made a pretty lousy team anyway. And now I was off the hook, at least. Which was a bit of a relief. I was pretty damn proud of the shingle effect I’d created with the icing, but it seemed like the other teams in the room had each managed to put together a decent entry without being tempted to kill one of their teammates.

*What a dream that must be.*

“We’re going to have a brief intermission while I get cleaned up,” Torin announced. “And when we return, I’ll examine every *intact* house and render my decision.”

“I’ll help clean up.” Cali winced. “I’m so sorry, Torin.”

He smiled. “I’m sure it’s an occupational hazard. A delicious, delicious hazard.”

While Cali, aided by Xavier, made quick work of our gingerbread mess, I stepped out of the kitchen and into the den. Somehow, the tarot card had ended up back in my pocket. It had to weigh almost nothing, and yet I couldn’t seem to ignore its presence. I pulled it out and examined it for the umpteenth time.

*When is Aysel going to contact me?* Pretending to court her was pretty much the last thing I wanted to do, but the sooner I could get my plan into motion, the better.

“Greyson?” Cali stepped into the den, looking pale and upset.

*I didn’t realize the gingerbread house competition meant so much to her…*

“Hey, don’t worry about the gingerbread fiasco,” I said gently. “I’m pretty sure you did us a kindness. Our house didn’t have a chance of winning, anyway.”

She shook her head. “That’s not it. I… I felt the handprints again. It was like someone reached out and grabbed my shoulders—that’s why I dropped the house.”

Well, that made the whole situation way less funny. Immediately, I reached out to pull her into my arms, to kiss her, to do anything I could to comfort her—but I stopped myself just shy of making contact.

*Fuck. This curse is gonna be the death of me.*

Never had I thought I’d miss the *due destini* curse veins on my chest, but compared to *this*, compared to not being able to touch Cali… Those veins were a walk in the park.

I wanted so badly to kiss her, to make her feel better, but thanks to Aysel’s curse, attempting any of those things would only make Cali feel worse.

“I’m sorry.” I sighed. “When Aysel makes contact, I’ll do everything I can to get the information I need to break the curse.”

Cali took a step closer, like she could barely contain herself either. “I hate this. I hate that we can’t… be together. And now Seluna seems to be playing games with me.” She looked up at me, her eyes wide. “Do you think she did that on purpose? Grabbed me so I’d mess everything up. All because we were actually starting to have some fun?”

“I wish I knew.” I glanced at her shoulders, where the two handprints stood out like a pair of beacons against Cali’s skin. I wanted to kiss them. Hell, at that moment, I’d have kissed any part of her I could. I missed the feeling of her soft skin against my lips.

At least the handprints looked the same. No worse.

“What if I just imagined it?” she asked. “Do you think that’s possible?”

“I don’t know.”

“Stranger things have happened to all of us. I’ve certainly been finding it hard to tell what’s real and what’s not, lately.”

“That may be true.” I gave her a soft smile. “But I hope you know my love for you is real.”

A matching smile tugged at her full lips. “Believe me, I never doubt that. If only Aysel could see that. She would finally realize that there’s no point in playing all these games with us. That she should just give up on winning you over.”

“Believe me, there is nothing in the world that I want more.” Suddenly, my pocket warmed, and I pulled out the tarot card again.

My eyes widened. “What the hell?”

The card was *glowing.*

Cali stared at the card in shock. “How often does it do that?”

“Uh, a grand total of never,” I said.

“What do you think it means?”

“You don’t think it’s about to explode, do you?” I asked, but I couldn’t feel any power or heat radiating from it.

I turned the glowing card over in my hands, weighing the absolute jack shit that I knew about this curse against the feeling in my gut. “I guess it could be a warning… Maybe it’s telling me I’m playing with fire. Or it could mean I’m on the right track with Aysel. Maybe it’s a sign the curse is on its way to being broken.”

Xavier popped his head into the den, wiping a smudge of frosting away from his forehead. “Hey, Torin’s back. He’s started judging and—what the hell?”

My brother’s gaze was locked onto the card as he rushed over to Cali’s side. “What’s going on? Is everything okay?”

Cali quickly filled Xavier in on why she’d dropped our gingerbread house. Xavier must have been operating on the same instincts as me, because he immediately inspected each of Cali’s shoulders and pressed a kiss to both marks.

*Bastard. Yes, we all know you can touch her. Can you at least not rub it in?*

I cleared my throat. “I think the glowing could be a sign that we’re on our way to breaking the curse. It’s never done that before, but now that I’ve got Aysel on the hook, suddenly this happens? It can’t be a coincidence.”

To my surprise, Xavier nodded. “Makes sense.”

*We might have argued over the gingerbread house like a couple of idiots, but at least we can agree on the important stuff.*

Still, I would have thought Xavier would want me to be stuck with the revulsion curse. Wouldn’t that give him a huge leg-up in his quest to win over Cali?

*Maybe I underestimated him.*

“Whatever this is, I don’t love the idea of anyone fucking with our pack,” Xavier growled. “I want to make it crystal clear to the Vanguards and their moonbeam of a prince that they can’t get away with whatever they’re up to. If they want to mess with us, there *will* be consequences.”

“Thank you. Your defense of and loyalty to the Redwood pack is admirable.” I left it unsaid that his reaction was exactly what a true Alpha should feel.

“Have you figured out what you’re going to do with Aysel?” he asked.

I grimaced. “I hate it when you put it that way.”

“How else would you put it?”

“*Meeting*. I’m meeting with Aysel.”

Xavier smirked. “It’s a date, no matter what you wrap it up in.”

“It’s *not* a date,” I began.

“You could always take her to the movies,” Cali blurted out.

I turned to look at her. “What?”

“With Aysel. You could go to a movie, or a play. Maybe dinner?”

I blinked. “Are you seriously trying to help plan a date for me and another woman?”

She scowled. “I’m trying to help you break this curse.”

She and Xavier launched into another round of suggestions, and I held up a hand.

“Enough. I don’t want—” My phone pinged, cutting me off. It was a text from Aysel.

*Hello, darling. Meet me at the Black Moon Club.*

**Episode 2345**

VIOLET

Torin returned to the kitchen, all traces of Team *Due Destini*’s gingerbread house cleaned away, and began to move from section to section, judging the contest entries. As he worked, I sidled up to Mrs. Smith. She was busy working on an entry too, but I wanted to help Marta find Big Mac’s magic mirror, and who better than her fiancée to know where the witch kept it?

I smiled at her and nodded toward her house. “Looks great. The candy cane lampposts are a nice touch.”

She beamed. “It’s the little things—the attention to detail—that makes all the difference.”

On the other side of the kitchen island, Big Mac was muttering to herself as she applied bright red icing to the back of the house. Perhaps if the icing were being piped by Mrs. Smith, it would have looked festive and cheery. But with Big Mac wielding the bag, it kind of looked like she was staging a massacre in the back yard of their gingerbread house.

“That’s… very artistic,” I said.

The only response I got was Big Mac rolling her eyes.

*Okay then. Definitely sticking to Plan A. Big Mac doesn’t seem to be in a helping mood right now.*

“How are things going between you and Big Mac? The wedding plans, I mean,” I added at the confused look on Mrs. Smith’s face.

“Oh, you know. Still a work in progress. We’ve been keeping busy lately, so there hasn’t been an abundant amount of time to plan.”

*Speaking of plans…* Realization slammed into me, and for a moment I forgot all about helping Marta find the mirror. One of the reasons Mrs. Smith and Big Mac had been so busy lately was because they’d been dealing with the rebel hunter situation. Which had been my fault. “I’m sorry. I guess life hasn’t been the most event-free to help with that.”

Mrs. Smith reached out and patted my hand, leaving traces of powdered sugar behind. “Some things are worth waiting for. My wedding is one of them. But keeping my pack, my *family*, safe… As far as I’m concerned, that’s the most important thing I can do.”

My shoulders relaxed. “Thank you. That means a lot to me.”

“We’ll get the wedding plans finished eventually—though I have to admit it can be frustrating to try to get alone time with MacKenzie. She’s always being pulled in so many different directions, and there are so many pack members living here. Even just a night to ourselves with no wedding planning, just enjoying each other’s company, feels like a pipe dream sometimes.”

My brows lifted. “That sounds rough.” But to me, it sounded like an opportunity. I perked up. “Hey, I’ve got an idea. Why don’t you take Big Mac on a date tonight?”

“Oh, I don’t know if she’d enjoy that right now. There’s so much going on.”

“Exactly.” I gestured to the chaos unfolding in the kitchen. “You think she wouldn’t love a break from all of this?” As if on cue, Sage and Zainab started squabbling with Artemis and Rishika about not “hogging all the gum drops!” “There’s clearly nothing serious happening tonight. Why not take advantage of the lull? Who knows when we’ll have one again? You could go out to dinner, maybe see a movie—make a night of it.”

“It is tempting, but I don’t know if MacKenzie would go for it.”

I leaned in, desperate to sell this idea. “You should *surprise* her. Make up some excuse to get her to go with you—maybe running an errand? You can say you’re going to the store to get Torin’s eggnog.”

She laughed. “I had no idea you were such a little schemer.”

I laughed along with her, a little uneasily. “Oh, you have no idea.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“What are we thinking about?” Marta asked as she joined us.

I thought fast. “There you are! We should go see how Torin is doing.” I pulled her into the hallway. “I’m trying to get Mrs. Smith to take Big Mac out tonight so we can search for the magic mirror portal thing.”

We turned to watch the two women from the doorway. As Big Mac passed by Mrs. Smith, carrying a small bowl of green sprinkles, Mrs. Smith caught her arm.

“What do you say to the two of us going out tonight?” she asked.

Big Mac frowned. “Why?”

I swallowed audibly, my heart racing. *Come on, Mrs. Smith. Sell it! Convince her!*

“Because it’s been ages since things have been this quiet around here, and I think we deserve a night for ourselves.”

“And leave all these helpless idiots alone?” The witch sighed. “I don’t think I can.”

*Okay then. Maybe this situation requires a little more finesse.*

“Play along,” I said to Marta, before entering the kitchen and approaching the couple. “Have you two seen a movie lately? You guys totally should. There’s *so* much good stuff out right now! I think there’s even a new George Clooney flick out. Plus, Oscar season is coming up! You want to be ready, don’t you?”

Both Mrs. Smith and Big Mac stared at me. Maybe I’d laid it on a little too thick.

The witch sneered. “I can’t stand Clooney movies. He’s never made a single good one.”

I tried not to grimace. “Sure. But maybe you could try something else then? There are a lot of movies out there.”

She shook her head and walked away, and Mrs. Smith followed after her. “Come on, MacKenzie. Just think about it!”

Marta let out a low whistle. “Well, that didn’t go at all like I’d hoped.”

“Total failure to launch.” I sighed. “I’m sorry. We’re going to have to find some other way to get Big Mac out of the house.”

Sage raced over, excitement bright on her face. “Torin’s about to make his decision!”

She grabbed Zainab, and they ran into the kitchen.

Marta shrugged. “I guess we might as well see who won.”

We followed the group and crowded into the kitchen with the others.

Charlie hooked an arm around my waist. “This is the most intense gingerbread house-making contest I’ve ever seen. I’m just as nervous as when I played in the state championships last year.”

Torin cleared his throat, a smile on his face. “I have carefully examined everyone’s masterpieces.” He swept his hand across the entries with a flourish. A couple of them looked really good. But others… They weren’t quite so masterful. He continued. “And the winner is… there is no winner! It’s a tie between Big Mac and Mrs. Smith, and Ravi and Ava!”

Charlie frowned. “What? We can’t end in a tie. That’s so anticlimactic.”

The rest of the group dissolved into murmurs, and Torin had to clap his hands to get their attention. “Charlie is right. Which is why we’re going to hold a lightning round! Each contestant will get an opportunity to fine-tune their house designs and submit them for the final judging.”

“No.”

I turned to see Big Mac standing in the doorway. “I baked my house. It’s done. I’m not fiddling with it anymore.”

I looked at Marta, my eyes wide. “We have to get her to do the bake-off!” I whispered.

I hurried over to the witch. “You can’t not bake! Torin will be disappointed, and remember—this is all about Torin. We’re trying to cheer him up!”

She glared. “And what about *my* happiness?”

Mrs. Smith put a hand on her shoulder and laughed. “I promise you’ll barely have to lift a finger. I’ll do the lion’s share.”

I glanced over to where Ava and Ravi were standing. They, too, looked pretty miserable to be entering the semifinal round. I turned back to Big Mac. “Come on, you can’t tell me you don’t want to beat Ava.”

“*Fine*,” she groaned. “But this is the last baking contest I’m ever going to participate in.”

Mrs. Smith kissed her cheek and turned to Torin. “Bring it on!”

While the semifinalists returned to the kitchen island and the rest of the pack clustered around them to watch, I grabbed Marta’s wrist and pulled her into the hallway. “This is our chance!”

We hurried upstairs to Big Mac’s room to find the mirror. Leaving the door slightly ajar, just in case we had to make a quick exit, we slowly crept through the room. I looked around, my eyes widening.

“Wait a minute…” Marta said slowly. “The last time we were here, wasn’t the room… smaller?”

“It sure seems that way. Big Mac must have used some kind of magic. But we can’t worry about that right now. We have to hurry.”

“Where could this mirror even be? There are so many places to look.”

I approached the vanity mirror. “This couldn’t be it, could it?” I stared back at my reflection and smoothed my hair. “No. It seems pretty normal.”

Marta picked up a hand mirror. “This one doesn’t feel magical, either.”

I headed to the closet and threw open the doors with a gasp. It was a gigantic walk-in closet.

*Maybe I need to ask Big Mac to enlarge my closet…* I tucked that thought away for later. In the very back of the space, a sheet had been thrown over something tall and narrow.

Marta must have been thinking the same thing I was, because she immediately strode forward and yanked off the sheet to reveal a full-length mirror.

“This has to be it, right?” I asked. “If Big Mac is hiding it in the closet, it must be important.”

Marta touched one gilded edge. “I feel some kind of energy coming off it. It’s definitely not a regular mirror.”

I was reaching out to touch it when suddenly the creak of a door opening sounded in the space. We both jumped and spun around.

Nobody was there.

*Wait, what’s going on?*

“It’s a cat!” Marta pointed at the ground, and my gaze was immediately riveted to the orange tabby. It prowled over and rubbed itself against our legs, purring.

“Whose cat is this?” I mused. “I didn’t think we had one here.”

Footsteps sounded on the staircase, and my eyes widened.

“We have to get out of here,” I hissed. “It might be Big Mac.”

We headed for the closet door, but I doubled back. We couldn’t just leave the cat in here.

As I bent down to scoop up the animal, it shimmied out of my grip and stepped into the mirror.

**Episode 2346**

I watched Greyson’s expression change as he looked down at his phone. “What is it? Did Aysel respond?”

He held up the phone in answer, and I scanned the text.

“She sure did,” Greyson said. “And she wants to meet with me.”

My brows lifted. “The Black Moon Club?”

It sounded so… dark and sexy. That was an aesthetic I could definitely attribute to Greyson, but not one I wanted to think about him and Aysel engaging in. It was all too easy to imagine Aysel dressed in a slinky, sequined black dress, and Greyson in a tux. Aysel’s hand on Greyson’s arm as they walked into the club. The place would be upscale, with smooth jazz playing and dim lighting. The kind of place that dealt in all kinds of pleasures—the kind of place that no good things could possibly come from.

They’d take a small, secluded table in the back, and Aysel would sit too close to Greyson, her sultry gaze on my mate, and—

*Pull yourself together, Caliana! Do you want the curse broken or not?*

I took a deep breath and focused on the present instead of whatever worst-case scenario my mind could conjure up. “Are you going to go?”

“I have to.” He didn’t look happy about it, but his eyes pleaded with me, begged for understanding. “If I back out now, I might never get another chance. We can’t live with this curse forever.”

“I know. I just wish you could back out of this altogether. And what is your plan, exactly? I’m a little vague on the details.”

He grimaced. “I’m… not entirely sure. I’m winging it a little. Aysel’s so unpredictable, I figure the best approach is to play it by ear. But the plan is essentially the same as we talked about: I’m going to try to convince Aysel that I’m interested in her, and hopefully doing so will allow me to learn who cast this goddamn spell.”

“I know that part,” I said slowly, trying to keep a level head when everything inside me was *screaming* not to let this happen. I trusted Greyson. Really, I did. I knew he would never do anything to harm me, to betray me. I knew the only reason he was even considering this ruse was for *us*. So we could break this curse and finally be together.

It was Aysel I didn’t trust. Lucian took the spotlight in public, but I knew Aysel was every bit as cunning as her brother—maybe even more so, because she didn’t have to pretend to care about appearances or decorum the way Lucian did. There was no telling what she would do to secure her future as Greyson’s chosen mate.

“It’s just… the whole part where you’ll be getting Aysel to believe that you’re interested in her. How do you envision that happening? What will that require?”

He looked away. “I don’t want you worrying about that. Nothing’s going to happen—I’m just going to lead her on.”

I hated that we were even having this conversation, but more than that, I hated that Greyson couldn’t seem to look at me while we had it. How much worse would things be when the ruse was over? My stomach knotted with anxiety. “And what are you going to do if Aysel wants to take things… further?”

Movement in my peripheral vision caught my attention, and I saw Xavier rubbing his chin. He looked like he was holding back a smile. He caught my gaze and bit his lip. I looked away. It was bad enough that I couldn’t touch Greyson, that we were even entertaining this crazy fake dating situation to break the curse. Did Xavier really have to look so pleased about it?

Greyson frowned and turned to his brother. “Why don’t you go check on the contest.”

It wasn’t a question.

Xavier raised a brow. “Why? They’re fine. They don’t need me supervising.”

“Go check on them,” Greyson repeated. His tone seemed to dare his brother to refuse.

Xavier looked from my face to Greyson’s and shrugged. “Fine.”

He stalked off, and Greyson turned back to me, his expression softening.

“I know you’re not comfortable with this plan, but I don’t know what else to do here, love. We’re stuck. I don’t want to do this any more than you want me to, but if you have any other solutions, I’d love to hear them.”

“Of course I’m uncomfortable. Can you really blame me? I know what she tried to do to you. I know about the cabin she locked you up in, and all the times she’s tried to seduce you—”

“And she’s failed every single time.”

“Her curse isn’t failing. I haven’t touched you in days, Greyson.”

He sighed. “It hasn’t failed *yet*. But it will—*she* will. Just like she always does. It’s just a matter of time.”

“Is it? You kissed her at that first Vanguard party, just like she wanted you to.”

“Those were different circumstances. I wasn’t myself. Wasn’t in my right mind. And I don’t care what Lucian said—I still believe the Vanguards did something that removed our inhibitions and clouded our judgment. I mean, the whole damn party basically turned into a drunken orgy at one point.”

My eyes widened. “So, what? Am I supposed to be comforted by the fact that you only kissed Aysel instead of sleeping with her?”

“No, I’m just saying that was one isolated incident. An outlier.”

I pulled in a deep breath in an attempt to calm myself. He just wasn’t getting it. “But what if it does happen again? What if you have to kiss her to convince her you’re interested? Because let’s be realistic here—that *is* what’s going to happen.”

“I disagree.” He shook his head. “I think I can work around that.”

“Come on, Greyson. You know she’s going to expect it. She won’t just settle for a kiss on the hand and a declaration of your interest—she’s smarter than that.”

*And very, very horny and evil.*

He looked like my words physically pained him. “What do you want me to do? Do you want me to call this off? Do you want me to promise I won’t kiss her?”

“Yes. No…” I looked away. “It just sucks, okay? All of this sucks. I hate that she can kiss you. She cursed us, and you’re *my* mate, and yet she’s going to kiss you when I can’t. Not as long as the revulsion curse is in place. It feels like we’re playing right into her hands. What if this doesn’t help us break the curse? What if it only makes her hold on you even stronger? What are we supposed to do then?”

“Cali, hey.” He carefully reached out and lifted my chin. I flinched, waiting for the telltale nausea to kick in, but my stomach was fine. Maybe because he wasn’t standing too close. Not nearly as close as I wanted him to, anyway.

“There is no one else in this world I want to kiss,” he said softly, fervently. “There’s nobody else I love. Cali, there’s nobody else, and there will never be anyone else. Not as long as I have you. I love you. I want you. And the only reason I’m doing this is so that I can come back to you. So that we can be together again—with nothing standing between us.”

“Nothing except Aysel,” I said bitterly. I just couldn’t help myself.

“If I have to kiss her—and that’s big *if*—I’ll only be thinking of you. I promise.”

His words weren’t half as comforting as he’d likely intended, and I desperately tried to push the thought of my mate and Aysel in a lip-lock from my mind.

*Is this how Xavier and Greyson feel about me constantly? How can they live with this? Maybe this is what I deserve—it’s a taste of my own medicine, really. The* due destini *sucks. I didn’t ask for any of this, to be a* due destini *mate, or to put both of my mates in this situation. But Greyson didn’t ask to be cursed, either.*

I blew out a breath. This was so frustrating—even beyond the physical aspect of not being able to touch Greyson. Aysel had gotten in my head, and now even my belief in my mate bond had been shaken. All of this was far more complicated than I’d ever imagined.

But, at the end of the day, I had to believe in Greyson. Because if I didn’t, then what was the point of all this? He’d believed in me from the moment we’d met, and he deserved the same trust.

*Whatever happens, however it plays out, Greyson will come back to me. I know it.*

It just didn’t make the thought of him going on a date with another woman any less painful.

“I hate to put you through this,” he said. “And I know it’s a big ask, but I hope you can understand. I truly do believe that in the end, all of this will be worth it.”

I lifted my gaze to meet his. I wanted to kiss him, and I was pretty sure he was thinking about kissing me too.

*Fucking Aysel…*

He smiled wistfully. “Are we okay?”

“I wish I could say yes, but if we’re going to be honest with each other, I’m not okay.”

His face fell. “Why? What else do I have to say to convince you?”

“That depends.” I swallowed roughly. “How far are you willing to take it to get what we need to break the curse?”

**Episode 2347**

GREYSON

I had no fucking clue how to answer Cali’s question.

I knew she was having a hard time with this—to be fair, I would be too, in her place. Not a day passed where I didn’t struggle with the reality of having to share her with Xavier, and even though this wasn’t the same—this truly *was* a last-ditch effort to figure out how to break the curse—I didn’t blame Cali for struggling to be okay with me pretending to date Aysel.

*Maybe the* due destini *thing is actually easier than this*, I realized. *I might hate sharing Cali, but at least I know Xavier loves her and would never hurt her. Would never her ask for anything she wasn’t willing to give.*

It wasn’t *great*—most days it was only just tolerable—but maybe that was better than me trying to lead Aysel on. I didn’t love her, didn’t want her. And she might *want* me, but she sure as shit didn’t respect me. She’d put a spell on me for fuck’s sake. I honestly wasn’t sure if she was even capable of love. Judging by her sociopathic behavior, my guess was no.

So, no. This wasn’t like the *due destini*. Because Cali was sending me off to play lover boy to a crazy, powerful woman who’d likely already cursed us. It was dangerous, on multiple levels. And she was probably right: Aysel wouldn’t be satisfied with just a peck on the cheek.

Cali swallowed. “Greyson, if it came down to it, if it meant breaking our curse, would you sleep with her?”

And there it was. The thing that was really eating at her. Cali might forgive or ignore a kiss, but if this charade went any further, she would be devastated. And the very last thing in the world I wanted was to hurt her.

But this situation was bound to hurt her. There was no way around it. And as hard as this conversation was, Cali had a good point—Aysel could very well prove difficult to crack. I could very well be putting myself in a bad situation—potentially one even worse than the situation I was in now. After all, Aysel had already tried to seduce me multiple times. And then there was that creepy-ass encounter in her sex cottage.

*This… This could get messy.*

“Greyson?” Cali pressed. “Are you listening to me?”

I cleared my throat and shook my head. “I’m not going to sleep with Aysel. It won’t happen. I’m not going to take things that far.”

“But what if she tries to initiate it? Are you willing to risk getting caught in order to *not* sleep with her?”

I frowned. This situation was frustrating enough without Cali’s relentless prodding. I had no idea what she wanted me to say here. Every time I assured her that I didn’t want to fool around with Aysel, she kept giving me more reasons why it wouldn’t be so simple. Did she want me to say I *would* sleep with Aysel?

“I’m sure I can string her along. I mean… she wants me, right? That’s why she cursed us in the first place. She’s crazy about me, and that gives me some power in all of this. If she truly wants me that badly, she’ll be willing to wait. And that’s what I’m going to do—make her yearn, keep her waiting. Forever.”

Cali fell silent, her eyes focused somewhere near my shoes. God, all I wanted was to pull her into my arms and kiss her. If I did, we’d be sick in half a second, but at least that might remind her exactly what was at stake here.

Still, I’d rather not spend the last few hours before my date with Aysel making Cali dry heave.

I forced a smile. “Come on, love. Why on earth would I even be interested in someone like Aysel?”

Her brows drew together. “Hmm, let’s see… She’s beautiful. She’s rich—”

“And a fucking self-important moon cultist sociopath,” I added. “But you know what, even if she weren’t batshit crazy and deeply selfish, I still wouldn’t want her. Because she’s not my mate. She’s not you.” I carefully hugged Cali. “When this curse is broken and finally behind us, I’m not going to be able to keep my hands off you. That’s a guarantee.”

I could feel the heat radiating off Cali’s face, off her flushed cheekbones. She looked good enough to eat, sweet and sexy and *god* if it didn’t send all the blood in my body racing southward. I wanted her. So fucking badly—more than I ever had before. Like I was some kind of junkie and I’d gone way too long without a fix. Our workaround the other day had been fun, and it had taken the edge off. But it hadn’t been nearly enough to satisfy me.

Watching her pupils dilate with the hunger that simmered low in my belly, I had to assume Cali felt the same way.

I squeezed her hand, grateful that this gesture, at least, was still safe. “Stay strong, love. We’ll get through this, and… Maybe it’s selfish, but I’m going to need your support. Can you do that for me?”

She smiled, a real one this time. I could see the difference. “Of course.”

I stared into her eyes, wishing with every ounce of strength in my body that I could be with her.

Suddenly, my phone pinged again. Another text from Aysel. A single question mark.

I sighed. *Here we go*. “I’d better respond to this, huh?”

Cali nodded, her smile dimming as she watched me text Aysel.

*See you there.*

She responded with a flurry of rapid-fire texts.

*9 p.m.*

*I’ll send the address.*

*And G…*

*Dress to impress, won’t you?*

I groaned. “Great. It’s one of those kinds of places.”

Cali raised a brow. “You’ve been to lots of secret, who-knows-where-they-are clubs where you have to dress to impress? What does that even mean? Dress to impress whom? The bouncer? Aysel?”

I laughed. “Probably the club itself.”

“So you *have* been to places like this before.”

*Foot, meet mouth.* “Well, you know… There was a time before you and all. And I didn’t exactly have a golden reputation.”

She smacked my arm playfully, and we both laughed. It felt good to have something to laugh about, especially considering what lay ahead.

“Honestly, I’d much rather go someplace like that with you,” I said. “Get drinks, listen to music, go off into a dark corner…”

I flashed her a teasing smile and froze. I’d thought we were having fun, flirting. But now my mate just looked worried. Shit. Instead of imagining the two of us doing those things, she had to be imagining me and Aysel.

I cleared my throat. “It’s settled, then. When all this Aysel stuff is behind us, I’m taking you out. I promise.”

She smiled, and the cold dread wrapped around my chest loosened.

“Deal.”

We headed back to the kitchen, where everyone was crowded around as Sabine, Big Mac, Ravi, and Ava continued to finesse their gingerbread horses.

I sidled up next to Rishika. “What’s going on? I thought the competition was over.”

“They’re working on their showstoppers,” she explained, like I had the first clue what that even meant. My confusion must have been clear, because she added, “They’re the finalists, and they get to make additions to their houses before the final judging.”

My brows lifted. “Okay, then.”

It seemed like everyone was enjoying watching the “showstoppers” unfold.

“Hey, no magic!” Torin reminded Big Mac.

The witch glared, and my mother put a powdered sugar-dusted hand on Big Mac’s arm. “We don’t need magic to create a masterpiece.”

Across the kitchen island, I caught Xavier’s eye. He threw me a dirty look, and I sighed. I honestly didn’t know what Xavier was pissy about this time, but I had a feeling it had something to do with my ordering him back to the kitchen so Cali and I could have a private conversation for once.

It was clear my brother was just over the moon about my being cursed to not touch Cali. He wasn’t exactly a sympathetic listener. But more important than that, he’d have to deal with me being Alpha eventually. And the little things, like the look Xavier had just given me, told me that it was only a matter of time before my brother and I would have to settle things once and for all. It was inevitable—and we’d have to deal with it whenever Xavier finally made his move.

“Sabine!”

I turned back to the competition in time to see that the frosting bag in my mother’s hand had exploded on one side, sending frosting up her arm and across the front of Big Mac’s shirt.

I laughed, and my mother looked out into the crowd. Our eyes met. “Greyson, I need a hair tie!”

I blinked. “Uh… Where are those?”

Cali, who was standing right next to me, laughed and put a hand on my arm. “I know where to find one. I’ve got it.”

She left the kitchen, and I heard her footsteps heading up the stairs.

While we waited, Big Mac waved her hands around and moved my mother’s hair behind her shoulders, but then several strands fell out in front of her eyes. It was a comedy of errors, and while my mother and her fiancée struggled, Ravi and Ava never took their eyes off the prize.

“Hey.” I turned to see Xavier moving up next to me. “What time is your ‘date’ with Aysel? Because I’m going with you.”

**Episode 2348**

MARTA

Nothing could have prepared me for the horror of watching helplessly as the orange tabby walked into Big Mac’s magic mirror.

*Oh no! The cat!*

Before I could say anything, do anything, or truly give the situation the panic it deserved, those footsteps drew nearer. Oh god. It was Big Mac. It had to be. She’d probably finished up her portion of their baking contest entry and was heading up to her room for some peace and quiet.

*How are we gonna explain this to her? “Sorry! We got lost in the pack house and ended up in your closet. Oh, and there was a cat here too”?*

The footsteps sounded just outside the slightly ajar door—and then continued down the hallway.

I let out a breath. “Oh, thank god.”

“Save your thanks! We have to get that cat back!” Violet whisper-yelled. We scrambled back toward the mirror and knelt down in front of it.

Violet looked around the base of the mirror and then ventured farther into the closet, lifting up shoe boxes and tucking long dresses to the side. “Where did it go?”

I looked around the mirror, then behind it. Maybe there had been some kind of misunderstanding. An optical illusion, or something. Maybe it had only *looked* like the cat had walked into the mirror. I mean, sure, we lived in a house full of supernaturals and magical beings, and sure, this closet belonged to an actual witch, but was it too much to hope for that the cat *wasn’t* in the mirrorverse right now?

“This is insane,” Violet whispered. But when I turned to look at her, I realized she was smiling.

*We just accidentally doomed a cat to god knows what, and she’s excited about it? Seriously?*

“So… Not a cat person, huh?” I asked.

“What? No. That’s not it. I’m just thinking—if the cat went in there, this mirror has to be magic. Which means we’ve found it!”

I’d assumed as much when I’d felt an energy signature. Plus, there was the whole “precious thing stuck in the back of a closet and covered with a white sheet” drama at play.

“That’s all well and good, but first we’d better find that cat,” I said. “Whose is it, anyway?”

“No idea.” Violet shrugged. “I didn’t even think we had any living here. It’s not like I ever picked up that tabby’s scent.”

Dread and horror hit me in the gut. *Oh god. What if that cat belongs to Big Mac? Did we just lose her cat?*

How could we talk our way out of that one? *“Sorry about your cat, but my need to reunite my boyfriend with his wolf was more important”? “Oops, we lost your cat inside a magic mirror”?*

I examined the mirror again, running my hands over the gilded edges from each corner of the glass all the way down to the iron feet. Maybe we didn’t have to tell her.

It was evidence of just how damn desperate I was that I considered *that* to be an actual option. Of course she was going to notice a missing cat. Especially her own! People didn’t just forget about their pets.

“Here, kitty, kitty, kitty,” Violet called out softly. She pressed her hand against the mirror. It left a handprint, but not the normal kind. It almost looked like a warm hand pressing against an icy, frosted window. Still, we couldn’t see or hear the animal.

“Do you think it can hear you?” I asked.

“No clue.” She shrugged. “And even if it could hear us, we can’t hear it. Do you think we need some kind of spell to get into the mirror? Or maybe there’s a phrase to open it, like ‘hey, mirror, please open now,’ or ‘abracadabra’?”

“Original. Where do you come up with this stuff?”

She rolled her eyes. “Hey, I’m just the werewolf. You’re the fancy bridge witch person. What do you think?”

I sighed. “I think I don’t know any more about this than you do. I never even knew that magic mirrors were real until literally today.”

And even with my bridge powers, even if I hadn’t had these fancy, magic-suppressing bracelets, I was still woefully out of my wheelhouse. But the mirror had to be real. How else could we explain the disappearing cat?

I eyed the mirror dubiously. “Maybe we should get some treats—”

“What are you guys doing in Big Mac’s closet?”

Violet and I both shrieked and spun around, standing shoulder to shoulder to block the mirror from view.

“What are *you* doing in here?” Violet demanded.

Cali frowned. “Getting Mrs. Smith a hair tie so she can dominate the bake-off. What about you?”

“Um…” I looked over at Violet, who was wide-eyed and offering exactly zero explanation for our presence. “We got lost!”

*Oh, dear god. I did it. I really did it. I thought this would be the worst possible explanation in the world, and I went through with it anyway. Cali had warned us not to do this.*

“You got lost,” Cali repeated slowly.

*I can’t believe I just said that.*

Thankfully, she didn’t linger on my ridiculous and completely implausible explanation. She sighed, and her gaze shifted beyond us. It didn’t take magic powers to guess what she was focusing on. “What’s behind you?”

I met Violet’s eyes and gave her a meaningful look before stepping aside to reveal the mirror.

Cali’s eyes went wide. “No. You guys, I told you this was a horrible idea!” Then her eyes narrowed, her brows knitting together. “Does she know about you two being in here?”

Violet shook her head. “Are you going to tell her?”

I held my breath while we waited for Cali to respond. This had to be it, right? The jig was up. We’d made it all of, what? Ten minutes searching for this mirror so we could help Lilac be reunited with Plum. I knew Cali to be someone with strong morals, and an unyielding instinct for right and wrong.

She was gonna turn us in.I just knew it.

Then, to my surprise, Cali shrugged. “Your secret’s safe with me. For now.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Really.”

“Thank you, really,” I breathed. “We don’t want to cause any trouble for you with Big Mac.”

“I’ve done my share of snooping around. I understand that sometimes it’s necessary to get the job done.” She shrugged. “So, what’s the job that needs doing?”

I winced. “Have you ever seen an orange tabby around the pack house?”

“Yeah, that’s Big Mac’s cat, Lion.”

“*No*,” I groaned. This was like a nightmare I just couldn’t wake up from. “We’re in for a world of trouble.”

“Why?” Cali asked. “What’s wrong?”

“We lost the cat!” Violet confessed.

Again, Cali’s eyes widened. “*What?* How did you lose Lion? Did you accidentally let him out into the pack house or something?”

I shook my head. “Worse.” I pointed at the mirror. “He went in there.”

“And we can’t get him out,” Violet added. “Do you think Big Mac will notice? She’s pretty busy, right? She’s got a lot going on, and—”

“Violet, it’s her cat we’re talking about. She’s going to notice he’s missing.” Cali stepped up besides us to peer into the mirror. “There’s only one thing we can do.”

“Confess to Big Mac?” I asked.

“Uh, no. I don’t have a death wish.” She narrowed her gaze on the mirror. “We’re going to get him out of there.”

“Maybe we should go get Lilac,” Violet suggested.

“Is Lilac good with cats?” Cali asked, sounding dubious.

She shook her head. “Not particularly, but he’s been to the spirit world. If this really is a magic mirror, he might have an idea of how it works.”

“*No!*” I snapped. “We’re not telling Lilac, not until we know for sure that this will help him. He’s already going to be furious with me for going behind his back.”

“Not nearly as furious as Big Mac will be if she finds out we lost her cat.” Violet shuddered at the thought.

“Please don’t tell Lilac,” I begged.

“How are we supposed to get that cat back without him, though?” she asked. “It’s not like he’s an expert, but he certainly has more experience than we do.”

The three of us peered into the mirror again. All I could see was my own reflection.

*I’ve really screwed this up, haven’t I? I’m already pushing the boundaries of my sentence by even thinking about using magic, and it’s not going to help if I’ve really lost a witch’s cat.*

Guilt twisted my stomach. Big Mac had only ever been supportive to me. She’d stood up for me from the beginning. She’d taught me almost everything I knew about being a bridge, and about magic in general. Plus, she’d put herself on the line to represent me in front of the witch council.

She’d already done so much for me, but I couldn’t help thinking she wouldn’t make that mistake again if she knew what I was truly up to in here.

I noticed a shadowy movement deep in the mirror, well beyond my reflection. I glanced over my shoulder, but the closet door was the only thing there. It certainly couldn’t explain the movement.

I squinted and leaned closer to inspect the mirror. *There it is again.*

Then I heard a faint but distinct, “*Meow*.”

I reeled back. “Did you guys hear that?”

“Hear what?’ Violet asked.

I looked back at the shadowy movement within the mirror. “Tell me you can see that.”

Cali frowned. “I just see us. In a mirror. What do you see?”

“Movement. I think the cat is just on the other side of the barrier.”

“Maybe you can reach out and touch it?” Cali suggested. “It can’t be a coincidence that you can see it and we can’t.”

Slowly, I raised my band and touched the tips of my fingers to the mirror. They sank inside it like I was pushing my hand beneath the surface of a body of water.

“I found a way in!”

“Grab the cat and bring it back,” Violet said.

I carefully reached further in, watching Lion’s shadow move beyond my reflection. He was just beyond my right.

“Here, kitty, kitty, kitty,” I whispered.

Suddenly something grabbed my hand and jerked me forward. I was pretty sure it wasn’t Lion.

“You should be in here,” a voice rasped.

**Episode 2349**

XAVIER

I wasn’t the least bit surprised by the flabbergasted expression on Greyson’s face. I knew he probably hadn’t seen this coming—true to form, he’d probably planned to go into this fake-dating Aysel shitshow all by himself. So the confusion was expected. But I had one job to do in this conversation, and that was to make sure that confusion didn’t keep me from giving Greyson the backup he so desperately needed.

My brother angled himself toward me and lowered his voice so we’d have some modicum of privacy—a big ask in the crowded kitchen.

“I’m not sure if you’re aware of this, but typically little brothers don’t tag along on dates,” Greyson said.

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, so this is a real date then? I hadn’t realized.

His eyes narrowed. “There’s no need for you to accompany me. I’ll be fine on my own.”

I tilted my head, raising an eyebrow. “Isn’t there? Aysel’s doing her damnedest to become your personal kryptonite. She’s powerful, clearly has some magic on her side, and she has no shame. Shouldn’t someone be there to offer you backup, just in case you get in over your head?”

“I don’t like what you’re implying—”

“Fine. Then I won’t imply it. You shouldn’t go into this alone. You need someone watching your back, and that’s why I’m coming with you.”

He shook his head. “I’m perfectly capable of handling Aysel. We’ll be in a public place, for god’s sake. Just the two of us. I appreciate your concern, but I don’t need your help.”

I laughed. “Right. Just like you didn’t need my help on your last errand to the Vanguard palace, when you went to play mailman and got beaten up while delivering a letter? Yeah, you definitely handled things like a champ.”

“I didn’t get beaten up,” he growled. “And for the record, I *did* handle it. Alone. Thanks for checking in, baby brother, but this doesn’t concern you.”

“Like hell it doesn’t. You’re running off to play Casanova with the Vanguard’s demon princess—you think that won’t have consequences for the pack? What happens if you get caught? If she casts more magic on you? It doesn’t take a genius to see how this could go sideways, so do me a favor and just say, ‘Thanks Xavier, I’d love some help.’”

“I’ll say it again—this date won’t be at the palace with Lucian and his merry men. It’s at a public nightclub.”

“Great, now you’re just being naïve. Who’s to say that Aysel will come alone? Besides, I won’t just be going there for you. I’ll be there for Cali, too.”

Again, Greyson looked confused. “What does this have to do with Cali?”

“Everything. This is all about her, isn’t it? Aysel cursed you so you two can’t touch each other, or whatever.” I cleared my throat, not wanting to dwell on the thought of my mate touching *anyone* besides me. “She’s clearly not thrilled about this plan you’ve come up with, and the last thing I want is for her to get hurt because of your stupidity, and this entire ‘seduction plan’ fits the bill perfectly.”

I could tell from the look in his eyes that my brother wanted nothing more than to slam me against the wall, but he managed to restrain himself. I didn’t know if it was due to the rest of the pack being crammed into the room with us, or something else. Either way, I’d take it.

Greyson pulled in a deep breath. “I assure you, I can handle anything Aysel or the Vanguard pack throw at me. Again, thanks for the offer, but I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Fine.” I shrugged. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

My brother might have been too in love with himself to see it, but he was setting himself up for disaster with this half-assed plan. Aysel wasn’t stupid, and the fact that she’d managed to curse the Redwood Alpha so easily just showed what a formidable opponent she was—to say nothing of her brother, or the resources of the Vanguard pack.

But fine. *I* was the idiot here. If my brother wanted to go it alone, that was his choice. And when it inevitably blew up in his face, I’d be there to deal with any fallout with Cali.

*Maybe there’s a silver lining here. If Greyson really does screw the pooch on this, maybe it’ll make it easier for Cali to choose me. And then all this* due destini*, multiple mates bullshit can finally be put to rest.*

A tug in my chest had me glancing over at Ava, who was working feverishly with Ravi on their semifinal project. Neither one of them seemed particularly happy to be there, but then again, Big Mac was part of it too, and she was hardly a barrel of laughs either.

I watched Ava pass over a tube of icing to Ravi, her fingers brushing against his. My wolf snarled low in his chest at the sight.

*I wonder what’s going on with them. If anything. They had a connection after the battle with Letifer. Is that still happening? Can I exploit that to finally get Ava off my back?*

My wolf threatened to turn rabid at the thought. I pushed down the hot rush of fury, the bloodlust. Okay, then. That wasn’t going to work. Besides, it wouldn’t be fair to Ravi to dump Ava on him anyway.

As if she’d felt my eyes on her, Ava looked up at me, and our eyes met. She smiled and mind linked with me. *Would you like to come lend a hand?*

*No.*

*Suit yourself.*

She put a hand on Ravi’s arm and turned him back to their gingerbread showstopper. What a fucking tease. I knew exactly what she was trying to do—make me jealous. She’d said she didn’t want to be a one-night stand, that she wanted my respect, but clearly she wasn’t above some game-playing.

*She’s going for the long con*, I realized. *A slow seduction.*

And I couldn’t have cared less. My wolf stirred at the sight of her, but me? I didn’t want her anymore. Not even a little bit. And as long as I could keep my wolf leashed, keep our focus on Cali, Ava could play seductress all she wanted. Because I wasn’t going to let anything come between me and Cali—certainly not Ava.

Of course, that was easier said than done, as per fucking usual. We were fighting a mate bond that should have stayed dead, even after Ava had been brought back. And yet, here it was. It wasn’t a *due destini* situation—it was a weird anomaly. An old bond somehow restored, even after a new bond had taken its place.

I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised at the hiccup. It wasn’t every day a former mate came back from the dead. Still, I was being pulled in two directions. Just like Cali.

*I’ll have to remember this the next time I get pissed off because Cali wants Greyson too.*

No matter how much it made me want to break Greyson’s teeth, the bond with Ava had taught me that this gigantic mess was nobody’s fault.

Someone tapped my shoulder, and I turned to see Mrs. Smith standing next to me. Her hair was still floating weirdly behind her, Big Mac’s magic at work. “Do you know what’s holding Cali up? She was supposed to bring a hair tie.”

I peeled my gaze away from Ava. “I’ll get her,” I said quickly, beating Greyson to the punch. I smirked at my brother. “Why don’t you help your mother with her hair?”

I darted upstairs before Greyson could rethink throwing me through a wall.

“Cali?” I called as I reached the upstairs landing. What *was* taking her so long? She’d left to grab the damn hair tie nearly ten minutes ago. It couldn’t be that difficult to find one—not with all the women in this house.

*Seriously, how hard can it be to find a hair tie?*

I was surprised to find Big Mac’s door closed.

“That’s weird,” I muttered.

Was Cali not in there after all? Maybe she’d gone to her room to get one?

*Or maybe she’s more affected by what Greyson’s doing than she let on. She was really quick to volunteer to grab a hair tie—was that just an excuse to be alone?*

Fucking Greyson. He hadn’t even gone on his stupid date yet, and already our mate was upset.

I was about to turn on my heel and head to Cali’s room when I picked up her scent. She was definitely in Big Mac’s room.

I didn’t knock. I just pushed the door open and stalked inside, stopping in my tracks when I saw Cali, Violet, and Marta crouched down together in the closet.

I came over with a scowl. “What *hell* have you gotten into—”

I took in the full scene, and words escaped me. Marta was halfway inside the mirror, and Cali and Violet were holding her in a white-knuckled grip. Were they trying to pull her out? How had she even gotten *in* there?

“What the hell is going on?” I asked.

“Marta’s stuck!” Cali burst out. “Help us!”

**Episode 2350**

“Xavier, help us pull her back in!” I moved aside to make room for Xavier. Thank god he was here. Violet was stronger than I was, but trying to reel Marta back in from the mirror’s magical vise grip was beyond our strength. The most we’d been able to do was keep the mirror from swallowing Marta whole—and even then we were failing.

Xavier stepped forward, grabbing Marta around the waist. His grip on her seemed careful, not quite the white-knuckling Violet and I were doing with her legs.

*He must be trying to avoid hurting her.* My heart swelled at his consideration, even in a crazy situation like this one. How I’d explain this to him was a whole other issue.

*But hey, that’s Future Cali’s problem.*

Xavier grunted, the muscles in his arms straining as he fought to pull Marta back in. My eyes widened. *Is Marta okay? What could be holding her that’s stronger than Xavier?*

A million worst-case scenarios flitted by: Silas, Letifer, some unknown entity that wanted Marta or her power…

*Oh no. What if they lured the cat in so Marta would go after it? What if this is all a trap?*

Xavier gave a groan as he heaved back with Marta sliding out of the mirror—partially. Xavier, Violet, and I all stumbled back in a tangle of limbs, but Xavier scrambled to his feet and tightened his hold on Marta before she could get sucked back in again.

Her forearms and hands were still locked in the mirror’s grasp. “It won’t let me go!” she screamed.

“Vi, take her legs!” I shifted my grip up her body, grasping onto her arms just below the shoulders. I pulled with all my might while Xavier kept his grip on her waist and Violet kept pulling on her legs.

We had to look absolutely ridiculous, but I couldn’t have cared less. I’d have all the time in the world for self-consciousness once we managed to yank Marta free.

A shadowy creature appeared just below the mirror’s surface. Its features were shrouded, but there was no missing the writhing movement of its body. I screamed and jolted backward in shock, popping one of Marta’s arms free of the mirror in the process.

Then, with the mirror holding onto her via just one arm, Xavier and Violet’s combined strength overcame the mirror—or the creature, or whatever was holding her—and Marta’s other arm popped out.

We all collapsed on the floor of the walk-in closet, panting.

“*Mrow*.”

I lifted my head. Lion was tucked under Marta’s other arm, right up against her chest as she lay on her back. The little cat licked her face and purred.

Violet scrambled to her feet and carefully picked up the cat, inspecting him. “He’s fine,” she announced. “Not a hair out of place.”

“Wish I could say the same for me,” Marta panted.

Xavier climbed to his feet and held out a hand to help her stand. “Will someone please explain to me what the hell is going on here?”

Marta’s eyes widened. She looked terrified, and I couldn’t blame her.

I stepped forward. “First, you have to promise not to tell anyone.”

He scoffed. “That depends on what happened. I’m not making any promises until you guys fill me in. Marta was almost sucked into a mirror.” He pointed at the mirror, which suddenly looked way more ominous than it had when I’d walked into the room in search of a hair tie. “That might be of some importance, don’t you think?”

“It is,” I conceded. “Just… listen before deciding what you’re going to do, okay? Listen to the whole story.”

He put his hands on his hips. “Lay it on me, then. I’m all ears.”

I glanced at Violet and Marta. “Well, and please correct me if I’m wrong, but Marta and Violet were in here looking for Big Mac’s magic mirror.”

“Dare I even ask why?” Xavier asked.

Marta swallowed but managed to speak. “I was trying to contact the spirit world.”

His eyes narrowed. “I’ll ask again—why?”

Marta stared at the floor. I stepped up beside her and rubbed her arms. “She’s trying to find out more about the connection between Lilac and his wolf. They were separated when he died. That’s why his wolf is living outside his body now that he’s come back from the dead. Marta wants to see if there’s something she can do to reunite them.”

A crease appeared between Xavier’s eyebrows. “So you dove into Big Mac’s mirror?”

Marta shook her head. “It wasn’t like that.”

“Then how was it? Because right now the picture you’re painting seems to be missing some pretty important details.”

Violet held up Lion. “The cat dove in first, then Marta reached in to try to get him back.”

Xavier blinked. “You reached into a mirror that you think connects to the spirit world, without any preparation, to save a fucking cat?”

His voice was soft, and that was how I knew he was beyond pissed off.

Poor Marta looked on the verge of tears, but she tilted her chin up so she could meet Xavier’s eyes. “I couldn’t just leave him there.”

“Xavier, it was all an accident,” I said. “Maybe Marta and Violet were being a little reckless, but their intentions were pure, and they didn’t mean any harm. In fact, nobody got hurt. Not even the cat.” She looked at Marta. “You’re okay, right?”

She nodded.

Xavier rolled his eyes. “You got lucky.”

“We did,” I agreed. “And I think we’ll all be a bit more careful from now on. So… You don’t have to tell anyone, right?”

He seemed to mull this over for a moment, and I turned to Violet and Marta. “Did either of you see that thing?”

“What thing?” Xavier and Violet asked.

“I think I know what you mean,” Marta said quietly. “It was the one pulling me in.”

A chill slipped down my spine, and I turned to Violet and Xavier. “I saw this… shadowy creature, I guess. Right before Marta’s arm slipped out.”

“It was a spirit,” Marta said.

“What did it want?” I asked.

“That one’s obvious.” Violet looked at Marta meaningfully. “It wanted you, right?”

“I don’t care what it wanted, so long as it stays in the mirror,” Xavier said. “I hope you’ve all learned your lesson. You can’t just mess around with stuff like this. You could have been hurt—or worse.”

Marta swallowed audibly. “Are you going to tell Big Mac?” Her voice was trembling.

After a beat, Xavier shook his head. “I’m not getting involved. But you all know what you need to do.”

I grabbed the sheet off the floor next to the mirror’s legs. “First things first, we need to cover this up. There’s a reason why Big Mac kept it hidden.”

After covering up the mirror and double-checking to make sure that Lion was truly all right, we shuffled out of the room. Marta and Violet immediately headed toward Marta’s room, and I took a step to follow after them before Xavier caught my arm.

“The hair tie,” he reminded me.

“Oh, right.”

I hurried back in. Lion was on the bed, grooming himself and generally seeming completely unfazed by his jaunt to the spirit world. I dug through the vanity drawers for a hair tie.

*Is this room bigger than I remember?*

I glanced at the closed closet door and shuddered. Just knowing that the mirror was still in there and that thing—that spirit or whatever it was—was hiding inside made me want to hightail it out of the room and never come back.

*Seriously, how can Big Mac sleep at night knowing that monsters like that are literally in her closet? Does Mrs. Smith know about this?*

I finally found a hair tie in the vanity and rejoined Xavier in the hallway. Violet and Marta were gone, probably off licking their wounds. I didn’t blame them for wanting some time to regroup.

Xavier shook his head at Marta’s closed bedroom door. “Why can’t they stay out of trouble? Just for, like, three days in a row?”

“I hope you’re not including me in that. I did tell them not to go looking for the mirror. I was only trying to help them get Lion back when things got a little more complicated.”

“Complicated.” He snorted. “And here I thought you came upstairs because you were upset with Greyson.”

“I am,” I admitted. “But I know why he’s doing what he’s doing. And it’s not like I’ve got any better ideas.”

He kissed my forehead. “Don’t worry about my idiot brother. “

Xavier led me back downstairs, where I handed over Mrs. Smith’s long-awaited hair tie. The competition continued for only a little while after that, and soon enough Torin took his spot in the middle of the kitchen again and announced, “The winners of the showstopper are Big Mac and Mrs. Smith!”

The crowd went wild. Even Ravi and Ava clapped for the couple.

Before the applause died down, Xavier took my hand again and started to lead me away. He grabbed something off the counter and tucked it under his other arm on the way.

“What’s that?” I asked. “What are we doing?”

He smirked. “We’re going to take your mind off things.”

**Episode 2351**

My eyes widened at Xavier. “Okay, I’ll bite. What did you have in mind?”

He gave me a sly smile, and my heart began to race. Of course, that smile could mean any number of things. It didn’t necessarily mean what my dirty mind immediately thought it meant.

*He could be taking me car shopping again*. I fought a smile at the thought. *Because that went so well last time.*

When Xavier began to lead me upstairs, the mystery item still tucked under his other arm, I dragged my feet. This did seem to be heading into sexy territory, which wasn’t a bad thing, per se. Except that Greyson was downstairs, and so was everyone else. Wouldn’t it look suspicious if Xavier and I mysteriously disappeared together? They might even ask questions.

“We shouldn’t do what you’re thinking,” I said. “Not right now.”

That sly smile turned into a full-on smirk. “Get your mind out of the gutter.”

Heat rushed into my cheeks. “I-I wasn’t thinking… *that*.”

“Sure you weren’t.”

I never had been a very good liar.

Xavier pulled me upstairs and into his room, closing the door behind us. He nodded at his bed. “Sit down.”

I still hadn’t quite been able to make out what he’d brought upstairs from the kitchen, and he tucked it behind his back as I perched on the edge of his bed.

He moved off to my side and leaned in close. “Close your eyes.”

I craned my neck to look at him. “Why?”

With one firm hand on my jaw, he turned my head to face forward again. “Just do it.”

I didn’t have the first idea what my mate was up to, but I trusted him. Besides, there was something in his voice that made desire simmer low in my belly. Whatever he had planned, I was pretty sure I was going to like it.

I closed my eyes, and in the absence of my vision, my other senses made up the difference. My ears picked up the sound of him moving around the room. The clack of something being set on the dresser, the whoosh of a drawer being pulled open. And then footsteps nearing as he approached me.

My skin crackled with sensory input, the warmth of the air and then something soft and cool brushing against my cheekbone and my brow, pressing ever so gently against my eyes. I realized a beat too late that Xavier was blindfolding me. He was even careful to not catch my hair in the knot he secured at the back of my head.

“So you can’t cheat,” he murmured. His voice was low and rough, like he was just as turned on by this little game we were playing as I was beginning to be. He’d never blindfolded me before, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like it.

“Is it too tight?” he asked.

I shook my head. The blindfold stayed exactly where it was but was nothing more than a solid presence against my skin. “It’s fine.” My own voice was breathy by comparison.

I heard Xavier pull in a breath through his nose. “You smell delicious, like gingerbread.”

Butterflies danced in my stomach. Where was Xavier going with this? The blindfold was a nice touch, but I was sitting upright on his bed, still fully dressed. He’d barely even touched me. And then there was Greyson.

As intrigued and turned on as I was right now, I couldn’t help the guilt nagging at me. It didn’t seem fair to Greyson to fool around with Xavier right now.

Xavier stepped away for a moment, his footsteps carrying him to the other end of the room, near his dresser, before he returned. He set something light on the mattress beside me. Its weight was only barely marked by the mattress.

His breathy whisper slipped over the shell of my ear, sending chills down my spine. “Open your mouth.”

A new wave of heat blossomed in my cheeks, my neck, and the lust simmering inside me shifted to full boil. I let my jaw hang open, my mind filling with filthy possibilities.

Xavier placed something solid and sweet on my tongue, and I immediately snapped my mouth shut.

“Wha’ is it?” I asked, my mouth still full. Then I grimaced. *Wow, Caliana. Really sexy.*

“You tell me.” His voice was warm, amused, and still low enough that I was pretty sure he was turned on. “You’d better get it right, or there will be consequences.”

I bit down, and coconut, chocolate, and shortbread filled my mouth. I swallowed. “It’s a cookie.”

“Mm. You’ll need to be more specific on the next one. What kind of cookie?”

Realization hit. *Oh my god.* “Are you seriously trying to seduce me with cookies?” Something that I previously wouldn’t have thought possible.

“And what of it?”

I shrugged. “There are worse ways to seduce someone, but why are you doing this?”

“Because I want to. Do I need any more reason than that?”

“Or is it because you want to keep my mind preoccupied while Greyson goes on the anything-can-happen date with Aysel at a sexy nightclub?”

There was a beat of silence, and then Xavier growled, “Be quiet and open your mouth.”

My thighs clenched. *I probably shouldn’t find that nearly as hot as I do.*

“It’s not going to work—”

He shoved another cookie into my mouth, and I groaned, chewing and savoring until I swallowed it down. “Oh my god. Is that double chocolate chip? It’s delicious.”

His voice was close again. So close that his hot breath washed over the shell of my ear. “The lady is right. I wonder what her reward should be?”

Then his lips pressed against mine, giving my mouth something entirely different, but no less satisfying, to keep it occupied. His tongue slipped into my mouth, and I moaned, reaching blindly for him. My hands found his chest, and I pulled him closer—only for him to ease himself out of my grip and step back.

I panted, overcome with longing. The ache between my legs begged to be satisfied. “That wasn’t a cookie.”

“Nope. But this is.” He stuffed another cookie into my mouth. This one was big and hard, and I struggled to chew it.

*I probably look like a chipmunk right now.*

“Well?” Xavier asked. “What is it?”

I finally managed to swallow it. “It’s a coconut macaroon.”

His laughter filled the air. “You’re better at this than I thought. Next time I’ll have to pick some more exotic cookies.”

“I can’t take any more cookies,” I groaned. Suddenly, I wished I hadn’t sampled so many sweets during the gingerbread house competition.

“Hmm. I wonder what else we can do, then? After all, you’re still blindfolded, and you smell fucking amazing. I’d be lying if I said this wasn’t a fantasy of mine.” He leaned in close and breathed me in. “Have I ever told you how sexy you are? You’re my gingerbread mate.”

As turned on as I was at this point, his words were so ridiculous that I couldn’t help but laugh. “I appreciate what you’re doing, but I’m okay. I trust Greyson the same way I trust you with Ava. This date with Aysel is… Well, it’s kind of a nightmare, and everything’s really complicated right now, but I know all of our bonds are stronger than any problems that stand in our way. No matter what happens with anyone else.” I smiled. “Still, I appreciate you doing this. You’re very sweet.”

He caught my lips again, kissing me hard enough to take my breath away. Then he pulled back, panting. “I’m glad you’re doing all right, but I’ll say when we’re through here.”

I laughed again, delighted and thrilled. “Oh, you will, will you?”

I felt him nod as he trailed a hot line of kisses down my throat. “I am not even close to being done with you yet.”

Just like that, desire slammed into me again. All the laughter, affection, and amusement burned up in the pure lust sliding through my body. Xavier’s hands firmed on my waist before he tossed me further back onto the mattress. My blindfold was still on, and it made me dizzy with wanting to be so vulnerable while my mate caged my body with his own.

He straddled my hips, and his deft fingers began unplucking the buttons of my top. I reached for him, but he pinned my arms back down to the mattress. “Still, Cali.”

Obedience had never been my strong suit. I canted my hips up with a whine. “I want to touch you.”

“You will.” His broad, warm hands slid over my breasts, teasing my nipples through the thin material of my bra. They felt more sensitive, somehow, maybe because I couldn’t see him touching me. I could only feel it. I moaned as he pinched my nipples, the bite of pleasure-pain making my head spin.

Xavier leaned in close. “If you’re done with the cookies, I can think of something else we could do to keep your mouth occupied.”

**Episode 2352**

LOLA

“Lola? Babe, are you okay?”

I glanced over at Jay, dazed. “Huh?”

A crease appeared between his eyebrows as he stared back at me. “Are… Are you all right?”

It was about then that I realized the reason he was worried was because I was holding a piece of gingerbread in my hand, my mouth hanging open, completely lost in thought.

*Really sexy, Lola! It’s a miracle Jay can keep it in his pants.*

I set the piece of cookie down and pushed my plate aside. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.” He watched my face carefully. “Is something on your mind?”

*No. Yes.* I sighed. “I just keep thinking about Jacs’s offer to go to college in my place.” At Jay’s raised brows, I quickly added, “Of course, she was joking. She had to be, right? I mean, that’s like the plot of a half-baked sitcom, right? Having Jacqueline assume my identity and go to college? It’s just so… ridiculous.”

“Is it?”

See, that was the thing about Jay. The guy was basically a mind reader. I could never play dumb with him or try to beat around the bush and say I didn’t want something when, in reality, it sounded too good to be true.

Still, I had to try. Because the alternative—admitting to my mate that the idea of sending Jacs to college in my place was seriously tempting—was still a little too embarrassing to just come out with. A girl had to have some pride.

“You don’t think it’s bound to backfire? Or that it’s, like, disrespectful to my dads? Or deeply fucked up to have a fake degree? Hypothetically,” I added quickly.

His lips turned up into a smile. “Those are all valid concerns, but it’s not my call to tell you what to do with your life. *Hypothetically*.”

I playfully smacked his shoulder. “You are exactly zero help sometimes, you know that?” I sighed, my smile slipping off my face. “I would feel bad lying to my dads about something like this. I mean, the whole werewolf thing, that’s just… how life has to be. But I don’t have to lie to them about school. That would just be me being selfish. But it *would* get them off my case. And it would give Jacqueline something she wants very much—a chance to finish college. But, then again, that would be a logistical nightmare. And if Jacs really wants to go to college, she can do it herself. Without pretending to be anyone else. I mean, sure, she’s technically dead and has been for years, but vampires must have some way to get fake IDs and everything else to prove they’re alive—if she doesn’t already have all that stuff.”

I frowned. That seemed like the kind of resources Tottenville would provide for their students. Maybe Emmet could help Jacqueline with that, if she didn’t already have everything she needed.

I shook my head, suddenly resolute. “No, I can’t do that. If my dads found out, they’d kill me. Besides, I’m technically *alive*, so I really have no excuse for not getting my degree, other than the fact that I don’t really want to.”

Jay was quiet as I unloaded my thoughts—an occupational hazard of being mates with an external processor. But whatever. He had to be used to it by now.

He plucked the gingerbread cookie off my plate. “If you’re just gonna drool over it, give it to me.” He popped it into his mouth and gagged. “Gross!” He grimaced, his mouth full. “It’s all soggy.”

He eyed the plate, clearly looking for someplace to spit it out, and I covered the remaining cookies. “Not here! Go to the kitchen!”

I followed him into the kitchen, where he spat out the cookie into the garbage can. He rinsed his mouth out with water from the tap and gave me a dirty look. “I love you, but you’re disgusting sometimes.”

I smiled sweetly. “I was just gonna say the same to you.”

He rolled his eyes and headed over to the kitchen island to get a fresh, non-soggy cookie. Jacs was already in the room, staring at a plate of gingersnaps.

“Do you… want to try a cookie?” I asked.

Regular food was mostly a mixed bag for vampires. They could eat it, most of the time, but it wasn’t a pleasurable experience.

After a beat of Jacqueline staring down at the cookies like they were some kind of holy relic, she shook her head. “I used to love them. Gingersnaps. Sugar cookies. Thin mints. Oreos, especially.”

She sounded so sad, so wistful. I’d never heard someone talk about cookies like that, and it almost made me want to cry.

Finally, she shrugged. “Ever since I was turned, I’ve found that all cookies taste the same—like yeast and old sugar.”

My jaw dropped. “That is the saddest thing I’ve ever heard in my life.”

*Thank god I don’t have to worry about that side effect of vampirism. I* love *cookies.*

I cleared my throat. “So, Jacs, about our conversation earlier. You were joking about going to college in my place, weren’t you?”

“Of course. That would be ridiculous. It was just a stupid joke.”

“Right, yeah,” I said. “But you did say that you wished you’d finished college. That was more than a passing thought, right? Because, if you want, I’d be happy to help you go to college as yourself. Not Tottenville.”

She shook her head. “Drop it, Lola.”

My brow furrowed. “What, why? You were literally just saying how cool it would be for me to go back—but why don’t you just go yourself?” She was acting super cagey.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m going to live forever, remember? I have all the time in the world to go to college. I was just… talking. You know, like, thinking romantically about it. But it’s not for me. Not right now, at least.” She cleared her throat and smiled. “I think I need to go take another look at the winning gingerbread house. I’ve heard Mrs. Smith turned a pair of candy canes into some very impressive lampposts.”

She started to walk away, but I put a hand on her arm to stop her. “Jacs, wait a second—”

“I thought you were smart,” she snapped suddenly, “but there are things you don’t understand. Seriously drop it, all right? Kay.”

Jacqueline stomped away before I could even process her response.

*What the hell was that about? She was fine, and then she started acting so weird when I brought up going back to college… And what was that about things I don’t understand? What was she even talking about?*

Jay appeared next to me, now carrying his own plate filled with his own cookies. “I have a surprise for you.”

“What is—umph!”

*Did he just shove a cookie in my mouth?* Wow, he must really have been bothered by that soggy gingerbread.

I began to chew so that I could yell at him for shoving something in my mouth without asking, but then an intoxicating blend of flavors slid across my tongue. And instead of yelling, I *moaned*.

“That’s amazing! Like, life-changingly delicious,” I said after I’d managed to swallow it down. “What *is* that?”

He smiled. “Mrs. Smith made her white chocolate mocha into a cookie. You have to eat some too, or I’m going to get a sugar rush.”

I laughed. “How about we take a walk? We can eat all of these cookies, *and* find a use for some of that sugar, *and* get some air.” I still couldn’t shake what Jacs had said. There was definitely something to unpack there. She had been so excited and then flipped so quickly. Maybe a walk would also help me clear my head from all that—for now.

“Sounds good. But first I want to get a good sampling of all the cookies. We can have a walking buffet. Do you want any more?”

I was about to shake my head when I noticed Dani sitting all by herself in the living room. My stomach clenched.

*What’s she doing all by herself? This all must be so hard on her. Being uprooted from her home, her life. Being isolated from her family. Sure, we’re a fairly warm bunch here, but she barely knows us. She has to be so lonely.*

Jay followed my gaze. “I’ve tried to talk to her a few times, but she either hates my guts or she’s super shy.”

I frowned. “I can’t imagine why anyone would hate you.” I brushed a sugary-sweet kiss against his lips. “The word is that she’s shy. Maybe I should go talk to her. Try to make her feel welcome.” I looked down at his plate. “Bring some cookies for Dani, too.”

As he made another round through the sweets platters, I sidled up to Dani. “So, give me the hot goss on the contest. Do you think the best house won, or was Torin just afraid to not choose Big Mac’s team?”

Dani’s lips curved up into the ghost of a smile. “I thought it looked pretty cool.”

“Me too.” I smiled back. “Though I did wonder at one point if Big Mac was going to lose her patience and just start using her magic. But I guess with Mrs. Smith on her team, she didn’t really need to cheat.” I laughed, and Dani gave me that same weak smile.

*Okay. This is going to be harder than I thought.* An awkward silence settled between us as I looked around the room. *Where the hell is Jay with those cookies?*

I pointed to the Christmas tree. “What do you think?”

“Um, it’s pretty. I haven’t had much experience with Christmas decorations.”

Another heavy silence settled in before I was saved by my phone buzzing.

*Thank god.*

I pulled it out of my pocket and checked the display. My friend request to the girl I’d seen on Ava’s Facebook page had been accepted. Perrie, her name was.

In fact, she’d sent me a message.

*You Redwoods better watch yourselves!*

**Episode 2353**

XAVIER

I liked the sight of Cali in a blindfold way too much. My cock had been hard, pressing against my zipper, aching for relief from the moment we’d started playing this game.

But I wouldn’t have to wait much longer.

She was already half undressed, her nipples hard through the material of her bra and just begging me to take them into my mouth. And she wanted me just as badly as I wanted her. I could smell her arousal, mixed in with the scent of sugar and gingerbread.

She reached for her blindfold, and I pinned her arms to the mattress. “Keep it on.”

Those full, kiss-swollen lips pouted. “But I want to see you.”

“No. I want you to feel me first. Focus on that.”

And then I dove back in for another searing kiss, nipping and licking and sucking as I left a hot trail from her mouth down to those pretty pink nipples I couldn’t wait to taste.

I shoved her unbuttoned shirt down her shoulders and off her arms entirely before starting in on her bra, then her pants and underwear. Finally, I pulled off my own cookie-mussed clothes.

She was panting with need now, and the scent of her arousal made my head spin. But she was being such a good girl, keeping her blindfold on, her wrists against the mattress.

“I think you deserve a reward.”

She cried out my name when I finally took one of her hard nipples into my mouth, my fingers teasing its twin. Her hips bucked beneath me, but her hands stayed in place as I moved over to give her other breast equal treatment.

“Xavier, please!” she whined.

I leaned down to take off Cali’s blindfold. As fun as it was to play with her like this, to keep her focused solely on the sensations I was evoking, I wanted to look into her eyes when I fucked her. I wanted her to know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that I was the one making her feel this way. Now that I’d gotten her worked up, I wanted all that desire, all that longing and attention, to be focused on me.

Plus, there was nothing sweeter than watching the look on her face when I first sank to the hilt inside her.

I gently tugged the blindfold off, careful not to catch her hair in it, and tossed it to the side before kissing her.

The moment our lips met, a lurch went through me. A sense of… wrongness.

My wolf was objecting, and I could feel why. He wanted *Ava*.

*Well too bad*, I answered back with an inner snarl. I wanted Cali. Only Cali. And my wolf was going to get with the program. I ignored my wolf’s sudden rebellion and kept kissing Cali. My mate. The only woman I was meant to be with.

And she felt amazing, of course. Her warm, soft skin against mine, the way her chest hitched as I kissed her, how fucking wet she was when she rolled her hips up against mine.

The connection was as intense and lively and fucking perfect as it always was.

But my wolf was still unsatisfied. He needed to know how Ava felt—how her body would slot against mine, the sounds she would make.

*Fuck!* I wanted to scream. To tear my hair out. *Cali is enough. Cali is who I want.*

My wolf didn’t give a fuck. He wanted Ava. He had a big attachment to her—so much so that before Cali came into the picture, my wolf had left me, despite what Ava had done. But I didn’t understand—I loved Cali.

That old yearning I hadn’t felt in years, those feelings I had thought were buried along with Ava were suddenly back, full-force. My body thrummed with tension, but not the good kind. Having thoughts in my head of both Ava and Cali was too distracting right now. I felt like I wasn’t totally present here with Cali, and that wasn’t fair to her.

And suddenly, all my lust disappeared. I was left feeling empty, unsatisfied. I sat back on my heels, panting. My fucking wolf had totally pulled me out of the moment.

A gorgeous blush had painted its way across Cali’s cheeks and down her chest, but she frowned up at me. “Is everything okay?”

I had no fucking clue how to respond to that.

*No, things are not okay. My mate bond with Ava just kept me from having sex with you!*

I swallowed and shook my head. “Nothing’s wrong. I just… Maybe you were right. Maybe we should go back downstairs.”

Her eyes widened. “You want to go back downstairs, now?”

“Yeah. You know, before anyone comes looking for us.”

“Um… Okay.” She looked flustered, confused, entirely devoid of the smoking hot desire that had been riding her before. “You’re probably right. We’ve been gone for a while. Everyone will probably guess what’s going on.”

Only they’d be fucking wrong, because I was one million percent certain that nobody in this pack house would guess that my old mate bond was keeping me from being intimate with my new mate.

I forced a smile. “We’ll pick up where we left off later. Okay?”

“Okay.” Her answering smile looked just as fake as mine felt. “I’m gonna go get cleaned up. I’ll see you downstairs.”

I was about to pull my clothes back on when I realized I needed to get cleaned up too. I had sprinkles and icing in places they definitely did not belong. Not as bad as Torin, of course, but still. A shower was necessary.

I headed into the bathroom and turned the shower on high heat before stepping inside.

*Thank god Ava didn’t win the contest. It would probably only make her feel more welcome at the pack house, something nobody but Ava wants.*

But I didn’t want to think about Ava, especially when Cali was around. I’d already given that lying bitch way too much real estate in my brain, and it felt wrong.

It had happened before, of course, thinking of Ava when I was with Cali, but it had never been that intense. I would have a fleeting thought about Ava, push it away, and then pick up where Cali and I had left off.

But I couldn’t do that anymore, because my wolf was champing at the bit to be with Ava. Even though I was in love with Cali, and Cali loved me too. That fucking dog needed to take note—he wasn’t the one running the show here.

I washed the icing out of my hair and reached for a bar of soap to wash the remaining sugar and sprinkles off my body. That unsatisfied feeling echoed inside me, bubbling up with the intensity of a hunger left unfed.

“Fuck.” I wouldn’t have been feeling this way if my wolf hadn’t gotten in the way. Things with Cali had been getting so fucking hot, too. She’d been really turned on. So turned on that she hadn’t seemed to be thinking of Greyson at all.

Her moans echoed in my head, along with the taste of her skin—sweet gingerbread and Cali. I braced myself against the wall with one arm, the showerhead beating down on my shoulders as my soap-slicked hand slid down to my hard, aching cock.

I fisted up and down the length of my cock. The pleasure was so immediate, so intense, that it almost scalded me. Why the fuck couldn’t I have felt this way when Cali was here?

I imagined what it would feel like, sinking into her, those hot, wet walls wrapped tight around me as we moved together.

My grip tightened, and my hand moved a little faster.

Suddenly, Cali’s voice in my mind shifted into another breathy, feminine voice. One I knew all too well.

Ava’s moans echoed through my head, and it was all too easy to imagine her kiss-swollen lips forming my name as I fucked her.

My eyes shot open, and my hand froze.

*No. I can’t. I can’t. I can’t…*

Another cry rang out in my head. A memory from long ago, when Ava and I had been newly mated, so hungry for each other all the time, never satisfied. We’d gone up to Seattle for a nice dinner, and on the drive home, she’d teased me with her mouth until I’d had to pull over, until I’d dragged her out of the car, bent her over the hood and fucked her until my legs had given out.

I didn’t realize my grip had firmed, my hand was moving again, my stomach muscles clenching—until white-hot pleasure began to coil low in my belly.

I didn’t slow my pace this time. Not as Ava’s naked body flashed through my mind. My cock sinking into her. Her cunt on my mouth as she rode my face.

Every memory I could conjure and every filthy fantasy she and I had never gotten to fulfill washed over me until I couldn’t hold back anymore.

I came into my hand with a roar, the pleasure so devastating it almost blinded me.

And then, in the blink of an eye, reality set in. The hot water rolled over my body, washing away the evidence of what I’d just done. But guilt and fury—at my wolf, but most of all, at myself—smothered me.

How am I going to stop this?

**Episode 2354**

GREYSON

After much celebrating (a little too much in my opinion—I mean, come on, it was a gingerbread house-baking competition, not the Olympics) the kitchen had finally cleared out. Torin had laid out all of the gingerbread houses, except Team *Due Destini*’s, of course, along the counter amidst different plates of cookies. The kitchen looked and smelled like a professional bakery in the middle of the holiday season, but there was still a huge mess—baking trays, bottles and jars and bowls of different candies and icing and assorted other edible treats used for decoration… And, of course, there were gingerbread crumbs *everywhere*.

Torin, good man that he was, immediately began to clean up the mess without anyone asking him to do so. I moved over and smoothly took the baking sheets out of his hand and set them in the sink. “I’ll take care of all this. Go enjoy yourself with the others.”

He frowned. “This is a colossal mess. Are you sure you want to clean it up?”

Nobody *wanted* kitchen duty, but seeing as how Torin had put so much effort into making the pack house festive already—and not forgetting that this whole gingerbread house-baking competition had been initiated for the sole purpose of cheering Torin up—leaving him with kitchen duty seemed beyond selfish.

“I’m sure.”

Torin beamed. “Thank you, Greyson!”

He passed by Tom on his way out of the kitchen.

“Let me help with that,” Tom offered.

“Oh, thanks.”

While I washed the baking pans, he moved through the kitchen, gathering up the dishes.

“Do you have any plans tonight?” he asked. “I thought maybe we could watch *Elf*. It’s a Christmas classic.”

My shoulders tensed. *Well, shit.* I wracked my brain for an appropriate response but came up empty. How could I explain to my mate’s father that I couldn’t join him for a movie night because I had plans to go on a date with some werewolf princess—who wasn’t Cali?

“Um, thanks, Tom, but I’ll have to take a rain check. If that’s all right? I have some things I need to take care of tonight.”

*Like go out with someone who isn’t your daughter.*

“No problem at all.” As I stepped aside to start wiping down the counters, he started rinsing out the rest of the dishes and loading them into the dishwasher. “Um… But if there’s anything I can help with, let me know.”

I forced a smile. “It’s nothing—just some Alpha stuff. Wouldn’t you have a better time watching the movie with your family?”

He loaded the last dish into the dishwasher. “That’s a great idea. I’ll go ask Orla if she wants to join me. You good in here?”

I nodded. “We made quick work of it. Thanks for your help.”

Tom left, and, finally alone in the kitchen again, I blew out a breath. *What. The. Hell?*

It was perfect in the worst way possible that the night Cali’s father had invited me to join him and his family for a simple holiday activity—a rite of passage in itself—my evening had already been spoken for, by Aysel no less. So, not only was I unable to join, I’d had to lie to him to avoid it.

*Fuck. This had better not come back to bite me in the ass.*

I hated lying to Tom, but the truth was too complicated—and way too personal—to try to unpack with the man. Besides, he wouldn’t have been thrilled to hear I was going out with another woman tonight, leaving his daughter at home.

I wasn’t particularly excited about it either, for that matter. And Cali might have accepted it as a necessary evil to break our curse, but she was obviously unhappy about it. I was still haunted by our earlier conversation—all the worst-case scenarios she’d asked about. The fact that some part of her was certain I would have to betray her to break this curse.

My jaw tensed, and I scrubbed harder at a particularly thick glob of icing that had glued itself to the countertop. The thought of going to see Aysel while Cali was left here, filled with doubt, made my stomach twist into knots. I couldn’t just leave her here, not until she understood just how much she meant to me. How it would kill me if I ever betrayed her.

As I swept up the last of the crumbs on the floor, an idea struck. Finally, there was a lull in the house. Some goddamn peace and quiet, and I was going to take advantage of it by making Cali dinner, just the two of us.

What better way to try to reassure her that my date with Aysel meant nothing?

I’d already started boiling some pasta when Cali returned to the kitchen. She was all cleaned up now, with no more cookie crumbs in her hair. Though I had to admit, she’d looked adorable earlier.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Cooking dinner.”

Her brows knit together. “I don’t think the pack will be hungry—they’re all gorging themselves on cookies right now.”

“It’s not for them.” I began thinly slicing a clove of garlic. “This is for you and me.”

“Oh.” She brightened. “Can I help?”

“Sure.”

She stood next to me, and I almost immediately regretted accepting her offer. I wanted her close, wanted to spend as much time with her as possible before I had to go on that date with Aysel, but the sexual tension I’d been trying to avoid crackled between us. I could barely control my urge to gather her up in my arms and kiss her senseless.

*Thwack.*

The paring knife embedded itself in the cutting board, mere centimeters from the tip of my thumb.

Cali frowned and put a hand on my arm. “Be careful. I know you’ve got your werewolf healing abilities, but I don’t think they’d work to reattach a finger.”

I pulled in a deep breath. Her touch sent a jolt of lust up my spine. All I wanted to do was rip her clothes off, lift her up onto the counter, and sink myself inside her right there, where anyone could walk in on us.

*Make dinner*, I reminded myself. I took another deep breath and continued slicing the garlic.

Next to me, Cali was slicing tomatoes. “The gingerbread house contest was a success, though it would have been better if you and Xavier hadn’t been bickering the whole time.” She gave me a rueful smile.

“I’m sorry. We’re just competitive. I’d like to say it won’t be a problem in the future, but I don’t want to make any promises I can’t keep. It’s in our blood.”

She laughed, and it only made me want her even more.

I pushed the longing down and smiled. “Can you imagine this? The two of us together, spending our time doing normal things like cooking dinner. Just ordinary stuff that ordinary couples do all the time.”

She looked wistful. “I wish it could be that way, but I’m thankful to be here, too. In the pack house with all the people I love most in the world.”

“Mm. The pack house can be a difficult place to live, at times. Privacy is practically unheard of, but it is a home.” I smiled. “A good home.”

“You know, you don’t have to do this.”

“Make you dinner? It’s no problem. I wanted to do it.”

She shook her head. “I know you’re worried about tonight, about how I’ll cope. But I really do understand, and I love you and I trust you. You don’t have to prove anything to me.”

“That’s what I was hoping to hear, and more than anything, it’s what I want you to believe.” God, I wanted to kiss her, but I had to satisfy myself with blowing a kiss instead.

She smiled and blew one back. “So, what are we making?”

“Midnight pasta. Do you mind grating some parmesan? I need to go talk to Rishika. I’ll be right back.”

“Sure. Just don’t leave me alone in here too long. I don’t think you’ll like what my cooking attempt tastes like.”

I found Rishika in the den, kicking Ravi’s ass on the PS4. “Hey, I need everyone to stay out of the kitchen for a couple hours.”

She didn’t look away from her game. “That won’t be a problem. We’ve been eating cookies nonstop. But I’ll take care of it.”

“Thanks.”

I came back to find Cali setting the table. I wrapped up dinner as quickly as possible while she lit two candles at the dining room table. The candlelight illuminating her face made her look like she was glowing.

*Why the hell do I have to go hang out with Aysel tonight, again?*

I smiled. “Dinner is served.”

We filled our bowls and poured some wine, then returned to the candlelit table. Between the candles and the excess of Christmas decorations, the room did feel festive—even a little magical.

Speaking of Christmas… I still needed to get Cali’s Secret Santa present. “So, what do you want from Santa this year?”

Her brows rose. “What do *you* want?”

“I asked first.”

“I don’t need anything.”

I set down my fork and took her hand. “Want and need are two very different things. What do you *want*?”

She seemed to think about this, then shook her head. “I don’t know, but I promise I’ll let you know if I think of something.”

“You’d better,” I teased. “Or you’ll get a lump of coal.”

Dinner passed by too quickly. The food was good, but it was really the time spent with Cali that I savored. Getting to talk her with, laugh with her.

*I wish it could always be like this.*

My phone pinged. A text message. My heart sinking, I pulled my phone out of my pocket. Aysel had sent over the address of the Black Moon Club. I looked at the time and cursed.

“Shit,” I muttered, then looked up at Cali. “It’s time to get ready.”

**Episode 2355**

Greyson stood to clear away our dinner plates, and I helped, trying not to let his impending date with Aysel rattle me too much. I’d enjoyed dinner, and we’d had a really good time… but I couldn’t ignore how awkward things had gotten the moment he’d received Aysel’s text.

We cleared the table in silence, and it seemed like we were both intent on avoiding eye contact. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been so unsure of what to say to him.

*The Vanguards are really cramping our style, and I’m tired of it. We’ve only even known of their existence for a short time, and already they’ve managed to come between me and my mates.*

Greyson going out with Aysel was a necessary evil, and I was accepting of his plan—theoretically. But now it wasn’t so theoretical, and the easy, carefree fun we’d just enjoyed was gone. No matter how much I tried to be logical about why Greyson was doing this, I couldn’t shake the image of him and Aysel sitting close together in some dimly lit club. It was enough to drive me crazy.

I had no doubt that Greyson was going to do his best to keep things above board, but I didn’t trust Aysel in the least, and she was just so damn persistent. I wished like hell that Greyson didn’t have to go, but I didn’t want to voice my uncertainty. He was having a hard enough time with this plan already, and there was no question that if I pressed him, he would back out.

*And if he backs out, we’ll still be in the grip of Aysel’s stupid curse with no end in sight.*

That was a fate way worse than him spending a meaningless night out with the moon princess from hell.

“Oh, I’ll handle the dishes,” I offered. “Washing them, I mean. Since you have to get ready and all.”

“No, I don’t mind helping,” he said with a weak smile. “If helping to wash these dirty dishes gives me extra time with you, I’m all for it.”

I smiled at him, and we fell back into an uneasy silence while we stood shoulder to shoulder, washing and drying the dishes. I could tell that he was trying to put on a brave, confident façade, but it was clear that he was anxious about it, too.

*If only I could kiss him…*

“I’m going to go change into… What did she say? Dress to impress? Something like that,” he said as we finished up.

“That’ll be easy for you,” I said, trying to lighten the mood. “Any idea what you’re going to wear? I can help you pick something out, if you like.”

“Yeah, sure,” Greyson said hesitantly, almost as if he didn’t trust that I was being honest. He looked back at me as we ambled up the stairs, lost in our own thoughts. “You really don’t have to do this if you don’t feel comfortable, Cali. I would understand, under the circumstances. I’m sure I can pick something on my own.”

“No, I want to help. I can’t have my mate going out not looking his best.” I tried to laugh, but I couldn’t. I just wanted this damn curse to go away, and I hated that Aysel was getting what she was aiming for—more alone time with Greyson.

Once we were in his bedroom, Greyson pulled a few options from his closet and laid them out on the bed. There was a variety of shirts in various styles and colors, plus slacks, jeans, ties, shoe options, and everything in between. I stared down at the clothes, seeing them but not really seeing them, and wishing that he were picking out an outfit for *our* date rather than his date with Aysel. When the curse was lifted, we’d definitely have to make up for lost time.

“Any thoughts?” Greyson asked as he peeled off his shirt.

“Umm… A few.”

I stood there staring at him, suddenly hit by how I used to freak out, just being near him. And when he was shirtless? Forget about it. Even though I was used to it now, butterflies still flew into a frenzy in my stomach at the sight of him, and my heart raced as I took in every sculpted angle of his chest, arms, back, and abdomen. He was really a work of art.

*I want to kiss him so damn bad!*

I bit my lip, imagining how delicious his lips would taste right about now.

Greyson paused and smiled, noticing that I was staring. He glanced down at his chest. “For a moment there, I thought the veins had come back.”

“What? Why?” I asked, snapping out of it.

“Because of the way you were looking at me.”

My cheeks warmed. “I wasn’t doing anything unusual, just admiring the view.”

Greyson smiled. “I love the way you look at me. Don’t ever stop.”

Getting flustered, I grabbed one of the shirts off his bed without looking at it and thrust it into his hands. “Try that on.”

As he maneuvered into the shirt, I thought about how I’d been with Xavier earlier. I’d had similar feelings about seeing him, being with him, and a similar overwhelming feeling of attraction. That damn mate bond always pulling me back and forth between the two of them. If the way I felt about Xavier and Greyson was even half of what the mate bond between Ava and Xavier felt like—or potentially what a Seluna bond could mean for Greyson and Aysel—then I was in big trouble.

Greyson’s hand on my shoulder brought me back to attention once again.

“Well?” He twisted back and forth, modeling the shirt for me. “What do you think?”

“I think you look amazing. But then again, you’d look amazing in anything.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Greyson teased. “I agree, I like this one. But *this* one fits me better,” he said, holding up another shirt.

I sighed, trying to decide whether or not I should say what was on my mind.

“I have to admit, I feel a little strange about helping my mate dress up for a date with someone else.” There. I’d said it. It had been festering between us this whole time, and now it was out on the table—as if there had ever been any doubt that it was tearing me apart.

Greyson stopped. “It’s not a date. Don’t call it that. Think of it more like a business meeting.”

“I wish I could.”

Greyson took me by the shoulders again, his shirt hanging open. “I will put an end to this right now if you want me to. Just say the word and I’ll cancel on her in a second.”

I was trying to keep my eyes on his, but I was a little too aware of his chiseled chest and abs staring back at me. I swallowed. “I’m not going to back out now.” I forced my hands to button up his shirt, pausing a few times to run my hands over the taut ripples of his chest. The nausea in my stomach was worth it.

Greyson took my hands. “Thank you, Cali.”

“Don’t thank me. This is for both of us, remember?”

Greyson changed his shirt again, and then one last time before we finally agreed on his outfit. I stepped back to admire him in the full-length mirror.

“Wow, maybe I should change a few things up to make you a little less appealing, if that’s even possible,” I said, dusting a speck of lint off his shoulder.

Greyson laughed and snuck a glance at his watch. “I should get going.”

“Yeah, don’t wanna be late, right?” I felt a knot in my stomach as we went downstairs. Once again, the reality of what Greyson was about to go do smacked me in the face.

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and looked up at me. “If I could kiss you right now, I would.”

“I know. I feel exactly the same.”

“I guess I’ll have to settle for a hug.”

He pulled me close, and I settled into the hug, but as we stood there holding each other, I started to feel even more queasy. At first, I thought it was because of the anxiety of knowing that I was willingly sending my mate off to have a romantic night with another woman, but then Greyson pulled back and I saw the look in his eyes. It was the revulsion curse.

“It won’t even let us hug anymore?” Greyson said bitterly. “It’s getting worse.”

We looked at each other, and I could tell that he felt as hopeless as I did. I just couldn’t believe that he was about to go out for a night on the town with the very person responsible for making sure we couldn’t even hug each other goodbye.

Greyson smiled wistfully. “Time to go.”

He started toward the door, and I had the overwhelming urge to stop him.

Panic surged in my chest as my mind jumped from one awful conclusion to another.

*If I let him walk out that door, will he come back to me? Is letting him go to her a horrible idea?*

**Episode 2356**

Everything in me wanted to cry out and tell Greyson not to go. I wanted to tell him that I was afraid that he wouldn’t be able to resist beautiful, mysterious Aysel and her wealth of sex appeal—but I stopped myself.

Greyson was lingering in the doorway with his hand on the doorknob, and I wondered for a second if he was going to call the whole thing off himself. He turned back to look at me.

*I love you, Cali*, he mind linked. *And I will be back, love. I promise.*

Then he blew me a kiss and left.

I watched him go, frozen to the spot. The door closed a little too loudly behind him, startling me.

*This is it. He’s gone.* *He’s doing it. He’s going to meet Aysel. With my help.*

The queasiness from before was suddenly replaced by gnawing anxiety. Had I lost my mind? How dumb could I be to let my mate—no, to *encourage* my mate—to go on a date with a beautiful woman like Aysel, who literally didn’t know the meaning of the word no? Anything could happen!

My breathing quickened, and I was starting to feel woozy again.

*Calm down, Cali. Everything’s going to be fine. He told you he loves you and that he’ll be back. Greyson doesn’t lie. Think of it this way—this is just like sending someone you love into battle.*

Imagining Greyson as a soldier doing his duty dampened my anxiety slightly, and I let out a long breath. All I had to remember was that Aysel was the enemy, and that we had to defeat her just like we’d defeated every other enemy that had threatened us—Ryker, Silas, Letifer, the rebel hunters… She’d fall like all the rest of them, even if our mode of attack was a little different this time around.

Maybe a good old-fashioned banishment would work. It wasn’t like we needed the Vanguard pack, and they’d been nothing but a severe pain in the ass since they’d shown up. I wished that they would just go back to wherever they’d come from.

*The moon would be far enough away, for sure.*

I pictured a formal pronouncement. “Aysel of the Vanguard pack, you are hereby banished to the moon you love so damn much!”

I was smiling as I stepped outside, but that smile quickly faded as Greyson started up his car and drove away. It was too late to stop him now.

Artemis came outside. “Was that Greyson? Where’s he headed off to?”

I hesitated, knowing that Greyson had asked for Xavier and me to keep the whole thing under wraps. And the truth was, I was too embarrassed to explain it. I was afraid that Artemis would think what I was thinking: that only a total idiot would let her mate go out on a date with another woman, no matter the circumstances. I didn’t want to tell her everything, but I didn’t want to lie to her either.At least not outright.

I decided to be a little evasive. “Greyson had to take care of someone. Something. But he’ll be back.”

“Oh, well hopefully he won’t be gone long, because Rishika gets annoyed when he leaves Xavier to watch over the pack.” Artemis’s eyes went wide, as if she’d just said something she shouldn’t have. “Not that Rishika doesn’t like Xavier, it’s just…”

“You don’t have to explain it to me; I get it. For whatever reason, Rishika and Xavier just don’t get along.” I gave her a small smile, hoping that she wouldn’t push for more details about Greyson.

We fell silent as we stood watching Greyson’s tail lights disappear into the darkness.

“You good? I’m going to head back inside,” Artemis said.

“I’m good, see you later.”

I watched Artemis go, but I lingered outside for a moment, thinking about Greyson before I finally turned and went inside—only to run right into Ava. *Great.* It was like we literally just couldn’t get out of each other’s way. Ever since she’d helped us out at the Vanguard palace, she’d taken that as an open invitation to linger around the Redwood pack house again (and Xavier). I didn’t understand how many times she had to be told we didn’t want her here.

Life wasn’t fair, was it?

I decided to bite the bullet. I knew that Ava wasn’t going to be the bigger person here, so there was no reason why I shouldn’t be.

“Thanks for helping at the Vanguard palace, Ava. That was nice. We didn’t know how it was all going to shake out, so it was good to have you there as backup.” *Even if you weren’t invited.* “I’m sure there’s somewhere you have to go now.”

Ava ignored my last statement. “Yeah, it’s too bad it didn’t all work out.”

I was surprised by her statement, and more than a little wary. *Is she being supportive all of a sudden?* That would be a new twist in our purely antagonistic relationship. *Ugh, are we becoming frenemies?* I shut that thought down as quickly as it formed. I could handle being frenemies with Maya, but Ava? Never.

Ava tossed her long hair over her shoulder and laughed. “I mean, it’s too bad you weren’t just married to Lucian so these guys could be free of you.”

I didn’t laugh. It wasn’t funny. “What, so that you could finally get your claws into Xavier? Nice fantasy, but Xavier’s made it clear that he doesn’t want you.”

Ava flashed me a bored look. “Oh? Who’s living in a fantasy now?”

She walked away with a self-satisfied grin on her face.

I watched her go, gritting my teeth.

*It never fricking fails! She always knows just how to get under my skin.*

I wished that I’d thought of a good comeback line, but it was too late now. The best comeback would come later, when I was with Xavier in the way that she wished she could be. For all of Ava’s smart talk, the reality was that Xavier wanted to be with me, not her. *That* was no fantasy.

Still, my confidence began to ebb as Ava’s last words echoed through my head. Why had she implied that *I* was the one in the fantasy? What had she meant by that? I’d been with Xavier earlier and things had gotten pretty intense, but then he’d acted really strangely and ended things—abruptly. *Why?* When I really thought about it, he’d never done that before. When I’d asked him if he was okay, he’d been evasive. A little shifty. I hadn’t thought much of it then, but in retrospect and in light of Ava’s comment, I was starting to wonder.

I tore off into the depths of the house in search of Xavier. I wasn’t sure if I missed him or if I just wanted to see him so he could erase the doubt that Ava had expertly implanted in my mind. *Damn her!* The sooner Xavier figured out how to break the bond he had with her, the better.

I looked everywhere, but I couldn’t find him. I asked a few people if they’d seen him, but no one had.

Then I spotted Jay, and I ran over to him. “Hey, Jay, have you seen Xavier?”

“He’s working out,” Jay said. “He wanted me to work out with him, but I ate way too many cookies today to exercise. I’d probably puke all over the place if I moved around too much,” he added sheepishly.

“TMI, but thanks,” I said, dashing off to the basement. It was a little weird that Xavier was working out at this time of night, but then again, he was a werewolf, and time seemed to work a little differently for them.

I heard the crash of weights even before I entered the room. Xavier didn’t notice me right away, and I leaned against the wall and watched his muscles ripple as he pumped a huge barbell up and down over his head. He looked like something straight out of a bodybuilding magazine. He was sweaty and shirtless, and his muscular body gleamed like polished marble in the light. I thought back to the blindfold. It had been sexy and fun, but it was better to see Xavier than not.

“Ahem,” I said, pushing off the wall and walking toward him.

“Oh, hey.” He looked surprised to see me. “Is everything okay?”

“I don’t know…” I hesitated, not knowing the right way to bring it up. I couldn’t just blurt out that I’d talked to Ava, who’d planted a seed of doubt in my head. I had to play it a little cooler than that, even though cool was the last thing I felt at the moment. “You were acting a little strange earlier. *Is* everything okay? We were kissing and everything…” I trailed off as Ava’s “fantasy” comment played through my mind once again.

“Cali, what is it? What’s on your mind?” Xavier wiped off his forehead and slung a towel over one of his broad, strong shoulders, a concerned expression etched onto his face.

Looking at his amazing body and his handsome face only made me think about how hard it had to be for Ava to resist him. No matter how afraid I was of what the answer might be, I had to ask him.

“Xavier, did something happen?”

**Episode 2357**

XAVIER

I paused for a moment and put on my best poker face. So, she’d noticed that I’d had to stop earlier. Shit.

I’d hoped that she hadn’t suspected anything, but how could she not? I couldn’t recall ever putting on the brakes like that with Cali before. Usually, I was doing whatever it took to get next to her—to be against her, for that matter—so it was no surprise that she’d found my behavior a little suspicious.

I sighed and wiped my face again with my towel, just to give my hands something to do while I tried to decide how to get out of this. I wanted to tell her that it was nothing, but that would be a lie, right? How, exactly, was I supposed to answer her question? The only thing that had really happened was in my head.

*Ava is in my head, and no matter what I do, I can’t get her out.*

I was still so angry at myself for how I’d thought about Ava while I was kissing Cali, and then I’d gone one step further and gotten off to thoughts of her in the shower, too. Things were starting to spin out of control, and there was nothing I hated more than losing control.

Cali wanted to know if anything had happened between Ava and me, but the truth was, nothing *had* happened—at least in a physical sense. I didn’t know if that was better or worse.

*If I go down this road with Cali, she’ll only get hurt—no matter how much she’s trying to be understanding. But I don’t want to lie, not to Cali.*

I stepped close to her, hating to see the worried look on her face.

“I was distracted,” I said finally. “About Greyson, Aysel, Ava, the baking contest… I’m sorry that I let all that get in the way.”

I forced a smile and kissed Cali on the forehead. I lingered there for a minute before she leaned back so that she could look me in the eye.

“You could have just told me that, you know.”

“I’m telling you now!” I snapped. *Okay, I’m definitely on edge.* I was being short with Cali because I was feeling guilty. I knew that I wasn’t being totally open, and I was punishing Cali for my own turmoil. But even though I knew that, it didn’t help the annoyance creeping up around my resolve.

“Excuse me?” Cali pushed away from me and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Nothing—I’m sorry. Let’s just drop it, okay? You asked, I answered.”

I turned away from her and tried to occupy myself with adding more weight to the barbell at my feet. With a deep breath, I picked up the barbell and did a few hard curls, my mind racing a mile a minute. I gritted my teeth and lifted the barbell over my head, then pumped it up and down as fast as I could while keeping my eyes on my reflection.

*That extra weight is doing the trick. I need to burn off some of this pent-up energy… and sexual frustration.*

“Stop it, Xavier! Why are you acting like this?”

I dropped the weights to the floor with a crash. “What am I ‘acting like,’ exactly?”

“You’re acting like your old self,” Cali whispered.

“My old self? There is no ‘old me,’ Cali. No ‘new me,’ either. I’m the same as I ever was.”

“That’s not true, Xavier, and you know it. We’re supposed to be honest with each other, and you’ve been doing a good job of that, up until now.”

“What, are you saying that I’m lying?” I wasn’t lying. Not really, but it hurt to think that Cali didn’t trust me.

“No, I’m saying that you’re acting like an asshole right now.”

That stung. *It’s true. I* am *acting like an asshole.* “I’m… I—I’m sorry, Cali.”

Cali got in my face. “Tell me the truth. Was what happened earlier because of Ava?”

She might as well have just jabbed me with a cattle prod with the way my entire body jolted to attention at her words, but I covered nicely with a snort. “Ava? Please. Stop obsessing over Ava. I’m doing all I can to work that out, and having you constantly rubbing it in my face isn’t helping in the least.”

Cali narrowed her eyes. “Are you kidding me right now? The last thing I want is to rub Ava in your face.” Her cheeks were flushed.

“Then why do you keep bringing her up?” I asked.

I was in a downward spiral, and I just couldn’t stop directing my anger at myself and my actions right at Cali. It was easier to deflect than to even begin to describe the intensity of what my wolf felt for Ava. If Cali knew even the half of it, she wouldn’t be able to handle it.

“I’m bringing her up all the time because she’s always here, always getting in our way. Every time I turn around, she’s standing there with that self-important, smug look on her face, and I’m tired of it! I know that you’re dealing with the mate bond between you, and I understand better than anyone what you’re going through, but that doesn’t make this any easier for me! Don’t you get that?”

“Well maybe if you stop bringing her up every five seconds it *would* get a little easier for you!” I turned back to my weights, but I didn’t pick them up just yet.

“Fine!” Cali huffed, before walking out of the room without looking back.

“Shit!” I hissed, slamming my fist into my palm. I felt battered and beaten and irritated all at once.

*If I’m going to be angry at anyone, why Cali? I love her! She’s my mate. What the fuck is wrong with me?*

If anything, my anger should have been focused on the source of all this—Ava.

I heaved a sigh and picked up the barbell once more. It felt heavier all of a sudden. I managed to get a few reps in, but my heart just wasn’t in it. I put the weights down and glanced toward the door. I wanted nothing more than to go after Cali, but she was mad and I was mad—and that wasn’t a good combination. I knew I could’ve handled things better, but Cali’s insecurities over Ava were killing me. It was bad enough that my wolf was constantly on the prowl for Ava, but to have Cali constantly reminding me of it wasn’t helping. I was getting more and more upset as time passed, and my stomach was in knots.

With Greyson off to play with the moon princess, I’d had a better chance than usual to go and comfort Cali, especially knowing how upset she had to be about Aysel and Greyson. Instead, I’d blown up at her and ruined everything, and I had no idea how to fix it.

“You idiot!” Lola snapped as she stomped into the room. “I just saw Cali. What did you do?”

*Uh-oh. She’s super pissed.* “Take it easy, Lola.”

“I’m not going to take it easy, Xavier! I agreed to help you with your Ava problem, remember? Then you go and hurt Cali!”

I winced at the thought. “I hate to break it to you, but your last offer didn’t work out so well—the whole ‘I should just fuck Ava’ thing? Not your best work, if I may say. The only thing you managed to do with that little piece of advice is make Cali obsess over Ava even more.”

Lola cackled. “You should really look in the mirror, Xavier. *You’re* the one who’s obsessing. If you want my help, you’re going to have to do a better job of looking out for Cali throughout all this.”

“I’m not even sure I want your help. Who knows who else you’ll suggest I bang it out with?”

“Well, at least I was trying to solve the Ava problem instead of sticking my head in the sand and pretending that nothing’s wrong—which seems to be your plan at the moment. I’m going to help you whether you want me to or not, but it won’t be for your sake—it’ll be for Cali’s. I hate to see her going through all this.”

“Lola, I get that Cali’s your friend and you love her and want to look out for her, but this isn’t helping. So if you don’t mind, could you leave? I don’t need to be reminded of what just happened with Cali, and you should know me well enough by now to know that I don’t respond well to threats.”

I turned away from her, picked up a couple of hand weights, and lifted them in a slow rhythm, relishing the resistance. It helped to clear my head a little. A *very* little.

“Xavier, that is rich—”

“Despite what you may think, Cali is my mate and I love her. I appreciate that you’re there for her and all, but what happens between me and Cali is our business, and it doesn’t include everyone in the pack house. It’s between me and Cali. Period.”

Lola held her ground. “I’m Cali’s best friend. Don’t ever forget that.” She crossed her arms. “So, do you want my help or not?”

**Episode 2358**

GREYSON

The Black Moon Club wasn’t much farther now. I’d activated voice assist on my GPS, since thinking about how I’d left Cali behind had already caused me to ignore the map and miss a few turns. I just couldn’t stop seeing the look she’d had on her face. It had said everything that I knew she’d been struggling to keep to herself—that she didn’t want me to do this, that she wanted me to stay home with her, that she would worry about me the entire time I was gone… All the same, I knew she understood why I was doing it. *For us.*

I steeled myself as my GPS suddenly directed me to make the next turn. I cursed under my breath as I missed it. I glanced at the map as it recalculated my route. My head wasn’t in the game right now, and that needed to change—I had to bring my A-game tonight if I wanted all of this to work. Luckily, there wasn’t much traffic in this little town, so I was able to make a U-turn, and then I made my way down the right street. It led to a bunch of little mom and pop restaurants and a few bars that looked closed and super run-down. Granted, I didn’t know Aysel all that well, but it didn’t look like the sort of neighborhood she would frequent.

I drove slowly, gazing into the darkened windows and noticing how deserted the streets were, trying to make sense of the area. I’d just started to worry that I’d taken a wrong turn somewhere when the GPS announced that I’d arrived.

*Huh? This really doesn’t seem like the right place.*

I slowed to a stop in front of a large, shabby building. There was sign on the front door announcing that it was closed for a private event, which indicated that maybe this was the place after all. It was still so strange to me that Aysel would want to meet here. The building—and everything around it—looked like the kind of place Aysel would avoid so she wouldn’t get her expensive shoes dirty.

I parked and got out. I smelled werewolves as I approached the building, along with something else. I rounded the corner to see two bouncers and a line of people waiting in the alley. One of the people looked at me and flashed his teeth.

*Vampire. I knew I smelled something rotten. Is this one of those seedy but somehow classy all-supernatural clubs?* I shifted to high alert. *Exactly how many potential enemies can I count on being in there?*

There weren’t all that many supernatural-only haunts in the area, so the few places that there were tended to draw people from all over, which upped my chances of running into someone I might not want to see, or who might not want to see me. But I couldn’t think about any of that right now. I had to keep my eye on the prize.

I relaxed as best I could and got in line. When it was my turn, the bouncer nailed me to the spot with a harsh glare.

“I was invited,” I said quickly.

“Well, if you were invited, then I’m sure you know the code,” the bouncer said.

“The code?” I pulled out my phone and paged through Aysel’s text messages. None of what she’d sent seemed like a secret code.

At a loss, I was about to excuse myself from holding up the line when someone ran a warm hand down my arm.

“He’s with me.” Aysel was dressed in a flowy silver dress, and her hair was in a thick French braid that trailed down her back. She was draped with sparkling, delicate jewelry, and she smelled good, too. She leaned into me the way a normal date would as she smiled at the bouncers. “Lemon drop.”

“What?” I pulled away from her, confused.

Aysel laughed and pulled me close again. “That’s the code, silly!”

The bouncer nodded and stepped aside to let us in.

We made our way down a dark hallway, and I could hear low ambient electronic music as we entered a dimly lit room filled with people sitting in booths, perched at the bar, and standing at clusters of high-top tables. It was the kind of place that wasn’t exactly loud, but where you still couldn’t make out anyone else’s conversations.

Aysel led me to the bar. “What would you like to drink?”

She snaked her arm through mine and rubbed her fingers along the bare skin of my forearm.

Despite myself, I was suddenly hit by how gorgeous she looked tonight. I immediately pulled my arm away. *Get it together, Greyson!* Why was I suddenly so struck by her? Was it because of the curse? The “Seluna bond”? I didn’t quite believe in the Seluna bond nonsense, but I definitely felt something simmering between us, subtle as it was. Whatever that “something” was, I would be doing my best to ignore it.

I took a deep, quiet breath and tried to keep anything from showing on my face. I had to play things exactly right. I wanted Aysel to think that I was into her, but not *too* into her, because I knew that she’d latch on to that and work it to her advantage. Like a predator. I also didn’t want to look at her with even a hint of what she might perceive as disinterest. My goal was to play her tonight, and I had to remember that—no matter how I felt about Cali. My love for her was the reason I was here tonight, and I had to get what we needed to remove the revulsion curse by (almost) any means necessary. I didn’t know how much longer I’d be able to avoid touching Cali, kissing her, feeling her body against mine… I needed the curse gone. Now.

With renewed fervor and focus, I looked down at Aysel and turned on a bit more charm. “I thought I was taking *you* out tonight?”

Aysel tilted her head toward me. “Oh, well in that case, I’d like a martini. Dirty.”

I laughed, and Aysel batted her eyelashes.

“What? Was it something I said?”

“No, not at all,” I teased. I caught the bartender’s attention and ordered two martinis, which we took to a booth in a quiet corner of the room. As soon as we sat down, I couldn’t help but be hyperaware of Aysel’s closeness. I recalled how close we’d gotten in the palace, and how intoxicating she could be.

“Sorry again about what happened at the cottage,” Aysel said out of nowhere. “I have to admit that I thought it would go differently—the bond of Seluna is a strong thing, but I know that I went about things the wrong way. I hope you won’t hold that against me?”

“Big of you to apologize for that. Thanks,” I said, surprised.

“Thank *you* for inviting me out. I was so pleased to get your note. But I have to admit, it’s much better to have your phone number. Now you’re reachable at any time. Day *or* night.” She smiled as she took a sip of her drink. She paused to adjust the thread-thin strap that had slid down her shoulder, and my eyes followed the movement with interest before I managed to tear my gaze away.

*Eyes off the merchandise, Greyson.* I needed to stay focused, and I couldn’t help but remember what Xavier had said about getting in over my head. I might not have been drowning just yet, but I could definitely feel the water rising. I had to get a grip. I was here to play her, not the other way around.

I reached over and helped with the strap, allowing my fingers to brush against hers. I was surprised by the sudden pull I felt toward her. It wasn’t like a mate bond, but it was enough to stir my wolf awake, deep inside me.

Aysel glanced down at where my hand lingered on her shoulder. “For such a strong Alpha, you have a soft touch. I bet you know how to handle yourself in all sorts of slippery situations.” Aysel ran her fingers along mine before I pulled away.

*Don’t rush it. Take it slow.* I needed to tease her, play with her, draw her in. If I laid it on too thick after everything that had happened before now, she’d probably get suspicious, and if I didn’t lay it on thick enough, she would shut down. The stakes were high. If this didn’t work, I wasn’t sure how I was going to get her to remove the curse, so I had to play it cool and keep the upper hand.

I picked up my drink, hoping that Aysel missed the nearly imperceptible shaking in my wrist.

*Remember why you’re here.* I thought of Cali, and my nerves calmed. I was doing this for us. *For our relationship, and for our sex life*, I thought, with no small amount of bitterness.

Aysel kept her eyes on me as she sipped her drink. She plucked the olive from her glass and made a show of eating it slowly before licking her lips and smiling.

“I’m curious, Greyson.” She leaned in close, so close that I could feel the heat rolling off her body and washing over me in incensing waves. She brushed her foot up and down my leg softly. “Why did you really want to see me tonight?”

**Episode 2359**

MARTA

I was hiding out in my room and still feeling quite shaken up by what had happened with the mirror in Big Mac’s room. I should’ve known that tampering with anything of Big Mac’s was a bad idea, but I was desperate to help Lilac, by any means necessary. I hadn’t known what to expect from a mirror portal, but I hadn’t expected *that*. It had been bad enough when Big Mac’s cat had disappeared into the mirror’s depths and I’d had to scramble to get him back, but then that creature—or whatever it was—had shown up and had taken things to a horrifying new level. I could almost feel it clamping down on me, like it was happening right at that moment. It had tried its hardest to suck me in. Only Cali and I had seen the creature, and it had wanted me to come over to the other side with it. Worst of all, it had spoken to me.

*Was it a spirit? Or something else?* I shuddered as I relived those tense moments when I’d thought it was going to pull me through into the spirit world. What could it have been? *I need to do more research, but I’ll have to be discreet about it.*

Something rubbed against my foot, and I screamed, nearly jumping out of my skin as I pictured the shadowy creature grabbing me and yanking me into the mirror. I looked down. It was only Lion.

“What are you doing following me? Haven’t you gotten me into enough trouble?”

I kind of wanted the cat to go away—I didn’t want it to lead Big Mac right to me in case she came looking for it later—but it was just so darn cute. I scooped Lion up into my arms, and he purred happily. Looking at Lion made me think about Bert, who had been deathly afraid of cats and had never allowed any into the house.

I scratched Lion’s head.

*If he’s upset about what happened in the mirror, he sure isn’t showing it. Maybe I should be careful. He’s Big Mac’s cat after all, and Big Mac* is *a witch.*

I put Lion down, and he rubbed himself against my ankles as he purred. I looked closely at his adorable face. Could he be spying on me? If Big Mac ever found out about what we’d done with the mirror, the bracelets on my wrists would be the least of my worries.

*Violet and Cali wouldn’t say anything, right?*

I didn’t think they would, since they’d be in just as much trouble with Big Mac if she found out. I only hoped Xavier wouldn’t tell.

Violet came walking in. “Aw! Glad to see that you and Lion are BFFs.” She closed the door behind her. “How are you doing? That was scary as hell, earlier.”

“Right? I hope Lilac doesn’t find out.” I could already imagine the lecture he would give me about being careful, minding my magic probation, and not putting my safety at risk to get his wolf back. He’d probably never let me out of his sight again if he found out what I’d done.

“Same. If he does find out, I think he’ll be pretty upset. He wants his wolf back, I don’t doubt that at all, but not at the expense of you putting yourself in danger.” Violet reached down and patted Lion as he wove in between her legs.

“I know, he would be miffed for sure. I just want to help him, and he won’t let me do it… So really, I have no choice but to sneak around. I’m definitely not interested in being pulled over to the other side by some mysterious creature, though. I think I need to figure out what that thing was. If it was a spirit, it clearly wanted me for some reason. But why? It said ‘you should be in here.’ I definitely don’t want to be in there, and I can’t imagine why the hell I *should* be.”

Maybe the spirit wanted to tell me something—or maybe it wanted to have me for lunch. Either way, I was going to be more careful next time.

Violet stroked her chin. “I wonder if it’s a good spirit or a bad spirit? I don’t think a good spirit would try to drag someone into a mirror against their will, but who knows? Maybe we shouldn’t speculate. Especially when I have a better idea.” Violet tapped the laptop she’d brought with her. “Let’s check out that blog.”

She opened her laptop, and the screen popped open to Rain’s blog. We scrolled through a few entries before we found something of interest.

“Look, there are stories here about supernaturals who got sucked into the spirit realm and managed to get back,” I said. “A werewolf and a vampire.”

“So, it canbe done,” Violet said. “Who knew that mirrors were so popular among the supernatural crowd?”

“Yup, and in a few of the cases, they also encountered dark spirit creatures that tried to trap and kill them. Not so good. The creature I saw was definitely dark. I wonder if it would have tried to kill me if it had managed to pull me over to the other side?”

I jumped when Lion meowed. *Hmm. Is that a good sign or a bad one?* I realized that I was spooking myself. I just had to remember that I was doing all of this for Lilac, and I was confident that I could get answers if I could just avoid getting pulled in next time.

“The good news is, if we did somehow get sucked in, we’d be able to get back out—as long as nothing killed us,” Violet said thoughtfully.

“That simple, huh? Just don’t get killed. I wonder if all the people who’ve been killed in the mirror spirit world had the same plan.”

Violet laughed. “Good point.”

I appreciated that Violet was on my side with this and trying to help me, but I wasn’t sure that I wanted to involve her. It didn’t seem like the safest place to take a friend, and it was bad enough that I was putting myself in danger. I didn’t think that Lilac would ever forgive me if I dragged Violet into this thing and she somehow got hurt.

“Hey, you two.” Lilac strolled into the room, and Violet and I both jumped.

*Guilty through and through.*

“Oh, hey, Lilac,” I said quickly. Violet slammed the laptop shut, trapping my finger. “Ouch! I mean, oh, I’m so happy you’re here!”

“What are you two looking at?” Lilac asked, giving us a suspicious look.

“YouTube!” Violet said.

“MyFace!” I said at the same time.

“Um, okay… Which one?” Lilac was even more suspicious now, but he looked pretty amused at the same time.

“YouTube,” Violet said. “You know Marta isn’t up on all the socials yet. She just got confused.” She shot me a look. “You’re thinking of *Facebook*, which is the one with the profile pictures and status updates, not the one with videos.”

“*Oh*,” I said, nodding and trying to look natural. It actually *was* new information for me, since I had no idea what either of those websites were.

Lilac chuckled. “Oh, yeah, she doesn’t know much about social media, and I kind of like that. She’s so pure and uncorrupted.” He flopped down on the bed, then sprawled out on his back and sighed. “I think I might have eaten too many cookies.”

I sat down next to him. “You want to rest?”

He sat up and laid his head on my shoulder. “No need, I already feel better.”

Violet rolled her eyes. “Okay, you two are cute and all, and I’m a fan, but I do *not* need to see my brother flirting. Why don’t we watch *Friends*?”

“Is that some kind of TV show?” I asked.

I wasn’t really in the mood to watch anything. I was still feeling quite rattled over the mirror monster, and I didn’t know how I was going to even sleep tonight with that thing on my brain. I just wanted to get Lilac’s wolf back and leave all this mirror portal business alone. I wanted so badly to ask Lilac about Plum, but I wasn’t sure how to bring it up—especially without making him suspicious.

“Whose cat is that?” Lilac pointed to Lion, who was perched on a shelf in the corner.

*When did he get up there?* “That’s Big Mac’s cat, Lion.”

“Really? Oh. I kind of find it hard to believe that Big Mac would have a cat. She seems more like a gremlin person.” Lilac smirked.

Violet laughed. “Totally. So, *Friends* it is!”

She opened the laptop, and my eyes went wide. The Rain blog was still up on the screen!

Lilac scrunched up his forehead and leaned forward to get a closer look. “What’s that—”

I grabbed Lilac’s face and kissed him.

“What was that for?” Lilac asked when we came up for air.

“Do I need a reason?”

Lilac grinned and reached for me.

“Okay, either we’re binge-watching something, or I’m out of here,” Violet grumbled.

Lilac laughed for a moment before he suddenly let out of piercing, anguished scream and curled up in pain.

**Episode 2360**

It didn’t take long for me to get tired of brooding in my room.

*Why should I isolate myself in misery just because Xavier’s got a chip on his shoulder today?*

He could brood all by himself if he wanted; I was going to go enjoy the rest of my evening.

I got up and went downstairs, thinking about how mad Lola had gotten about how much of an asshole Xavier was being. It was nice to have a friend as supportive as Lola, but I was concerned. Maybe I shouldn’t have told her. She could be a little hotheaded, and that wasn’t going to help anything. The last thing I wanted was for her to go and confront Xavier. He wasn’t in the mood, and I had a feeling that Lola getting involved would only make things worse—especially if she yelled at him.

I passed by one of the studies and stopped short when I saw my dad inside. He looked like he was wrapping something. I lingered in the doorway for a few seconds before I went in.

He nearly jumped out of his skin in surprise. “Oh! Cali!” He pressed a hand to his chest.

“Hey, Dad, didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Oh, it’s okay, honey. I was worried that it was your mother. I hid away in here to wrap her Christmas gift.” He held up a little herb garden. “Do you think she’ll like it? You know your mother loves plants, and the winter is so hard on her since she can’t go out to tend the garden. So I thought I’d bring the garden to her.”

“That’s a great gift, Dad, she’ll love it. So thoughtful of you.” I looked closer to admire it. It really was cute, and my mom was definitely going to love it.

He looked relieved. “I’m glad to hear that. One time I bought your mother a used copy of a biography on Pat Boone. She donated it to the library a week later. I’ve been trying to do better every Christmas since.”

I laughed. “Remember that time you bought her that ice cream maker, and then you were the only one who ended up using it?”

“Yeah, I remember that like it was yesterday.” He chuckled. “I got pretty good at it, too, except when it came to the banana and rice flavor. Maybe brown rice in ice cream wasn’t such a good idea.” He shrugged. “Who knew?

“You live and learn,” I said. “No one can ever accuse you of not taking risks in the kitchen, that’s for sure.”

We both laughed as he turned back to finish wrapping the gift. I realized then that I needed to get my parents gifts, too. I quickly ran through a few ideas in my mind, thinking about what they might need that they would never buy for themselves. I’d have to give it more thought, but at least I knew what I *wasn’t* going to get my father. He already had a closet full of neckties, so I could cross that off the list. My mother was actually easier to shop for, even though my dad clearly didn’t think so.

“Oh, I meant to ask how your dinner with Greyson went,” he said. “It looked so romantic that I didn’t want to interrupt you two.”

I smiled. “It *was* romantic.” *Unlike what just happened with Xavier.*

Oblivious to my loaded pause, my dad asked, “So, what was the important pack business that Greyson had to leave you for?”

I was caught immediately off-guard. How exactly was I supposed to be explain to my father what Greyson was really up to?

“Greyson told me that he had a little pack business to deal with. I figured that if he had to leave you after such a romantic gesture, it had to be something important.”

I’d successfully managed to be mildly at peace with Greyson’s decision, and chatting about Christmas presents had helped, but now it all came rushing back, and my stomach started to churn. I had a flash of them sitting in the club, snuggled up under strobe lights and sipping champagne.

*I hope they’re having an awful time, even though I know I need them to have a* good *time! Argh!*

I shrugged, doing my best to appear unaffected. “Oh, it was something to do with the Vanguard pack.”

It was better to keep it vague. I couldn’t tell my dad everything, but I didn’t want to lie to him, either.

“Can you give me a hand with this part?” He cut a length of ribbon and wrapped it around the box.

“Oh, sure.” I leaned over to hold down the ribbon as he taped it to the wrapping paper.

“Thanks, you’re the best.” He looked up at me. “Hey, is everything okay? You look a little… pensive.”

*No. Nothing’s okay. I’m starting to feel like my entire life is spiraling out of control and everything is weird and strained between me and my mates.*

I wanted to blurt everything out, but there was no way I was going to get my dad all worried and wrapped up in my love life. Still, I was craving a bit of fatherly advice from him.

“How did you do it?” I asked him. “When Mom was sick, you never gave up hope. You were always right by her side, cheering her on. Didn’t you ever just get overwhelmed and want to walk away?”

Dad frowned. “Never. Not even once. I love your mom, and sticking by the person you love during all the awful stuff is what you do when you really love and care for someone.”

I let his words sink in. “You make it sound so simple. You stay by the people you love, no matter what.”

He nodded. “That’s the idea. It’s not always easy, but it’s not supposed to be.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I leaned over and hugged him. I felt so lucky to have a dad like him. He was so sweet and thoughtful and loyal. I wanted so badly to be all of those things for my mates, and I definitely wanted the same from them.

“You’re welcome, but what are you thanking me for?”

“For loving me. For loving Mom. For loving Artemis.”

“Well, I have to say that you three make it easy.”

I gave my dad one final squeeze before I left him to his wrapping. Nothing in my life seemed as simple as my dad had tried to make it out, especially when the reality was that one of the people I loved was being a big jerk, and the other was at a sexy nightclub with someone who wasn’t me.

Violet’s scream broke me out of my thoughts, and seconds later, she came sprinting down the stairs in full-blown panic mode. “Cali, thank god, it’s Lilac! Come quick! And have you seen Torin?”

Right on cue, Torin came spinning out of the den with a VR headset on. He banged into the wall and then nearly tripped up the stairs. “Am I doing this right?”

Ravi came running behind him with a game controller in his hands. “Uh, no, not quite. You need to slow down.” He plucked the headset off Torin’s head.

I grabbed Violet. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know! Something happened to Lilac. He’s in a lot of pain.” Violet grabbed Torin’s hand and pulled him upstairs. “You have to come heal my brother!”

“We’re right behind you!” I called out.

Violet’s screams had attracted quite the crowd, and Mrs. Smith, my parents, and Ravi were right behind me as I raced upstairs. I couldn’t even begin to think how Lilac had hurt himself. Had he fallen? Eaten something that didn’t agree with him? Whatever it was, Violet was absolutely beside herself.

Everyone crowded around Marta’s door and looked in. Marta had Lilac in her arms, and he was clutching at his legs, which were bleeding. A lot.

*Oh no. This doesn’t look good.*

Xavier came pushing through the crowd and rushed to Lilac’s side, giving me a quick, awkward glance as he passed.

“What happened?” His voice was authoritative and firm as he surveyed the scene.

Lilac grimaced as he tried to explain. “Plum… Ah!”

He was in too much pain to talk, and he buried his head in Marta’s lap.

I looked around. “Plum… He’s not here. What’s he talking about? Is he delirious? Is he in shock? Should we get him a blood transfusion or something?”

Ravi frowned. “No! Bad idea.” He cast a meaningful glance at Ava, who’d just come up the steps and was hanging back a little, watching everything unfold.

I stared at her for a moment, barely resisting the urge to tell her to get lost. This was pack business, and she wasn’t part of the pack—but now wasn’t the time, and I knew that.

I turned back around and stood on my tiptoes so that I could see over everyone’s heads. Everyone seemed a little freaked out, and no one crossed the threshold. I supposed that was a good thing, since crowding Lilac right now might have made things worse. I still couldn’t quite figure out what exactly had happened to him, but his legs looked even worse than I’d first thought. It was almost as if something had bitten him—and taken a chunk out of his leg while they were at it. It was a gruesome sight, to say the least.

Xavier turned to face us. “Who the hell did this?”

**Episode 2361**

GREYSON

I hadn’t expected Aysel to come right on out and ask me my intentions, though it was more than a fair question after our previous interactions, where I’d behaved as if I didn’t want anything to do with her. Still, it wasn’t like I was going to be upfront and tell her, “Oh, I asked you out so that I could fake seduce you into getting rid of the pesky curse that makes me want to puke if I get too close to my mate.” Typically, I believed that honesty was the best policy, but saying that would be a little too on the nose. I decided to do the only thing that would work in a situation like this: turn up the charm.

With surprising ease, I tapped into the way I used to be with women before I’d met Cali—before everything had totally changed for me.

I scooted closer to Aysel and leaned in to whisper in her ear. “I thought it was obvious why I asked you here tonight. I was glad you reached out to me.” I picked up my martini and held it up for a toast. “To new beginnings.”

Aysel clinked her glass against mine. “To new beginnings.”

I held her gaze as we both sipped from our glasses. The martini was definitely on the strong side, but it was good. Aysel crossed her arms over her chest and leaned against the table, affording me a full view of her cleavage. I immediately snapped my eyes up to meet hers.

*She’s really pulling out all the stops tonight, isn’t she?*

It almost would’ve been comical if she hadn’t put a curse on me.

Aysel was a princess, and admittedly beautiful. She could probably get anyone she wanted, and yet here she was, throwing herself at me without even a shred of shame. In fact, I wondered if a woman like Aysel ever felt shame about anything. I was sure that everything she was doing right now had effectively seduced many people, and there had absolutely been a time in my not so distant past when I would’ve gone for it, too. Back then, under different circumstances, we would have both expected to end up in bed together by the time the night was over. There would’ve been no question about it. But that wasn’t the way things were for me anymore.

*But* *what is it about me that makes her so interested that she would go to these lengths to get me?*

If it weren’t for, well, *everything*, I’d have been really damn flattered. But Aysel was crazy and vindictive, so it was a non-starter.

“Did you hear me?” Aysel said, breaking through my thoughts.

“What?”

Aysel smirked. “I asked how you became Alpha.” She picked up her drink and swirled the last olive around as she leaned forward to show even more cleavage. “Unless there’s something else you’d rather talk about? You do look like you have something on your mind.”

She smiled and dipped her tongue into her glass like a cat lapping at milk before winking at me, then she tipped the glass to her lips and took a generous sip.

*God, she’s laying it on thick.*

I fumbled for a moment, trying to get my bearings. Had I really not heard her question?

I eyed my drink. I’d watched the bartender make it. Plus, I was a werewolf, so it shouldn’t have been affecting me so easily, but I definitely felt a little buzzed. Maybe more than a little.

I cleared my throat. “Well, I used to be a Rogue. I kicked up a lot of trouble and sewed my wild oats and all that. It wasn’t a bad life. Then I came back to the Redwood pack to help protect the pack—and my brothers—from an outside threat.”

I decided to leave out the part about that threat being our own father.

“I must admit I am surprised by such a story. So, your brother Xavier wasn’t Alpha at the time?”

I shook my head. “No, but he wanted to be. I won the position in a Lupo Finale. It was how it had to be.” I thought about adding more, but I didn’t. There was no reason to tell her too much. Just enough would do.

Aysel placed her hand on my bicep. It felt so soft and warm. “It must be so difficult for you to be at odds with your brother. I can’t imagine being at odds with Lucian for the throne. I hope that I’m never put in that position.”

“No, it’s not pleasant, but we’re dealing with it.” I didn’t want to say too much about the rift between Xavier and me—it would make us appear weak, fractured. “But I have to admit that I’m surprised to hear that from you.” I wasn’t going to touch her comment about the role of Alpha being a “throne.” “I don’t know you very well, of course, but I guess I find it strange that a strong woman like you wouldn’t jump at the chance to be in a position of power. I guess that means you’re good with always just going along with whatever Lucian says? Just curious.” I smiled, keeping up the charm.

Aysel smiled back. “It’s a fine question, and I get why it may not seem to… go along with my personality. But I simply don’t want the position—if I had it, it would mean that my brother was dead. Unless he had a Luna, and they had an heir.”

That piqued my interest. Lucian seemed content to be single and free to bed any woman who crossed his path—or at least that was the impression I’d gotten. Was a Luna something that Lucian wanted? I wondered what that meant for Cali. Lucian had done everything he could to show that he was interested in her as more than just an ally.

*And who can forget their little kiss in the baths that “had” to happen?*

Even thinking about that aggravated me all over again. The whole thing had been a huge mess. I couldn’t shake the feeling that Lucian had scammed Xavier and me into watching him kiss our mate while we’d just stood by and let it happen. Meanwhile, Cali still had the handprints, and we were both still cursed.

I pushed those thoughts away and returned my attention to Aysel. I didn’t want to drift off again.

Aysel slid close so that our thighs were touching. The smell of her perfume filled my nose, and it was distracting to say the least. “So, what about you? A strong Alpha deserves an equally strong Luna. Who will the lucky wolf be?”

“Good question,” I began. I wasn’t sure how to answer that. Obviously, I wanted Cali for my Luna, but I had a feeling that I probably shouldn’t admit that in this context.

“Sorry, I know that’s probably an unfair question. I know that Caliana is special to you, but I’ve also seen how she’s affected you and your brother.” Aysel arched an eyebrow at me, waiting to see how I would respond.

I was confused, and a little caught off-guard. “How do you know anything about that?”

She laughed. “How could I not know? It’s clear whenever you three are in the room together. That, and you two *did* both try to be Alpha and pass Cali off as Luna to both of you. I can imagine that it put you all through a lot of taxing emotions.”

“I suppose it’s not ideal,” I admitted. I was feeling a little anxious about this line of conversation, though I wasn’t quite sure why. Maybe it was all hitting a little too close to home. I didn’t want to expose the extent of the rift between Xavier and me, but I also hadn’t realized that the tension between us was so obvious.

“Anyway,” Aysel said smoothly, “I’m proud of you for reaching out to me and coming out with me tonight. I meant what I said about the ritual. The spell wasn’t meant to harm or burden you, Greyson, but rather open you up to the possibilities beyond the *due destini*. That’s all.” She leaned in closer, nearly brushing her breasts against my chest. “That is, if you’re open to exploring them—and you being here tonight means that you just might be.” She slid her hand onto my thigh.

I flinched at her touch, but I stayed put despite the alarm bells clanging in the back of my mind. I looked up at her, feeling strangely drawn in by her eyes. Again, I thought about Xavier’s warning about getting in over my head. It was starting to the feel like the water had risen to my chin and was getting higher by the second.

Aysel leaned in until she was only a breath away.

“So, are you open to it?” she asked.

Before I could even figure out how to answer her question, she crossed the remaining distance between us and kissed me.

**Episode 2362**

CHARLIE

I jumped at the sudden commotion upstairs. Without a moment’s hesitation, I ran up there to find everyone gathered around Lilac, who was looking weak and spent in Marta’s arms. She was stroking his hair and whispering in his ear, doing her best to comfort him. Lilac was pale as a ghost, and he had beads of sweat on his upper lip and forehead.

“Oh, Charlie!” Violet wailed as soon as she saw me. She looked like she was on the verge of tears as she ran into my arms and clung to me. “I’m so glad you’re here.” A few tears slid down her cheeks.

“It’s okay, Violet, don’t cry. What’s wrong with Lilac?” I rubbed her back, doing my best to try to comfort her, but I was worried myself. I was still getting to know Lilac, and we weren’t BFFs or anything, but he was Violet’s brother, and family mattered above all else.

“It’s his leg! It looks like something took a chunk out of it. It’s bleeding really badly, and he’s in a lot of pain. I hope Torin can heal him, but what if he can’t?” Violet buried her face in my chest again as she fought back sobs.

I held her tighter. *I can’t believe this is happening. She’s already lived through watching her brother die once. Is she going to have to endure that again?*

“Can anyone tell me what caused this?” Xavier asked.

“I’m not sure,” Torin said, “but I feel some sort of magical connection to the wound. I’m not sure why, but the magic seems to be radiating from the wound in strong waves…”

“Magical?” Marta asked, shaking her head. “How?”

“But how did he *get* the wound?” Xavier asked, clearly growing impatient.

“It’s Plum,” Lilac croaked. He tried to lift his head to look at Torin, but he was too weak.

“Don’t try to get up; just relax,” Marta whispered into his ear, pushing his hair back and looking deeply concerned.

*Plum? Isn’t that Lilac’s wolf? I thought they were physically separated right now… What does he mean?*

Torin got up to confer with Xavier, and though I couldn’t make out exactly what he was saying, I could hear the concern in his voice. I wondered if the magic that Torin had mentioned was impeding his ability to heal the wound.

Violet broke away and went to Lilac’s side. “What about Plum? Do you want him?”

“No, don’t worry about me,” Lilac groaned. “It’s Plum! You have to find him right away!” He winced and grabbed a handful of Marta’s shirt, clearly overcome by pain.

“Why?” Violet asked.

“He’s hurt! He needs help. *Please!*” Lilac hissed.

“Do you know where he is?”

Lilac opened his mouth to speak, but he couldn’t. He only managed to shake his head, and then he cried out in pain again. Marta gasped and pulled him closer, running a hand through his hair over and over.

Violet looked around the room. “How can we find Plum?”

I couldn’t stand to see the anguish in Violet’s eyes. I had to do something—anything—to fix this. I could tell that the rest of the pack was shocked, and while I wasn’t sure what I could do, I couldn’t just stand here and watch Lilac suffer while Violet suffered along with him.

“I’ll go find him,” I announced.

I figured I could use my hunter skills to track Plum down. Between that and my elevated wolf senses, I was sure I could do it. I was turning to head out when Violet stopped me.

“I’m coming, too.”

“No, Violet. I’m fine to go on my own.” I shot a glance at Lilac. His legs were in bad shape, and a pang of panic hit me in the stomach. *How much blood can someone lose before things get really bad?* “You should stay with your brother.”

I almost added “just in case” but decided against it. Violet was worried enough without me planting the idea that Lilac might not make it through this—but from the looks of things, that wasn’t far from the realms of possibility. Still, there was no way I was going to let that happen.

“I know my brother’s wolf best, Charlie, so I’m coming with you,” Violet said, her jaw set.

I immediately realized that this was one of those times where it was no use arguing with her, so I took her hand and we raced downstairs. I was determined, but I was also worried.

*What if I can’t track him down? How hurt is Lilac’s wolf, to cause so much damage to Lilac? Are we racing against a clock without even knowing the time?*

I was doing my best to stay hopeful and positive for Violet’s sake, but there were just so many unknowns, and it was clear that time was not on Lilac’s side.

We raced outside, and Violet wasted no time shifting. I did the same, realizing that we would probably be able to move much faster in wolf form. Tapping into my hunter instincts, combined with my sharp wolf vision, I scanned the ground for any tracks, since Plum had been hanging around the yard a lot lately, playing with Lilac. Wherever he was now, he’d probably started off here.

*I’ve got his scent!* Violet mind linked, before taking off into the woods.

*I’m right behind you!* I replied.

I was suddenly glad that Violet had come along—I probably would’ve missed Plum’s unfamiliar scent. I increased my speed and caught up with Violet while I kept my eyes on the ground to continue searching for tracks. I was using every ounce of stamina I had to keep up with Violet. She was moving with an urgency I’d never seen before, and I knew why—her brother was in agony, and she wanted to help. It made perfect sense. It was exactly how I felt about Violet—that I would do anything in the world for her. I could only imagine what I would do or how I would react if it were Violet lying up there bleeding and suffering, and I hoped I’d never have to find out.

We slowed as we came to a stream.

*I lost the scent*, Violet mind linked. *Plum must have crossed here somewhere, but where?*

She lifted her nose into the air as she looked around. *Shoot, I can’t pick it back up!*

She looked at me, and I could see the panic flashing in her eyes.

I leapt into the stream and examined both sides of the bank. I didn’t have to search for long before I spotted paw prints leading into the stream, not far from where Violet was standing. I looked along the opposite bank, and sure enough, I saw the trail leading away into the thick cover of woods on the other side.

*Follow me!* I mind linked.

We raced ahead, following the trail.

*I’ve got his scent again, but it’s harder to single out—there are a lot of unfamiliar scents floating around out here*, Violet said.

*I’m finding it harder to single out Plum’s tracks, too. There are a bunch of other wolf prints jumbled up with them*, I said.

I had a sudden thought, and my heartbeat quickened. Was this some sort of trap? Could the Vanguard pack have set us up? Maybe they’d kidnapped Plum to lure the Redwoods out and were planning to ambush us at any second. Xavier and Greyson seemed to think they had the Vanguards under control, but I knew better than most how unpredictable people could be, and now I was questioning whether it was wise to have Violet out here after all. She’d already been through enough and had just narrowly avoided being seriously injured—or worse—by Zachery, who was the very model of unpredictability. What would be the point of saving Plum if I lost Violet in the process?

I skidded to a stop, and Violet stopped too once she realized that I was no longer following her.

She looked over her shoulder. *What is it?*

*I want you to stay here, Violet.*

*Excuse me?*

*We don’t know what we’re up against. I think it’s a little too risky, and I’m sure that the last thing Lilac would want is for you to put yourself in danger—even for Plum.*

Violet growled. *Charlie Kim! I am a werewolf, and I was a werewolf long before you! Don’t pull that crap on me.*

*Violet, I know that you’re experienced and can hold your own and all that, believe me, but I don’t want to—*

*I don’t care what you want! I’m going to find Plum! Are you coming or not?*

I should’ve known that there was no way I was going to be able to talk her out of this. *Okay. Let’s go, but will you at least let me take the lead?*

Without waiting for her answer, I moved ahead of her, and we kept following the trail until I could no longer make it out. Why were there so many wolf prints? My ears perked up as a collective howl rang out, answering the question.

Violet and I both came to a sudden stop. A pack of wolves stood blocking our path, and they looked ready to attack.

Behind them, Plum was sprawled out on the ground, weak and whimpering, his leg caught in a silver trap.

**Episode 2363**

As Torin worked to heal Lilac, my mother cleared her throat and spoke up. “I know we’re all here to support Lilac, but I think that everyone but Marta should leave. Let’s give them some space.”

I hated to leave Marta and Lilac like this, but my mom was probably right.

I passed Dani on my way out. She was staring into the room, her eyes wide and frightened. I knew that this had to be quite a shock to her.

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

Dani nodded. “Is Lilac going to be all right?”

“We hope so,” I said, casting a quick glance over my shoulder into the room. “Torin is an amazing healer, so Lilac’s in good hands.”

I didn’t want to mention that Torin looked a little worried, but even so, I was confident that he would be able to bring Lilac out of this.

Mrs. Smith came over to join us.

“I’ll take care of Dani,” she said, placing a reassuring hand on Dani’s shoulder. “How about a nice hot cup of white chocolate mocha?” I heard her saying as she led Dani downstairs.

I watched them go, my stomach in knots. I was starting to wonder if bringing Dani here had been the right thing to do. It wasn’t like this was a calm place—or even the safest. There never really seemed to be a moment’s peace at the pack house.

I turned to head to my room, only to run right smack into Xavier where he stood leaning against the wall. In light of everything that was going on with Lilac, suddenly my anger with him seemed small and petty, but I was still upset with him.

I took a deep breath, trying to decide how to let him know what he’d done wrong without being accusatory and starting another argument. “Listen, I—”

“You should know that—” Xavier began at the same time, cutting me off as we tried to talk over each other.

“I don’t want to fight,” I said quickly.

“Neither do I.”

*At least we can both agree on that.* I stared at him, waiting. He seemed to be waiting, too. *Isn’t he going to apologize? He certainly owes me an apology after the way he spoke to me!*

He wasn’t quite forgiven, but I still wanted to hear it.

“If you don’t want to fight,” I said, “then what do you want?”

“I don’t like being called an asshole,” he said simply.

I clenched my fists. “That didn’t sound like an apology.”

I started to move past him, but then there was a commotion as the front door slammed open downstairs.

“Help! Help us!”

“That sounds like Violet and Charlie!” I said, already rushing to the top of the staircase. I gasped at the sight of Charlie and Violet, carrying Plum’s limp form up the stairs. There was a lot of blood, and I raced off to get towels. When I got back, Violet and Charlie were talking to Xavier.

“We found him caught in a silver trap,” Violet said. “Some real wolves were there trying to help. I’m just glad that Charlie and I got there before Plum hurt himself more by thrashing around.”

Violet and Charlie carried Plum into Lilac’s room and laid him on the floor beside the bed.

“Plum,” Lilac said weakly. He tried to reach for his wolf, but he was too weak. If it hadn’t been for Marta’s quick reflexes, he probably would’ve tumbled out of the bed.

I knelt on the floor beside Plum and pressed towels to his wound in an attempt to sop up the blood.

“Lift the towels, Cali, so I can see the wound,” Torin said, gently pushing me aside.

“It was a silver trap!” Violet repeated.

I shuddered, remembering how Greyson had nearly died from silver poisoning, and how Violet had suffered as well when that hunter had used silver on her. Silver was fast becoming my least favorite precious metal.

“Do you think it’s a leftover trap from when the hunters were here? Maybe they forgot it?” I suggested.

Charlie nodded. “Maybe,” he said distractedly. He looked almost as upset as Violet.

Torin was already hard at work on healing Plum. He pressed his hands flat against the wound for a few seconds before he withdrew them and pulled out a knife. He used it to slice his palm, and then he held his hand out, dripping his blood into the gash on Plum’s leg.

“Will Fae blood work the same for Plum?” I asked.

Torin nodded, his brow knitted in concentration as he held his hand steady over Plum’s wound. “We have to assume that Plum, as a wolf, will heal with Fae blood the same way that a werewolf would. For good measure, I’ll drop some into Lilac’s wound, too.” Torin’s expression relaxed, and he suddenly seemed upbeat. “Looks like it’s working!” he said, leaning close and examining Plum’s leg.

Plum whimpered softly, but his eyes already looked more alert and focused. Lilac, however, still looked pale and weak. He couldn’t even hold his head up long enough to watch Plum.

“How are you feeling, Lilac?” I asked, trying to keep the panic out of my voice. He didn’t look good, and I was struggling to keep my mind from going to the worst-case scenario.

“It doesn’t hurt as much as it did before,” Lilac rasped. He tried again to get up, but Marta placed a hand on his shoulder, holding him in place.

“Not so fast, Lilac. You need to rest,” she said.

Torin rose to his feet. “Okay, everyone out!” He ushered everyone toward the door. “We need to let Lilac and Plum get some rest. I’ll come find all of you later with a status update.”

Torin closed the door behind us, and I headed to my bathroom to wash the blood off my hands. I heard someone come in behind me, and I was surprised to see Xavier’s reflection in the mirror. He lingered in the doorway for a moment before coming in and closing the door softly behind him.

“I’m actually kind of exhausted. I don’t have the energy to fight,” I said.

Rather than look at him, I concentrated on rinsing my hands, feeling uneasy at the sight of the blood swirling down the drain.

“I didn’t come in here to fight. I never wanted to fight with you in the first place, Cali.” He sighed and looked down at his feet before meeting my gaze in the mirror once again. “I came to apologize. I’m sorry. I should’ve been more understanding about what a horrible situation you’ve been put in with all this Ava stuff… And I should’ve been a better mate to you.”

I felt myself softening a little. I was tired—both physically and mentally—but I needed this moment with him.

“You really upset me,” I said. “You were really mean, and I don’t want you to do that again.”

“I know, Cali. Please, just let me make it up to you.” Xavier stepped forward, closing the gap between us.

I turned to face him. *Am I going to let him off that easy?* Only a few moments ago, I’d wanted nothing more than to slap him. I’d been so angry. But how could I feel that way now? He’d apologized, after all, and seeing Lilac and Plum in such an awful state had a way of putting things in perspective.

His eyes were searching mine—and he was still shirtless. I wondered if he’d done that on purpose, as a distraction tactic.

Deciding to give in, I lifted onto my toes to kiss him. I’d intended for it to be a peck—that was all he deserved, after how he’d acted—but before I knew it, our arms were wrapped around each other and the kiss had deepened to anything but a peck. His tongue mingled with mine as a surge of emotion overtook us both, along with some of the unfinished frustration from earlier.

I closed my eyes and let him take the lead. His hands roamed all over my body, caressing my breasts before traveling upward so he could weave his fingers into my hair. He pulled me tighter against him and deepened the kiss even more, his tongue probing my mouth with an urgency that I felt throughout my entire body.

He walked me back against the wall then slid his hands down to cup my ass, and I arched against him as I ran my hands over his chest. I snaked my tongue into his mouth and closed my eyes, picturing him in the gym pumping the iron over his head, his muscles shining and flexing in the light. He’d been mean to me before, and that wasn’t acceptable, but he’d looked damn good all the same.

“Cali,” Xavier whispered against my lips. “I want you.”

“Then have me,” I breathed. It felt so good to have him in my arms again, and I was happy that I’d given in to him. It felt better than the alternative. Way better.

Xavier planted a series of kisses down my neck before he picked me up and carried me to his room.

**Episode 2364**

GREYSON

Aysel was kissing me. I wasn’t the least bit shocked by this development, not with the way she’d been acting. Still, I was uncertain about what to do. I thought about Cali and how upset she would be if she knew this was happening, but I knew that she trusted me. This was all a means to an end, after all.

Fighting every instinct to pull away, I leaned into the kiss as much as I needed to in order to play the part, but soon the heat of the kiss started to get to me. I certainly hadn’t expected to like it, and I hated that I was kind of enjoying it.

Aysel turned up the heat even more, and what had been a deep but furtive kiss quickly morphed into something more. Aysel threw a leg over my lap and shoved her tongue down my throat. I fell back against the seat, keeping my hands at my sides so that I didn’t encourage her—as if she needed any encouragement.

Before long, the heat spiked in my belly again, and I found myself lunging against her as I slid my tongue deep into her mouth. Our tongues dueled ferociously as Aysel moaned and pressed her breasts against me. It was almost as if we were devouring each other, and I knew that we were on the cusp of being told to get a room.

*Cali. Think of Cali!*

Yes. Cali. What would she think if she walked in and saw this? Would she think that it was all an act? No. I was certain that it looked very, very authentic.

I pulled away abruptly, nearly sending Aysel off-balance. She sat back in her seat and touched her fingers to her lips, which were flushed and red from the kiss. She had a satisfied look in her eye, like the cat that ate the canary.

I was about to tell her that she’d better not do that again when I remembered that I was supposed to convince her that I was into it so that she would trust me.

Going against all my instincts, I flashed her a charming smile. “What was that for?” I asked breezily.

Aysel lifted a brow as if she were surprised, and for a moment, I worried that I was overdoing it. Then she smiled and put a hand on my arm. “I just wanted to get another taste of you.” She licked her lips. “And it was just as good as I remembered. Doesn’t it feel good to open up for one night and be a little bad?”

I fought the urge to scowl. Aysel was being far more forward tonight than I’d anticipated, and maybe I’d been mistaken to underestimate her after everything that had happened. I recalled Xavier saying that I shouldn’t come alone in case I got into trouble. I hated it when he was right.

“Excuse me, Aysel. I need to use the restroom.” I stood up and slipped away before Aysel could object.

In the bathroom, I paced back and forth, playing the last moments over and over in my mind. What the hell was in that martini? I was feeling majorly tipsy already. Maybe they made the drinks stronger here so that they would affect supernaturals more, despite our higher tolerance.

*Is that why Aysel wanted to meet here? Because the drinks are strong as hell and she knew they’d put a damper on my inhibitions?*

I wondered if she was up to something, but then I laughed. Of course she was up to something.

*That woman never says anything in a straightforward way.* I looked into the mirror and pressed my fingers to my lips. *But she sure is straightforward in other ways.*

It pained me that I hadn’t completely hated the kiss. In fact, it had almost felt good. Right now, with the revulsion curse, even the thought of kissing Cali made me feel sick.

*We can’t even hug anymore*, I thought, recalling the surge of nausea I’d gotten when we’d hugged before I left. *That’s how I should feel about Aysel, not Cali.*

Maybe the revulsion curse was also making me unnaturally attracted to Aysel, but she’d insisted that the curse only affected my attraction to Cali.

*But when does Aysel ever tell the truth?*

I thought back to the Vanguard party. The kiss I’d shared with Aysel there had felt the same way—and that had been before the curse. I felt absolutely horrible for liking a kiss with anyone but my mate, but then Cali *did* like to kiss Xavier… I cut those thoughts off before they could grow into something more.

I turned to leave the bathroom—just as Andrei walked in. The man filled up the entire doorway so that I had no choice but to back up and step to the side so he could pass. I was surprised to see him.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

Andrei glared at me. “What do you think? You’re out with Aysel.”

I rolled my eyes. I really didn’t feel like dealing with this right now.“So what, did you follow her here?”

Andrei nodded. “Of course I did.”

I hoped that this wasn’t about to turn into a thing, but those hopes were dashed when Andrei stepped close, butting his chest against mine as he got right up in my face. “You’re a liar, and a hypocrite, and probably an opportunist.”

I pushed Andrei away. “You should get out of here, man. Do you really think it’s an attractive look to any woman to follow her and threaten her date? You’re an idiot if you think Aysel’s into that. No wonder she’s more interested in me.”

I pushed past Andrei and tried to leave again, but he shoved me hard, and I slammed into the wall. I gritted my teeth, trying to keep my cool.

“You told me you weren’t into her, and now you’re at this club kissing her for everyone to see.”

I almost pointed out that Aysel was the one who’d kissed *me*, but I didn’t even owe Andrei that much. Instead, since Andrei had pissed me off in a major way, I decided to add fuel to the fire. “I’ll do more than that, later, and it’ll be none of your business.”

I shoved Andrei back, and at the same instant, he took a swing at me. Of course. I ducked it with ease and countered with a punch that caught Andrei hard in the jaw. He flew back against the door just as it opened, and he smacked right into another werewolf.

“Hey, man, watch it!” the werewolf snarled, instantly pissed off as he shoved Andrei back toward me. I pushed Andrei back toward the werewolf, and Andrei used that momentum and socked the werewolf in the stomach. The werewolf fell through the swinging door and landed on the floor, just outside the bathroom.

“Now to finish you, liar!” Andrei said.

He rushed at me, and I jumped out of the way. Andrei wasn’t able to stop in time, and he went crashing into one of the stalls.

“You’re really slow on the uptake, you know that?” I said, planting my feet as Andrei recovered and squared off to face me.

I lunged forward and partially shifted my hand just before connecting with Andrei’s face, using my claws to slash at his cheek. Andrei ducked out of the way at the last moment so that the strike didn’t do as much damage as I intended, but it still left a trio of red marks on his cheek.

“Asshole!” Andrei said, barreling straight for me and tackling me into the sink. It shattered and broke off of the wall, causing water to spray everywhere.

Andrei had one arm locked around my neck, and I was struggling to get him off of me. I managed to plant my foot against the wall, then I kicked off it and twisted up and around so that I broke out of Andrei’s hold and landed behind him. I chopped him hard in the back of the neck, and he fell to one knee.

“Hey! You assholes messed with the wrong guy!” It was the other werewolf again. He was wavering on his feet as he came stumbling in, his fists up and his eyes on me.

Without missing a beat, I socked him hard in the nose, and he went flying back through the door and out of the bathroom. I turned to Andrei just as he was winding up to throw another punch. I ducked it, bent low, and gave him a solid punch to the kidney.

“Low blow, asshole!” Andrei said as he sagged against the wall, sink water spraying his chest.

I wound up and gave him a swift kick in the abdomen, then dodged away as he shifted and lunged for me, his teeth bared. I shifted too, and we circled each other, growling and each waiting for the other to make the next move.

Wanting to get this over with, I lunged at Andrei and caught him in the flank, but I wasn’t able to sink my teeth in, and he slipped out of my jaws easily. He countered with a bite to my lower flank, nearly in the same place I’d bitten him. I wrenched out of his jaws and shifted back.

“That was just a scratch!” I said as I punched him in the snout.

Andrei howled and shifted back too, his hands covering his bloodied nose. He pulled his hands away and balled them into fists, dodging another one of my kicks and—finally—landing a powerful punch right in my eye.

I saw stars. *Shit, that was a good one. He hits hard, I need to make sure not to let him get another one of those in.*

I stumbled a bit and backed up against the wall, narrowly avoiding a left hook that connected with the mirror instead, shattering it to pieces. I knew that had to have hurt, but Andrei barely batted an eyelash before he was coming for me again.

I went low and lashed out with three swift punches in quick succession; one caught him in the jaw again, the other in the temple, and the final one landed right under his left ear—just as four bouncers came bursting into the bathroom and wrestled us apart. I scowled at Andrei as the bouncers subdued us both.

I was pissed off and out of breath and in more than a little pain, but only one thing was on my mind.

*Shit, did Andrei just ruin my plan for Aysel?*

**Episode 2365**

XAVIER

I stripped Cali’s clothes off quickly and without my usual finesse.

“Ooh, you’re really excited!” Cali teased.

Damn right I was. I wasn’t holding back. I was excited about seeing her naked and in my bed. I wanted to make up for earlier, and I knew that I pretty much had to after the way I’d acted. I planned to do whatever it took.

“Lie back,” I commanded, my voice sounding gruff and hungry even to my own ears. I stripped off my pants, liking how Cali’s eyes focused in on my erection. “Spread your legs,” I said, dropping to my knees at the foot of the bed.

Cali did as I’d asked and, without a moment of delay, I pressed my lips to the pulsing, slick warmth between her thighs. I parted her folds with the tip of my tongue, then pulled away and used my hands to spread her open.

“You’re so beautiful, Cali,” I said, before I bent down and suckled at her clit.

She bucked and moaned and clenched her thighs tightly around my head. I pried them back open, stuck my tongue deep inside her, and pumped in and out slowly, savoring her, drowning in her.

“Xavier, yes. Yes!” she moaned. She raked her hands through my hair and caressed the back of my neck as she moved against my mouth, ever so slowly.

“You taste so good, Cali,” I said, once I felt the familiar quake in her thighs that signaled that she was close. I didn’t want her to come just yet.

I pressed gentle kisses along her thighs, up her stomach, and then further up to her breasts. I took her nipples into my mouth one after the other, gently sucking them before I stood up and pulled out the blindfold we’d used before. I moved to put it on Cali, but she grabbed my hand, stopping me.

“How about you wear it this time?” she said with a mischievous grin.

Without waiting for me to agree, she snatched the blindfold out of my hands and pulled me down onto the bed, then she straddled me and tied the blindfold around my eyes.

“And no peeking!” she said, straightening the blindfold and pulling it tight enough that I couldn’t see a thing.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I said.

I felt a little exposed lying there without being able to see what she was doing, and I could tell that Cali was excited to take control, and I was happy to let her. The only real downsides were that I couldn’t admire her beautiful body, and that I wouldn’t be able to see the look on her face when I slid inside her, inch by inch. But when she took me in her hand and started stroking, I knew that I was in good hands. Literally.

“Does that feel good?” she asked, increasing her speed while using her other hand to caress the base of my cock.

“Mmm hmm.”

“How about this?”

I moaned when I felt her warm mouth take me in slowly, her tongue dancing along the tip before she engulfed my entire shaft with her mouth. She paused for a few seconds, and I felt the warmth of her breasts brushing against my thighs as she changed positions, her tongue dancing along my length as she did so. Then she started pumping up and down at the perfect pace; not too fast, not too slow, her mouth nearly taking all of me in completely before she slid back up and twirled her tongue around the tip only to plunge back down. After a few minutes of that, I began to feel my control slipping away.

“Cali, I’m going to come,” I said, not wanting to but also feeling like I couldn’t help it. It felt so damn good, and not being able to see her only heightened the sensation of her lips and tongue. She was driving me crazy.

“Oh no, not yet,” she said. A second later, she was holding my cock against her warm, fluttering opening.

“Yes, please, I want to be inside you,” I said.

“How much?”

“So much. I can’t wait a second longer, Cali. Please.”

“Well, you know I like to give you what you want—especially when we both want the same thing.”

A second later she plunged down, gasping as I filled her to the brim.

“Shit yes,” I moaned. I reached up and found her breasts. I kneaded them in my hands, thrusting up to meet her as she bounced up and down on top of me. Even though I couldn’t see, I closed my eyes and tuned in to the sound of our flesh coming together in a quick, steady rhythm. Cali’s hands were splayed out on my chest, and the mere feel of her weight shifting as she raised her hips before she eased off and slid back down my cock was maddening.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Cali whispered, almost like a chant.

“Fuck yes,” I growled. I grabbed her ass and squeezed it, pulling her down hard on my cock so that she took every bit of me inside her. I held her down and then grabbed her waist and moved her back and forth, and she let out a scream that nearly sent me over the edge.

Unable to resist seeing her body up close and personal, I ripped off my blindfold.

“Hey, I said no peeking!”

“When have I ever followed the rules?”

I looked up at her, relishing the sight of her tousled hair, her flushed cheeks, her beautiful breasts, her parted lips… I sat up and kissed her, pulling her tight against me as I moved to the edge of the bed so that my feet were on the floor. I grabbed her by the waist and lifted her up and down on my shaft as fast as I could. I could feel her tight channel pulsing rhythmically around my shaft, and a few seconds later, she collapsed against me as her entire body vibrated with her climax.

“I’m coming too,” I grunted, my hips jerking as my own orgasm surged through my entire body, weakening me so that I could do nothing but fall back on the bed. Cali fell with me and buried her head in the crook of my neck as I continued to jerk against her until finally, I was spent.

We lay that way for a while, me still inside her, her head on my chest, both of us on the edge of sleep. I loved having her here with me.

I hadn’t told her about Ava, about how my former—and annoyingly still current—mate had managed to seep into my thoughts. I thought back to our fight earlier. It had been a warning not to let Ava come between us like that. I had to find a way to keep Ava and the mate bond from taking over my life. If I didn’t, I knew that I would lose Cali, and I would die before I let that happen.

Cali suddenly lifted her head to look at me, propping her chin on my chest for a moment before she stretched up to kiss me. “I’m sorry we fought… And I’m really sorry that I called you an asshole. You’re not an asshole.”

“Thanks for that. Maybe I overreacted, though. I’m a mercenary; I should be able to handle a little name calling. There’s just something about hearing that from my mate, of all people… It was tough, not gonna lie.”

“Is there a better word? How about ‘dickhead’?”

“That’s just the perfect description for Colton.”

Cali laughed. “Maybe I should come up with our own special word. Like… mustard. If I call you mustard, that means you’re being an asshole.”

I laughed and wrapped my arms around her even tighter. “Mustard? What am I, a hotdog?”

Cali grinned. “Yeah, I guess you are… in a way.”

“You’re acting so weird,” I said, getting up and sliding her off me before rolling on top of her. “Why are you like this?”

“What? Do you mind? I’m just having a little fun. Don’t we deserve a chance to laugh? To have fun?”

“Of course we do. But mustard? Really?”

“Well, I considered ketchup, but you’re more of a hot and spicy kind of guy.”

I groaned as Cali shoved me off her and rolled out of bed.

“I have to use the bathroom. Be back in a sec.”

“I’ll be here,” I said, watching her go. I eyed her tiger marks, remembering how shy she used to be about them and thinking about how much I absolutely loved seeing them. I loved seeing every part of her. She was beautiful, funny, and feisty, and we had amazing sex. I felt pretty lucky, which made me even more determined to not mess things up over the likes of *Ava*.

I lay back and sighed. I was so happy we’d made up. When we weren’t getting along, nothing felt right.

My phone chimed, and I picked it up from the bedside table and glanced at it.

Greyson? Why was he calling me?

**Episode 2366**

GREYSON

I waited patiently—that was a lie—for my annoying little brother to pick up, pacing outside the club. What was taking him so long? Shouldn’t he be checking his phone in case I needed him? Not that I’d admit to needing him, but still, the dickhead should’ve—

“Greyson,” Xavier barked when he finally picked up. “Did something go wrong?”

I gritted my teeth together. There was no way I’d use the word “wrong” to describe what had just happened. The last thing I needed was Xavier thinking that he should’ve come with me to “save” me or whatever bullshit.

“Just wanted you to know that Andrei attacked me,” I said calmly.

Xavier’s voice was deadpan. “That sounds like trouble to me.”

I scoffed. “It’s nothing. I got away from the bouncers, who saw that Andrei was the one who started the fight. Kinda obvious when he tried to actually take a swipe at the bouncers to get to me again. He seemed pretty determined, though, so if the bouncers let him go, there’s no guarantee he won’t find me again to start something. Aysel is clearly a trigger point for him, so—”

“So you really *are* having some trouble, then?”

“Is he okay?” I heard Cali’s worried voice in the background, and I felt my stomach clench.

“He’s fine,” he told her, just as I said, “I’m fine. I just called to let you know what’s going on in case I don’t make it home tonight. That’s all.”

Xavier paused. “Why wouldn’t you come home? Are you sure you’re okay?”

I felt like growling. “Why are you making such a big fuss over this? You’d better not make Cali worry.”

“Don’t stress over it, Greyson. I’ll be there to comfort her in case she starts crying,” he said wryly, and I wanted to smash his head against the wall.

“Give the phone to Cali before I fucking murder you,” I snapped. I needed to reassure her myself—to let her know I’d do everything I could to come home. I’d always come back to her, come hell or high water.

“Cali’s not listening right now,” Xavier said casually. “We’re actually pretty busy here at the moment. I’d drop everything and come find you if you needed my help, though, but I’d have to hear you ask for it first.”

I stayed silent. Boiling.

“So? Should I come pick you up?”

My brother’s condescending tone was amazing. I’d never thought he had the brain cells to pull off this kind of sarcasm, but apparently hanging out with me had done wonders for his smarts. I, on the other hand, had gotten nothing in return, because he was a vastly inferior specimen. I had to stop wasting my time with him.

“I told you, I’m fine,” I barked. “Stop stirring shit.” I glanced over my shoulder at the club. “I gotta go.”

“But—”

Before Xavier could talk to me about his feelings or lack thereof, I hung up.

Taking a deep breath, I hurried into the club. I had to get back to Aysel, who had definitely seen the fight, and make sure the whole scene hadn’t thrown off my plans.

As soon as I stepped inside, I saw Aysel sitting at the bar, casually sipping a green drink. The moment I slid in next to her, she gave me a sultry smile.

“Did you just fight Andrei for me, jealous boy?” she asked with a wink.

I actually wanted to die, thinking how Cali would feel about this whole situation, but I knew I needed to play along here. The ends justified the means and all that.

I gave Aysel a smirk that was sure to appease her ego. “Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t. Do you want me to be fighting for you?”

Aysel preened. “Well, this wasn’t the first time men have fought over me, but it never gets old.”

The effort it took not to roll my eyes deserved a medal.

“I have to admit…” Aysel leaned in closer and traced a finger down my jawline. “You make a worthy champion, Greyson.”

I tensed at her closeness. I pulled back slightly, hoping she didn’t notice. I saw that she’d ordered another drink for me, but I ignored it—I needed to stay sober.

“Feels like I’m getting a little lost in this thing between us…” I trailed off.

She looked very happy. “Are you, now?”

“Obviously. I just proved that I’m willing to fight for you,” I said. “I just faced off with Andrei, and—”

She sighed. “And it was so lovely to watch. Andrei fought so hard.”

Aysel seemed obsessed with the idea that Andrei was obsessed with her—yet another amazing little element of her sparkling personality.

“Yeah, but I obviously won. Would you ever fight for *me* like that?” I asked.

I hoped, so hard, that she’d drop some sort of hint about the curse. After all, wasn’t that “fighting for me,” in some sort of fucked-up way? If I were lucky, she’d say something like, “I’m already fighting for you! I hired someone to place a revulsion spell on you and your mate!” And then, accidentally, in her flurry, she’d offer some sort of info about who this person was.

It all sounded ridiculous in my head, now. There was no way Aysel would be so easy to trick. In fact, all she did was swirl her drink and shrug. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

I should’ve known this wouldn’t be so easy. She wasn’t even drunk enough to let anything slip.

I forced myself to chuckle, more flirty than enraged. “You keep your cards close to your chest, don’t you?”

Aysel glanced down at her cleavage, then raised an eyebrow at me. “You can always come closer and find out.”

It was starting to feel like this whole plan wasn’t actually very smart. Aysel was too crafty to deal with. Just as I was mulling over those thoughts, though, a slow kind of song came on—something sexy and sappy—and Aysel’s eyes lit up.

Fuck.

“Greyson! I love this song! We have to dance!” She stood up and tugged on my arm. I had no choice but to concede and let her pull me over to the dance floor. She locked her arms around my neck and tugged me close, her whole body flush against mine.

Her breasts were glued to my chest, her nose brushing mine, her warmth all fucking over me. I hated myself for not feeling entirely repulsed by her nearness, her heat. She was going all out, here—her nails scratching the back of my neck and upward, through my hair, her thighs on either side of my leg, almost fucking grinding against me, her eyes fixed on my mouth.

The second I made a move to loosen my grip around her waist, she grabbed my palm and moved it lower to her hip—really low, basically her ass—and then she was breathing all over my neck, my jaw, rubbing herself all over me as she said, “You can touch anything you like…”

Well, then.

My body felt hot all over, and I wasn’t sure if this was happening because of the friction, or because of some lingering spell effect, or because of Seluna, or because of whatever the fuck. The one thing I knew, though, was that this woman had tied me to her bed and kept me away from my mate. Like she was trying to keep me away from my mate right now.

This woman saw me as a conquest, not a person.

She was dangerous, sinister, and I needed to beat her in her own game.

There was no way I was going to get any information here, though.

Aysel had a one-track mind, which was currently set on mounting my leg and going all out in her very obvious seduction. She wasn’t going to answer any questions, especially not while we were dancing. And if that wasn’t enough, when the song changed, she breathed against my ear, “Oh my god! I love this one too!”

And then she grabbed me tight and kissed the corner of my mouth.

I wasn’t going to escape.

If I wanted any answers to this curse mess, I was going to find them for myself—Aysel’s contribution would probably just make things murkier and hornier. I needed to get to the palace and look through her stuff.

Hopefully Aysel wouldn’t get even more aggressive in the meantime.

My stomach dropped with guilt, and I thought about Cali—how much she’d hate this. I imagined her witnessing Aysel’s sexy dance, the way she touched and grabbed onto me, how I was letting her do it. She’d be heartbroken and furious.

*I’m sorry, love.*

I saw no other alternative. I needed to break this curse before both Cali and I lost our minds. I needed to do it and prove to everyone—Aysel and my brother above all—that Cali was mine and I was hers. We were meant to be, and I would fight for us with everything I had.

Even if my current weapon of choice was completely messed up.

I leaned down toward Aysel, my grip on her hips tightening enough for her to literally purr against me. Her chest was heaving, her eyes glazed as she looked up at me, biting her lip. She was turned on, no doubt about it, and maybe feeling like this would lower her inhibitions enough for me to manipulate the situation.

I leaned in close. “Why don’t we take this somewhere more private?”

**Episode 2367**

I stared at Xavier as he hung up the phone.

“What’s going on?” I asked yet again. “Is Greyson okay?”

Xavier waved me off. “He’s fine. Better than fine, actually.”

I squinted at him suspiciously. “What’s ‘better than fine’ supposed to mean?”

The image of Greyson and Aysel together in a dimly lit club popped into my head. The two of them dancing, touching, locked together in a dark corner, Aysel’s hands all over Greyson’s fucking spectacular body, her gaze greedy on him…

My head started throbbing.

*Oh my god, is this what a fainting spell feels like? ABORT, ABORT!*

I forced myself to shove the mental image aside and reminded myself that I trusted Greyson. I knew that he loved me—he would do anything for me, including interacting with Aysel, a person he viewed as some sort of dangerous, evil she-wolf who’d never even heard of consent.

“You don’t have to freak out,” Xavier told me casually, being his usual very unhelpful self. “Besides, I don’t wanna talk about Greyson.”

“What did he mean about not coming home, though?” I pressed. I hated the sound of that.

Xavier shrugged again, and that just annoyed me more. “Greyson’s dealing with Vanguard nonsense in the form of Andrei mucking up his plans, but he’s probably handling it.”

“*Probably?*” I demanded.

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Cali, if he were in real trouble, he’d tell me to come over.”

“He’s too proud and stubborn to ask for your help! The only person more proud and stubborn than him is you, Xavier.”

Xavier bypassed my comment entirely. “I think Greyson would overcome that if he were in danger. He’s going to be fine, don’t worry—worst thing that’s gonna happen is that this might be a late night for him.”

A *late night for him* meant a late night for Aysel, and a late night for Aysel would mean getting her paws all over MY GREYSON, WHO WAS ALL MINE AND NOBODY—

“Why do you look like you’re screaming inside your head right now?” Xavier asked me, raising an eyebrow.

I smiled tightly. “It’s fine.”

He huffed, shaking his head before his expression softened. “Okay, please don’t worry. Greyson can take care of himself.”

“That’s what we said last time, and Aysel literally tied him to her bed,” I said.

Xavier clenched his jaw. These werewolves were always clenching their jaws without getting TMJ issues, which was the most unfair thing ever—among many others.

“Cali,” Xavier said seriously, “Greyson’s a big boy. He’ll be okay. We have other things to worry about right now, anyway—I’d better go upstairs to see how Lilac is doing.”

Xavier headed upstairs, and I contemplated calling Greyson myself to see how he was. Maybe send him a little text. Huffing, I decided against it—no need to risk Aysel seeing anything.

But what if there *was* a need?

*No, Cali! Xavier said Greyson’s okay—you know you can believe Xavier, no matter what! Also, Greyson loves you—he’d never do anything with Aysel! He thinks she’s horrible!*

Ignoring the pinch of anxiety in my stomach, I followed Xavier to the second floor, to Lilac’s room. When we walked in, I saw Torin leaning over a sleeping Lilac on the bed. Marta was sitting right next to Lilac, by his side, holding his hand. She looked pale and lost in thought.

Violet and Charlie appeared to be a little more frantic, hovering over Plum, who was whimpering on the ground, his eyes closed. Someone had put a pillow under the wolf’s head, and my heart broke. Both Lilac and Plum looked like hurt puppies.

“How’s everything going?” Xavier asked in a low tone.

Everyone’s attention turned toward us. Torin spoke up first, his expression both nervous and hopeful. “I used my powers to stitch up the wounds, and they’re both going to be fine.”

Violet, from her position on the floor, right next to Plum, looked up at Xavier. “That’s just for now, though…” Her voice broke. “How did this even happen?”

“Sunshine, calm down.” Charlie stroked her arm, but Violet was inconsolable.

She stared at Xavier, her lips trembling. “You’re an Alpha—have you ever heard of anything like this happening before?”

Xavier approached, arms crossed. “What do you mean, exactly?”

“The connection between Lilac and Plum, how Plum’s injury with silver somehow transferred to Lilac himself,” she explained.

“I have no idea,” Xavier said, shaking his head.

“But when you lost your wolf, did you ever feel anything that your wolf might have been experiencing on his own?” Violet pressed.

I turned to Xavier, taking in his expression. I’d never thought that would be possible myself. Xavier looked equally baffled, and obviously frustrated by the situation. “I’m afraid I can’t help here. I’ve never heard of something like this happening before.”

Violet sniffled, tears gathering in her eyes. She looked between Plum and Lilac, drawing in a sharp breath.

“What’s happening to my brother?” she whispered, her voice full of anguish. “I’ve already lost him once, I can’t…”

Charlie pulled her into a hug while I rushed over to her, sitting by her side to hold her hand. She gave me a soft look, squeezing my hand back. I glanced over at Marta, who was Violet’s exact opposite. She looked like she was in pain as well, but she’d bottled it all up, every horrible emotion lurking under the surface of her deadly white skin, multiplying in her silence.

*This is so, so bad…*

Marta *had* been partially sucked into the mirror right before this had happened to Lilac. I’d seen a shadowy figure pulling Marta into whatever dimension was on the other side. None of that had been a figment of my imagination.

And then, a thought occurred to me…

Could we have done something—like tempt a demon or whatever the fuck—when we had messed with that mirror? Could this “mirror effect” that was happening with Lilac and Plum have anything to do with our earlier scary adventure?

The idea made my stomach hurt. Marta looked up right then, meeting my gaze, and the panic that I saw in her eyes made me think that she was thinking along the same lines. She seemed very upset while still fighting to keep it under wraps, and I had no idea what we could do to fix this.

In the meantime, everybody else kept talking around us.

“Should we talk to Big Mac about this?” someone asked.

“Maybe Kira?” said someone else.

A third someone added, “We should talk to both of them.”

But I wasn’t really listening—my head was full of thoughts, panicked and wild ones. Should we go back to the mirror? Maybe poke around some to see what was up with it?

*Cali, NO! Have you learned NOTHING?*

The voice scolding me in my head sounded like Big Mac. That was such a stupid, stupid idea, to mess with magic we didn’t understand. Especially when I suspected that it might have gotten Lilac into this mess in the first place!

“Marta…” I trailed off in a barely audible voice, staring at her, about to ask if I could maybe talk to her outside, but she was no longer looking at me.

All of a sudden, she stood up, the movement so sharp and quick that everybody stopped talking and turned to her with wide eyes. They seemed surprised to notice her, as if her quietness had made her invisible.

Well, that wasn’t the case anymore.

“I’m tired of waiting,” she said loudly, looking around the room. Her expression had changed from fearful to determined, and even though I could still see apprehension hovering at the edges of her posture, I knew that she’d made some sort of decision that would change a lot of things.

But what could that decision be?

“Marta, what are you talking about?” I asked.

She shot me a glance before looking at Xavier and Torin, then Violet and Charlie. And then, she declared, “We need to reunite Lilac with his wolf before something like this happens again. We were lucky to find Plum in time before something worse happened, but next time who knows what could happen?”

“But there might not be a—”

She cut Xavier off. “Next time? It’s still dangerous, is it not? He’s part of the pack; don’t you want him safe?” She pointed at Lilac, then at poor Plum, and growing dread overcame me. Where was she going with this?

“There’s no other way,” she said, looking around the room with the kind of steadiness I’d seen her carry during the battle of Letifer.

“No other way to what?” I squeaked.

“Lilac and Plum have to become one again, one person, one entity, one soul—that’s the only thing that’s right,” she said. “And I’ll do anything I can to help. So if that means that I have to charge into the spirit world right now, I’m going to do it, and nobody’s going to stop me.”

**Episode 2368**

MARTA

Everybody was staring at me in disbelief. I could’ve been offended by their doubt, but I had no time for that. I needed to make sure that nothing like this ever happened to Lilac again. He was the best person I knew—sweet, kind, and funny. He deserved, literally, every nice thing in the world ever.

Even if he was peacefully sleeping now, the image of him collapsing in a pool of blood was still fresh in my mind, along with the terror I’d felt. I didn’t think I’d ever be able to get that horrific sight out of my head, and I simply couldn’t take seeing him like that ever again.

The idea that I would just sit around to wait for something equally traumatizing to happen to him at any second had my heart and head pounding. This was all new to me, so intense—the way I felt about Lilac couldn’t compare to anything else in my entire life.

Lilac was my reward for surviving Bert’s house.

Lilac was the only person who had made me feel happy in decades.

Lilac was my person.

And I couldn’t let him get hurt. Not again.

“I’m going to the spirit world to fix this once and for all,” I said once more, looking around the room.

There was a very long beat of silence. Cali stared at me with astonishment, Violet looked shocked but somehow hopeful too, Charlie and Torin looked confused, and then—

And then there was Xavier.

The Alpha, his face blank, so calm it was unnerving. And then, he opened his mouth, and in that imposing, intimidating voice of his, he said, “Absolutely not.”

His tone was final, the kind of tone that would take an army to argue with, and the others—even rebellious Cali—seemed to agree with him.

“It’s too dangerous, Marta,” she whispered.

I swallowed the tears that threatened to escape. “It’s Lilac who’s in danger! And the longer he and Plum are separated, the more possible it is for things to escalate.” I shook my head. “I’m *not* going to sit around and wait until another accident happens.”

“But Marta, how?” Violet asked helplessly.

“I’ll figure it out,” I declared. “And if that means I need to go back into that mirror and get answers, I’m going to do it.”

A very, very pissed voice suddenly echoed through the room, making all of us jump, even Xavier. “What did you just say?”

Every soul in room turned to see Big Mac standing in the doorway. Her expression was thunderous, her eyes dark, her whole body rigid.

“Oh. *Shit*,” Cali said under her breath.

“What mirror are you talking about, exactly, Marta?” Big Mac asked in a low voice, walking into the room.

“Um…” I swallowed convulsively. My earlier bravado had evaporated in front of her powerful presence, because I knew I’d been wrong to go snooping earlier. Both Cali and Violet were staring at me with matching panicked expressions.

And then, by some weird coincidence, all three of us said, “It was my idea!”

Torin slapped his forehead while Charlie winced and Xavier remained entirely still. The other two girls cringed, just like I did, and Big Mac narrowed her eyes.

“Am I to understand that you kids have been messing around with my mirror?” she demanded.

Violet, Cali, and I exchanged guilty glances, and Big Mac’s mouth dropped open. If I thought I had seen pissed-off Big Mac before, this was a whole new level.

“I can’t believe this! The three of you snooped through my things? My private belongings? After all the help I’ve offered to all three of you?”

The guilt was so heavy that I felt it on my shoulders, on my chest, to my very core. Before I could explain things to Big Mac—and/or beg for forgiveness—Cali stood up from the floor and stared at the witch with her head held high.

“What we did wasn’t right, but we were trying to help Lilac. We were desperate to reunite Lilac and Plum, and we thought that the spirit world would have answers,” she said.

Cali’s delivery had required a lot of courage, and it looked great on her, but Big Mac was not moved. If anything, now she was appalled.

“How many times do I need to tell you not to mess with things you don’t understand? And besides, Marta—you can’t be involved with anything magical with your mentor still on the way. Do you want to stand trial against the council for a second time?” She threw her hands up, flailing about, and it would’ve been funny if I weren’t feeling so scared and guilty.

“Big Mac, perhaps—”

“Perhaps what, Xavier?” Big Mac snapped, glaring at the Alpha, who shut up.

Oh my god, if Xavier was shutting up in the face of her anger, what was *I* supposed to do?

“This is unacceptable! This is more than invading my privacy—this is engaging with uncontrollable forces that you don’t understand!” she snapped. “You’re not toddlers—*you should know better!*” She looked around. “Does no one in this pack house have any damn sense?”

Nobody said a word.

Torin raised his hand and squeaked, “I mean, I’m at least trying to make good decisions?”

Big Mac scoffed so loudly that I shuddered. It was obvious that the witch was determined to put the kibosh on my plan to try and save Lilac and Plum, and the frustration I felt was overwhelming. I knew what I needed to do—I knew it in my heart—but I couldn’t go behind Big Mac’s back again. I owed her honesty after all she’d done for me.

I felt… trapped.

I felt like I was locked in a house with nowhere to go, and the feeling was so familiar it made me feel like I was suffocating. And yet, my anxiety resembled something closer to anger.

“So what?” I choked out, gesturing at Lilac. “What am I supposed to do then? Just sit around and wait for Plum to race off and get himself, and Lilac by proxy, hurt again? It’s safer and healthier for Lilac to be attached to his wolf.”

Big Mac pressed her lips together. “Marta—”

“If anything happens to him…” My chest heaved, and I swallowed down tears. Or maybe I didn’t, because my eyes were wet. I wiped them quickly. “I don’t know what I’d do if anything happened to him.”

Nobody spoke for a long moment, and then Violet wrapped an arm around my shoulders in solidarity.

Big Mac’s expression softened. “It’s not going to do Lilac any good if you run off and get yourself killed. Or worse—if you dive into something you don’t understand without a plan. You have no idea what the consequences could be.”

Violet squeezed my shoulders. I could feel her tension, how it fed off mine. I knew that Big Mac was right, but it didn’t *feel* right. None of this felt right.

Staring at Lilac’s pale face, I whispered, “I can’t just sit here and do nothing. I feel like I owe it to Lilac.”

I’d saved Lilac from the spirit world, yes, but since then, *I’d* felt more alive than ever.

“Marta,” Violet muttered, breaking the side hug to take my hands. “You know Big Mac is right. We all saw what happened with the mirror when you got sucked in, and then—”

“You actually got *stuck*?” Big Mac bellowed, shocked and furious all over again.

“It’s okay!” Cali blurted out. “We pulled her right back out!”

Xavier’s groan echoed in the silence, while Torin and Charlie stayed silent. Big Mac looked between all three of us—Violet, Cali, and myself—and shook her head bitterly.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” she said. “I would’ve broken the damn thing if I thought you were all foolish enough to play around with it so lightly.” She pointed at us, one by one, and I felt a shiver down my spine. “You got lucky this time, but you can’t ever go near that mirror again, do you understand?”

Violet and Cali nodded. I just said, “Why?”

Big Mac took a few steps closer. Her voice came out low, but intense. “Do you have *any* idea what would have happened if you’d been drawn fully in?” She huffed, looking like she wanted to pull her hair out, before a look of horror crossed her face. “Wait, you covered the mirror, right?”

Violet nodded instantly. “Of course.”

Big Mac placed a hand over her chest. “Jesus fucking Christ, thank god.”

Cali frowned. “Why exactly does the mirror need to be covered?”

Big Mac looked around at everybody before her sharp eyes settled on us again. “That mirror has been acting erratically ever since Letifer, so I keep it covered. If you can be drawn into it, there’s no way to promise that something won’t come *out* of it.”

I froze. My brain flashed back to that spirit that had been dragging me in, the spirit that Cali had blasted back. Oh my god, had we covered the mirror fast enough? Could something have slipped out without us noticing? Something *other* than the thing that Cali had sent back in?

Before I could voice all my fears or mull them over further, a sound echoed through the room.

*POP!*

“Witchcraft!” Torin exclaimed, jumping back. Everyone else—even Xavier and Big Mac—was equally startled. There was a letter floating in midair, right over my head.

“It says your name,” Violet whispered, elbowing me.

I swallowed audibly.

“It’s from the witch council,” Big Mac told me seriously.

Taking a deep breath, I reached up and plucked it from the air. I opened it, my heart pounding.

“Well?” Cali asked. “What does it say?”

I glanced at Big Mac, then read it out loud, my nerves firing a mile a minute at the words. “Dear Miss Zhao, your mentor will arrive tomorrow.”

**Episode 2369**

GREYSON

I had to keep a level head here and deal with Aysel as smoothly as possible.

I was going to have to figure out how the hell I was going to get the information I needed *without* having sex with her. Cali had been worried about things going too far with Aysel, but obviously that wasn’t going to happen.

What did Aysel have going for her, anyway, to believe that I’d ever prefer her over my mate? She thought she was a princess, and she was gorgeous, yeah, but beauty was such a cheap thrill when Aysel had the charm of a shark and a barracuda, all rolled into one. I one hundred percent didn’t need either of those animals anywhere near my dick.

It was kind of ridiculous how she thought she could compete with Cali.

Cali, my mate, the sexiest, sweetest, funniest woman I’d ever met.

Nobody made me laugh like she did. Nobody made feel as good as she did.

There wasn’t even a competition to be had here.

Of course, Aysel disagreed.

“What exactly did you have in mind?” she purred after my suggestion to get out of there. She smiled up at me, giving off those same shark vibes. She trailed her fingers up my chest. “There are plenty of VIP rooms in the back of the club that we could sneak off to, if we wanted to do something deliciously sordid.”

More like morbid. It was taking all my self-control to stay around her even this long.

The urge to literally jump away from her body, from her scent that was clearly oozing sex, was visceral. But I forced myself to stay relaxed and in the flirty zone, because I had no choice.

“What I have in mind would take a little longer,” I murmured, my lips brushing the shell of her ear. “I want to make sure we’re completely alone, if you know what I mean…”

*C’mon Aysel, take the bait already*. I needed to get back to the palace to get what I had *really* come here for. Aysel looked delighted, which was good, but also extremely fucked up. How the fuck was I going to get out of sleeping with her? It felt like I was getting in over my head here, but…

One thing at a time.

I’d worry about that when I actually got to the palace.

“What kind of location do you think would be fitting?” she asked with a smirk.

“We obviously can’t go back to the pack house, so…” I trailed off.

And finally, Aysel said, “My rooms back at the palace will afford us all the privacy we want.”

“Perfect,” I said.

Aysel shot me a glance, and there was something dark in her eyes that I couldn’t properly get a read on. She took my hand, squeezing hard. In my ear, she softly breathed, “Let’s get out of here.”

\*\*\*

A fancy car and driver were waiting outside for us. When we slid into the back seat, Aysel snuggled in close to me in an instant.

“Oh my god, you smell so good,” she almost moaned, her hand snaking up to my nape to pull me down for a kiss.

I pulled up in an instant, pointing at the driver. The partition was down. “We have an audience.”

Aysel laughed. “Trust me, he’s seen it all. We’re not going to offend him.”

Ignoring my pounding heart—which Aysel would hopefully interpret as arousal instead of panic—I gruffly said, “I’m not big on public displays of affection.”

Aysel pouted, her lower lip jutting out. Did she think I was buying this coy bullshit? Because I was just waiting for her to stab me.

“Big tough guy, huh?” she asked.

“Figured those would be your type.”

She smirked, reaching for the buttons of my shirt. Starting to unbutton, her lips trailing up my neck, she murmured, “You’re not wrong… It’s what makes breaking you down all the sweeter.”

Her phone rang suddenly, and I thought that I’d been saved.

“Should you get that?” I asked, trying to appear composed and very “Alpha” instead of stressed and angry that I had to endure her nonsense.

“No, it’s—”

The phone rang again, and she glanced at the caller ID. She huffed, her sexy vibes dying down when she realized who was calling. She dislodged herself from me—thank god—and said, “I have to take this.”

Her frown made me realize that this had to be someone very important if they were taking her away from me, considering she was so obsessed.

When she picked up, her tone was official, professional. “Hello? Yes, I got your message. Thank you, we should…”

She started rambling about something that thankfully didn’t have anything to do with me or the Redwood pack. As the car sped through the night, my mind was racing, processing how I was going to play this next. I was on really shaky ground here.

Aysel obviously thought that we were going to have sex, and I wasn’t sure how to get out of it without making her suspicious. I thought back to Cali once more. I’d promised my mate that nothing more than a kiss would happen, and even the idea of a kiss had upset her. How could I blame her, though?

I’d been furious when she’d had to kiss Lucian for that fucked-up moon ritual, and I was constantly struggling with accepting the *due destini*, too.

As Aysel rambled on at the phone, I forced myself to stop drowning in guilt and focus. What was the plan for when I got to the palace? I kicked myself—I knew that I hadn’t thought the situation through properly. My only thought had been tosomehow shake Aysel and snoop around to find out who had put the curse on me and Cali.

But the how—the way I would do this—still eluded me.

If he were here, Xavier would’ve said, “I told you so.”

Just the thought of his smug face made my pettiness grow to the size of an elephant.

Aysel hung up the phone and offered yet another bratty pout, which she considered sexy and I considered ridiculous.

“Sorry about that,” she said. “Didn’t mean to interrupt us. Where were we?”

She slid in close again and ran a hand up my thigh. I had to fucking curse my libido, because this was ridiculous. Disgust co-existed with arousal, and I hated how being a werewolf translated to *this*.

Thankfully, though, when I looked up, I realized we were pulling up to the palace.

Freedom. At least, for now.

“We’re here,” I said.

The second we were out of the car, I headed toward the entrance as Aysel attached herself to me like a leech once more.

“Someone’s eager!” She grabbed my arm and giggled. “We’ll have to go through the back door, though, okay? Just to keep things low profile.” She smirked, leaning up to whisper in my ear, “This all feels so naughty, doesn’t it?”

This all felt wildly creepy and like a bad idea, but I was in too deep to chicken out now.

Also, I couldn’t let Xavier be right.

The pit in my stomach grew as I followed Aysel through some back halls, stopping only so she could look up at me hungrily and press me up against the wall, her mouth devouring mine.

Oh, no.

Fuck, *no*.

This wasn’t gonna work.

I grabbed her by both her wrists and flipped us around, pushing her up against the wall. The display of physical strength had her whimpering. She was breathing hard, and when she tried to kiss me again, I shoved her backward once more, growling while I was at it.

The scent of her arousal skyrocketed.

“If you want me, you’re gonna have to work much harder for it,” I snapped, and she whined.

“Alpha—”

“That’s right, I’m the Alpha,” I said sharply. “We do this my way, or not at all.”

She whined, her hips arching toward me, and I was gaining confidence. This Alpha bullshit was foolproof, thank *god*, and I finally felt more in control of the situation.

“Take me to your room,” I said. “Follow directions, and I might just give you what you want.”

She tilted her head to the side, showing submission, before grabbing my hand and pulling me to her bedroom.

When we were inside, she locked the door and turned to me. “We’re all alone now.”

I made sure to remain aloof, because that seemed to be working. I had no fucking idea what to do next. I only knew that I really, *really* needed to remain in control, so I ended up saying, “Hope you’re up for the challenge.”

She smiled devilishly. I regretted the words the moment they were out of my mouth, because I could tell that her excitement was through the roof now. She dropped all her things into a heap on the floor—jacket, purse, scarf, all of it.

And then she reached for her clothes.

Keeping eye contact, she undid the laces of her dress and let it drop to the ground. She wasn’t wearing any underwear. None at all. Zero.

Smirking and entirely naked, she sashayed over to me, flipping her hair over her shoulder. “Well, Alpha. How do you want me?”

**Episode 2370**

XAVIER

I closed Lilac’s bedroom door behind me. Troubling thoughts kept floating into my mind over Lilac and his wolf. Poor kid. This had to be rough on him.

Lilac was like a little brother to me—a little annoying, but mostly harmless, pretty funny, and a good kid. Violet had looked devastated, and I realized how horrible this must’ve been for her. I fucking hated this entire situation, and the fact that I couldn’t do anything right now to help.

But at least now I was much more confident that Marta wasn’t going to run off and do anything stupid in the name of love. Cali would’ve loved to tag along, for sure. This kind of adventure would’ve included all the things she enjoyed: running away and straight into danger, a pair of star-crossed lovers, and helping her friends.

Thankfully, Big Mac had overheard, and there was no way she’d let anyone move an inch without taking charge. As much as I didn’t like witches—I’d felt a little iffy about Big Mac ever since she’d taken Jay’s eye—I had to admit that she was trustworthy when it came to remaining in control.

What I needed to do right now, for my part, was put together a team to sweep the grounds and make sure there weren’t any more silver traps out there. Plum had gotten severely injured, and we were really fucking lucky to have Torin around.

As I was walking downstairs, I saw Rishika in the living room, feeding the fireplace. Just the person I needed.

“Hey,” I said. “You up for patrol?”

“Always,” she said.

She followed me outside as I started explaining. “After Plum’s injury, we have to assume that there might be more leftover silver traps from Shanna and her posse.”

“Or there could be a new threat?” Rishika asked.

“Exactly. Either way, I’m not taking any chances—we have to scout the area to make sure everything is safe.”

“I’d double-checked the perimeter, you know. I thought we were all clear,” Rishika said, her brow furrowed, “but apparently, I was wrong. What happened to Plum has got me a bit freaked out. Don’t go around telling the whole pack I said that.”

“Your secret is safe with me,” I said, pausing by the door. I rested my hand on her shoulder. “This isn’t your fault, you know.”

“You two going out for a perimeter check? Can I come with you guys?” Ava popped out of nowhere, startling me. I didn’t show it, though, just stared at her as she said, “I overheard the conversation—I’d love to help find any leftover traps. We can’t have that around the pack house.”

Ava was speaking like she was part of the team. I knew that she was extremely eager to remain in my good graces, and I also knew that she was trouble, but I couldn’t deny that another body in the sweep would help.

“Fine,” I said gruffly.

The three of us headed out. Once we got to the edge of the forest, I turned to Rishika.

“You run across the eastern border,” I said, “I’ll take the west side. Okay?”

“Okay,” Rishika said seriously.

“I’ll take the western border with Xavier,” Ava piped up. “Wouldn’t mind the chance to talk to him.”

I sighed internally. No surprises there.

Rishika looked between us, a funny expression on her face. She didn’t comment, though—probably not in the mood, considering we had some serious shit to deal with—and headed off. I was alone with Ava, surprise, surprise, but I ignored her stare. I should’ve expected that she would follow me—this wasn’t anything new.

I decided to ignore her. At this point, there was no need for arguments that literally had no possibility for resolution, so I shifted and started running.

Ava caught up with me easily, and mind linked, *So. How was your day?*

Small talk. Just what I excelled at. I had no idea what was she getting at, but I didn’t want to know. Not really.

*Fine*, I replied, and kept on running.

Casually, Ava kept talking. *The gingerbread competition was really something, huh?*

I glanced over at Ava’s wolf and frowned internally. I wasn’t used to her acting so casual. As if we were pals or something equally weird. She had to be playing some sort of game, so I decided to keep my answers to a minimum.

*Yeah*, I replied. Maybe if I gave her one-word responses she’d shut up.

Her low chuckle echoed through my brain, and I ignored the way it made my spine tingle. She kept going on about the competition after that, saying things like:

*Torin was so excited. It was a lot.*

*Did you see how Sage was ready to eat every cookie in sight?*

*I kept thinking Big Mac was just going to storm out.*

Her rambling escalated as she commented on various things about various pack members, until I couldn’t take it anymore. I slowed down my run and turned to face her, irritated.

*Okay*, I snapped, cutting her off. *What are you playing at here?*

Ava seemed confused. *I’m just chatting with you. You know, friendly banter? Ever heard of it?*

Her voice was light and teasing, vibrating in my head, and I just stood there.

Staring at her.

I thought back to the night when the two of us had stayed up talking, and she hadn’t come on to me or tried to get me to sleep with her. That didn’t mean anything, though—I couldn’t be so naïve as to believe that she was changing. I needed to keep my walls up around her, but when she did this small talk bullshit, it confused me.

She sounded genuine, like she was having fun, but how could I believe her?

Could I ever believe Ava about anything?

Could I ever trust her again?

I was feeling weird about this whole thing. In the end, though, I decided it wouldn’t exactly hurt anyone if I just talked to her right now. She wasn’t trying to get into my pants. In theory.

*Torin really did have a great time judging everyone’s houses*, I replied, and started running again.

She followed, her whole face lighting up. *It’s good that he had a nice time—it’s his first Christmas, right?*

*Yeah*, I said as we continued with our loop.

*He’s a great baker*, Ava said. *And I feel like he enjoys making the food just as much as we enjoy eating it. Perhaps even more.*

I snorted, nodding. I kept it up with my curt replies to Ava’s long-winded comments, tolerating the conversation for the most part as we checked out the perimeter. We hadn’t seen anything suspicious, and I was relieved.

My initial guess had been correct—the trap that had hurt Plum had been a leftover one. There weren’t any new threats to the pack. I glanced over at Ava. *At least not from the outside.*

Ava didn’t look so scary or malevolent right now, though.

*Xavier*, Rishika mind linked, meeting us at the edge of the woods. *I didn’t see anything suspicious. All clear.*

*All clear for us too*, I replied.

But as I looked over my shoulder, at the house, I got an uneasy feeling. Plum and Lilac were still upstairs, bedridden, and even though Torin had worked his magic—literally—we still had no idea what was going on with them.

I’d never heard of anything like that—of a wolf and its human being separated, but also connected in a way that made one’s injury manifest on the other. In my experience, new and strange occurrences never spelled anything good for the pack. When I had lost my wolf, it was just that: he was gone. Not pulled right out of my body. I hated the whole idea of it.

These thoughts weighing in my head, I shifted back to human. The other two followed my lead, and we started to get dressed—we’d left our clothes in a pile by the woods. Rishika had neatly folded hers, but Ava’s and mine were a mess. I refused to think that we had something in common, no matter how obvious it was.

Shaking my head, I zipped up my pants and reached for my phone in the front pocket.

I had a text from Greyson.

A couple, in fact.

*E’m in the place*

*Gonja fend it*

I had no fucking idea what he was talking about. Was this some sort of code? I hoped Greyson knew what he was doing. Should I call him? Just to make sure he was okay—not because I gave a shit, but because his plan was pretty risky and I didn’t want him to, like, die.

“What the hell was that?” Rishika grabbed me by the shoulder, interrupting my musings.

It took a second for me to realize she wasn’t talking about Greyson’s weird texts. She was pointing upstairs, toward Lilac’s room. She looked freaked out in a way I’d never seen before. And when I followed her line of vision, my stomach dropped.

Right there, in Lilac’s window, I could clearly see a dark, shadowy figure hovering over what had to be Lilac’s bed.

**Episode 2371**

Marta had just finished reading her letter from the witch council. It had popped up out of nowhere and almost given me a heart attack, but at least they’d finally contacted her. Everybody in the room—Torin, Big Mac, Violet, Charlie, and myself—stared at her, our interest piqued.

“The mentor is going to be arriving tomorrow,” Marta repeated slowly, as if trying to wrap her head around the words.

“Well that’s good news, right?” I asked, trying to remain optimistic. “Maybe they’ll be able to help with this whole debacle.”

Marta seemed to absorb my words, and then she looked at the still sleeping Lilac and Plum with wide eyes. “You think so?”

“Why not?” I asked, and she seemed much more hopeful now.

“That’s true. Maybe they’ll know how to connect Lilac with his wolf, and then we won’t have to worry as much,” she said to Violet, holding the letter close to her chest—

Violet screamed in horror.

I jumped back, yelping. *Oh my god, what could it be this time?*

We all turned to look at where she was pointing, and my heart skipped a beat. There was a dark, shadowy figure hanging over Lilac on the bed!

*What in the new fresh hell is this?*

“Lilac!” Marta shouted and rushed over to the bed, Violet following her with the same determination, while I stood there, frozen to the spot, fighting not to freak out. The moment they reached for Lilac, though, the shadow vanished.

“It’s gone…” Violet trailed off, panting.

“No, it’s not!” Charlie let out a strangled yelp that was definitely not his usual style and jerked away from the dresser. The black shadow was now hovering in the corner of the room.

My fear had me paralyzed, almost mesmerized with horror. The creature floated like a dark cloud, mystical and utterly frightening.

It was shaped differently to the thing that I’d sent back into the mirror, though.

“It’s not the same spirit,” I whispered, shaking slightly. “It’s something else. But how did it get out?”

“And what the hell does it want from Lilac?” Marta asked, mimicking my whisper. It was as if we were both afraid of screaming again in case the shadowy figure got enraged.

Marta and Violet were clutching at a still sleeping Lilac. Plum was asleep as well, on the floor, with the little pillow under his head, both of them too exhausted to realize what was going on.

“Is it going to hurt him?” Violet asked Big Mac, her face ashen, her hands trembling. “Why was it floating over him?”

“The spirit chose Lilac because he’s touched death most recently,” Big Mac said.

Nobody spoke. And then Torin flailed, pointing at the thing. “What in the world is *that* supposed to mean?”

Big Mac rolled her eyes, letting out a long-suffering sigh. “I’ll get my exorcism kit.”

I gaped. *An exorcism kit? How is she so casual about this? Oh my god!*

Other people had first-aid kits, but Big Mac had, of course, a handy-dandy kit for demonic possessions.

“Don’t move,” she told us darkly. “I’ll be right back.”

The spirit thing kept hovering by the corner, as if it knew it wasn’t welcome. Big Mac seemed a little bored, though, so that gave me hope.

“Exorcism kit?” Charlie asked hoarsely.

“This is freaking terrifying,” Violet whispered.

“Do you think it can hear us?” Marta hissed, nodding at the thing.

We all exchanged worried and/or weirded-out and/or panicked glances. I was ready to shrug in response, but then I remembered what Big Mac had said about not moving. All of us seemed to have taken her words literally, because we had stayed in our exact positions.

“Are we *really* not supposed to move?” Torin asked through gritted teeth, saying what everyone was thinking.

“Do you want to risk it?” Charlie shot back, eyeing the dark figure.

Torin swallowed audibly. “Yeah, better safe than sorry.”

“I’m of that opinion as well,” I piped up.

Torin frowned in confusion. “I thought you were more of an ‘act first, ask questions later’ kind of person, since you and Violet and Marta went around snooping and all.”

“Torin,” Violet said, eyebrows raised. “This is really not the right time.”

“Not the right time for what?” Big Mac said. She’d returned to the room holding a briefcase. She looked around at all the living statues in the room and rolled her eyes. “When I said not to move, I meant that you shouldn’t leave.”

Everybody exhaled, but it wasn’t in relief. We all stared at the shadowy figure, and I could feel the tension continuing to rise.

I cleared my throat. “So, er…” I stared at Big Mac. “How bad is this?”

Settling her briefcase on Lilac’s desk, Big Mac shot me an irritated look. “Well, not good, obviously.”

Big Mac’s snark actually made me feel a bit better. If she was up for sarcastic remarks, then whatever this was couldn’t be *deadly* serious.

“Can you elaborate?” Charlie asked sheepishly. When she glared at him, he quickly added, “Please?”

Violet gave him a thankful look as Big Mac said, “This happened because the cover came off the mirror. But it isn’t the first time I’ve had to deal with a similar situation.” She gestured in the general direction of the shadowy figure that was just casually hanging out with us, like a potentially deadly jellyfish.

“Wait,” I said. “So spirits have been on the loose in the pack house before?”

Big Mac huffed, rummaging through her briefcase. “Not in the pack house, but in other locations. The mirror is a powerful object. And getting a little ‘visitor’ of sorts is quite possible when a powerful medium like Marta—”

Marta winced.

“—bracelets or not, starts a connection with the spirit world,” Big Mac finished, still looking annoyed and haughty.

Her attitude was a little unnecessary when there was an actual horror movie playing out in the room, but I kept that to myself. Big Mac, though, did notice my grimace.

“Cali? Something you’d like to share with the class?”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” I said innocently.

She raised an eyebrow. “Good. Because I need to concentrate when I’m cleaning up you guys’ mess*. Again*.”

My embarrassment at the callout was overshadowed by the fact that that the spirit suddenly disappeared and then reappeared in another corner of the room. Everybody shrieked—even Charlie, who also reached out to grab Violet’s hand.

“What the hell is it doing?” Violet asked frantically.

“What does it want from us?” Marta added.

“Better question: why isn’t it attacking any of us?” I piped up.

Big Mac waved us all off. “Keep it down, all of you! I’m trying to focus here!”

Everybody fell silent as Big Mac pulled an odd variety of things out of her briefcase, including a piece of chalk that she used to draw a circle on the carpet.

Suddenly, the door slammed open, breaking the silence.

All of us shrieked once more, before realizing it was Xavier.

His expression thunderous, he stormed in, followed closely by Rishika and Ava—it was getting crowded in here. He made a beeline for me.

“Cali,” he said, pulling me into his arms. “You’re okay.” He looked over at Lilac worriedly. “How is he? We were out on the lawn and saw—”

“That?” Big Mac pointed at the shadowy figure in the corner. “Yeah, we know.”

“What the fuck is happening?” Xavier asked, bewildered. “What even is that?”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “I’m on it. If you could all just shut the hell up for a minute, I’ll take care of it.”

Rishika started, “But—”

“Whatever questions you have,” Big Mac barked, “you can ask them after the exorcism, hmm?”

I was still in Xavier’s strong, warm embrace as everybody fell silent. I felt so safe, even though Big Mac started doing some witchy mumbo jumbo around the circle on the carpet, grumbling in a language that I didn’t recognize. Was it Latin? Ancient Greek? Both?

No idea.

*Stay in school, kids!*

Anyway, as every single soul in the room held their breath, Big Mac raised her hands over her head, twisting her body before straightening into a sharp line and waving her hands upward in a final, flicking motion, bellowing in English, “Begone!”

At least I understood that part.

Before I could feel any sort of triumph, the room’s temperature dropped. I actually began to shiver. It was at least a good ten degrees colder. Not exactly what I expected from a successful exorcism.

“This doesn’t feel right…” Torin trailed off before Big Mac shushed him, and then the lights started to flicker all around us.

“This definitely doesn’t feel right!” I said, and then I had nothing more to say because my voice was overshadowed by a hideous, high-pitched screeching.

I screeched inside my head as I covered my ears. Xavier did the same but still pulled me back as the lights kept flickering, getting brighter and brighter…

Until they burned out with a hiss and left us all in pitch darkness.

**Episode 2372**

GREYSON

Aysel was getting close, and I needed to remind myself that I was in control here.

I.

Was.

In.

Control.

Even if Aysel thought she could manipulate me, I wouldn’t let her win. It just wasn’t gonna happen—I was too in love with Cali, and also too proud to give into someone as fucking horrendous as Aysel.

She pressed her naked body against my fully clothed one, wrapping her arms around my neck. She rubbed up against me, nuzzling my neck, and when my idiotic dick responded to the friction, she purred, “Oh, Greyson. You’re hard already.”

*I’m a 26-year-old man and an Alpha, I fucking hope so.* I held my tongue from telling her that this was just a reaction from the situation, nothing more. I refrained from saying that I hated her with all my heart. God forbid I ruin the mood. Instead, I grabbed her by the wrists, yanking her back in a way that jolted her.

“I think I told you that I’m the one calling the shots here,” I said gruffly. “Get on the bed.”

She smirked, tilting her head to the side. “Is that an order?”

I raised an eyebrow. That was enough, thank god, and she let go. Biting her lip, she moved backward to get on the bed. She then spread her legs for me, really wide. Her scent was overwhelming, and I realized—this was the point of no return.

How the fuck was I supposed to stall after telling her to get on the bed?

How the hell was I going to get information out of her?

I was about to twist my brain into figuring out how to continue the no-touching power play between us when—

I was saved.

*BEEP!*

An alarm blared, startling me. I didn’t show my surprise—that would be a weakness—but I did look up.

“What the hell is happening?” I asked Aysel.

The alarm sounded really serious, but Aysel just looked annoyed at the interruption. She huffed out a breath, got up from the bed, and pulled on a robe. “I’ll just be a moment. My brother will need to talk to me.”

She gave no indication of what was truly going on, but I didn’t exactly give a fuck. The point was that I had escaped.

As Aysel walked past me, I stood there for a moment, marveling at my luck. When she got to the door, though, she paused, turning back to give me a sultry smile. A sharky kind of smile that reminded me of all the times when my saying no hadn’t mattered to her, because she saw me as a thing to possess.

I resented her, actually.

“Make yourself comfortable,” she purred. “I’ll be right back, and we can pick up right where we left off.”

I offered her my best curt Alpha nod, which seemed to make her melt, and then she opened the door. I saw a few worried-looking people running down a hallway before she closed it behind her with one last wink.

What the fuck was happening in the palace?

It didn’t matter—this was my only hope of snooping around without Aysel getting suspicious. I needed to find something in here that could lead me to more information about the witch who’d put the spell on Cali and me. A receipt, perhaps? An incriminating check? Royalty used checks, right? Weren’t they frozen in time or something?

I checked in my back pocket and felt the tarot card there. Did Aysel’s half stay on her at all times the way mine did? I looked around—could it be here?

Aysel could return at any moment, so I had to make this really fucking quick. I moved swiftly over to her desk and started opening drawers.

There was so much stuff in here—paperwork and notes and small bottles and jars and whatever the hell. How on earth was I going to find something so specific? Desperate times called for desperate measures, though, and I reminded myself that I had no other choice. This was my one shot, my one opportunity, and I had to take it.

Glancing at the door and looking through the drawers at the same time, I rifled through papers as quickly as I could, my heart pounding in my ears the entire time. No tarot card, no receipt or any kind of note. Aysel’s drawers were full of random bullshit that didn’t help me in the slightest, and all her spa receipts only served to infuriate me further.

*DING!*

My werewolf hearing picked up the sound over the still-blaring castle alarm. It was a text. I looked over—Aysel had left her bag on the floor, along with the rest of her belongings, and her phone was in there. I rushed over and pulled out the phone. The light was flickering, and there was a new message on the screen. Holding my breath, I read it.

*I don’t do spells for free, even for royalty*

Holy fucking shit, this had to be whoever had put the curse on us, asking for payment! But was Aysel really so cocky as to leave her phone’s messages exposed like this? Could it be a trick? But this kind of hubris did seem like her—thinking she could get away with anything.

Either way, I didn’t have the time to consider this much. There was no name for the contact, but the number was clear as day.

Just then, the blaring alarm turned off.

The silence was deafening, and Aysel would be back any second, so I had no time to waste. Quickly, I plugged the number into my own device, slipped Aysel’s back into her purse, and headed straight for the door to get the hell out of here.

The doorknob turned before I could take another step.

*Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck!*

I looked behind me, quickly scanning the room to make sure I’d put everything back in order and the drawers were closed, and then I threw myself onto the bed. My stomach twisted, my mind heavy with the possibilities. How the fuck was I gonna get out of here now?

Okay, I would tell Aysel that I wanted to tie her up. Yeah. I’d tie her up and walk straight out before anything worse happened. I would try to play it off as a silly sexy joke or whatever—there was a chance that she’d buy it.

By some miracle, though, when Aysel came back in, her vibe had completely changed. She looked really pissed and barely even looked at me, which was great, actually. I didn’t want her to look at me. At all. Ever.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, trying to hide my glee.

With a heavy sigh, she said, “You’ve got to get out.”

“Oh no,” I said, biting my cheek to hide my smile. I wanted to shift and howl at the moon in relief. But, of course, I was also a little suspicious of anything Aysel said or did. I got up, pretending that I was sad instead of ready to fucking breakdance.

“Is everything okay?” I asked. “Did something happen?”

Yeah, actually, what was up with that alarm? It had never gone off during all the other ill-advised times I’d been in this castle.

“It’s annoying,” Aysel said irritably. “Just something that I need to deal with. And you need to go.” She walked up to me, pouting. “You know I’m not happy about it either.” She trailed a finger down my chest. “Do you forgive me?”

*Never.*

“Of course,” I said. “It’s too bad things turned out this way.”

*I literally could burst into song right now, and I don’t even fucking sing.*

“I hope everything works out for you,” I said, ready to walk the hell out of there.

But then Aysel grabbed me by the elbow. “Wait!”

Oh, god. When would this end?

Grinning, she grabbed my face and gave me a lingering kiss. I tried to block it all out—the anger, the disgust, every other bad thing—and focus on returning to Cali and telling her all about that number I’d found.

“I’m sorry that the night ended this way,” Aysel said. “I’m looking forward to seeing you again soon.”

*I’d rather rip your throat out, you mediocre predatory bitch.*

“Sure,” I said, smiling tightly. “I hope so.”

She smiled back, pleased. “Do you want me to arrange for a car to take you back to fetch yours?”

“Thanks, but I can get it myself,” I said.

Once I was finally out of the room, I contained myself and did not break into song. I was careful to leave via the more private hallways, hoping that nobody would notice me. I succeeded.

When I finally made it to the woods and shifted, I breathed a sigh of relief.

*Freedom!*

I went straight back to the club to pick up my car, my thoughts going back to the number that I’d saved in my phone. Cali would be so excited to hear that I’d made progress. But then another thought entered my mind—what was up with that alarm?

Aysel’s behavior had shifted so abruptly that it was all extremely suspicious.

Just what the hell was the Vanguard pack up to?

**Episode 2373**

XAVIER

The second the lights went off, everybody started screaming.

Not me, of course, but literally everybody else.

“OH MY GOD, WE’RE GONNA DIE!”

“WHERE DID THE LIGHT GO?”

“VIOLET, I’M RIGHT HERE, FOLLOW MY VOICE!”

“OUCH! WHO GRABBED MY HAIR?”

“XAVIER, OVER HERE! XAVIER!”

“Cali, I’m right here!” I shouted. At least I knew she was okay. The darkness was so thick that I couldn’t even see my own hand—not even with my werewolf vision. It was unnatural. It reminded me of the time when Cali and Torin had accidentally done a dark magic spell to conjure darkness at the lake pack house.

“CAN YOU GUYS STOP BUMPING INTO ME?”

“TORIN, YOU’RE BUMPING INTO *ME*!”

“HOW THE FUCK IS LILAC STILL SLEEPING?”

“MAKE SURE YOU DON’T STEP ON PLUM, OH MY GOD!”

Similar exclamations like, “What the hell?” and, “What happened to the lights?” echoed up from downstairs. I tuned it all out, refocusing on Cali’s scent, and her voice. I found her after Torin and Marta bumped into me twice.

“You’re okay,” I said into her hair as she burrowed into my arms.

“What’s even *happening*?” she whispered against my neck, trembling slightly.

As if hearing her question, Big Mac’s voice boomed through the room, rising above the general hubbub. “Everyone, QUIET!”

The authority in her tone was enough to make everyone fall silent immediately, and I was thankful for it. But then…

We all heard a horrible skittering sound coming from the ceiling.

“It’s like a giant spider,” Cali hissed, and then everybody else started to freak out.

“WHO’S TOUCHING ME AGAIN!” Torin shrieked.

“OH MY GOD, IT’S ME!” Violet snapped back.

“Okay, everyone get out of the goddamn room!” Big Mac snarled. “I need to focus, damn it!”

“What the fuck is happening in here?” Kira’s voice demanded from the doorway.

“Oh, finally, someone with working brain cells,” Big Mac said. “Everyone out! Only Kira stays with me!”

“Lilac is still sleeping,” Violet said. “How the hell is he still sleeping after all this commotion?”

“He’s in a healing coma,” Torin explained.

“I’m not leaving him here,” Violet said shakily.

“I’ll pick him up,” Charlie said, reassuring her.

“What about Plum?” Marta asked, panicked.

“I’ve got him,” I said. “I’m going to let you go so I can help them, okay?” I told Cali, and I felt her nod against my chest.

I walked in the general direction of the bed and told Charlie, “Let’s do this one at a time. Use your sense of smell to make sure you don’t bump onto anyone. Stick by my side.”

“Okay,” Charlie said.

“Torin, Cali, Violet, Marta—exit the room first!” I called.

I heard agreements while the eerie skittering noises continued. I ignored them and coordinated with Charlie, getting both Lilac and Plum out into the hallway. Everything was still pitch black.

*Cali, you with us?* I mind linked.

*Yes, right here. I’m fine*, she replied.

In the meantime, Kira and Big Mac were chanting in the room behind us, while the creepy-crawly sounds continued. We all really needed to get the fuck away from here.

“Everyone, downstairs! Use your hands to trace the walls and stair railing. You can do this. Slowly and one at a time, in an orderly line!” I was commanding in the face of everyone else freaking out—like an Alpha should be. But even with my heightened senses, it wasn’t easy keeping track of the entire pack in the pitch dark.

Ignoring Torin’s squeaking about someone stepping on his feet and Cali saying that this was really not the best time to be as clumsy as she was, I kept my ears open and shifted Plum’s weight over my shoulder.

“Charlie, you go first with Lilac,” I said. “I’ll follow with Plum.”

A few moments later, we placed both Lilac and Plum on two of the couches in the living room. Once I’d made sure they were both settled down, I felt a soft hand on my elbow.

“Xavier?” Marta asked. “Are they okay?”

“Yes,” I said.

Marta exhaled in relief, and I turned in Charlie’s general direction, reaching out to squeeze his shoulder.

“Good work,” I said.

“You too. I’m gonna go find my mate.”

The moment the words were out of his mouth, I heard my own mate’s voice—a loud yelp that stood out from the chaotic talking all around me.

“Cali! Oh my god, I’m so sorry!” I realized that Lola had probably bulldozed into Cali.

“It’s fine—are you okay?” Cali replied.

“Does anyone even know what’s going on?” Lola asked, her voice cracking.

“It’s something to do with Big Mac’s mirror,” Cali said. “There was a shadow.”

“More like a spirit monster that came out of it,” Violet said.

“A demon that wants to eat us!” Cali added.

“We don’t know if it wants to eat us, Cali!” Charlie said.

“Don’t we, though?”

“A DEMON?” Zainab shrieked from a few feet away, obviously having heard some of the conversation. The moment the word erupted into the air, all the conversations all around me became terrified shouts.

*Cali!* I mind linked.

*Oh my god, WHAT?* She replied.

*Did you REALLY have to say the D word?* I asked.

“What?” she said out loud. “Demon?”

Jesus fucking Christ.

“A demon! I’ve seen *The Exorcist*—we’re all gonna have our souls sucked into a black hole!” Sage screamed.

“That’s not what happened in that movie, Sage!” Ravi snapped.

“There’s a demon movie? WHY IS THERE A DEMON MOVIE? WHO IS GIVING THEM A PLATFORM TO SHOWCASE THEIR PROPAGANDA?” Torin squealed.

“We’re doomed!” Lola screeched.

“I’ll save you, Lola!” Jay shouted.

“No, it’s gonna be okay!” Violet said.

“Yeah, at least I think so!” Charlie added.

“Big Mac and Kira are working on fixing this; nobody freak out!” Marta said.

“There was a creepy spider noise crawling on the ceiling too!” Cali shouted.

“THERE’S A MASSIVE MOTHERFUCKING DEMON SPIDER UPSTAIRS TRYING TO EAT BIG MAC AND KIRA!” Zainab screamed.

“OKAY, EVERYONE SHUT UP!” I bellowed, loudly enough that the entire pack stopped talking, including my mate, who really did love setting fires without realizing it.

“First of all, there’s no spider—”

Cali was indignant. “BUT IT DID *SOUND* LIKE ONE!”

I huffed. “*Cali*.”

“Okay, shutting up now.”

“Is there a demon, though?” Sage asked.

“We don’t know,” I said truthfully. “But I do know there’s no spider. Everyone stay in the living room and sit down—Big Mac and Kira are taking care of the situation.”

At least I fervently hoped they were. I could still hear the chanting coming from upstairs.

“Big Mac’s instructions were for all of us to stay calm and out of her way. You better stop it with the screaming and focus on settling each other down.”

After what had to be a few minutes but felt like a long-ass time, everyone was settled in the living room. I made sure Cali was by my side the entire time, and then I did a quick roll call.

“Okay,” I said, “everyone’s accounted for. We’re good.”

An eerie silence fell over the group.

*Cali?* I mind linked, reaching for her hand.

She squeezed mine. *I’m here.*

*Sorry I yelled at you*, I said.

*Sorry I yelled at you too*, she said. *Though it did sound like a spider.*

I snorted, shaking my head. The silence continued after that, with the exception of Kira and Big Mac’s chanting. The sounds were getting louder and louder and were soon joined by that same creepy skittering sound.

Torin groaned. “Cali was right. It does sound like a spider.”

Nobody had the time to comment on that, because then the skittering and chanting were followed by a low rumble.

“What the fuck is that?” Cali choked out, grabbing at my hand harder, and then—

The whole house started shaking.

“Is it an earthquake?” Orla asked.

“Should we get out of the house?” Tom asked. “What if it falls down?”

I was wondering the exact same thing. The safety of the pack was my responsibility.

“Everyone, stay calm until—”

I didn’t finish my sentence. The rumbling suddenly turned into a roar, and the relative calm everybody had been maintaining for the past few minutes evaporated.

“We need to get out!”

“THE HOUSE IS COMING DOWN!”

“I’M TOO HOT TO DIE!”

The noise got so loud that I heard nothing after Lola’s ridiculous statement. No one was listening to me, either—no matter how hard I tried to shout for everyone to follow my lead. Everything was just dark chaos, and then, to my horror, Cali let go of my hand.

*Cali! CALI!* I shouted through our mind link, and then—

A blinding light sliced through the darkness, making everyone freeze in awe. I shielded my eyes against the brightness, but when I opened them again, I saw…

“Cali,” I breathed, amazed.

My mate was standing in the middle of the room. Her brow furrowed in concentration, her jaw set in a determined line, she held her hands up, blinding warmth pouring out of her fingertips as she shielded us all with her magic.

**Episode 2374**

I had no idea what was happening.

*How… How am I doing this? How is my magic doing this? WHEN DID THIS EVEN BECOME A POSSIBILITY?*

My arms were raised, holding the shield over my head. Overwhelming warmth spread from the depths of me and outward, toward the edges of my fingertips before it spilled out into the room, engulfing everyone. I couldn’t believe this was happening!

*OH MY GOD! Am I… saving the pack?*

I felt an incredible sense of power rushing through me, a rightful contentment that was effortless, smooth, and comforting in its strength. The sensation was unlike anything I’d ever experienced in my life. I hadn’t even planned to cast a shield in the first place, but when everyone had been screaming earlier that the house was going down, I’d acted without thinking.

The idea of Xavier and my parents and all these people that I loved being in danger had propelled me into action. I’d followed my instincts, this quiet powerful urge to do what needed to be done in order to keep everyone safe. It was amazing, incredible, and I felt like I could just stand there and protect them all forever, just to make sure they made it out of here alive.

I loved them all so much, and I’d do anything to protect them.

*Also, is this what superheroes feel like?* I wondered. *Because I can definitely get behind it!*

Before I could get even more into my own head, the lights flickered back on and all of the noise disappeared immediately. No shrieking, no spider-y creeping. Panting, I dropped my hands, and the shield disappeared.

When I looked around, everyone was staring at me with wide, disbelieving eyes. Xavier, Lola, my mom and dad, Artemis—

Who stepped forward, still gaping, and shouted, “That. Was. fucking. AWESOME!”

Her praise broke the dam, and now the whole group was crowding around me, everybody asking questions at the same time.

“Oh my god, how did you do that?!”

“You saved us, Cali!”

“That’s my daughter!”

“I knew you had it in you, honey.”

“Cali, we love you!”

“The spider’s gone, and the demon too!”

“Thank you, Cali!”

Xavier moved through the crowd of people hugging me and pulled me away, smothering me with his embrace. I was smiling so wide that my cheeks hurt.

Xavier faced me, stroking my cheek. “You were amazing. Have you been practicing?”

I shook my head, about to tell him about how it had all been instinctual when Big Mac came tromping down the stairs.

Everybody fell silent all over again.

“Well, then,” she snapped, looking frazzled, her hair mussed. She glared first at Marta, then at Violet, then at me, and declared, “And that, kids, is why we don’t play with magic mirrors.”

There were murmurs among the pack, someone asking, “I thought it was a demon spider?”

But Marta thankfully ignored them all and asked Big Mac, “Is it gone? Is Lilac safe?”

“It’s gone,” Big Mac said grimly.

“But could it come back?” I asked, hesitant to feel too much relief.

“It was simply an errant shadow creature from the spirit realm. One of the desperate, hungry entities that crave to live. It got out when the spirit realm was breached.” Again, Big Mac shot daggers at Marta, Violet, and me. “We were lucky—this one was acting alone. They usually come in swarms.”

I shuddered. “Okay… yeah… we did get off relatively lucky, then. Thanks, Big Mac.”

She grunted and turned away, stomping back upstairs without another word.

“Thanks for your help!” Marta called after her, but Big Mac didn’t acknowledge her.

Violet winced, shooting a look at Marta and me. “You girls think she’s mad?”

I scoffed, just as Ravi asked me, “What magic mirror was Big Mac talking about?”

I flushed, and Xavier cleared his throat loudly. “We’ll explain everything in the morning,” he said in his most Alpha-y tone. “Right now, you all need to get some rest. Everything is fine. We can clean up the minimal disarray around the pack house in the morning.”

“But I need more details about the mirror!” Lola huffed, desperate for gossip.

“I’ll tell you tomorrow,” I whispered.

Lola seemed happy, grabbing Jay and heading off to bed, along with everybody else—everyone apart from Marta, who was still standing over Lilac, watching him as he slept on the couch, looking upset. Plum, at least, seemed much calmer as he lay on the other couch. Someone had lit a fire, and he looked warm and cozy.

“You should get some rest,” I told Marta, resting a hand gently on her arm. “Your mentor is coming tomorrow, so you’ll want to put your best foot forward.”

Marta turned to me, sniffling. “This is all my fault, isn’t it?”

I shook my head. “Everyone will understand that you were just trying to help Lilac, Marta. Nobody’s going to blame you.”

“But—”

“No buts!” I said seriously. “Come on, we’ll get Lilac upstairs and you can lie down next to him and try to sleep too. Okay?”

“I’ll carry him,” Charlie said, and Violet kissed his cheek in thanks.

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When we were finally done and everybody was settled upstairs, it was just Xavier and me alone in the room.

Xavier wrapped his arms around me once more. “I’m so proud of you.”

I was still buzzing with fear from the chaos and adrenaline of the night. Power lingered at my fingertips from the shield I’d produced, but now I felt exhausted, spent, the high dialing down.

“You too,” I mumbled. “You helped everybody get in line.”

When our eyes met, I realized that he looked really tired too.

“I wish nothing bad had happened tonight,” I said earnestly. “I told Marta and Violet about the mirror, but I never in a million years could’ve guessed that all this would happen…”

Xavier sighed, shaking his head. “I know. Don’t blame yourself.” His expression suddenly shifted into something theatrically severe, and he said, “But if you ever catch anyone in the pack messing around with magic, you’d better come find me. We don’t need any more demons.”

I nodded seriously. “True. I’m not interested in spooky ceiling men any more than you are.”

“Good,” Xavier said, softly kissing my mouth. “You should go to bed now—you look super tired.”

I yawned. “What about you?”

“I gotta do a final check around the house first,” he said.

He gave me another kiss, this one lingering, and shooed me upstairs. I smiled a little and followed direction without any more complaining—which was a rare occasion, I had to admit.

After a quick shower, I got ready for bed and slipped under the covers. My god, I was tired. I checked my phone one last time, though—I’d really been hoping for a message from Greyson. It was late, and he wasn’t back yet. What could THAT mean?

*Nothing, Cali! Don’t be paranoid!*

I forced myself not to imagine my beautiful mate in compromising positions with Aysel. Greyson had promised that he wouldn’t take things too far with her, and I trusted him—I knew I could believe in him, could expect him to do the right thing.

*I wonder if he’s made any progress with his research about the curse, though…*

I was so tempted to call or text him, but again I thought that if Aysel noticed, I could ruin his plans, and that was the last thing we needed.

*It’s gonna be fine, Cali!*

Huffing to myself, I placed my phone on the nightstand and tried to get some sleep. I looked up at the ceiling for a long moment, going over the day, especially the part where I’d conjured up a magical barrier to literally shield like twenty people.

I felt so proud of myself.

With a smile on my lips, I finally fell asleep.

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When I opened my eyes again, it wasn’t morning.

And I wasn’t at the pack house anymore.

I was standing in the main entryway of the Vanguard palace with Seluna. The goddess was floating in midair, her silver skirts and jewelry as gorgeous as ever. She stared at me appreciatively, and I wasn’t sure if I liked this look or not.

“Um,” I said, clearing my throat. “Hi. What’s going on right now?”

Seluna smiled enigmatically. “Your magic is growing, Caliana.”

She was talking about the shield. How did she know about the freaking shield? She wasn’t at the pack house! How could she see my every move? This was beyond spooky!

“It’s, uh…” I swallowed, unsure how to respond. In the end, I said, “It’s just Fae magic. It’s got nothing to do with you.”

Seluna raised an eyebrow, sliding closer to me. “Good. You’re going to need it.”

I felt a chill run down my spine. My voice cracked when I asked, “For what?”

Seluna stared at me in that cryptic way of hers and leaned closer.

All of a sudden, her face started to melt and morph, bits of skin slipping down before it bubbled like toxic foam. The horror of the sight made me gasp, made it harder to breathe, and I stood there, frozen, waiting for worse things to come.

And then Seluna screamed.

“Wake up, Cali. WAKE UP!”

**Episode 2375**

I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound came out. Seluna was terrifying, and I flinched back, ready to run away—

Then I blinked.

Suddenly, I was back in my bed, and there was light streaming through the windows. It took me a long-ass moment to realize what was going on, but then Greyson’s voice flooded my ears, making me feel safe.

“Cali? Are you awake?”

I bolted upright and faced Greyson.

I gasped. “You’re back!”

He was sitting on the edge of the bed. I was so fucking happy to see him that I launched myself into his arms and attached myself to him like a koala. I ignored the instant nausea that was building in my stomach. The solid strength of him was as reassuring as ever as he held me tight, nuzzling my hair. I’d fight the urge to throw up no matter what.

*He’s here, he’s fine, everything is fine!* I told myself.

I lifted my face to give him a kiss—

Before remembering that I wasn’t *allowed* to give him a kiss. The nausea turned my stomach. It was full on going-to-puke-sweats time.

*Fucking Aysel… UGH!*

And as if *that* wasn’t enough, as I moved backward, trying to separate us before I got sick, I caught a whiff of his neck, I realized that he smelled strongly of a very sweet, very feminine perfume that was *not* mine. I gagged. My heart started pounding in indignation and anger, a little voice in my head yelling, *Mine mine mine!*

I had known what Greyson would have to do tonight, but to actually smell Aysel’s perfume was something else altogether. It made my stomach churn, and I felt furious and sad at the same time, the image of Greyson and Aysel twirling in bed naked invading my mind.

*No, Cali!* I scolded myself. *You have to stop this!*

“It’s okay,” he said, holding my face between his hands. “I’m here now.”

“Yeah,” I said, clearing my throat before backing away. I felt like hot garbage. “I can see that. I can smell it too.”

Greyson cringed, sniffing himself. “Damn.”

“That’s definitely not my perfume,” I commented. I was trying not to make my voice sharp, but it was very difficult here.

“Sorry,” he said quickly, “I should’ve showered when I got back, but I was so eager to see you first thing and—”

“Why would you need a shower?” My voice sounded squeaky and high-pitched, and it suddenly felt like my whole face got hot. With *fury*. “Greyson, what happened, did she—”

“She tried, but nothing happened,” he said, cutting me off seriously. “It was a bit more intense than I thought it would be—”

“Oh, my *god*—”

“No.” He held a hand up. “But the only thing that happened was kissing, like I’d told you. Nothing else—I was keeping her at bay the entire time, and she was none the wiser.”

I held my breath, taking in his gorgeous tired face. I felt like crying a little at the idea of ever losing him. “Promise?”

“Of course.” He came closer, leaning in to brush his fingertips over my cheekbone. I tried to hold the nausea at bay. “Aysel is a fucked-up, spoiled little princess who doesn’t take no for an answer. How could she ever compare to you?”

“But—”

“And even if things were different, and Aysel wasn’t a monster, it still wouldn’t matter,” he said, staring deep into my eyes. “You’re the only one for me, Cali. Always. Nothing will change that.”

I placed my hand over his on my cheek and exhaled loudly. Half for relief and half to keep my stomach in check. The earnestness in his face was so pure that it settled me down. “Sorry for jumping down your throat; I couldn’t help it.” I bit my lip. “It’s just that the thought of you with another woman makes me crazy…”

A sharp look crossed Greyson’s face, and his hand dropped from my cheek.

*Cali! Did you REALLY JUST SAY THAT? With the* due destini *and all?*

I’d just put my foot in my mouth, for sure—Greyson had to feel that way all the time about Xavier. And it wasn’t like Aysel lived here and Greyson was also in love with her or anything.

*Shit shit shit!*

“I—I’m sorry I ever doubted you,” I said quickly, feeling a little sick with remorse (or revulsion). “I trust you. You know I do.”

Greyson looked up from his lap, shaking his head a little as he swallowed down the bitterness that had crossed his face. When he smiled, just for me to see it and feel better, my heart broke for him.

*My god, this is torture.*

“Did you find anything?” I asked, desperately trying to change the subject.

“Yes,” he said, fishing around in his pocket for his phone. “I actually have good news.”

“What?” I asked, intrigued.

“I happened to see a text on Aysel’s phone while she was distracted, and I’m pretty sure I got the number of whoever she hired to put the curse on us.”

I clapped my hands. “Greyson! You did it!”

He snorted, shaking his head. “Well, at least I completed step one.”

“We can worry about that later,” I said, waving off whatever negativity still floated in the air. I was just so glad that there was finally some progress. “Right now, I’m just so happy you’re back, here with me.”

He smiled. “Me too. How was last night?”

I chuckled awkwardly. “We had quite an eventful evening, that’s for sure.”

He scowled. “What does that mean? What happened?”

“Well,” I started, flailing a little, “so there was a magic mirror in Big Mac’s room, and Marta and Violet and I went snooping around—”

“You did *what*?”

I tried to ignore his completely valid tone. “As I was saying, we were messing around with the mirror, trying to help Lilac unite with Plum—”

“Oh my g—”

“And we accidentally let in some sort of demon? That kinda hovered over Lilac and made spider-y noises on the ceiling? Nobody knows why it was so interested in Lilac, or what it was going to do to him.”

Greyson gaped at me.

“It was a whole thing—lights going out, et cetera, but the witches took care of it!” I finished happily.

Greyson was still looking at me with wide eyes. “Seriously?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding a lot. “Now, how about some breakfast downstairs instead of dwelling on all that doom and gloom?”

He frowned. “And everyone’s okay? No casualties?”

“Nope,” I said. “No injuries, all good. Oh, and I also made a shield!”

Greyson watched with immense interest as I explained the shield thing to him, then he shook his head, grinning. “I’m so proud of you, love.”

I could get used to all this pampering from both the Alphas, not gonna lie.

After that, I finally convinced Greyson to go get breakfast. He showered—thank god—as I got ready, and then we headed downstairs together. I felt so, so much better now that both my men were safe and sound with me, under the same roof.

“Why are you smiling?” Greyson asked as we walked into the kitchen.

I shrugged. “Just… I’m happy you didn’t vanish into the night.”

Greyson snorted. “Please. That’s much more Xavier’s style.”

Speaking of Xavier, he walked up to us at the doorway. No, not walked—*stalked* with the grace of a lion. *Damn*.

He raised one eyebrow as he took in Greyson. “Brother.”

“Brother.”

“You’re back.”

Greyson grinned. “Obviously.”

Xavier rolled his eyes, shooting a glance at Rishika and Artemis, who were eating breakfast and making eyes at each other. Super cute. Then he grabbed Greyson by the arm and towed him out into the hallway. I of course followed, because their business was mine.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” Xavier asked Greyson in a low voice.

“Yep,” Greyson said with a shrug.

“Did you have to fuck Aysel?” Xavier asked, crossing his arms.

I smacked his forearm. “That’s not funny!”

He shook his head. “Agree to disagree, so—”

“I did *not* sleep with Aysel, and I still got what I needed,” Greyson said. “I’m just that good at pulling off high-pressure spy operations, all by myself.”

Xavier glared.

Greyson smirked.

“Oh my god, just tell him what you found!” I hissed, poking Greyson in the ribs.

He chuckled, the menace, then turned to Xavier. “I’m just trying to make sure my dear brother realizes that I didn’t need any of the help he so patronizingly offered last night.”

“Honestly, fuck you.”

I gasped. “Xavier! Be nice!”

Xavier grumbled. Greyson kept smirking like a freaking evil mastermind and pulled out his phone, making a show out of it. “We just have to call this phone number and figure out who cast the curse on Cali and me.”

Xavier scowled. “What are you waiting for, then?”

Greyson paused. “Nothing?”

I was about to say that I’d like some pancakes or waffles first, with whipped cream and strawberries if we had them, perhaps some coffee too, and to snuggle up with Greyson, who had recently returned from war.

But before I could even utter a single word, Xavier reached over to Greyson’s screen and tapped the call button.

**Episode 2376**

GREYSON

I wanted to smack my brother upside the head for pressing “call” without asking me first, but we were in too deep now. If I took the phone away and told him to fuck off, it would be a sign of weakness, and I definitely didn’t like those.

Cali, on the other hand, had no qualms sharing her thoughts with him.

“Xavier!” she hissed as the phone rang. He’d put it on speaker. “I wasn’t ready for that!”

“Why?” he stared whispered. “Do you want me to hang up?”

Cali paused. “No, it’s too late now! Continue.”

Xavier gave her a self-satisfied smirk that made me want to smack him, while the phone continued its *beep beep beep*. It kept ringing, so at this point, I was waiting for the voicemail—to hear this person’s greeting and figure out if their voice was at all familiar.

But the line simply cut off.

All three of us frowned at the phone.

“Well,” I said. “Great idea, genius.”

Xavier shrugged. “Worth a try, right?”

“It wasn’t even your call to make,” I snapped.

He smirked. “Are you mad that I got to push the button?”

Seriously? Was he trying to start a fight with me?

Meanwhile, used to our bickering, Cali simply sighed, looking disappointed. “We probably shouldn’t have expected it to be so easy, especially with our luck.”

Her stomach growled, and I said, “Go. I can smell the pancakes from here.”

She gasped, distracted, and then marched off to the kitchen. The moment she was gone, I grabbed Xavier by the shoulder. “Happy now? Cali hadn’t even eaten breakfast before you sprang this on her.”

Xavier shook me off. “She’s not a baby.”

“Did I say that? No,” I said. “Calling the number without a plan was reckless, and you know it. This is too important to just wing it.”

Xavier shrugged. Again. “Seemed like the simplest way to get to the bottom of things.”

“This isn’t your problem, Xavier,” I snapped. “This is my business and Cali’s above all. You’re just an observer. Got it?”

He raised his eyebrows. “I just wanted to help.”

“No, you just wanted to look decisive in front of Cali, when in reality you’re just an annoying little shit.”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re delusional.”

He made a move to leave, but I blocked his way. “Not so fast. Don’t give me that ‘I want to help’ bullshit—I bet you’re just loving the fact that this curse is keeping me and Cali apart, aren’t you?”

Xavier shoved my shoulder. “What the hell are you going on about now?”

“I’m saying, why are you so interested? Maybe you want to sabotage us—that would serve your purposes perfectly.”

He huffed. “We’ve been through this, Greyson. Paranoid much?” he said. “This whole thing is upsetting Cali, and when she’s upset, so am I. That’s all there is to it.”

I laughed sardonically. “And since when are you so selfless, Xavier?”

Xavier glared at me, clearly fuming. “Have you lost your mind? Are you seriously thinking that I’m working against you here?”

I crossed my arms. “Wouldn’t put it past you.”

Xavier stepped closer, his nostrils flaring, but then I heard a loud, familiar voice from right next to us.

“Good god, can you two take your Alpha posturing to some other hallway?” Big Mac snapped. “I’m coming through!”

Both Xavier and I flinched. The witch stood there, looking peeved and exhausted. There were dark circles under her eyes, her hair didn’t look like it had been brushed, and she wasn’t even wearing all her rings and necklaces.

This was *bad*.

The most curious thing, though, was that she carrying a large object wrapped up snugly in a blanket.

“What are you doing?” Xavier asked her cautiously.

She sneered. “I’m going to take this thing and hide it somewhere where no one in this nosy, meddlesome pack will find it.”

Xavier offered a solemn nod. “That’s for the best.”

I looked between them with a scowl. I was missing something huge here, and I hated missing *anything*, especially when it came to the pack.

I stared at Big Mac—she was my mother’s fiancée, so I *expected* her to prefer me over Xavier—and asked, “What the hell is going on here?” I nodded at the blanket-covered item. “What is that?”

Big Mac rested it against the wall and took a seat on a nearby sofa. She gestured for me to sit next to her. “You’d better strap in.”

Big Mac started telling a tale that was decidedly more detailed than Cali’s version of events.

“Wait, she had to *pull Marta out of the mirror?*” I asked. That hadn’t exactly gotten covered when Cali explained things to me.

“Yes,” Big Mac said. “Because something was pulling her *in*.”

“Shit.”

“And that’s not all,” Big Mac said, smiling tightly. “The thing that came out of the mirror? It was a different spirit. So Violet, Marta, and your beloved Cali interacted with not one, but two different hostile spirits. *Demons*, if you will.”

I swallowed convulsively. “That’s—”

“It’s dangerous, Greyson,” Big Mac snapped. “So, obviously, since I can’t trust any of you not to play with things you don’t understand, that mirror will be gone.”

I shook my head. “Can’t say I blame you.”

“The girls had good intentions, though,” Xavier grumbled. “They wanted to help Lilac and Plum.”

Big Mac glared at him.

“What?” he said defensively. “They did.”

“They’re a bunch of idiotic children who don’t think before they act, and that *will* get them killed,” Big Mac said calmly. “I’d just prefer that it didn’t happen in my room.”

“That’s cold, MacKenzie, even for you,” I told her.

“Well, too bad,” she said and stood up, grabbing the mirror. “I’m exhausted. I’m constantly cleaning up your messes—please take note of that, Alpha, and control your pack.”

I pointed at Xavier. “He was supposed to be the one in charge last night.”

Big Mac stared at Xavier. Then she laughed, loudly, grabbed the mirror, and off she went.

Xavier glared at her. “Should I be offended right now?”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I snapped, standing to my feet. “Why didn’t you think to immediately tell me everything that happened while you were in charge? Why do I have to hear things from Cali and Big Mac?”

“I had things under control,” Xavier said sharply.

“You’re not allowed to keep vital information from me under any circumstances,” I declared. “Do you understand that? I need to be able to trust you, otherwise this is never gonna work. Next time, I’ll just put Rishika in charge, and you know she would’ve sniffed out the plan before anything even happened.”

Xavier raised his hand, probably to shove me, but then his gaze flickered somewhere behind me. We both turned to look at Cali, who had a bowl of whipped cream and a spoon in her hands. She was staring at us and anxiously eating, looking worried.

I knew that she hated seeing us argue, but this was even worse. She had an “I’m not upset, just disappointed” kind of vibe, which made me grit my teeth. I talked myself out of the fight, and turned to my annoying brother.

“You need to get your shit together,” I told him in a low voice. “I’m the Alpha here, and it’s time you accepted it.”

Xavier snorted. “All I know is that I was here to keep the pack safe while you were off on a date.”

My anger flared. “Never call it a ‘date’ again.”

“You think I don’t know you’re trying to make Cali jealous with all this bullshit?” Xavier stepped closer to me, his tone barely audible. “I bet you get off on making her worry about your affections—do you think that’s gonna make her pick you?”

I gaped, unable to wrap my head around his words. Cali had turned her back on us, distracted by some waffles this time, and I could speak more freely.

“Are you nuts?” I hissed. “What kind of sick theory is that?”

He sneered. “I wouldn’t put it past you.”

I wanted to punch him. In the face. Over and over.

“You’d better stop stirring shit between Cali and me , Xavier,” I declared. “Because, unlike you and Ava, I have no history with Aysel.”

He rolled his eyes. “That means nothing—”

“I’m just saying, if you want to start the jealousy game between me and Cali, you’d better be certain that you’re ready to play. Because Ava is still here, isn’t she?” I raised an eyebrow. “You just can’t seem to let her go.”

Xavier’s smugness vanished. It turned into anger, and he was about to start yelling at me when there was a loud knock on the front door.

“Nobody move!” Marta came hurtling down the stairs. “I’ve got it!” she said, dashing over to the entrance.

“What the…” I trailed off in disbelief as Marta threw open the door.

An official-looking young man was standing at the entryway.

He looked down at Marta and cleared his throat. “Hello. I am Okorie. I’m looking for Marta Zhao and Dani Silverstein. I’m their new mentor.”

**Episode 2377**

MARTA

I stood motionless at the door, staring into the man’s dark eyes. They were so deep and so inky, I was mesmerized, and for a moment I forgot who he was and what he was doing here.

Then those dark eyes rolled upward. “*Hello?* I get that I’m impressive as hell, but my patience is actively waning. Are you planning on standing there all day?”

Snapping back to myself, I blinked and gave my head a little shake. “I’m sorry, there must be some kind of mistake. You’re the mentor?”

The man made an irritated noise. “That’s me. Okorie, the wise. But don’t call me that.”

I had to force myself not to keep staring at him. “But… *How?*”

“How what?” he asked, a perfect dark eyebrow rising.

“How can *you* be my mentor? You look like you’re only a few years older than me.” I looked over his shoulder at the empty drive behind him. “Is there anyone else with you? Are you the assistant to the mentor or something?”

But Okorie had stopped listening, his eyes on the bracelets encircling my wrists. He looked up at me. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I’m twenty-two.”

*Twenty-two?!* I was only eighteen! Ish.

“Which one are you? Dani or Marta?” He shrugged. “Not that it really matters.”

“Marta.”

He gave me a cool, assessing look and took a deep breath. “Okay. Well, the sooner we start, the faster we can get this over with.”

I frowned. “Over with? I don’t understand. Don’t you work for the witch council? Isn’t this your job?”

Okorie’s mouth pressed into a thin line. “Let’s just say I’m only here because I have to be. We’ll leave it at that, okay?”

I shifted on my feet. I didn’t know what to do next. Should I invite him in? He was so abrasive, and I had a sinking feeling that maybe this wasn’t going to be the most pleasant experience.

Apparently finished sizing me up, he looked past me into the house. “And where’s Dani? I don’t have all day here.”

Stepping out from in front of the door, I waved him in. “Come on in—”

“Hang on.” Greyson walked up behind me and stood blocking the door. “You should wait outside.”

Okorie took Greyson in with one glance and nodded, though he gave a gusty sigh.

“Fine.” He turned and sat on the bench just beneath the windows. “Werewolves,” he muttered disdainfully.

I turned around—I needed to find Dani—but Greyson addressed me before I moved.

“Do we know anything about this guy?” he asked. He glanced out the door. “Like what kind of magic he has or if he’s really your mentor?”

My stomach clenched. “It has to be him. They notified me at least… I just don’t want to get into trouble with the witch council because I was rude to the mentor they sent,” I admitted.

Greyson crossed his arms, thinking. “I don’t want that to happen. Let’s just be cautious with him, all right? We don’t know much about him.”

“I understand,” I said quietly. More than that, I knew not to argue with Greyson.

My stomach was a mass of nerves as I turned to go find Dani. I’d hoped having a mentor would help things, but Okorie was already intimidating the hell out of me, and I just didn’t know how this all was going to go.

As I headed upstairs, I knew I needed to find Dani, but I decided to check in on Lilac first. Whatever the witch council had in mind for me, none of it would matter if Lilac wasn’t better.

When I walked in, Violet looked up. She was sitting in a chair by the side of the bed, and she smiled and got to her feet.

She stretched long and yawned. “I’ve been sitting for too long.” She nodded toward Lilac, whose eyes were closed. “He was calling for you in his sleep.”

My heart pounded when she said this. I stepped over Plum, who was resting on the floor next to the bed, and took Lilac’s hand. He looked a little better, but his skin was still pale, and his hand was cool to the touch.

“I’m going to go find something to eat,” Violet said. She gave my arm a squeeze. “I’ll see you later.”

As she walked out, I put my hand on Lilac’s head. His skin was dry and cool. At least he wasn’t feverish. But as I stood there, he shifted a little in his sleep. He moaned, and his eyelids fluttered.

“Hey,” I whispered, taking a seat next to him on the bed. “Are you waking up? How are you feeling?”

Hearing my voice, his hand squeezed mine, but he moaned again as he turned his head toward me. “I think I’m dying,” he said, his voice barely a whisper.

My throat was suddenly dry. “You’re not dying,” I insisted, as much for my benefit as for his. “Everyone thinks you’re getting better. You’re not dying.”

He didn’t answer right away. Then his hand squeezed mine again. “Kiss me.”

“What?” I asked. He looked barely lucid. I wasn’t even sure if he knew what he was saying.

His eyes fluttered open, and he looked at me. “Kiss me, Marta. I want a kiss from you before I die.”

I knew he was getting better, but his words made my blood run cold. Why did he keep saying that? Did he know something the rest of us didn’t? Was it possible he *was* really dying, or was he just delirious?

“I’m going to go get someone to take a look at you,” I said, getting to my feet. “Big Mac or Torin or someone.”

But he tightened his grip on my hand. “Please, Marta. One last kiss.”

My heart pounded. “Don’t talk like that.”

“Okay, I’m sorry, but I really do need a kiss.”

I leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to his lips.

Then Lilac’s arms snaked around me. He pulled me down onto the bed and kissed me hard and deep.

I surfaced with a gasp and stared at him. “Dying, *right.*” When Lilac grinned, I smacked his shoulder. “You should be ashamed of yourself.”

He laughed. “You can still kiss me if you want.”

Feeling my cheeks flushing, I got to my feet. “My mentor is here, Lilac. I don’t have time to play games right now.”

Lilac’s smile slid away, and he suddenly looked very interested—and very alert. “Your mentor’s here? What’s she like?”

Annoyed, I straightened my shirt, which had gotten twisted. “It’s a guy, and he’s kind of a dick.”

Lilac looked surprised. “Oh. You want me to talk to him? Werewolves can be very intimidating—I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

I rolled my eyes and gave his shoulder a shove. “Maybe you should worry about getting out of bed on your own first. Anyway, I need to go find Dani.”

But as I headed to the door, Lilac called after me. “What would have happened if Plum had died?”

I turned slowly around. “Why do you ask?”

All traces of his grin gone, Lilac looked down at his wolf. “Ever since Plum was injured, I’ve been wondering—what happens if my wolf dies while we’re separated?”

I looked down at Plum for a moment, then back at Lilac. “Why are you worrying about such morbid things, Lilac?” He opened his mouth to answer, but I spoke over him. “You’re both recovering, so just concentrate on getting better. Okay?”

Lilac gave me a long look, then finally nodded. “Okay.”

But as I closed the door behind me, I realized that Lilac had spoken aloud the question I’d been wondering about, too. I didn’t know the answer. All I knew was that I *had* to reunite Lilac and Plum. It was hard enough just keeping one of them safe—it was twice as hard with them separated.

Maybe this mentor wouldn’t be so bad. Maybe we’d just gotten off on the wrong foot. And if I could get my magic under control, then I wouldn’t have to rely on anyone else to help me. I’d be able to reunite Lilac and Plum all on my own.

I had just stepped toward Dani’s room when a figure came hurrying forward and—not looking up—bumped right into me.

“Dani!” I said, grabbing her arms before she stumbled backward.

“Oh, Marta!” Dani’s eyes were wide as saucers, and she looked terrified. “Is it true?”

“Is what true?”

She was twisting her hands nervously. “I heard the mentor’s here.”

“Oh, that. Yeah, he’s here. I was looking for you.”

Dani looked at me with wide, wide eyes.

“It’s fine,” I said, trying to sound reassuring. “Think of it this way—the sooner we start with him, the sooner we’ll be free of him. And the damn witch council.”

Dani’s gaze darted around skittishly. “Do you think this is really going to work?”

I thought back to Okorie’s condescending attitude and his frequent eyerolls and sighed. “I really hope so. Anyway, he’s here, so let’s go.” We headed downstairs.

I grabbed the doorknob and looked at Dani. “Ready?”

She looked terrified, but she nodded. “Okay.”

Okorie looked up from his phone as we walked out onto the porch. “Oh, there you are. *Finally.* Shall we begin?”

**Episode 2378**

Greyson

I scrubbed a hand over my face, feeling the scratch of stubble on my jaw. I’d been gone for one damn night and had come back to fucking chaos. My night had been bad enough—I hadn’t realized I was going to have to deal with so much when I got home.

Glancing over at the closed front door, I felt a twinge of doubt. Maybe I had been a little unwelcoming of this mentor guy, but with everything else going on, did we really need *more* unstable magic in the house right now?

As if in answer to this question, Big Mac came down the stairs and looked around. “Where are they?”

“Who?” I asked.

“Dani and Marta’s mentor. I heard they were here. Where are they?” she asked, peering into the empty living room.  
 “Outside,” I said.

“Outside? Why?” Big Mac asked.

“I told him to wait on the porch,” I said simply.

Big Mac seemed unbothered by this, and she stepped toward the door. “I want to check him out. The witch council is unpredictable at the best of times, and they don’t always send the best person for the job. I want to see who they got this time.”

It wasn’t what I wanted to be doing, but I followed Big Mac out onto the porch. If this guy was going to be hanging around, I should probably get a sense of him. But I hoped it didn’t take long—I wanted to do a walkthrough of the house to see if there was anything else that needed my attention.

And I still had to figure out how to get Aysel’s witch to respond. Big Mac had made it clear she didn’t know the details of the curse. If I wanted this taken care of quickly, asking the witch who cast it seemed the fastest.

Dani and Marta were on the porch, standing stock-still in front of Okorie as he filled out some paperwork he’d taken from a manila envelope that had appeared out of thin air.

Witches.

“What’s going on?” I turned to see Cali standing there.

“Dani and Marta’s mentor is here.”

“Oh wow, already?”

Next to me, Big Mac gasped. “Oh my god,” she said breathlessly, then pushed past me to get closer to Okorie. “You’re Nneka’s son, aren’t you?”

I had a sudden flash of memory of meeting Nneka while on my way to the Fae world, and my eyes narrowed. The shotgun-wielding witch had run the world’s least convenient convenience store. My eyes slid to Okorie—if this guy was her son, then I had some serious questions about how well this whole mentorship was going to work.

Okorie looked up in surprise. “MacKenzie?”

“Why are you here, Okorie?” Big Mac asked, looking surprised. “I thought you were at that boarding school.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m not a child anymore, MacKenzie. I’m not in school.”

Big Mac gave him one of her assessing looks. “Does your mother know you’re here?”

“Of course she does,” Okorie said sharply.

Big Mac raised her eyebrows at this. “You’re supposed to be here to do Marta and Dani some good. Let’s not forget that.”

Okorie’s eyes flashed. He looked like he didn’t like being lectured.

“I don’t want to be rude, but I actually have a lot of work to do,” he said, gesturing down at the papers.

Big Mac looked like she had more to say, but I took her arm and led her back into the house.

“What do you think of this guy?” I asked, closing the door behind us. “Can we trust him?”

Big Mac thought about this for a moment. “Normally, I’d probably say no, but I’ve actually met this kid before. I haven’t seen him for years, though. The last time I saw him, he couldn’t have been older than five. But I remember him. Even as a baby, that kid was a pain in the ass.”

“Great,” I muttered.

“But I do trust Nneka,” Big Mac went on, “despite her many, many faults. But if Okorie is her son, then…” She shrugged. “I’m okay with it.”

Cali had followed us into the house, and she nodded. “I agree with Big Mac. Nneka’s a good witch.”

I gave her a look. “You really think that?”

Cali gave me a sheepish grin. “I know, I know. But I think she just has very firm boundaries, which—given all the supernatural stuff *we’ve* been dealing with—I think is probably pretty smart.”

I shot Okorie a look through the window. “He seems kind of young to be mentoring anyone.”

Big Mac followed my gaze out the window. “He is young, and it seems like he’s still a pain in the ass, but he’s supposed to be a prodigy.”

“Really?” Cali said, looking impressed.

“What does that mean?” I asked. “A prodigy at what?”

“He’s just always been a great talent. I saw it myself. He was able to master very advanced magic very early. And I heard he just got better and better. A natural. That boarding school I was talking about? It isn’t for everyone.”

I took this in. “Well, I’m no expert on magic, so would you mind keeping an eye on the guy wonder while he’s here?”

I glanced out at the porch, where Marta had just stepped into view. I knew this really shouldn’t be any of my concern. Marta wasn’t an official member of the pack, but she was living here, and everyone liked her, and Cali certainly seemed to care about her, so I knew I would rest better knowing she wasn’t in any danger.

I was still wary of Okorie—I wasn’t thrilled having another magic user hanging around the house. But, in fairness, Okorie probably wasn’t too thrilled to be hanging around a house full of werewolves, either. I sighed. I was probably being way too on edge. He just seemed like a cranky guy with an assignment he didn’t want.

Anyway, maybe he’d prove useful in dealing with the revulsion spell, since I wasn’t really getting anywhere with Aysel.

“Yeah, I’ll keep an eye on him,” Big Mac said, and headed back outside.

Cali looked up at me. “What do you think of him? I think he’ll be helpful,” she said. “I just don’t want Marta getting into any more trouble. The last thing we need is another mirror disaster.”

I had a sudden and very powerful urge to pull Cali close and kiss her. I was so grateful that she was keeping an eye on things in the pack. I even took a step forward and reached out, but then I stopped myself and pulled back, feeling awkward. This goddamn revulsion spell!

Watching me, Cali frowned. “What’s wrong? Why are you looking at me like that?”

I gave her a sardonic smile. “I just can’t help myself. I want to kiss you, even though I can’t.”

She reached for my hand and squeezed. “Is there anything else we can do about this stupid spell?”

I shrugged. “I was hoping that witch would call me back, but so far it’s just crickets.” I pulled my phone out of my pocket. “I suppose I could try texting. That’s how the witch communicated with Aysel.”

But just as I started to compose a message, my phone rang.

“Is that the witch?” Cali asked quickly.

The name on the screen made me freeze for a moment. “It’s Aysel.”

Cali’s eyes flashed angrily. “What does she want?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Do you really want me to find out?”

Cali heaved a gusty sigh. “What I *want* is for you to never have to speak to that woman ever again.”

“That’s fine,” I said, and went to slip my phone into my pocket when Cali caught my hand.

“But if it’s going to help us break the spell, then yes. You need to talk to her.”

I knew Cali was right. I was desperate to break the spell that was separating us. But my thoughts went back to the night before—and to Aysel’s naked body pressed against mine, trying to tempt me. I could feel heat rushing through me, just remembering it. Did I really want to take a call from this woman in front of Cali?

Absolutely not.

I dismissed the call. I was certain there might be hell to pay for that later. Oh well.

I looked at Cali. “Right now I want to deal with her witch. And if I get what I want, maybe I won’t ever have to deal with Aysel ever again.”

But just as I went to send the witch a text, my phone rang again. Aysel again. If nothing else, the woman was persistent.

But when I looked at the number displayed, I realized it wasn’t Aysel—it was the witch.

Cali’s eyes went wide. “Answer!” she said.

She didn’t have to tell me twice. I pressed to answer the call, feeling on edge as I did. This witch could be how I could finally kiss Cali again and be rid of Aysel’s antics.

“Hello?”

**Episode 2379**

I grabbed Greyson’s arm and tried to pull his phone closer to my ear to listen.

*I want to hear!* I mouthed anxiously.

Greyson’s gaze darted around, and I thought I understood his hesitation. We were alone—for the moment—but were standing in the middle of the front hallway. Any moment now, someone was going to come down the stairs or walk through the front door and start asking questions or offering cookies or needing something from Greyson.

I nodded and hauled him into the small office off the hallway. I shut the door and, turning toward him, hissed, “*Speakerphone!*”

Greyson didn’t look thrilled, but he put the call on speaker, and I stepped closer to him to listen.

“Hello?” he said again. “Are you there?”

There was a little rustle, almost like static, and then silence. I thought maybe the call had dropped before a faint voice spoke.

“How did you get this number?” the static voice demanded. It was like one of those concealed voices on *20/20*.

Greyson’s hand around the phone tightened. “Aysel.”

“Why would the princess give out this number?” the staticky witch snapped. “How do you know her?”

I frowned down at the phone. I was listening hard, but for the life of me I couldn’t tell if it was anger or fear I heard in the voice. Sometimes the two were interchangeable.

Greyson muted the call. “I just had an idea. Don’t let them know you’re listening.”

I stared at Greyson in disbelief. “Why would I let them know?”

He gave me a hard stare. “Because you might want to react to what I’m about to say.”

“Okay,” I said warily. “I’ll stay quiet.”

I knew it wasn’t the time to ask them, but I had a few more questions. What was Greyson planning? Was he going to propose to Aysel or something?

Greyson unmuted the call. “I just wondered if you’re still interested in getting paid for Aysel’s spell.”

There was a long pause in response to this. Then, “Who are you?”

A muscle in Greyson’s jaw flexed. “All you need to know is that I’ve assumed all of the princess’s debts.”

Wait, *what*? I stared at Greyson, trying to catch his eye, but he kept his gaze on the phone. He had been right about my wanting to react, though, and it was everything I could do to keep my mouth shut.

On the other end of the phone, there was another long pause.

My stomach tightened with anxiety. What was going on? What game was Greyson playing? And was this witch going to play along with it? Or were we totally screwed?

Greyson glanced up at me, and I saw the question in his eyes. He wasn’t sure if he should ask the witch the question again.

I shrugged and nodded in a kind of “why not?” gesture, but just as Greyson opened his mouth to speak, the call ended.

Wide-eyed, I snatched up the phone. “Did that witch hang up on us?”

When Greyson put his hand over mine and slid the phone away from me, my heart sank. The call really had ended. The witch was gone. I hadn’t fully realized it until that moment, but I’d really been hoping that the witch getting back to Greyson would mean a quick fix to our revulsion curse problem.

I bit the inside of my cheek, trying to hold back the tears that were welling up in my eyes. I just wanted to be able to touch Greyson without worrying about making both of us sick.

“So,” I said, looking up at Greyson. “What do you think we should do now?”

He shook his head. “I’m not sure. I wasn’t expecting the witch to just… disengage like that.”

“Maybe it’s for the best,” I said, though I didn’t really believe it. “Do you have a plan from here? Were you really planning to take on Aysel’s debts?”

Greyson looked pained, but I kept speaking before he could answer.

“Because that’s a pretty dangerous proposition. We’re not just talking about money here, Greyson. Remember what happened to Jay? He lost an eye paying someone else’s debt. Who the hell knows what Aysel promised that witch in exchange for the revulsion curse? I mean, I doubt she’d actually promise her eye—I don’t think she’d do anything that put her beauty in jeopardy—but what about her first born or something? She doesn’t exactly strike me as the motherly type—”

“Cali,” Greyson cut in, “take it easy. I’m not planning to actually take on Aysel’s debts. Besides, what does it matter? The witch didn’t go for it. They hung up.”

“I guess,” I muttered.

Greyson thought for a minute. “The thing I keep thinking about is the witch might circle back to Aysel about this.”

“Oh god,” I said quietly. Greyson might be right about that, and I didn’t like it one bit. Who knew what Aysel would do to Greyson if she found out he’d gotten in touch with the witch? Though—if I were trying to find a bright side—that might mean that Greyson and Aysel wouldn’t have to spend any more time together.

Greyson narrowed his eyes. “I know that look, love. I can tell you’re worried.”

I heaved a sigh. “Of course I’m worried. We’re dealing with a witch here. Isn’t that cause for concern?”

Greyson leaned back to sit on the desk, looking tired. He ran a hand through his light hair. I missed doing that. “You know I’d give up my wolf if it meant you and I could be together without any curses.”

“Greyson, don’t say that,” I said quickly. “Your wolf is part of who you are.”

His eyes were like summer storms as he looked at me. “You’re worth it, love.”

I felt my heart stutter in my chest.

“Listen,” I said, trying to get ahold of myself, “just don’t agree to anything with that witch, okay? Not until you know for sure what Aysel’s debts are. I don’t want any surprises. Any *more* surprises. Will you do that for me?”

His gaze softened. “Of course I will.”

Everything in me wanted to lean forward and kiss him, but I had to content myself with giving his hand a quick squeeze. “I’m going to go check on Marta and Dani to see how everything’s going with the mentor now. You’ll let me know if you hear anything else from the witch?”

Greyson nodded. “I’ll find you.”

I left the office and headed back outside, but the porch was empty when I stepped out. I looked around in confusion. Where the hell had they gone? Had Okorie taken them somewhere?

I was just on the verge of panicking when I heard an annoyed voice.

“Marta, did I *ask* you to cast your energy onto the astral plane? No. I didn’t. So please don’t.”

Following the sound of the voice, I hurried down the porch and around the side of the house, where I found the small group standing near a withered heap that I *thought* had been a rhododendron at some point.

Okorie was putting Marta’s bracelet back on her wrist, and he glared up at me. “Can I help you?”

The icy tone of his voice nearly stopped me in my tracks. Maybe I’d been overly nice with my assessment of him before. This guy was not the type of mentor I’d imagined for Marta and Dani. Weren’t mentors supposed to be supportive and helpful?

I felt a flash of anger, but I gave Okorie my cheeriest smile. ‘I’m just here to cheer my team on.”

“Your *team*?” he asked, his tone disparaging.

“Yeah, like, go Team Marta! Go Team Dani!” I called, like I was leading a cheer.

Okorie did not smile. He narrowed his eyes. “You’d better not get in the way.”

*Get in the way?* I wasn’t trying to…

“What’s your problem?” I demanded, narrowing my eyes right back at him.

Okorie’s mouth opened in surprise. “My *problem*?”

“Yeah. What’s your problem?”

He took a deep breath, his nostrils flaring with fury. “Look, if you want to help your friends, you’d better learn to be more respectful.”

“Excuse me?” I said, my face burning now. “You know, for the record, I have magic too, and I know how to use it.”

“Is that a threat?” Okorie hissed.

“Of course not,” I hissed back at him. “I’m just wondering how you expect to help Marta and Dani when you’re being so mean and condescending.”

“I can help them without being their friend,” he said coldly. “I can help them because I’m a master of magic.”

“Does being a master make you a good teacher? No, I don’t think it does,” I snapped, without giving him a chance to answer.

Okorie laughed, the sound brittle and angry. “Fine. You know what? That’s just fine with me.” He glared at me with his dark eyes. “If you’re *so* gifted and know *so* much about teaching, then why don’t *you* mentor these two?”

“What?” I gasped. “Why would *I* do that?”

He glowered at me. “Because I quit!”

**Episode 2380**

XAVIER

Out the window of my room, I could see Cali standing with Marta and Dani. Okorie was with them, and they were all staring at a dead bush. Okorie certainly seemed pretty animated, what with him waving his arms about. Looked pissed to me. Cali had her hands on her hips, and I would’ve bet my life that she was yelling back at him. I’d seen Marta obliterate that bush just by brushing it with her bare hand, and I definitely wasn’t feeling too hopeful about this whole mentorship arrangement. Cali had gone out there to support Marta and Dani, and I knew she was always going to want to look out for her friends, but I also knew that messing with magic was dangerous. What if that bush had been her?

I narrowed my eyes at Okorie, who was glaring at Cali. If anything happened to Cali, that warlock was going to pay.

My train of thought was interrupted when there was a knock on the door. “Come in.”

The door opened, and Violet walked in. She looked pale and upset, and she joined me at the window without a word. For a moment we were both quiet as we looked out at the scene playing out on the snowy ground below.

“So, this guy. Do you think he can help Marta?” she finally asked.

*No*, was my actual answer, but I tried to hold back my negativity. I figured a shrug might be neutral enough. “I guess we can only hope so.”

Violet let out a shaky sigh, and I looked over at her from the corner of my eye. I felt for the kid—she’d had a rough time of things lately, between Charlie and his mom and now this thing with Lilac. It was clearly stressing her out. Part of me wished I could do a better job of comforting her, but that kind of thing wasn’t exactly in my skill set, and I had no idea where to even start.

Violet leaned her hands against the edge of the window. “What do you think would happen if Marta went back to the spirit world?” she asked.

Anger flashed through me, and I gritted my teeth, trying not to snap in response. “I have no idea, but it doesn’t matter, because she’s not going back. I thought I made it clear that none of you were going to try that again.”

“I know,” Violet said quickly, “you did. And that freaky-ass shadow thing made it clear enough that we should stay away.” She shook her head. “Losing Marta would have been horrifying enough, but I realized that when we messed with that mirror, we could have lost the entire pack. We never would have done it if we’d known. But it’s just so frustrating!”

“What is?” I asked.

“I want to help Lilac,” she said, flushing. “I want to help him as much as Marta does. But I can’t figure out what to do. Lilac’s wolf getting hurt and it affecting Lilac really freaked me out.”

Violet’s voice caught like she was about to cry, and on instinct, I pulled her into a one-armed hug. “I’m working on it,” I assured her.

“Are you?” Violet asked, looking up at me, her eyes wide with hope. “Really?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I’m kicking around a few ideas.”

“Thank you, Xavier,” she said, hugging me tight. “Thank you. I know you’ll figure something out. I’m going to go see how Lilac is.”

As I watched her go, I had to admit to myself that I had absolutely *no* ideas. Plum and Lilac… What the hell *could* I do? I didn’t have magic. I didn’t have a pipeline to the spirit world. Marta didn’t know what to do. Even Big Mac and Kira didn’t seem to have answers about any of this. Not that I thought Big Mac would be going out of her way to help anyone, since the Scooby gang had snuck into her room to use her mirror.

What the hell was that mirror doing in my house, anyway? Especially with the whole pack here. It was clearly a dangerous magical object. I was glad Big Mac was taking care of it now, but I would’ve preferred to avoid the whole ordeal from the start.

But I had told Violet that I’d think of something to help Lilac, and now she was counting on me. I didn’t want to let her down.

I thought back to when I had been separated from my wolf. It had been hell, but the situation had been very different. Then I thought back to Portland and that guy I’d talked to—Swift. When my wolf had gone missing for the second time, Gabriel had recommended him. When I’d first walked in to see Swift’s shop, full of weird candles and crystals, I’d thought he was full of shit. But—whatever the guy’s weird, mystic methods—I *had* gotten my wolf back.

Maybe there was something Swift could do for Lilac that wouldn’t involve anyone having to go into the spirit realm. Not anyone I cared about, anyway. I guess I wouldn’t mind if Ava ended up back there. That would sure as hell solve a few of my problems.   
 Maybe I should have shown Ava the mirror—and then shoved her into it. I grinned at the thought.

But I forced my thoughts back to the matter at hand. I wondered if Swift was still around, and if he made house calls. I remembered thinking the guy was annoying as fuck, but I would put up with it if it meant getting Lilac reunited with his wolf. Though maybe it would be better to visit Swift. It probably wasn’t a good idea to ask him to come here—we had enough to deal with without some random hippie rolling up with his crystals and bad attitude.

Besides, I wouldn’t mind a trip to Portland. I’d be able to pick up some of my favorite coffee.

I was googling Swift’s website when there was another knock on the door.

Greyson didn’t wait for me to answer before he walked in. “The witch called,” he said.

“Really?” I had to admit, I felt pretty vindicated, but I tried to keep my gloating to the bare minimum. “I guess my plan really worked. Maybe you could learn a thing or two from me about just going with your gut—”

Greyson rolled his eyes. “Cool it, Xavier. I didn’t come in here to compare dick sizes, okay? I just wanted to keep you in the loop.”

“So what did the witch say?” I asked.

Greyson heaved a frustrated sigh. “Not much, actually. They hung up on me. I’m waiting to hear back.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “And if you don’t hear back, is there a back-up plan?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Greyson growled.

I liked seeing him so annoyed.

“Do you need *me* to call the witch for you?” I asked.

Seeing Greyson glowering at me was like a shot of dopamine to my brain.

“Maybe you could ask Aysel about it. While you’re at it, see if she’s free tonight. You could take her to a movie,” I said, needling him. “Maybe a fancy restaurant?”

Greyson shot me a death glare. “Hilarious,” he said in a tone that meant anything but. He glanced at the open laptop on my lap. “What are you looking at?”

Swift’s website was open on my screen, and his photo was in the center—he was sitting in the middle of a flower garden as the sun beamed down on him. He was wearing a flowing white shirt and had his legs folded into the lotus position. The website had his shit New Age music playing in the background.

Greyson smirked as he took it all in. “Friend of yours?”

I shook my head. “Funny.”

“Who is that?” Greyson asked, leaning forward and looking curiously at Swift’s photo.

“Swift. Gabriel told me about him. He runs a store in Portland. He’s the one who helped me get my wolf back the second time.”

Greyson looked up at me, surprised. “Are you thinking about Lilac?”

I nodded.

Greyson looked grim. “Hell of a thing about his wolf.”

“I know. Violet’s torn up about it. I was thinking about reaching out to Swift, see if there’s anything he can do. It’s a different situation with Lilac, but who knows?”

Greyson nodded. “Okay. Do you need anything from me?”

“No, you don’t need to worry about it.” I thought of the hopeful look in Violet’s eyes. “I’ll take care of it.”

Greyson grinned and slapped my back. “It’s all yours, little brother.”

He was being condescending as hell, and I bristled, but Greyson’s phone buzzed before I could say anything.

He pulled the phone out of his pocket, and the grin melted off his face in an instant. “Shit,” he muttered.

“What is it?” I asked.

He looked up. “It’s a text from the witch. They want to meet.”

**Episode 2381**

“*What?*” I took a step toward Okorie, getting up in his face. “You can’t just up and quit.”

“And why not?” he demanded.

“Um, because you haven’t actually done anything yet. Except kill a bush. You’re supposed to mentor these two, remember?” I snapped, gesturing at Marta and Dani.

Okorie heaved a long-suffering sigh. “Do you have any idea what kind of magic I possess?” he started, sounding epically bored with the whole exchange. “I don’t need your permission to leave. I could literally snap my fingers and be somewhere else.”

“So why don’t you?” Marta said, moving to stand next to me. Her eyes were flashing, and her tone was surprisingly challenging, considering how anxious she’d been to impress him.

“Yeah,” I said, grateful for her support. “You were some kind of child prodigy, right?” I gave him a smirk I’d learned from Xavier. “Guess you grew out of that.”

“Indeed. Into a far more powerful warlock than you could imagine,” Okorie said testily.

“Oh, well, then, mentoring us should be relatively easy for someone of your *vast* and *immense* talents.”

We all whipped around to face Dani, who had spoken.

I was surprised to hear from her, as she was usually so quiet. But she was looking at Okorie now, her cheeks flushed with emotion.

Okorie rolled his eyes with a groan. “I’m not a babysitter.”

“Excuse me?” Marta flashed. “We’re not babies, and we don’t need a sitter. Just who the hell do you think you are?”

Marta looked really pissed, and I could feel my heart starting to pound. Things were turning ugly, fast. I had to figure out how to pump the breaks on this.

“Why are you here?” I asked Okorie, changing tact.

He gave me an even stare. “I was chosen for this job because I’m the best.”

I pressed my lips together, trying to think before I responded. I was used to confidence, but this guy had an ego the size of Oregon.

“Well why’d you accept the job if you’re not even interested in it?” Marta said.

Okorie’s eyes darted away, and for the first time, his confidence seemed to flicker—just a bit. “I accepted it because I didn’t have a choice.”

Marta and I exchanged a surprised look.

“Is the council forcing you to be here? I just assumed they had a set list of approved teachers, or something.”

He glared at me. “I’m not here out of the goodness of my heart, okay? Being a mentor for the witch council isn’t exactly something you apply for, and it’s not something you can just turn down.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Why are you here?” I asked again.

When Okorie spoke, it looked like it cost him. “It’s my punishment.”

Marta gasped. “What?”

“My *unearned* punishment,” Okorie amended.

“What did you do?” Dani asked.

But he shook his head. “Nothing. It’s not important.”

“Um, yeah it is,” Marta countered. “It’s important to me. I don’t want a criminal’s help.”

“Oh, honestly, I’m no criminal,” Okorie snapped. “I said it was *unearned*. They never proved anything. And they couldn’t, because I didn’t *do* anything.”

I was starting to feel really stressed out again. It was clear that tensions were high, and I was going to have to figure out a way to de-escalate the situation.

“Listen,” I said, looking at Okorie, “you’re here, right? You could leave, but I think the best option would be to take your mentoring role seriously. You do that, help these two, and you’ll be done. Then you can leave and go do whatever you want. And Marta and Dani will be able to safely use their magic. It’s a win-win situation for everyone.” I smiled. “See?”

Okorie narrowed his eyes. “What is it with you? You were a cheerleader in high school, weren’t you?”

I took a calming breath, trying to stop myself from wringing his neck. “So are you going to help or not?”

Okorie’s gaze flickered over my shoulder to Marta and Dani. He gave a dismissive shrug. “I’ll do what I can, but I want to be clear—no one should get their hopes up.”

I kept my smile plastered determinedly onto my face. “I have faith in all of you.” When I turned to Marta and Dani, my smile became more natural. “Will you two be okay?”

Marta shrugged, still looking bad-tempered, but Dani nodded.

“Sure we will,” she said softly.

It wasn’t much, but it was going to have to be good enough for now.

I turned back to Okorie. “For what it’s worth, if you stop thinking about the unfairness of your situation, I think you’ll be a great teacher.”

“I’m so moved,” he deadpanned, waving me away with an elegant hand. “Enough with the pep talk. I have work to do.”

As I turned away from him, I could feel the smile sliding from my face like melted ice. It was clear that this guy was going to be a handful.

But I hoped whatever it was that he had to teach Marta and Dani, he was going to be able to do it, and quickly, too. The guy was easy on the eyes, but he was a royal pain in the ass, and I got the feeling that the sooner he was gone, the better. I hated that I felt like I had to kiss his ass to keep him happy.

I knew he wanted us all to be impressed by him, but I wasn’t. I had my own badass magic. Who the hell did this guy think he was?

Then again, if he *was* anything like his mother, I had a good idea of who he thought he was.

I turned as I walked and called back to the group. “I’ll go get you some mochas for… studying purposes,” I finished. “It’ll help you concentrate.”

Marta looked slightly cheered by this. Maybe a treat would grease the wheels a little—make the process easier with some caffeine and sugar—so I headed into the kitchen to get white chocolate mochas for everyone.

If that didn’t soothe everyone’s nerves, then nothing would.

In the house, I was heading toward the kitchen when I saw Xavier and Greyson coming down the stairs together, talking.

That alone was enough to make me stop in my tracks.

“—and how do you think we should respond to that?” Xavier was asking.

Greyson shrugged. “It’s going to be a balancing act—” He stopped when he caught sight of me. “The witch texted me back. Wants to meet.”

“Oh my god,” I said quietly. “Really?”

“And now we’re trying to figure out what to do,” Xavier said. “Trying to weigh out the pros and cons.”

I nodded. I knew this was what we wanted, but now that it was actually happening, I could feel the dread creeping in.

“We really don’t know anything about this witch,” I pointed out.

“I know, but I still think the best thing to do is to just meet,” Greyson said.

“Maybe, but I don’t think you should plan on going alone,” Xavier said. “I don’t think the witch will be alone.”

Alarm bells rang in my head. “Do you think this could be a trap?” I asked. “Could the Vanguard pack be involved with this?”

“I doubt it,” Greyson said.

“What makes you so sure?” I asked.

“What would be the point for the witch?” Greyson pointed out. “The witch wants to get paid. Trapping me for the Vanguard pack isn’t going to pay off the debt.”

“That’s probably true,” Xavier agreed. “Though it is possible the witch might be worried that you’re there to cancel the debt by any means possible. Maybe on behalf of the Vanguard pack.”

Greyson raised his eyebrows, considering this.

“That’s a possibility,” I agreed. “This witch could be coming in scared. Worried that you’re planning on killing them.”

But Greyson shook his head. “It’s possible, but it’s a chance I’m going to have to take. And I’m a werewolf, remember?” he said, with a smile for me. “I’ve dealt with witches before. This isn’t my first rodeo.”

“Greyson—”

“It’s only a conversation,” he said soothingly. “Just a friendly chat.”

I couldn’t believe how calm he was being. It was like I had to do all the worrying for him.

Greyson pulled out his phone, and his fingers moved quickly over the screen.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Getting the particulars. Texting back to ask where and when.”

I stood on tiptoe to look at his screen, waiting for the response. Part of me wanted the witch to ghost Greyson. Or to straight-up cancel the appointment. But I also knew that this curse was awful, and it wasn’t going to go away on its own. We needed this witch.

Greyson’s phone buzzed, and I leaned over to look at it. I held my breath as he opened the message and began to read.

It was an address, and it was in Portland.

**Episode 2382**

GREYSON

I looked down at the address in the witch’s text. I thought I recognized it. It was a place on the outskirts of Portland Proper.

I was glad that the witch had responded, but I was also left wondering what to expect. I wasn’t all that thrilled about the idea of getting into a beef with a witch, but I also wasn’t about to let this damn curse hang over Cali and me for the rest of our lives.

Tapping the sides of the phone, I thought quickly. Even if we didn’t get the resolution I was hoping for tonight, at least I would have started the ball rolling.

Cali gripped my arm, and when I looked up at her, I saw the anxiety in her eyes. “Are you really sure about this, Greyson?”

I hated to see her nervous, so I tried to reassure her. “I can handle whatever’s waiting for me.”

“Just like you handled Aysel?” Xavier asked with a smirk.

I shot my brother a warning look. He had no idea what had happened last night; he was just messing with me, loving the difficult situation I was in. I hadn’t told him or Cali all the details about last night, and I wasn’t planning to. Honestly, I’d have preferred to forget that any of it had ever happened. It was so typical of my brother to try and get a rise out of me while Cali was around.

“Would you feel better if you came along?” I asked Cali suddenly.

Both Xavier and Cali looked surprised by my question.

“What?” Xavier demanded, looking pissed.

“You want me to come?” Cali asked.

“I mean, it’s not ideal, but I know you’re worried about this and you’ll worry while I’m gone. And the reality is that you’re affected by this curse as much as I am. If this witch *can* break the spell, maybe they’ll need you around to do it.”

Xavier was glowering, and I was sure that he was just dying to list all the reasons this was a bad idea, but I didn’t let him start.

“Maybe you should come, too,” I said.

That stopped him. “Why?” he asked, shocked, looking at me like he half-expected me to tell him I was joking.

“I’m not stupid; I know I’m going in there to meet a witch that I know nothing about. Could be dicey, and it’d be nice to have some backup.” I shrugged. “Why not have a Xavier around, just in case?”

Xavier thought about this for a moment, and his eyes narrowed warily. “Are you *asking* if I’ll come, or is this an Alpha order?’

“If it matters, I’d rather ask,” I said.

Xavier took this in, then shrugged. “If you need me there to hold your hand, then fine, I’ll go.”

I bristled but gritted my teeth.

“Besides,” Xavier went on, “if Cali’s going, so am I. You can count me in.”

“Excuse me,” Cali said quickly, looking at Xavier, “but I’m not helpless, and I don’t need a minder. I can use my own magic to protect us all.”

“Let’s just hope you don’t have to,” I said. “Okay, Xavier, why don’t you go pack some clothes?”

“Clothes?” Xavier looked surprised. “How long are you planning on being in Portland?”

“Not long, but it’ll be faster to get there as wolves, and then we won’t have to worry about parking.”

“What if we need a car while we’re there?” Cali asked.

“I have a car in a garage there.” I shrugged. “I haven’t driven it in months. It might need a jump, but it’ll be fine.”

“What time should we leave?” Cali asked.

I pulled my phone out and reread the text. “The witch wants to meet at eight.” I glanced at the time on my phone. “That gives us plenty of time.” I was feeling more confident now that I had a plan. If the witch was smart, they’d want to settle on an agreement. Which meant the revulsion spell could be broken and I could have Cali—*tonight*. Heat flooded through me at the thought.

Xavier was nodding. “Great. If we leave now, that will give us plenty of time to stop in to see Swift.”

“I guess we could go now,” I said slowly, “but you’re in charge of dealing with this dude. What is he, some kind of shaman? I don’t want to get involved.”

“Who’s Swift?” Cali asked, frowning. “I feel like I should know. That name sounds familiar.”  
 “He’s this weird-ass dude in Portland who helped me get my wolf back,” Xavier started.

“And if we’re going to meet him, we have to get moving,” I interrupted. “Let’s be ready to leave in ten minutes. The faster we can handle this, the better.”

Xavier and Cali nodded, and I headed out to pack my own bag.

Cali’s door was open, and I looked into the empty room as I passed by. Her bed was neatly made, though she’d thrown her robe across it. Even the smell of the room—lilacs and vanilla—made my mouth water. Going to Portland to meet this witch, I had to remember what was at stake. And I was certain of one thing—if this witch actually showed up tonight, I was going to break that spell, or break the witch.

In my room, I grabbed a duffel bag from under my bed and chucked a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and a sweater into it. As I reached into my pocket for my phone, I felt my fingers close around the torn tarot card.

That damn card. It was a reminder that no matter what happened with the witch, I was still going to have to deal with Aysel and the Vanguards. I didn’t want to keep having to pretend to seduce the woman. It was too risky. I knew I’d felt something for her that last time—just physically, but still. How could I not? I was a man, after all, and Aysel was a beautiful woman. And she’d made it crystal clear that all I had to do was snap my fingers and she’d be mine. It was a lot for a man to take. And as much as I fought against it, I wasn’t blind to the physical connection between us.

But none of that mattered. It was nothing compared to what I felt for Cali. Nothing in my life had ever come close to what I felt for Cali. I hoped she understood that.

I lobbed a pair of shoes into the duffel bag on my bed and thought hard. But what about Aysel? She was a freaking princess, and I seriously doubted she could be made to understand. She was used to getting exactly what she wanted, when she wanted it. She’d made that much clear.

And she’d acted on it, too, putting that fucking revulsion curse on Cali and me. She’d sworn she’d done it to help me—for my own good—but I wasn’t a fool. She’d done it to help herself get what she wanted. And when she discovered that the curse was broken, she was going to be livid. There was no telling what she would do. And—if I was being honest with myself—that freaked me out.

“Hey,” Cali said, stepping into my room with a smile. She had a backpack on her back, and she unzipped it and tossed it onto my bed. “I thought you could put all your stuff in here. That way I can hold it for you while we travel.”

My thoughts were a swirling mess, but they clarified as I looked at the beautiful woman standing in front of me. Her brown hair tumbled softly around her shoulders, and the light from the windows picked up the warm red tones. Her eyes shone bright as she looked up at me, and her sweet mouth had a smile that felt like it was made just for me. She was so strong and so fierce, but also so kind and thoughtful. I reached for her on pure instinct.

I pulled her into a hug, and she slid her arms around me, but she was being cautious, which hardened my resolve even more. We *had* to break this curse. I pulled away just in time before I lost my lunch.

“You are going to be careful, aren’t you?” she asked, looking up at me.

Every cell in my body was frantically messaging my brain to kiss this woman, but I held back. “I’ll be careful, love,” I said quietly. “And I will fix this.”

She nodded. “Good.”

I brushed a stray lock of hair away from her eye and tucked it behind her ear. But even that caused a wave of nausea to roll through me. I took a step back, trying to smile. “You ready to see a witch?”

Her face had gone pale, so she must have felt the same effect from the curse, but she smiled back at me. “Hey, it can’t be that bad, right? Maybe they’ll want to help?”

I moved my things into her backpack and slung it onto my back. “Ever the optimist,” I said as I took her hand, and we walked downstairs.

Xavier was standing at the door, his own bag packed. He looked less than pleased to see Cali and me hand in hand.

“Ready?” he asked shortly.

I nodded. “Let’s get this over with.”

**Episode 2383**

MARTA

I curled my hands into fists and felt the bracelets tighten around my wrists. I was *not* hopeful about this. Even after Cali’s attempt to get Okorie to take his mentoring role more seriously, his attitude was still… irritating. Annoying. Generally off-putting. And completely alienating.

I even found myself fantasizing about getting my powers back under control, simply so that I could wipe that cocky smirk right off his pretty face, consequences be damned.

Honestly, as much as I was hating this, I felt even worse for Dani. If anyone needed a truly supportive mentor, it was her. I’d been around a while and didn’t expect anything from anyone. I’d had fifty years of Bert to toughen my skin. But Dani had just been thrust into all this, and she was probably feeling pretty alone. I knew it would have helped if we’d been able to find Tabitha. I’d tried to reach out to Dani, of course, but it was hard. She was a tough read, and I hadn’t had much success so far. And the rhododendron bush I’d just slaughtered really hadn’t helped. She’d looked really freaked out by that.

“Marta!”

I looked over. Okorie was staring at me, and I got the impression that wasn’t the first time he’d called my name.

“What?” I asked, trying to sound like I hadn’t been zoned out.

He rolled his eyes. “I said to try again.”

“I know that,” I lied. “I heard you. I was just getting ready.”

Okorie looked at me like he didn’t believe a word I said. “I’m going to remove one of your bracelets again, and I want you to hold this flower. And Dani, I want you to come over here right next to Marta to watch.” He pulled the bracelet off my right wrist and held out a red rose. “Take it.”

I groaned. I was absolutely going to kill this poor flower. Add it to the growing list of plants I’d already killed. I was starting to feel kind of bad about my increasing body count. How much floral murder did the guy want me to commit today?

But he was staring at me, so I grasped the stem of the rose. And almost instantly, I felt it—the sucking feeling of all the life being drained out of the flower. I watched as the red petals turned dark and began to curl. The leaves shriveled and fell off, and the stem softened and flopped over, rotten and unable to support itself. It was like watching decay in fast-forward.

And watching it, I felt the life drain out of me, too.

“What’s the point of this?” I asked. “No matter how hard I concentrate, everything dies at my touch.”

Okorie slapped the bracelet back onto my wrist. “You’re not even trying,” he grumbled.

He locked the bracelet again, and as I watched the gold key disappear into his hand, a flash of fury surged through me.

“Not trying to do *what*?” I snapped, throwing the dead flower to the ground. “The great prodigy hasn’t told me to do a damn thing, just to take the flower and try not to kill it. How the hell is that helpful? How am I supposed to *stop* doing something when I don’t even know *how* I’m doing it in the first place?”

A ringing silence followed my outburst.

Okorie heaved a heavy sigh. “Must you be so difficult?”

I stared, open-mouthed. “If anyone’s being difficult, it’s you!”

He shook his head. “You’re taking this all too personally. It shouldn’t be that hard.”

That pissed me off even more.

“It *is* hard,” I shot back. “If it was easy, I wouldn’t need a mentor, would I?”

“Okay, okay,” Okorie said, rolling his eyes. “I guess I shouldn’t expect everyone to be able to master everything on their first try. After all, not everyone is as brilliantly talented as I am.”

I gritted my teeth and tried to take a breath before I responded. “Do you think you could *try* to be a little more constructive? What am I supposed to be *doing*, exactly? I’m getting sick of killing flowers.”

“Better than killing humans accidentally,” Okorie said. He could tell by my look that his joke had failed to go over well.

Okorie sighed, gesturing to the ground. “Okay, let’s all take a breath and take a seat.”

I stared at him, then glanced over at Dani. “Why?”

Okorie gave me a level stare. “I want you to try some meditation.”

“Meditation?” Dani asked, frowning. “Isn’t that just sleeping sitting up? I don’t usually take naps in the middle of the day. My grandma does, but I really only sleep at—”

“It is not a nap,” Okorie snapped. “Meditation is mindfulness, and it might provide you with some insight. Something you both could do with a lot of.” He sat on the damp ground and pulled his legs into a lotus position.

Dani looked doubtful, but she sat down, too. And finally, with a heavy sigh, I followed. But I wasn’t happy about it. The ground was cold, and I could feel the dampness through my pants immediately. How the hell was I supposed to feel calm and mindful when my ass was freezing?

This whole thing was stupid, and I let my thoughts drift to Lilac.

“You realize why you’re here together, right?” Okorie said, looking between Dani and me.

We glanced at each other and shook our heads.

He rolled his eyes. “It’s because you both have this magic that you’re not turning off. If magic were a faucet, you two would be letting it run and run. It’s flooding the entire place. You have to learn how to turn it off.”

He was probably right, and I tried to focus my mind on that idea, but it was hard. I was willing to try anything at this point, but I didn’t know how much longer I could sit on the ground and discipline my mind to think of anything other than how good a white chocolate mocha would be right now.

Speaking of which—where was Cali? She was supposed to bring mochas out to us.

“Let’s try breathing in through our noses, and out through our mouths, trying to make the out breath last as long as possible,” Okorie said, his voice softer than usual.

After we’d done that for a few minutes, he went on. “Now I want you to try to picture an empty field. Completely empty. And now I want you to put yourselves into that empty field. You are standing alone.”

But I wasn’t alone in my field. I was with Lilac. And I was looking at him and smiling at him and reaching for him. And he was leaning down and closing his eyes and—

“Everyone on your feet,” Okorie said crisply, breaking into my thoughts.

The cold had made me stiff, and I got clumsily to my feet.

“Now, we’re going to try this again, Marta, but this time I’m going to take both the bracelets off,” Okorie said.

“*What?* No!” I said, hiding my hands behind my back. “It was bad enough with just one off. With both off I could wipe out the entire forest. No way.”

Okorie shook his head. “There’s no danger unless you think you’re going to kill something.”

“I *do* think I’m going to kill something,” I said frankly. “So let’s not. This is a bad idea. Trust me. I once melted a vampire with just one bracelet off. It wasn’t pretty.”

Okorie picked up one of the dead roses. “Then a few of these must be a vast improvement.”

“I don’t know,” I said slowly. “I really don’t want to.”

“Let’s be honest here,” Okorie said, looking between Dani and me. “None of us want to be here. But if we’re going to get through this, you’re just going to have to trust me.”

He might have been right about that, but I wasn’t sure if that was possible. For one, I barely knew the guy. And after fifty years of being manipulated by Bert, it was hard for me to trust anyone.

But then I thought of Lilac, and how—ultimately—this might be able to help him. And if I couldn’t actually trust Okorie, maybe I could at least pretend to.

One thing I did know was that I had to get free of these damn bracelets.

“Okay,” I said warily. “I’ll trust you.”

“Terrific,” Okorie bit out. He waved the golden key, and I felt both bracelets release from around my wrists.

My arms felt strangely light without them, and a little wave of energy flowed through me.

“Okay, take the flower,” Okorie said, holding it out to me.

I took a deep breath and reached for it, but—as I did—my fingers accidentally brushed against his. The touch was infinitesimal, but I felt the effect of it ripple through me, and I gasped.

Okorie’s eyes went wide with surprise. His body froze, as if it had suddenly been turned to ice, then gave one hard convulsive jerk. In an instant he fell to the ground, shaking, his face contorted with agony.

**Episode 2384**

The December wind was freezing on my face as we raced through the forest. I was riding on Xavier’s back. I could tell Greyson hadn’t been thrilled about it when I’d climbed onto Xavier at the house, but I didn’t know what I was supposed to do about it. Whoever I rode with, the other one would have been pissed off. In another circumstance I might have flipped a coin, but since none of us knew if the revulsion spell would still apply to Greyson’s wolf and cause problems for the two of us, accepting Xavier’s ride had seemed like the safest choice.

I glanced over at Greyson’s grey wolf, running next to us, and felt a surge of hope. If things went well with the witch and we broke this damn spell, I’d have a chance to make it up to Greyson.

Just then Xavier leapt over a small stream, and I turned my attention back to holding on. I grasped his sides as he landed lightly on the other side. I was cold, but I was still glad we hadn’t driven to Portland. I loved the feel of riding on my wolf mates. It never ceased to amaze me how fast they could go, and how gracefully they moved through even the densest parts of the woods. It was like they knew every inch of forest. I’d done it hundreds of times, but it never got old for me—I loved the feel of the wind on my face and the smooth motion of the muscled animal beneath me.

My only regret was not wearing a scarf. I’d worn my winter coat, but it was still a lot colder than I’d imagined with the wind whipping around me. I held tight to Xavier and tried to bury my face in the collar of my coat.

As we ran on, the trees blurring around me, my thoughts drifted back to Marta and Dani. I wondered how they were doing with their new, fairly reluctant, mentor. I just had to wonder what the witch council been thinking, sending Okorie. He had a pretty face and a bad attitude and not much else. I was stewing over that when a thought hit me, and I sat up straight. I’d told the girls I would bring them white chocolate mochas, but I’d gotten sidetracked by Greyson and Xavier and totally forgotten.

*Aw, man! To be promised a delicious mocha and then not receive one? I hope they can forgive me.*

The wind was cutting straight through me, so I leaned back down over Xavier’s back with a shrug. Maybe next time.

*How are you doing?*

I wrapped my arms tighter around his neck. *I’m fine, just a little cold.*

*We still have a ways to go before we hit the city, but let me know if you need to stop to stretch or pee or anything.*

I grinned and burrowed my face into the soft fur on the back of his neck*. I think I’d prefer somewhere without trees. Like a real bathroom.*

I could hear his laugh in my head. *Going to be a while before we hit one of those.*

I glanced over at Greyson, who was running beside us.

*When this spell is broken, I’ll ride home with you.*

Greyson looked over at me, his grey eyes piercing through me. *That’s a promise you’re going to keep.*

Even in the cold, the tone of his voice in my head made heat rush to my cheeks, and I nodded.

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Another hour later, when the cold was starting to feel like it was wrapping around my bones, Greyson began to slow slightly. Up ahead, I could see the trees thinning out. Beyond the tree line, the skyline of Portland was just visible. When we reached the edge of the forest, I slid off Xavier’s back, and he and Greyson shifted back to human.

Standing between my suddenly naked mates left me flustered, and I wasn’t sure where to look. Not at their naked bodies, probably. But, I mean, where was I *supposed* to be looking?

Naked. Very naked. *So* naked. And both of them breathing hard from the run, their hot breath visible in the cold air. It was amazing to me how much better they both looked without the black veins swirling on their chests. And had their abs always been that defined?

Holy shit, I was *not* supposed to be looking. I pulled the bags off my back and busied myself by pulling out clothes and shoes.

Luckily, they were already talking to each other, and neither of them was paying any attention to my very obvious naked man freak-out.

“What’s the best way to approach this guy?” Greyson was asking.

“I’m trying to remember,” Xavier said. “My first meeting with him didn’t go so smoothly. But I think it’s probably best if I go in there alone.”

“Fine with me.” Greyson shrugged. “I’ll just wait outside with Cali.”

“Excuse me,” I said, clearing my throat. “Can you please put your clothes on?”

They both turned to look at me.

“Why?” Xavier asked, looking confused.

My face felt red hot. “Um, because you’re both standing around completely naked having a conversation, as if there’s nothing strange about it.”

Xavier shrugged. “So? It’s just us. Who cares?”

“No, Cali’s right,” Greyson said. “We should get dressed.”

“Thank you,” I breathed, but I was so flummoxed that I accidentally handed Greyson Xavier’s pants, and Xavier Greyson’s boxer briefs. This only delayed them getting dressed as they had to trade everything back.

After they were finally dressed and we were heading toward the city, I had a sudden thought: Greyson had an apartment here. I’d never seen it, but I’d always wondered what it was like. It seemed wrong to me that Artemis had seen it, but I never had. Maybe after this was all over and the revulsion spell was broken, Greyson would show it to me.

It was a long walk into the center of the city, but finally we approached a storefront in a rundown part of town. “Food for the Soul,” the sign read.

“Why are we going to a restaurant?” I asked. “I mean, I guess I could eat.”

“It’s not a restaurant,” Xavier said. “It’s Swift’s store. All he serves is tea. It’s… Well, it’s kind of hard to describe.”

“What’s the food for the soul, then?” I asked.

“I guess that’s the other shit he sells,” Xavier said.

“But what is it?”

He shrugged. “That’s kind of hard to describe, too.”

I was confused but kind of curious. If it was the kind of place that sold tea, maybe they sold herbs, too. Maybe I could find a Christmas gift for my mom. She liked that kind of stuff, and she’d appreciate the name of the place.

As we drew closer, I saw a long-haired guy wearing a colorful tunic over worn jeans step out of the shop and onto the sidewalk. He stood there for a moment, examining the store’s window display. As he turned back to the shop, he happened to glance over at us.

His eyes widened in surprise, and before anyone could do anything, he shouted, “Back in fifteen!” and ran back into the shop.

“Shit,” Xavier muttered, and sprinted toward the shop. “Don’t do this, Swift!”

But the long-haired guy slammed the door and locked it, then disappeared into the shop.

Xavier pounded on the glass door. “Open up, man! I can see you, Swift! Your ass is sticking out from behind that plant! Open the door!”

Reaching the door, I peered under Xavier’s arm and saw the guy, badly hidden behind a fiddle-leaf fig. The rest of the shop looked dim and dusty. There was a long counter, and behind it was jars of what looked like dried herbs. Maybe I *could* find a gift for my mom here. If we ever got inside.

Xavier pounded on the door again. “You might as well open up, man. I’m not leaving until you let me in. I can wait here all damn day.”

Behind the fig, I thought I saw the guy heave a sigh. Then he got to his feet and made his way over to the door, his gaze shifting around nervously. When he hesitated before reaching for the doorknob, Xavier slammed his fist into the door again, making the guy jump.

Then he shook his head—looking as exasperated with himself as he was with Xavier—and carefully unlocked the door. He cracked the door open just a little, bracing his foot against it so we couldn’t open it further, and glared out at us.

“What do you want?” he asked.

There was a flash from his hand, and I looked down to see that he held a silver knife. Protective anger surged in me, and I’d just raised my hand to blast the guy when Xavier made an irritated noise.

“Not this again,” he growled, and kicked the door wide open.

**Episode 2385**

XAVIER

As I barreled into the shop, Swift backed up, then turned and tried to sprint toward the back.

“Why are you running, man?” I called after him. “I know you recognize me!”

“That’s why I’m running!” Swift yelled back. He stopped at the beaded curtain that led into the back of the shop, breathing hard. “You’re nothing but bad karma dressed as a wolf, man.”

Greyson raised his eyebrows. “You weren’t kidding about this guy,” he said. “He’s a piece of work.”  
 I swung around to glare at him. “I thought you were waiting outside.”

Greyson gestured at Cali, who was shivering. “It’s too cold. And it looked like you might need some help.”

I bent and picked up the silver knife Swift had dropped.

“I can handle this,” I snapped. “I’ll be back,” I added, then went through the bead curtain.

Swift was just on the other side of it, pressed against the wall, panting. There were candles stacked on a shelf above him, and their smell was sour and almost overwhelming. Swift’s eyes got big as I walked toward him.

“Swiftie,” I said, holding up the silver dagger. “Really? Is this any way to greet an old friend?”

His eyes darted past me. There was probably a door over my shoulder.

“And don’t even bother trying to run. You can’t possibly think you could outrun me.”

Swift managed to look offended. “What do you want? Are you going to have more of your buddies break in and steal from me?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, confused. “You helped me, man, when no one else could. Why would I want to turn against you? Though,” I added, raising an eyebrow, “if you don’t stop this little cat and mouse game, I guess I could see myself making life kind of difficult for you.”

Swift looked at me for a long moment, then he slumped against the wall, looking defeated. “Fine. What do you want?”

Cali popped her head through the bead curtain. She looked around, then sniffed at the air. “Is this a weed shop? Is weed even legal in Oregon?”

Swift rolled his eyes. “Not yet, but hopefully soon we’ll get a few lawmakers who aren’t traumatized by the one joint they smoked in college, and we’ll be able to change that. Anyway,” he said, straightening up and putting on his shopkeeper persona, “I like to call myself a *cannabis service center.* What can I get you?” he asked Cali, walking back into the main shop.

Chuckling, I followed him. “We’re not here to buy weed, man—”

“It’s not legal, but it’s… you know… *fine*,” Swift assured me. “I’ve got some really fine samples here—”

“I need your help,” I said, cutting him off.

Greyson stood next to Cali at the counter. So much for the two of them staying out of my way. I didn’t mind having Cali around, but Greyson? Not so much.

“What kind of help?” Swift asked warily. “I’m not really doing favors these days. It’s not a very lucrative profession.”

“I’ve got a werewolf missing his wolf,” I told him.

“Another one?” Swift asked, looking surprised. “You’ve got a bit of an epidemic, don’t you?”

“This one’s different. He was dead and in the spirit realm, and then got kind of pulled back. But when he got here, he and his wolf were separated.”

“Separated?” Swift asked. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Just what it sounds like. The wolf’s around, he’s just not with the werewolf.”

“Whoa,” Swift said, looking shocked.

“Can you help?” Cali asked anxiously. “Would you be able to reunite them?”

Swift gave a low whistle. “That’s a tough one, for sure.” He thought for a long moment. “Would anyone like some tea?”

I narrowed my eyes. “What’s *in* the tea?”

“Uh… Tea leaves?” Swift said, more a question than a statement.

“*Just* tea leaves?” I asked skeptically.

“Well.” Swift shrugged. “There are a few proprietary ingredients that I’m not at liberty to reveal at this time. Liability and all that—”

“Then we’ll skip it,” Greyson said firmly.

“Forget the tea,” I snapped. “I didn’t come here for any damn tea. Do you know how to fix this kid? Lilac is his name.”

Swift heaved a sigh. “I don’t know. I can’t tell just by hearing about it. Bring the kid and the wolf inside and let me have a look.”

Cali shot a glance at me. “They’re not here.”

Swift stared at her for a moment, then at me. “I’m sorry, how did you expect me to reunite them, then? This isn’t the kind of thing you can do over video call. This is a very delicate process. It requires preparation, assessment, charting, double-checking. This is hands-on work, my friend.”

“Give me a break,” I muttered. I’d forgotten how patronizing Swift was.

“I don’t know what kind of shoddy work you were expecting, but please remember that *I* am a professional,” he said.

This was kind of a dubious claim from a man who’d been hiding behind a potted plant five minutes before, but I let it slide. There was no point in arguing with the guy. Not if he could really help.

“Okay,” Cali said, apparently thinking fast. “They’re not here, but do you make house calls?”

Swift rolled his eyes. “Just bring them here.”

“I don’t know if they’re in the best shape to travel right now,” Cali explained. “There was an incident. That’s why we’re here. So can you come with us?”

“I’d like to,” Swift said, “but I really can’t get away. I’ve got this store to look after,” he said, holding out his hands to indicate his junky little pot shop.

“So what are we supposed to do?” Cali asked, sounding desperate.

“If you really want to help your friend, you’re going to do what everyone else does and make an appointment. Bring this kid and his wolf in, and I’ll see what I can do for them.”

Cali chewed her lip nervously. “Can’t you make an exception, just this once?”  
 Swift was already shaking his head. “I might have before, but I really can’t leave my shop. There have been too many break-ins. I don’t feel safe leaving it without someone to watch over it. And what about all the customers who rely on me and the very specific services I provide?”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” I said, shaking my head.

Swift ignored me and reached beneath the counter. He brought out a leather-bound appointment book and began to leaf through the pages. “As it is now, I wouldn’t even be able to fit you in until early spring. The end of March at the very earliest.” He looked up with a shrug. “I’ve been very busy lately.”

“*March?*” Cali groaned. “We can’t wait that long. Lives are at stake!”

Swift only shrugged, and I realized I was going to have to play this carefully.

“You know what?” I said, turning to Cali. “We’re just going to have to forget this.”

“Xavier!” Cali cried, looking surprised.

“What are we going to do? He’s busy, and we’re clearly wasting his precious time.”

Greyson gave me a sideways glance.

*Just play along*, I told him.

He gave an infinitesimal nod.

“Anyway, thanks man,” I said, turning back to Swift. “Maybe next time I’m in town and I need some spiritual guidance, I’ll drop by.”

“Sure,” Swift said, looking surprised by my easy manner. “Any time.”

“But what about Lilac?” Cali asked me.

“Don’t worry,” I told her. “There’s a guy I know in Bend who we can see.”

“*Bend?*” Swift’s eyes went wide. “Who is it? Carlson Greene?”

“Yeah,” I told him. “That’s him. Good old Carlson.” I’d never heard of Carlson Greene.

Swift looked disgusted. “You’ve got to be *kidding me*. Greene’s a hack! He’s a fraud!”

“That’s funny,” Greyson said casually, “because that’s exactly what Carlson said about you—”

Swift slammed his fist down on the glass-topped counter, so hard his crystals jumped. “I’m the only licensed parapsychologist in Oregon, I’ll have you know. Greene is nothing but a *paratherapist*!”

“I know that, man,” I said, shrugging helplessly, “and I don’t want to have to do it. I want the best, but what am I going to do? You’re busy, and I get it, but Greene’s got an opening for us. We’re going to do what we have to.”

Swift was red in the face, but I turned for the door without waiting for answer.

I’d just reached for the knob when he spoke.

“Wait!”

The three of us turned around to see Swift slam his appointment book shut. “I can’t sit back and let Greene work his shit therapies on anyone. I’m going to make an exception, just this once. I’ll do it.”

Cali gasped. “You will?”

Swift nodded and walked out from behind the counter. “It’ll take some rearranging, and some people will be pissed, but I’ll clear my schedule. I’ll help your friend.”

**Episode 2386**

I felt startled, like I’d just stepped onto an uneven path. One minute I’d been feeling completely hopeless, and then the next, Swift had not only agreed to help Lilac reunite with Plum, but he had said he was going to do it in the next few days. It was hard to wrap my mind around his quick change of heart.

And since when did Xavier know anyone named Carlson Greene? A paratherapist? I’d never heard him mention him before. And it wasn’t like we’d never talked about the supernatural.

As we walked out of the shop, Xavier and Greyson looked at each other and started to laugh.

Which was even weirder! Since when did they have any inside jokes?

“What’s so funny?” I asked, baffled.

“We fooled the mighty Swift, that’s what’s funny,” Xavier said between chuckles.

Greyson shook his head in amused disbelief. “I didn’t think it was going to be so damn easy.”

I looked between them both. It was a strange feeling for me—like I’d been left out of a joke. “What’s going on?”

“Oh, nothing. It’s just that Swift has such an ego, and we used it against him,” Xavier said, still grinning.

“But what about Carlson Greene in Bend?” I asked.

This set Xavier laughing again. “I’d never heard of him before Swift said his name. Though now that I know he’s around, maybe we’ll have to hit him up.”

“We got lucky,” Greyson admitted.

I glared. “You could have told me,” I said, feeling a little annoyed.

“I’m sorry, Cali,” Xavier said, though he didn’t look it. “I just thought it would be more believable if you didn’t know. And it was. You pleading for Lilac and Plum really helped seal the deal.”

“That reminds me,” Greyson said, pulling his phone from his pocket, “I’m going to check in on Lilac, see how he and Plum are doing. If Swift can’t come to the pack house, I’m not sure that bringing them up here is such a good idea. I’m going to have to ask Rishika how they are.”

He stepped a little way down the sidewalk to make his call, and I looked over at Xavier, a sudden idea occurring to me.

“Hey, do you think Swift could help with the Seluna thing?” I asked.

Xavier hadn’t thought of this. “I don’t know.”

“He deals in souls and stuff, and it seems like that kind of expertise might be useful. Maybe one of those quartz crystals of his has some magic or something. Like the talisman that Lucian gave me. Hang on—” I reached for my backpack and pulled the talisman out of the small pocket in front. I always carried it with me. “Maybe I’ll show it to Swift, see what he thinks.”

Xavier looked at the talisman for a moment and shrugged. “I guess we could ask him. He might be able to help. Honestly, I have no idea what all Swift is into.”

I waved a hand to get Greyson’s attention. “We’re going to go back in for a second,” I told him. Greyson nodded, and Xavier and I headed back into the shop, the tinkling bell over the door announcing our second arrival.

Swift looked up from a small scale where he was weighing herbs to put into individual bags, surprised. “Hey. What’s up? You didn’t change your minds, did you? Please don’t tell me you’re going to see Carlson Greene after all. The shit I’ve seen that guy do… You wouldn’t be able to sleep at night if you knew. If there were a malpractice board for paratherapists, I’d have called it a thousand times—”

“Relax, man,” Xavier cut in. “Chill out for a second. Cali just has a question.” He looked over at me. “Show him the thing.”

I handed Swift the talisman, and he held it in his palm, examining it carefully for a long moment. Then he looked up at me. “What is this?”

I was surprised by the question. “I would have thought a parapsychologist like you would recognize a talisman.”

“A *talisman*?” It was Swift’s turn to be surprised. He walked over to a display case that held huge, colorful crystals and opened the sliding door in the back. He pulled out a jeweler’s magnifier and put it up to his eye. He put my talisman on the glass countertop and hunched over, examining it through the magnifier.

Then he straightened, shaking his head. “I hope you didn’t pay more than a buck or two for this.”

“What?” I asked, shocked. “Why?”

“Because that’s all its worth,” he said, shoving it back toward me. “Did Carlson sell you this piece of garbage? It looks like his.”

“No, it was a gift. I got it from… a prince,” I said quietly. I picked up the talisman again, feeling suddenly dizzy and confused.

“A prince, huh? Well, royal provenance or not, *that* isn’t a talisman.”

“But that’s what he said it was,” I insisted. “Even a witch told me that sometimes a talisman is just a talisman.”

Swift gave me a beady stare. “Yeah, and sometimes a fake is just a fake.”

I couldn’t seem to wrap my mind around this. Had Lucian thought the talisman was real? There had to be some kind of explanation for this… *Right?*

My mind was still spinning when the bell over the door jangled and Greyson walked back in.

“Let’s go.”

As we walked back into the winter afternoon, I was thoroughly baffled. And—as I stood there, feeling baffled—my stomach rumbled.

Xavier looked over at me, his eyebrow raised. “We have some time before we’re supposed to meet up with the witch. Let’s grab something to eat.”

Greyson nodded. “Yeah, sure. I think there are a few places a couple of blocks over.”

The industrial part of town soon transitioned into a hip neighborhood with bars and coffee shops, and we ended up at a trendy little diner with outdoor seating. There were heating lamps for comfort, and Greyson and Xavier put me closest to the heat.

They sat on the spindly chairs, looking wary, and I smiled to see these two hulking men folded into such delicate-looking chairs. But it wasn’t just the chairs—the whole situation felt very strange. For me to be out with the two of them—just the two of them—like this was definitely a first. But it was kind of nice, too, and as I leaned into the heat from the lamp, I tried to keep my smile to myself.

Xavier looked out at the street beyond the tables and watched the cars passing by for a moment. “It just feels like a waste of time,” he said sharply.

“What does?” Greyson asked.

“Waiting around to meet this witch. It feels like we could be doing something else.”

Greyson took a drink of the water the waitress had brought over. “If you don’t want to wait, by all means, you can go do something else.”

“Or you could just enjoy having lunch with your mate,” I said, looking between them. When they both looked at me, I flashed a smile and batted my eyes, which made them both smile back.

Xavier looked down at the menu. “Let’s just order. How about pizza?”

I glanced down at my own menu. “Oh, how about this one? Hawaiian. Ham and pineapple with a white sauce.” I looked up at both of them. “Here’s an important question I don’t think we’ve gotten to: pineapple on pizza—yes or no?”

“*No*.”

They both spoke at the same time, with almost identical tones of finality.

“*What?*” I gasped, shocked. “Are you kidding me? You really don’t like pineapple on pizza?”

Xavier narrowed his eyes, like he was wondering if I was joking. “Why would I? On *pizza*?”

“Yeah, if I wanted fruit, I’d order fruit, not a pizza,” Greyson added.

“Exactly,” Xavier said.

I stared at them, struggling to figure out how we could have gone on for so long without knowing this about each other. “Listen, I don’t think you guys are getting what I’m saying here. This is not about fruit, this a sweet and savory issue, which *everyone* likes. It’s the reason salted caramel is the flavor of the decade, okay? These are basics, here—”

“You can just stop right there, Cali,” Xavier said, holding up a hand, “because you’re not convincing me about this, and I don’t care how many peer-reviewed articles you have. I don’t want to hear from the pro-pineapple party.”

Greyson laughed. “If you want the pineapple pizza, we’ll get it.”

“Are you kidding me?” Xavier asked, though I could tell he was teasing. “I carried this girl all the way to Portland on my back, and now I have to eat fruit pizza?”

“It’s got ham, too!” I pointed out.

“Greyson!”

All three of us turned at the sound of Greyson’s name. A small boy with grey eyes was running toward us, grinning.

*Fenrir*.

My heart started beating a fast tattoo, because behind Fenrir was his mother, Maren.

**Episode 2387**

AVA

I didn’t know how it had happened, but I’d somehow found myself on dish duty after lunch. I didn’t even live here and yet.

I tried not to gag as I scraped scraps from what looked like a mangled steak into the trash. I didn’t know whose plate it had been, but it was covered in some kind of ketchup/maple syrup mixture, and it was making me feel like I was going to puke, so I plunged it into the sink full of soapy water as fast as I could and started scrubbing.

Even though I hated doing dishes, it was better than trying to hang out with the pack, who had all decamped to the living room and den after lunch. It always felt so strange to be at the house when Xavier wasn’t here. It wasn’t like he was ever happy to see me, but at least having him here anchored me to this place.

I always felt a sense of purpose in the pack house when he was in it. Even if he didn’t want me lingering around here—or had convinced himself that he didn’t—there was still that pull between us. That connection that just couldn’t be broken. That connection to him was the only thing in the world I was confident in. And—even though he tried to deny it—I knew he felt it, too.

The sticky plate was proving hard to clean, and I had to lean into it to scrub the grime. This was so fucking stupid. I hadn’t even had to do dishes when I’d worked at that vampire diner. I took a deep breath as anger threatened to engulf me. As soon as I was done with these dishes, I’d go for a run and get away from all the Redwood pack chaos—hopefully *before* my hands turned into prunes.

“Got some more for you,” Torin sang out, dropping another stack of dishes into the sink. A wave of soapy dishwater splashed over the edge and onto me, and I took a step back.

“Sorry,” he said, his eyes wide.

“It’s fine,” I said tightly, though it absolutely wasn’t. I grabbed a towel from the counter and tried to sponge the water off my sweater.

Behind me, Artemis and Rishika walked into the kitchen.

“—no, Lilac’s awake,” Rishika was saying into her phone. “He’s not in the best shape, though.” She paused. “Uh huh. You think if we take him to Portland, that will actually help him?”

“Portland?” Artemis asked, but Rishika ignored her.

“It’s a long drive,” Rishika continued. “He might not be stable enough for that. Okay. All right. Well, we’ll see. Just get back from this thing safe, okay? Yeah. Bye.”

Interested, my ears perked up. I tried to look busy getting the water out of my sweater, and I half-turned away from the two women.

“Wait, what’s going on?” Artemis asked. “What’s in Portland?”

“They made contact with this guy who might be able to help Lilac, but the catch is that he won’t come here, so they want to know if Lilac can travel to Portland.”

“Whoa,” Artemis said, looking surprised. “Really? Are they coming back to get him?”

“I guess at some point, but I don’t know when. They didn’t say when they were coming back. They said they had some other meeting tonight.”

They kept talking as they walked out of the kitchen and onto the back porch, but I turned back to the dishes, thinking hard. Another meeting? With who? Did it have something to do with the spell that was on Greyson and Cali? Did it have something to do with someone dropping the ball at Cali’s moon ritual thing?

I gritted my teeth, feeling frustrated. I wished that Xavier would just tell me things so I didn’t have to guess at what was going on. I’d be able to help him if he wasn’t so committed to icing me out of his life. It was like he wasn’t even *trying* to trust me again.

As I started rinsing the plate, I noticed it still had some kind of sludge along the rim, and I dropped in back into the soapy water.

“Hang on,” I said aloud. “Why am I even doing this?”

I wiped my hands on my jeans and headed outside, ready for that run. *More* than ready.

I was just so sick of all of this. I’d been playing so nicely with Xavier—taking it slow, talking with him about stupid shit. But I didn’t want to make small talk with him. I wanted more of our late night conversations, where we could just be real with each other.

Shifting to my wolf form felt like a release, and I sprinted toward the woods. I needed to show Xavier what I could do—how useful I could be to him—and maybe getting on Aysel’s good side would be a step in the right direction. It was a little complicated, but it made sense in my head. If I got on Aysel’s good side, I could find a way to help Greyson. If I helped Greyson, that would help Cali, and helping Cali was what Xavier was annoyingly fixated on.

But, honestly, I didn’t even get *why* Xavier wanted to help Greyson and Cali fix their curse problem. Shouldn’t Xavier have been thrilled that they were revolting to each other? It seemed like an easy fix for what Xavier wanted. I wished it were Xavier who was repulsed by Cali. It would certainly make things a hell of a lot easier for me.

I was so lost in my thoughts, I got to the Vanguard pack’s gate faster than I would have thought possible, and I shifted back to human. The guy guarding the gate dropped his sandwich when he saw me, which made me smile.

“I was hoping to see Aysel,” I said, batting my eyelashes.

“Is she expecting you?” the guard asked, his voice choked as he tried to swallow a bite of his sandwich.

“She’s not,” I said, still smiling. “I’m sorry. I should have called first. Is there any way you could let me through and let Aysel know I’m here?”

The guard was clearly having a hard time keeping his eyes from drifting down to look at my body, and his face had flushed bright red. He nodded quickly. “Uh, yeah. Sure. That shouldn’t be a problem.”

I flashed a wide smile as the guard punched the button inside the guard shack.

“Thanks so much,” I sang out as the gate swung open.

As I approached the house, I couldn’t keep the disgust off my face. The place was so opulent and tacky. Usually, I’d never be caught dead here.

The doors opened as I neared them, and a familiar figure stood in the doorway. Andrei looked me up and down as I walked closer.

“To what do we owe this drop-by?” he asked.

“I’m here to see Aysel,” I said.

His eyes dropped down, then made their way leisurely back up to my face before he stepped back and gestured into the house. “Right this way.”

He led me through the central entryway and through a long hallway.

He stopped in front of a door and knocked. “She’s in here.”

An attendant opened the door to let me in, but Aysel was nowhere to be seen.

“She’ll be out in a moment,” the attendant said quietly, handing me a blue silk robe.

I looked around the high-ceilinged room as I slipped on the robe, taking in the canopy bed and the deep, rich carpet.

“Ava!”

I looked over to see Aysel standing in the doorway to a large closet with a smile on her face.

“I’m so surprised to see you!”

I was surprised, too, when Aysel walked over and kissed me on both cheeks. “Hi.”

“I was hoping you’d come by again. We really didn’t have enough time to really chat, before.”

“That’s true,” I agreed, still baffled.

Aysel gestured toward a chaise longue upholstered in ice blue velvet. “Won’t you sit? I was wondering if you’d had a chance to think about my offer.” She settled into the couch and leaned toward me conspiratorially. “I can help you get Xavier.”

“I did want to hear some more about what that might mean,” I admitted. “But I was wondering something, too. Did you do something with Greyson last night?”  
 Aysel gave me a wicked grin. “I got close.”

I looked at her, genuinely surprised to hear this. “Really?”

“Yes!” Aysel gushed, apparently happy to talk about it. “He came over, you know, and I knew what he wanted. And we got *so* close, and everything was going so well until my stupid brother interrupted us. He’s acting like a LUNA-tic.”

I frowned. “Wait, you and Greyson almost hooked up?”

“Yep.”

“Wow,” I muttered. “That must be some spell.”

“It *is*,” Aysel said proudly. “Just think about it, Ava,” she said warmly. “If you use that same spell on Xavier, we could both get what we want. I mean it, it really does work.”

I found myself really considering Aysel’s offer. I hadn’t come here for this—I’d come here to help Xavier—but was it possible that teaming up with Aysel could actually pay off? Would that actually help me get Xavier back?

“So,” I said slowly, looking up at her, “what exactly would it involve?”

**Episode 2388**

*Maren* was here.

I couldn’t believe it.

Maren, Greyson’s old flame. Maren, the mother of the kid who looked uncannily similar to Greyson himself. She’d stayed at the pack house for a while but had taken Fenrir and returned to Portland when the revenant threat had become too dangerous for them to stay.

I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t been relieved to see them go. That I hadn’t missed their presence at the pack house one bit in the weeks since. But now all that relief was drying up—replaced by dread.

*Seriously? The* one day *I go to Portland with Greyson and Xavier. That’s the day we just happen to run into Maren and Fenrir at some random restaurant.*

*WHAT ARE THE ODDS?*

I forced a smile, though I was sure it had to look pretty damn ridiculous. And fake, probably. But still, I didn’t want to make this chance reunion as deeply uncomfortable as I was. Especially with Fenrir here. He was so excited to see Greyson, and it wasn’t the kid’s fault that I was less than thrilled.

Greyson stood to greet them, and Maren approached us, a similarly stiff smile on her face. Fenrir, on the other hand, bolted toward Greyson and wrapped his arms around Greyson’s legs.

“Greyson! I missed you!” The kid beamed up at him, and Greyson leaned down to hug him.

“It’s good to see you too, little man.” My mate tussled the boy’s curly dark blond hair, looking, once again, like he belonged there with that young boy’s arms wrapped tight around him.

I glanced over at Xavier, who was leaning back in his chair, a slight smile tugging at his lips as he chewed on the end of a toothpick. My other mate was practically radiating smug amusement.

A wave of annoyance washed over me. Xavier looked just as pleased by the sudden chain of events as Fenrir did. Like us running into Maren and Fenrir was the best kind of surprise he could have hoped for.

*Could he enjoy this just a little less?* He probably thought us running into these two would make Greyson look bad in my eyes. As far as I could tell, the only one looking bad was Xavier. I loved him, but his attitude wasn’t helping me any either.

Greyson scooped Fenrir up into his arms, and the little boy cackled with joy. It hit me with a lurch, just how much those two did really look alike.

*But the DNA test wasn’t a match*, I reminded myself. Even so, the resemblance between the two was uncanny. Fenrir was Greyson in miniature, with a tiny dose of Maren thrown in for good measure.

The negative DNA test kept me from wondering, but it still made my chest tight to see them all together. To think just how easily they could have been the picture-perfect family.

Maren put a hand on Greyson’s shoulder, and I had to resist the urge to throw myself at the woman. To tell her to keep her hands to herself. I was only half Fae and zero percent wolf, but for one split second, I was willing to tear her arm off with my teeth if it meant she would *stop touching* mymate.

*Things would definitely be better if Maren wasn’t here.* There was already more than enough drama at the pack house—and over at the Vanguard palace—without her.

I snapped back into the moment at the sound of Greyson’s laughter. Fenrir must have just made a joke, and Greyson was humoring the kid, laughing hard enough that Fenrir’s small, hopeful smile turned megawatt. I recognized that look—the love and adoration. It was exactly how I’d looked at my father when I was Fenrir’s age.

My stomach sank. *Greyson’s acting like a father.*

With the moment fresh in front of me, it was all too easy to remember how Greyson had been with Fenrir before, when the boy and his mother had been living with us at the pack house. It was clear then that part of Greyson had wanted to be Fenrir’s father.

Greyson had been disappointed by the results of the DNA test. Even though he’d dropped it and we hadn’t discussed it since, I couldn’t help but wonder… *Does Greyson still wish he were Fenrir’s father?*

Xavier’s voice slipped into my mind, and I was so caught up watching Greyson and Fenrir that I flinched at the sudden intrusion.

*Do you feel like a third wheel yet?*

I looked over at him, my brow furrowing. *Excuse me?*

He nodded over at Greyson, Fenrir, and Maren. *I guess since there’s two of us, it makes one of us the fourth wheel. I’m certainly feeling it.*

I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything. I just pulled my foot back and kicked him hard beneath the table.

Xavier grimaced. *I was just joking.*

*Sure you were.*

I turned away from him in time to notice Maren approaching me.

She smiled. “Cali, how are you?”

I forced that same pasted-on smile back to my lips. “I’m fine.”

A crease appeared between her brows. She must have been taken aback by my short response, but was I really gonna get into how Greyson and I were cursed and repulsed by each other? *Hell* no.

“What brings you to Portland?” she asked.

God, she was beautiful. It was unfair, really. Why did Greyson’s ex, the one who meant more to him than any other woman he’d been with in the past, have to be, like, a freaking supermodel?

I forced a laugh, and it sounded so awkward I almost winced. “Oh, you know! Threatening supernatural therapists and the like.”

Xavier coughed, and Maren’s smile faltered a little.

Greyson set Fenrir down and turned to face the rest of the adults.

“Um, how are things at the pack house?” Maren asked. “You aren’t still under threat, are you?”

“Well…” I hesitated. How was I supposed to respond to that? Weren’t we *always* under some kind of threat? It was the norm for the Redwood pack. Some people talked about the weather; we talked about the likelihood of our enemies trying to kill us.

Greyson covered Fenrir’s ears. “The revenant problem has been taken care of.”

The gesture was so casual, so layered with affection and comfort, that my heart lurched—then tripped over itself for a whole new reason altogether.

*Maren and Fenrir left the pack house because she didn’t think it was safe for him. Does that mean they’re going to come back? Didn’t she want Greyson to teach Fenrir about how to be a young werewolf? How to control his shifts and to give the boy some experience around other wolves?*

Oh god. No. They couldn’t come back. This mess with the curse and Aysel and Ava and everything else was hard enough without Greyson’s would-be baby mama and son sharing our space, too.

Fenrir pushed Greyson’s hands off his ears, and my mate responded by pulling the boy up by his arms.

The boy laughed and shouted in excitement. I thought I might be sick. This was so easy for Greyson, so natural. I wished I could have a family with him, that he could have that sense of belonging with *our* child. But of course, my life was way more complicated than that.

Plus, there was Xavier. A family with him would be wonderful too—even if he was an ass sometimes.

Maren’s voice destroyed my fantasy family moment. “Do you think the restaurant would let me use their bathroom? Too much Portland coffee.” She let out a laugh that sounded just as fake as mine had.

Greyson shrugged. “I don’t see why not.”

A new realization suddenly hit me. Maren was an experienced Fae. *Duh.* She must have seen lots of supernatural stuff. Could she know something about the ongoing mystery of Seluna?

“I could use a bathroom break too,” I piped up. “I’ll go with you.”

Xavier raised a brow, but I ignored him as Maren and I set off for the ladies’ room.

My palms began to sweat as I considered how to make my move. *Can I just bring it up?*

We passed the menu on the wall, and Maren grimaced. “Who would want to have pineapple on their pizza?”

I bit my tongue until we entered the bathroom. The door had barely swung shut behind us before I blurted out, “Have you ever heard of Seluna?”

Maren blinked. “Is that the new restaurant just south of downtown?”

“No. She’s more like a… moon goddess?”

“I’ve never heard of her. Why?”

I swallowed my disappointment. “I heard somebody talking about her, and I was just curious. From, you know, Fae to Fae.”

We went about our business, and as we washed our hands, I realized the question I *should* have asked. Artemis had been so disappointed when I hadn’t asked Grandpa Innes about Adair or Kadmos.

But maybe Maren knew something. After all, she was a Dark Fae… And unless she wanted to almost end up like my mom, she might have been back to the Fae world recently enough…

I turned to her. “Sorry, just one more question,” I said. “Have you ever heard of a Dark Fae named Adair?”

**Episode 2389**

MARTA

My eyes shot open in horror as Okorie dropped to his knees and crumpled to the ground.

“Oh god! Oh no no no no no.” I rushed forward to help him, to reach out and touch him—but I pulled back before my fingertips could make contact with his shoulder. My touch was exactly what had landed us in this situation in the first place.

*Did I just* kill *my mentor?*

I couldn’t imagine a situation in which the witch council would take that lightly. Even if it had been an accident. Mentors weren’t disposable, as far as I knew. Considering how long it had taken them to get Okorie out here, it must have taken a great deal of effort on their part.

Had I just escaped their clutches, only to wind up back in the exact situation I’d just escaped?

“Oh no!” Dani rushed forward, dropping to her knees next to his prone form. She was closer than I’d gotten, though I noticed she wasn’t in a hurry to reach out and touch him either. “What happened?”

“I don’t know! He took off my bracelets, and then I think he accidentally touched my hand! I *told* him I would kill something!”

This was just my luck! I hadn’t even made it a day with my new mentor, and now, because he refused to take me seriously, he was flat on his face on the ground. I ground my teeth. Okorie was annoying as hell, but that didn’t mean I *wanted* to kill him!

“He can’t be dead,” I said shakily. “We still need a mentor. The council’s not going to overlook this.”

I thought about what an absolute asshole our mentor was. The way he talked down to both of us, how, in his mind, we clearly weren’t worth his time.

*No. He doesn’t deserve to die. But I don’t deserve to go to jail for this, either! It’s not my fault!*

All I wanted was to get my magic in check so I could live a, you know, *somewhat* normal life—but clearly that was a long way off. In the meantime, I had to fix this. I pulled in a deep breath, trying like hell to calm myself.

I looked back at Dani. “Do you…” I swallowed. “Do you think Torin can help?”

She bit her lip. “It couldn’t hurt, right?”

I was about to scream for him to come help us when suddenly, Okorie pushed himself back up to his knees. His body was shaking—

No, not shaking. *Laughing.*

THE BASTARD WAS LAUGHING.

My jaw dropped, and for a moment all I saw was red. “You were *faking* it?”

Tears rolled down his cheeks. “You should have seen the looks on your faces!” He burst into a fit of laughter so intense he could barely breathe. He managed to compose himself long enough to keep gloating. “Of course I’m not dead. Please. I’m very much alive, and for the record, it would take more than a glancing touch with a bridge who can’t control her powers to kill me.”

Strangely, it didn’t even occur to me to be relieved. I couldn’t feel anything except deep, burning rage. “You son of a—”

“That’s so not funny,” Dani said with a grimace, the closest thing to a genuinely angry expression I’d seen from her.

“Oh, I beg to differ.” Okorie shrugged, still chuckling as he stood up and brushed off his pants.

“You unbelievable ass. Why the hell would you do that? I’m already worried about accidentally hurting people. Why use that to torture me?”

“I thought you could use an opportunity to lighten up a little bit. You take yourself far too seriously.”

“That’s rich, coming from you.” I scanned over his frame. He did seem totally fine—but now I really *did* want to do some harm. Maybe kick that insufferable smile right off his face. Give him something to actually feel hurt about.

But now that the panic was ebbing away—along with the anger—I felt the beginnings of relief. I hadn’t actually hurt him (though the thought was tempting). The witch council wasn’t coming to lock me up.

Nothing had happened.

Oh, except my so-called mentor had nearly given me a heart attack. Very professional.

Okorie’s expression sobered as he held my gaze. “Now that the worst thing you could have possibly envisioned didn’t actually happen—can we move on?”

My vision went red again. I couldn’t decide which was more infuriating—that my mentor had twisted my deepest fear and used it against me in some sort of teaching moment, or that he was acting like I was unreasonable for being pissed about it.

*Hell, why not both?*

“Seriously, what the hell is wrong with you? Do you really expect me to just ‘move on’ after the stunt you just pulled?”

He rolled his eyes. “Yes. Or, you know, work these issues out, but not on my time. Have you tried regular old therapy?”

My fingers clenched into tight fists, and I knew then that I couldn’t trust myself around this guy.

I pulled in a deep breath and turned to Dani. “Let’s get out of here. This is a waste of our time—there’s no point in spending another second with this so-called prodigy if he’s not going to teach us anything. Maybe we can request a new mentor?”

“Hey, stop.” He held up a hand. “I *can* help you. And believe it or not, I’m actually trying to help you right now. In any case, who’s to say there’s even another mentor available?”

I rounded on him. “You’re just saying that because you’ll look like a failure if you go back to the council and admit that you weren’t able to help us.”

The new tension in his jaw told me I’d hit the mark. He cleared his throat and forced a smile. It looked creepy and wrong.

“I can help you,” he said again. “Why don’t we pick up where we left off?”

I glanced over at Dani, who shrugged.

“Fine.” I sighed. “But if you try one more practical joke—which, by the way, was *so* not funny—I’m going to complain directly to Hawthorne.”

“Fair enough. Okay then, we’ll try again. But first: remember to relax. I know you struggle to recognize this, Marta, but you do have the ability to turn your magic on and off—an ability nobody else has. You are capable of it.”

*Easier said than done.*

Okorie plucked another flower off the bush and held it out to me. “Try again.

My eyes zeroed in on the flower, and I took a deep breath. Slowly, cautiously, I reached out to touch it.

*You can do this, Marta. You can turn your power off. You don’t have to hurt anything. This doesn’t have to be like the Fairly Fresh cabbage disaster.*

The second my fingertip touched the stem, the flower withered and died.

“Goddammit,” I muttered under my breath.

“You can try again,” Okorie said immediately, his tone oddly soothing. Somehow, that set me on edge even more than his shitty sense of humor.

“No, I can’t. Because it’s just going to happen again! It always happens—just like I knew it would.”

“Again, Marta.” He held out another flower.

I pulled in another breath and tried to focus, tried to imagine myself touching the flower without it withering…

And another one bit the dust the second I made contact.

Okorie produced another flower before I could so much as blink. “Again. Remember, you can control it. You have the power to turn it off.”

We kept at it, and I kept murdering one poor, unsuspecting flower after another. Soon, a full dozen were dead at Okorie’s feet.

*Come on, Marta! You can do this!* This time, rather than focusing on my hands, I imagined a big switch inside my chest, and I flipped that switch from “on” to “off.” Then I let out another breath, reached out, and touched the steam. I closed my eyes as my finger made contact.

Then, Dani began to clap. “Marta, you did it!”

My eyes snapped open. The flower—

“It’s alive!” I gasped. And not only had it survived my touch, the flower looked like it was at the peak of health. “I did it! I can’t believe I did it!”

I swiped the flower out of Okorie’s hand and brought the blossom to my nose. I had to smell it, to make sure it was real.

Okorie smirked. “Well, look at that. You can take direction after all.”

I glared. “Why do you have to ruin everything?”

Just like that, the petals blackened, curled, and fell to the ground as the stem withered and died. I tossed the dead flower at his feet. “I’m done with your bullshit.”

I turned on my heel and stormed toward the house.

“What a jerk,” I grumbled.

“Marta!” Okorie called after me. I turned to glare at him.

“Don’t forget these!” He snapped his fingers, and the bracelets locked around my wrists once more.

“Asshole!” I called back. I rushed inside, blowing past a surprised Big Mac and Kira, and stomped up to Lilac’s room.

Violet and Lilac turned to look at me, like I’d brought a storm cloud into the room with me. It probably wasn’t far from the truth.

“What’s wrong?” Lilac asked.

“Okorie. He’s wrong. About everything.” Tears pricked at my eyes, but I didn’t want to cry in front of them. I cleared my throat. “How are you doing?”

Lilac and Violet exchanged a look. My heart dropped. I knew that look. “What’s wrong?”

Violet gestured at Lilac’s wound. It was red and seeping.

I gasped. “It’s opened up again?”

**Episode 2390**

I stared at Maren nervously, suddenly hyperaware of the fact that I’d basically bombarded her with these huge questions in the middle of a women’s bathroom. I watched her face, trying to gauge her response, but she was a closed book. I couldn’t tell if the name meant anything to her.

What if the name Adair was like the Fae version of Kyle or Brian or Jake, or something like that? What if she knew like six Adairs?

“Adair is the brother of this Dark Fae guy, Kadmos,” I explained quickly. “We’re looking—”

Maren’s face lit up with recognition. “Kadmos? I definitely know who he is.”

“Really?” I couldn’t keep the excitement out of my voice.

She nodded. “You’d be hard pressed to find a Fae who hasn’t heard of him. He’s a Dark Fae legend.”

“What have you heard of him? Do you think he could still be alive?”

“Oh, I doubt that. Rumor has it he was killed in some big battle.”

This didn’t surprise me, but it also didn’t discourage me. Mom had believed Kadmos was dead for a long time. But rumor had it, he’d survived too. It just depended on who you talked to. According to some of the Fae trees my mom had spoken with—don’t ask me how—Kadmos was very much alive.

The tricky part was figuring out which of the rumors were actually true.

“But you don’t know for sure?” I asked.

Maren tilted her head to the side. “Why are you asking me about this?”

I hesitated. Though it probably wouldn’t hurt to tell Maren the truth, per se, we weren’t exactly BFFs. I didn’t want to invite her to become even more enmeshed in my personal life than she already was.

But I did want her help. And, as a Dark Fae, she was probably the best lead I’d gotten so far. As a gesture of good faith, I should probably refrain from lying to her… Right?

I cleared my throat. “Well, I know someone who’s trying to find Adair.”

*Two true statements, and no personal details given. Maybe this isn’t so hard after all.*

Maren nodded. “I’ve never met Adair, but I’ve heard his name mentioned from time to time. He and Kadmos come from a pretty important family in the Fae world, so he’s not just an average Fae by any means.” She seemed to think about this for a moment. “I’m pretty sure Adair’s alive?”

Not exactly a rousing statement of confidence. But this was the first bit of even somewhat actionable information we’d gotten since Mom had told Artemis about Adair in the first place.

“Do you have any idea where he might be?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, but I have no idea.” She seemed to hesitate too, like she was also deciding what was appropriate to share with me. “I don’t know what Greyson has told you about me, but I’ve distanced myself from the Fae world in recent years. I’m not as in-tune with things as I once was. Fenrir’s safety is the most important thing to me, and that’s why we’re here in the human world. The Fae world…” She grimaced. “There’s no safe place for him there right now.”

“Oh, yeah. He did tell me about that,” I lied.

*Is it a lie? Did he ever mention that to me?* I couldn’t recall us talking about anything like that where Maren and Fenrir were concerned, but then again, so much had happened it was almost impossible to keep track of it all. *He probably told me and I forgot all about it.*

We—*finally*—left the bathroom and made our way back to the table. Greyson and Fenrir were hunched over the menu, doodling with the crayons most restaurants handed out. My heart ached to see them together.

*They look just like father and son.*

Xavier, on the other hand, just looked bored.

Maren paused suddenly, and I took two steps ahead of her before turning back. “What is it?”

Her expression was grim, almost sad, as she watched the two of them. My heart began to race, and my mind spun with possibilities.

“I almost wish they hadn’t run into each other,” she said softly, nodding toward Greyson and Fenrir.

I frowned. “Why? They look like they’re having a good time.”

“Because it’s going to break Fenrir’s heart when we have to say goodbye. Not a day passes that he doesn’t talk about Greyson. He misses Greyson, and loves being around him. The last few weeks, it seemed like the distance was finally beginning to set in. Like he’d finally realized that Greyson wasn’t going to be part of his life anymore. But now that we’ve all run into each other again, I’m worried it’s going to make it that much harder to leave.”

*Oh.*

Somehow, even with all the time I’d spent obsessing about Fenrir and Greyson’s relationship, I’d never even considered that there might be a downside for Fenrir. That the little boy was anything but perfectly happy all the time.

I didn’t know what to say.

We stood there for a moment, watching Greyson tracing the lines of a big pizza drawing placemat so Fenrir could color it in.

The little boy laughed. “You can’t do pepperoni in blue!”

“Well, why not?” Greyson asked, pretending to be confused.

“Because it’s red!” Fenrir shoved the red crayon at him.

My heart ached all over again—this time for an entirely new reason.

Did Greyson feel the same way Fenrir did? Did he miss the boy when he wasn’t around? Greyson never talked about it, so I had no idea how he felt.

*Does he think about Fenrir every day? Does he think about Maren?*

Maren forced a smile as she approached the table. Greyson glanced up at her, nodding in acknowledgment before turning back to coloring in the menu. Fenrir was so absorbed in this special time with Greyson that he didn’t even seem to notice his mother returning.

Xavier stood and pulled out my chair for me. I all but collapsed into it, suddenly exhausted.

*Hey, I’m sorry about earlier. Are you okay?* Xavier asked through the mind link. *You look a little unsettled.*

*I’m fine. I don’t want to get into it right now.*

“How long will you all be in Portland?” Maren asked.

Why? Was she hoping to find more time for Fenrir and Greyson to hang out?

“Hopefully not too long,” I blurted out. I said it so suddenly, just this side of too loud, that both Greyson and Xavier looked at me in confusion. “We have to be somewhere,” I added, blushing.

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Maren said. “Maybe the next time you’re planning to come to Portland, you can let me know.”

*Um, hell no. I’m not about to set up playdates with my mate’s ex.*

*She’s probably just saying it to be nice, Cali!* I told myself.

Knowing what I knew now about how much Fenrir coveted this time with Greyson, I felt bad for responding that way. But it was genuinely how I felt, even if it was selfish.

Maren started describing another pizza place, one a little closer to her apartment, and I tuned her out.

At least this little reunion, awkward as hell though it was, had a silver lining. Maren had given me intel, and now I knew that Adair was probably alive. That was one more puzzle piece than we’d had when we’d gotten started.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket to let Artemis know. Of course, since Artemis didn’t have a cell phone, I had to go through Rishika.

*Hey*, I texted. *I have a message for Artemis. Can you pass it on?*

Almost immediately, three dots popped up on the thread and then Rishika responded. *Happy to be the messenger. What’s up?*

*I just spoke with Maren. She thinks Adair is alive.*

There was a long pause before those three dots popped up again. *Maren? As in, Greyson’s Maren?*

I glanced up at the Fae in question, who was sitting on the other side of Fenrir, also coloring in the menu. The three of them were doing that thing where they looked like a picture-perfect family again.

I suppressed a groan and looked down at my phone. *Yes. That Maren.*

*Oh fuck, okay.*

Yeah, she’s telling me.

Rishika’s next text came fast. *Artemis wants to know more.*

*There isn’t any more. Just that he’s alive.*

I was waiting for a response when Maren said, “Fenrir, sweetheart, we should get going.”

He turned to his mother with a pout—a fake one. How did I know? Because I’d seen Greyson make that exact same expression when he was trying to get me to change my mind.

*Ugh, this is eerie.*

Fenrir pulled his hand out of Maren’s. “I want to stay and draw with Greyson.”

“We have things to do today, and so does Greyson. We should let him and his friends have their lunch, okay?”

I clenched my jaw. *Friends? Is that all Maren thinks I am to Greyson? Try MATE, lady!*

Then I took a breath and realized exactly who Maren was talking to: her four-year-old son. How did one even explain mates and romantic attachments to a four-year-old?

Fenrir pouted again. “But I want pizza too.”

Greyson looked sympathetic, but he didn’t say anything. He wasn’t going to fight Maren on this. *Thank god.* Soon enough, it’d be just the three of us once more.

*Just like it’s supposed to be.*

But then Xavier squeezed my hand and gave me a smile. One that told me he was about to be a little shit.

He turned to Maren. “Why don’t you join us for lunch?”

**Episode 2391**

GREYSON

My head swiveled toward Xavier. He had a shit-eating grin on his face—the one he usually wore when he was trying to make my life difficult.

Fenrir grinned at my brother, then looked up at Maren. “Yes, Mommy! Let’s stay for lunch!”

I shot my brother a dirty look. *What the hell is he up to now? Why does he have to make this awkward situation even worse?*

He’d been pleased as punch that we’d run into Maren and Fenrir. The bastard had barely kept the smile off his face. Truth be told, I was glad we’d run into them too. Glad to have a few moments with Fenrir, at least. But I was certain Cali didn’t feel that way. She had never been comfortable around Maren—my ex—and she didn’t look too thrilled by Xavier’s invitation, either.

But there was no denying I was enjoying spending time with Fenrir. I’d missed the kid over the last several weeks. Without the boy getting underfoot, the house felt… I don’t know. Just a little bit empty. Fenrir seemed over the moon about our time together, and that made me glance over at Maren, a small flame of hope sputtering to life inside my chest.

Nobody in my entire life had ever looked at me the way Fenrir did. And keeping that bright smile on the kid’s face was suddenly more important than anything else we’d come to Portland to do.

Even though I knew having lunch with Maren and Fenrir would be some kind of torture for Cali, I still wanted Maren to say yes. Xavier and I agreed on that, at least. Only my dickhead of a brother wanted it for an entirely different reason.

Maren’s smile was thin. “Thank you. That’s very nice, but Fenrir has an art class to attend.”

The little boy pouted. “But I want pizza.”

“We can get you pizza when your class is over, okay?” She reached for his hand, but he tucked his hands under his legs.

“No!”

“I’ve got an idea,” I said, forcing some brightness into my voice. “How about I get Fenrir a slice to go? Would that be okay?”

She paused for a moment, then shrugged. “I don’t see why not.”

I looked down, meeting the boy’s eyes. “What kind of pizza do you want?”

“Plain pizza. No cheese.”

I blinked and looked at Maren for confirmation. “So, pizza crust and sauce?”

She rolled her eyes, an affectionate smile curving her lips upward. This one looked real. “You try getting a four-year-old to eat sometime, and you’ll understand.”

I was pretty sure “plain pizza” wasn’t on the menu, but I could scrape the cheese off easily enough. I stood up and tucked my seat back under the table. “One piece of plain pizza, coming right up.”

“I’ll go with you,” Maren offered.

I glanced over at Cali, who was looking less thrilled by the second. If I knew her at all, she was probably hating this. But I knew, deep down, that the trust between us was strong. And all I was doing was buying Maren’s kid a slice of pizza. She might not like it, but she knew what this was—and what it wasn’t.

“Are you guys okay to keep an eye on Fenrir?” Maren asked.

Cali was stone-faced, but Xavier nodded. “Happy to. You guys go get that pizza.”

*That little shit.*

I shoved all thoughts of my brother away and headed inside with Maren. As we took our place in the line, I glanced back and saw Fenrir, still doodling at the table. A not-so-small part of me wished I could ditch this line and go back to coloring with him. I really had missed him, and who knew when I’d get a chance to see him again?

An ache tugged at my chest as I thought, again, about those DNA results. The definitive proof that I wasn’t Fenrir’s father. That, even though we looked so much alike, even though I swore he and I had a special connection, I was just some guy his mom used to date. I had no claim to him—as much as I wished otherwise.

“I apologize for Fenrir’s attitude,” Maren said as we stepped up to the counter.

I ordered a single slice of cheese pizza, then laughed and waved her off. “The kid’s hungry. There’s nothing to be sorry about. Believe me, if you’d ever seen Xavier hangry, you wouldn’t feel the need to apologize.” After paying for the slice, we stepped away to wait for the order to come through. “But, is pizza without cheese really pizza? Or just a glorified breadstick with marinara?”

Maren laughed. “It’s a fair question.”

“I appreciate a kid who knows what he wants and isn’t afraid to say it.”

“That’s always been his way.”

“How’s he doing?” I asked. “Is he getting better at handling the shift?”

She nodded. “It’s less frequent lately. He’s got a better hold on it. And Aiden has been helping out a bit more, too.”

Irritation flared inside me at Fenrir’s father’s name, and just like that, all my humor evaporated. “You’re seeing him again?”

I remembered the text Maren had sent me a while back. Apropos of nothing, she’d reached out to me, late at night, telling me that Aiden wanted to see his son. Back then, I hadn’t known if she was looking for advice or permission, and I hadn’t been able to offer her either. She knew where I stood with Aiden, and so did I.

But I hadn’t liked the idea of Aiden being anywhere near Fenrir then, and now that I was seeing the boy again, I hated it even more. The guy was bad news. He didn’t deserve to be within a hundred feet of Fenrir or his mother. He was an abusive asshole who had no business breathing the same air as us.

“I have to,” she said quietly. “Fenrir is his son.”

“You seemed reluctant when you texted me about it,” I reminded her. “What changed?”

“It wasn’t an easy decision, if that’s what you’re implying. I didn’t make it lightly. All of the visits are supervised. Besides, it’s not your business.”

Her implied statement couldn’t have been clearer: I wasn’t Fenrir’s father, so I didn’t get a say.

Except…

“You made it my business when you texted me about it.”

She winced. “I probably shouldn’t have done that. It was a mistake. I was just… feeling vulnerable. I wanted to talk to someone I knew I could trust.”

I thought I detected something else in her tone, something more than what she was saying, but I didn’t say anything. Silence settled between us as we waited for Fenrir’s slice of pizza.

It was driving me up the fucking wall to think of Aiden—that toxic, abusive son of a bitch—anywhere near Fenrir. What the hell was Maren thinking, letting that guy back into their lives?

*Could he have threatened her?* I wouldn’t have put it past the scumbag for even a second. Yes, he was technically Fenrir’s father—though I personally thought the term “sperm donor” was more appropriate.

But a few shared chromosomes or not, Aiden was a piece of shit.

I glanced outside again. While Fenrir kept coloring, Xavier was talking with Cali. I could only imagine what he was saying, but judging by the tension on Cali’s face, she didn’t like it. I had no idea what had crawled up my brother’s ass today, but he’d been even more insufferable than usual.

I sighed and pulled my attention back to Maren. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

She rested a hand on my arm. “It’s okay. You don’t need to do anything for us. You don’t owe us anything.”

I frowned. “I know I don’t *owe* you, but I want to help.”

“It just…” She looked away, seemingly measuring her words.

“It just *what*?”

Her gaze snapped to mine. “It makes things difficult, okay?”

I blinked. *It makes things* difficult*? What the hell does that even mean? Difficult for whom? For Maren? Does she still have feelings for me, or something?*

I thought back to every moment of our interaction today. Fenrir had practically thrown himself at me, like he was being reunited with his favorite playmate. Maren, on the other hand, had kept her distance. Every word and gesture had seemed measured. Why?

“I can be involved as little or as much as you want, but I care about Fenrir too,” I said gently.

“Thank you.” She squeezed my arm but didn’t seem placated by my words. “The thing is, Fenrir really likes you. I’ve never seen him so attached to another person before. He *adores* you, and he’s missed you since we left the pack house. He asks about you every day. ‘*When can we go see Greyson? Is Greyson going to visit us soon? Can we call Greyson?*’” She swallowed.“But you have this whole other life, and I don’t expect you to make room in it for Fenrir. But he doesn’t understand that, and I don’t want to get his hopes up.”

Her words made my heart ache. “I get it,” I said after a beat. “But if there’s anything I can ever do for that kid, I will. You understand that, don’t you?”

“I do. Thank you.”

“Order up! One slice of cheese, to go!” The cook slid a paper plate stained with grease onto the counter in front of us. We peered down at the slice.

Maren laughed. “Wow, they really went to town with the cheese, huh?”

I slid the cheese off and dumped it into the nearby garbage can. “Problem solved.”

We headed back to the table outside, and Fenrir’s eyes lit up when he saw us coming toward him, “plain pizza” in hand.

“Hey.” I stopped to look at Maren. “If Aiden *ever* does anything to hurt you or that kid, you call me, and I’ll make him regret it. Okay?”

**Episode 2392**

I jumped up, relief rushing through me as Greyson returned with Fenrir’s pizza. I trusted Greyson, but he was only half of the equation. Maren had never seemed out to get Greyson for herself or anything, and she was nice and helpful when the situation called for it, but her intentions had always been a little murky to me.

Either way, it felt like hours had passed while Xavier and I had been sitting outside at the table with Fenrir. As much as the kid loved Greyson, he seemed entirely indifferent to both Xavier and me. Xavier had tried to make indulgent small talk with Fenrir while Maren and Greyson were gone, for reasons that were beyond my understanding. Fenrir had given him single syllable answers until Xavier stopped trying.

I didn’t even try. If the kid didn’t want to talk to us, I wasn’t going to push an interaction on him.

Still, I hadn’t been able to keep my eyes off Maren and Greyson while they were inside. First of all, did it seriously take that long to grab a naked slice of pizza? Secondly, I was *desperate* to know what they were talking about.

I watched their faces as they returned to the table. *Whatever they talked about, the conversation looked intense.*

I had a million and one questions for Greyson about their conversation, but I didn’t want to seem like the insecure girlfriend.

But seriously, did Maren really have to put her hand on Greyson’s bicep? It was like she was trying to use any excuses she had to touch him.

I pulled in a deep breath. *Chill out, Cali. Nothing is going on. You can trust Greyson. You* do *trust Greyson. If he wants to talk to you about it, you can ask questions then. So keep the fire-breathing monster act to a minimum!*

Still, the whole thing bothered me. Every freaking second we’d spent here since Maren and Fenrir had shown up had felt like a needle stabbing into my skin. It wouldn’t harm me, but it didn’t feel good, either.

This was exactly what Xavier had joked about—when Maren was around, I always felt like an outsider. I’d felt that way when she and Fenrir had been staying in the pack house, too, even though it was my home. I’d been there first. That was one of the many reasons why I’d been so glad to see them go: so my home could feel like mine again.

But now that we were running into them again, all of those old, bitter, jealous, and insecure feelings had come rushing back. It was even worse now, since we were in Portland—technically Maren’s home. And watching Fenrir and Greyson pick up exactly where they’d left off, like two peas in a pod?

*Ugh.*

Right back to square one. I felt more like an outsider than ever, and I hated it. That feeling never failed to stoke the anxiety beast within.

*Trust*, I reminded myself. *If you trust Greyson, you need to act like it.*

“Fenrir, we need to go,” Maren said.

*Thank god.* I didn’t want to look like the crazy girlfriend I probably was, so I hadn’t said anything. But I just couldn’t stand waiting around, hoping somebody would bring it up.

*We don’t want Fenrir to be late for art class!*

Fenrir just kept chomping on his weirdly topping-less pizza, as if he hadn’t heard his mother.

“Thank Greyson for your pizza,” Maren continued.

“Thanks, Greyson,” the boy said through a mouthful of pizza crust, then went back to his slice as Maren and Greyson hugged. It was short, barely a second or two of contact, but it was still enough to make my anxiety beast *roar*.

*Get away from my mate. Get the hell out of our lives while you’re at it.*

Maren turned to us, smiling at Xavier. “It was nice to see you again.”

Then she looked at me. “I hope your friend finds what they’re looking for.”

“Thank you,” I managed to spit out.

“But tell your friend to be careful, okay? That family’s f—” She stopped, glancing at her son. She cleared her throat. “Messed up. Your friend might be getting into more than they bargained for by pulling on that thread.”

With those cheerful and optimistic words, Maren tossed Fenrir’s greasy plate into the garbage, took her son’s hand, and walked off.

I frowned, watching them go. *Adair’s family is messed up? What does that even mean?*

Clearly, she hadn’t told me everything she knew about Adair and Kadmos, and I added that as another strike against her. Maybe the silver lining to this terrible run-in wasn’t so shiny after all.

Xavier laughed as Greyson slumped into a seat at the table. “Thanks for that. That was seriously the most awkward fun I’ve had in a long while. Even if we don’t get anything from the witch later, it was worth the trip out here just to experience that.”

I glowered at him. “I *will* kick you again.”

Greyson didn’t look half as ruffled as I felt. “Even more awkward than that little dance you and Ava are doing?”

I groaned. *Right. Xavier doesn’t have a leg to stand on.* Now there was a reminder I didn’t need.

“Can we finally order?” I asked. “I’m starving.” And I didn’t want this to turn into a pissing contest.

“That depends.” Greyson’s lips twitched. “Are you going to order the pineapple pizza? Because if that’s the case, I might want to sit at another table.”

I was stone-faced. After our little run-in with Maren and Fenrir, I wasn’t in the mood for jokes.

“I’ll order what I want.” *And you’ll get to sit there and deal with it. Just like I had to.*

We went inside and placed our orders, waiting near the cashier just like Greyson and Maren had earlier. I couldn’t help but notice that Greyson seemed a little subdued. Xavier was still on cloud nine about the whole Maren and Fenrir thing.

I mind linked with Greyson. *Are you okay?*

*I’m fine.*

I wasn’t convinced, but I didn’t press the issue. If he wanted to talk, I’d just have to trust that he’d ask when he was ready.

*Easier said than done.*

Our pizzas came out, and we carried our plates back to the table outside.

Xavier grimaced. “I can’t believe you went for the pineapple.”

“It’s not my fault you don’t believe it’s good,” I insisted.

Greyson shook his head. “It’s an abomination.”

“You should try it.” I held out a slice. “If you hate it, then you can drag it all you want, but you have to at least taste it.”

“Hard pass,” Greyson said, before lifting his own slice of pepperoni to his mouth.

“I’ll try it,” Xavier said. He took a small bite from the piece and seemed to mull over the flavor as he chewed.

“Well?” I asked.

He swallowed and shrugged. “It wasn’t good, but it wasn’t bad.”

Greyson laughed. “What a ringing endorsement.”

“I think you like it,” I said, pointing my finger at Xavier. “You’re just ashamed to admit it.”

As we dug in to our lunch, my focus shifted away from obsessing over Fenrir and Maren and returned to the task at hand.

“What are we going to do about the witch?” I asked.

Xavier wiped his mouth with his paper napkin. “I was thinking about that too. It’d be a good idea to go scope out the meeting place ahead of time.”

“I agree,” Greyson said. “It’s better to have an idea of what we’ll be dealing with. Might give us the upper hand if anything goes sideways. It’s likely the witch uses this location frequently. They might even have traps set. We don’t want to get caught in a bind.”

My eyes widened. “A bind?”

Maybe it was naïve, but I’d kind of assumed that this meeting would be straightforward—or at least as straightforward as the situation allowed. But then again, when was the last time *anything* relating to the supernatural world had been simple? Greyson and Xavier were probably right to assume the witch would be looking for an opportunity to screw us over.

*Why can’t witches, werewolves, vampires, and the like just sit down and have a conversation? Why does it always have to come down to whose claws or teeth are sharpest?*

Xavier pulled out his phone. “The meeting place is across town. How are we supposed to get there? We can’t just run around Portland as wolves.”

“We can take my car,” Greyson offered. “It’s only a short walk from here.”

Once Xavier agreed to that course of action, we tossed our empty plates and headed for Greyson’s apartment. I kind of loved walking down the street with my mates on either side of me. There could’ve been witches, dragons, and monsters up ahead, and I still would’ve felt safe and secure as long as I had my Alphas on each arm.

We stopped in front of a fancy apartment building, and my eyes widened. “Is *this* your apartment?”

Greyson nodded. “The car’s in the garage.” He started heading toward the row of garages on the ground floor.

“Wait,” I said, still staring up at the building. This was where Greyson used to live. Where he’d spent a part of his life that I still knew very little about. I turned to meet Greyson’s eyes. “Can we go upstairs and see it?”

**Episode 2393**

XAVIER

I scoffed at Cali. “Seriously? Why waste time going into Greyson’s apartment? We only need his car. Let’s just hit the road, get a good look at the meeting place, and focus on not getting one-upped by this witch.”

My brother nodded. “He’s right. We need a plan, and the best thing we can do right now is collect as much information as possible.”

“We have *hours* until this meeting happens,” Cali said, crossing her arms. “And I’ve never seen Greyson’s apartment before.”

I wanted to argue, to groan and snap *so fucking what?* But I knew that look on my mate’s face. She was digging her heels in for the long haul, and arguing with her any further would be a waste of time. She wasn’t going to change her mind, and if anything, trying to convince her not to walk down Greyson’s memory lane would just make me look like an asshole, and I’d already pushed my luck today after running into Maren and her kid at the restaurant.

Greyson sighed. “Well, if you insist.” He and Cali started for the door, but I made no effort to move. When they realized I wasn’t following them, they stopped and turned to face me.

“Aren’t you coming?” Cali asked.

Now it was my turn to dig my heels in. “Nope. I have no desire to hang out in my brother’s defunct bachelor pad.”

Greyson narrowed his gaze at me, and Cali frowned. “Have you ever seen it before?”

“If you’ve seen one, you’ve seen ‘em all. I’ll wait out for you both out here.”

Cali nodded. “Okay, we won’t be long.”

It wasn’t until after she and Greyson had disappeared inside that I realized I’d just given my blessing to my mate and brother going up to his apartment unescorted.

*Fuck. Maybe I should go up to the apartment?*

I honestly didn’t know much about Greyson’s life back when he’d been a Rogue, but I could imagine that this apartment had seen a ton of action. The thought of my mate walking into Greyson’s old sex nest made me itchy under the collar.

*Maybe I should make up some excuse and go join them. Make sure they—*

I stopped myself. Make sure they *what*? Didn’t fuck each other? I didn’t have much to worry about there. Greyson and Cali had been sleeping together for months now. Plus, thinking with my actual brain instead of my growling, possessive Alpha instincts, I seriously doubted they would try for a quickie right now, for several reasons. For one, they knew I was waiting down here, and that we had more important shit to do today. For two, I couldn’t imagine seeing the place Greyson brought his harem of one-night stands to would be exciting to Cali. And three, they were still repulsed by each other. Even if they wanted to get busy, they couldn’t.

So why the fuck was I getting all twisted up about it? The truth was, I’d felt pissy about Greyson and Cali ever since we’d run into Maren and Fenrir. Sure, it had been awkward as hell and more than a little amusing to watch my brother squirm, but if Cali had felt like a fourth wheel, then I’d been the fifth wheel because she’d barely been able to take her eyes off Maren and Greyson.

Her obvious jealousy was so out of control. I could smell it all over her, and no doubt Greyson could as well. It was fucking infuriating. And now she wanted to know all about his life before her—starting with seeing the apartment he’d lived in.

I started pacing outside the building, drawing more than one strange look from passersby.

*Jesus, is he giving her the grand tour or something? It’s an apartment, not the Louvre. How long are they going to be?*

Then I lurched to a stop, my molars grinding together. This was crazy—literal crazy behavior. I had to get my mind off them.

I looked around. There were a few shops across the street. Some were all decked out, with Christmas decorations hung in the windows, and I remembered I still needed to get Cali a Secret Santa present.

Gift giving had been so much easier before I’d met Cali. Colton and I had occasionally exchanged joke gifts—whoopie cushions and stink bombs were always a hit, but that was about the extent of it. I had a feeling Cali was going to take more effort than that.

I hated shopping. I always had. But for Cali, I could put in the work. I’d find the perfect gift, one that would make her forget all about Greyson.

I strolled across the street, checking out the displays. Shoe store. Outdoor apparel. Cooking and kitchenware store…

I stopped in front of a warmly lit storefront.

*Bingo.*

A jewelry store.

I glanced back at the apartment building across the street. They’d probably be holed up there for at least another ten minutes. Plenty of time to pick out a necklace or something.

Before I walked in, I braced myself. Maybe if I treated this like a mercenary job, it wouldn’t be too painful. My objective was simple: go in, get a gift, and get the fuck out. I could handle that.

I pulled the door open and stepped into the shop. The door chimed—loudly—making me flinch.

A woman with deep blue hair smiled at me from her post behind a large counter. “Welcome to Rose City Jewelers. How can I help you?”

“Uh…” I looked around, feeling completely overwhelmed. There had to be something like twenty cases stuffed with jewelry, to say nothing of the display pieces lying across velvet pads and hanging from fancy-looking hooks.

Honestly, if it weren’t for the *secret* part of Secret Santa, I would have just asked Cali what she wanted.

“Are you looking for something for yourself?” the woman pressed. “Or perhaps a gift for someone special?”

“Someone special,” I ground out, feeling like a complete ass. I’d been in the shop for all of twenty seconds, and already this felt like a huge mistake.

The woman’s eyes lit up. “Oh! Girlfriend? Boyfriend? Relative?”

Could she just stop with the sales-ey fake enthusiasm? “I don’t need any—”

She cut me off with a laugh. “Oh, I’ve heard that before. Do you have any idea how many people come in here every day, insisting they don’t need help, and then three days later, they come crawling back to return what they bought? Why don’t you save us both the trouble and let me help you?”

Maybe asking Cali what she wanted wouldn’t be such a bad thing after all. It might spoil the surprise, and the secret, but at least then I couldn’t screw this up.

“You’re killing me,” the woman groaned. “Come on! Why don’t you tell me about your special someone? What do they like?”

*Dear god. This woman isn’t going to stop. Maybe I should just buy this necklace and get the hell out of here—put us both out of our misery.*

I cleared my throat. “My ma—my *girlfriend* isn’t really into jewelry.”

That was just another way Cali and Ava were different. Nothing delighted Ava more than an expensive piece of jewelry. She was all about status symbols. Or, at least, she had been, back then.

*Wish I’d remembered that about Cali* before *I walked in here.*

The woman shook her head. “That can’t be true. Everyone—male, female, and in between—loves jewelry. Sometimes it just takes the right piece.”

She held up a glittering bracelet. “Can you picture her wearing this?”

I had no clue. *Cali would look good wearing a tin can.* I glanced across the street through the store’s windows. “I’m in a bit of a hurry.”

In the end, the woman earned her commission, and a few minutes after I’d walked into the store, I came out of the shop, shoving a jewelry case into my pocket. I hoped Cali would like her gift.

Next door, a line of wedding cakes was displayed in the bakery window.

A wave of horror slammed into me. *Wait.* When I finally got the opportunity to propose to Cali—and I would, no doubt about that—was I gonna have to go through this all over again?

Selecting a Secret Santa gift was hard enough. The idea of picking out the perfect engagement ring made my stomach churn. How the hell was I supposed to figure that one out?

*Maybe I can casually bring it up. Ask her what she thinks about one ring style or another?*

I shook myself. I couldn’t think about that right now, to both my frustration and relief. At least I could scratch Cali’s Secret Santa gift off my list.

I crossed the street and leaned against the apartment building, checking the time. *Jesus, how long are they gonna be?*

Greyson was probably taking his sweet time to get back at me for being a dick at the pizza place. I didn’t care—it was worth it just to have seen him squirm.

I glanced up at the building, wishing I knew which windows belonged to my brother. I trusted Cali, but I wouldn’t have put it past Greyson to try to really make me pay. He was a smart guy. Hell, he could probably figure a workaround to deal with the revulsion spell too, if he tried hard enough.

After all, if I had Cali alone in my apartment, and the same revulsion spell was in place, I’d find a way—

*Fuck.*

What the hell was I *thinking*, letting Cali go up with Greyson? I started toward the building’s entrance. Whatever shit those two were getting up to, it was ending. Now.

**Episode 2394**

We stood outside Greyson’s apartment door. In fact, we’d been standing there for nearly a solid minute now.

I peered up at Greyson. “Are you going to open the door, or…?”

“Oh. Right.” He fumbled with his keys and unlocked the door. He seemed a little nervous, though I wasn’t sure why. I knew why *I* was nervous—I was about to see a side of Greyson I’d never seen before. But him? He was just showing me his old apartment.

But maybe he was nervous for the same reason I was. Maybe he wasn’t in a hurry to show me the guy he used to be.

He opened the door a few inches, then closed it again before I could even glimpse what lay inside. He spun to face me. “We’re doing this all wrong.”

I frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Just… Wait here for a second, okay?”

Before I could respond, he slipped inside and closed the door in my face.

I blinked at the sudden rush of air. Well, okay then. Had he seriously just left me out in the hall? What was going on?

A door down the hallway, maybe one or two units down from Greyson’s, opened, and an elderly woman peered out. When she saw me standing on Greyson’s doorstep, she threw me the meanest, ugliest look I’d ever seen and retreated back into her apartment, slamming the door behind her.

I blinked. *What did I do to deserve that? What’s going* on *in this building?*

Greyson’s door opened just as suddenly as he’d closed it, and he bowed. “Welcome.” Then he gave me one of those smiles that never failed to make me weak in the knees. “I’m glad I swiped right on you.”

I laughed, and he stepped aside to let me in. He really had me going there for a minute, but it was just him being his dorky self as usual. As soon as I saw his apartment, my eyes went wide. On the elevator ride up, Greyson had told me not to expect too much. So I’d pictured something shabby with outdated furnishings. Something hyper-masculine or plain and empty. Utilitarian. Maybe dusty and tidy, since it had been a long time since he’d been here.

I never would have imagined the leather furniture, the stainless-steel appliances, or the *art* hanging on the walls.

This place was *nice*. Like, professional interior designer nice. And it was spotless.

*He must have a cleaning person keeping up the place.*

I glanced around and shook my head. “Greyson, this place looks amazing. Why were you acting so weird?”

“Hey, I wanted to make sure the place was presentable for you.”

“And was it?”

He smiled. “See for yourself.”

I seriously felt like I was entering an alternate universe, one where I was a Portland State student hooking up with Greyson for a night. The apartment was evidence of this whole other life he’d lived. Still *could* live, if he ever wanted to go back to it.

I glanced at all the immaculate furniture—including the king bed.

I knew Greyson had been a Rogue before I’d met him, and he was, without a doubt, one of the hottest guys I’d ever seen. I was no fool. Which begged the question: exactly how many other women had been in here before me?

*Ten?* My stomach clenched. *Twenty? Even more than that?*

I had to assume one of them had been Maren, since she and Greyson had hooked up back when he was living here. In fact, they’d probably looked up *right here*. On the couch. On the bed. Possibly right where I was standing right now.

My stomach clenched tighter.

Greyson leaned back against the sofa that had probably seen a veritable harem’s worth of women. “Do you approve?”

“I’m not sure,” I joked. My laugh sounded fake, but Greyson didn’t seem to notice.

He slowly approached, stopping right in front of me. “Maybe I can help make up your mind?”

He was so close I could feel the warmth coming off his body, and if it hadn’t been for the revulsion spell, I would’ve let him help me. At the very least, it might’ve distracted me from thinking of just how many other women he’d entertained here.

But the curse was still in place. And maybe, in this moment, that was for the best. Because Xavier was also waiting for us outside—and I knew he wouldn’t be content to wait for long. He hadn’t wanted us to make this detour at all.

“How about you give me the tour?” I asked.

Greyson chuckled. “It’s a studio.” He gestured broadly. “There’s the tour.”

“I don’t care. I want you to show me all of it. It’ll help me feel connected to you, help me understand your life before we met.”

He kissed my knuckles. “As far as I’m concerned, my life didn’t start until I met you.” He took my hand and led me to the kitchen, and from there he led me to the spacious living room-slash-dining area. Then he led me to his “bedroom” area.

I had mixed emotions seeing that huge bed with its heavy wood and dark, silky sheets. It was the kind of bed designed for the sole purpose of sex. How many times had Greyson slept with Maren here? Or any number of other women?

Greyson gestured to the bed. “Do you want to try it out? It’s been a while since I flipped the mattress, but I’m sure it’s still good.”

I playfully smacked him. “Let’s ditch this curse, and we’ll see.”

He gave me an easy grin. “Well then, that pretty much wraps up the tour. Do you want something to drink?”

“I wouldn’t mind some water.”

He headed to the kitchen, and I took the opportunity to poke around. I looked in his closet—clothes mostly, and some very expensive-looking suits—and under his bed. Then I noticed something sticking out of his bedside drawer.

I pulled open the drawer and pulled out a few newspaper clippings detailing some ring fights. Greyson had spent time in the ring when he was Rogue. The way he told it, it was an easy way to make money, being a werewolf and all.

I was about to close the drawer when I noticed a framed photo sticking out from beneath the clippings.

I couldn’t help myself. I grabbed the frame and pulled it out of the drawer. It was a picture of Greyson, smiling, his arm around Maren’s shoulders. They looked like they were at a bar. Maren was also smiling, but her eyes were on Greyson, not the camera.

Greyson was visibly younger in the photo. He looked absolutely adorable. And Maren…

*They look so happy together.*

Greyson’s hand landed gently on my shoulder, and I spun around, caught in the act.

But his expression was soft as he looked down at the photo in my hands, and his eyes were kind when they met mine.

“It’s an old picture,” he said. “I didn’t think you’d want to see it lying around.”

My fingers tightened on the frame. “I hope you didn’t think you had to hide this from me. I already know about Maren.” My mind took his little confession and ran with it. “Wait. Is that why you went into the apartment first? What else did you hide from me?”

“I’m not hiding anything from you, I swear. You’re welcome to tear the place apart.”

I set the picture back down in the drawer and slid it shut. “I don’t think I have to do that. I trust you. And how can I blame you for the past? We didn’t know each other back then. I didn’t even know the supernatural world existed at all.”

He pulled me into a hug, breathing into my neck. “I love you with everything I have.”

All I wanted was to kiss him, to lose myself in this embrace with him, but I couldn’t even do that. It was so unfair that, along with intimacy, we were being denied something as simple as a kiss.

I blew out a breath. “I hate this.”

“I know.” He pulled back to look me in the eyes. “But I also know that we’ll be together again. *Really* together.” He lifted my chin. “If I could, I’d kiss you right now.”

I was *so* tempted. All that stood between us was a handful of inches of open air and one very persistent curse. But the curse itself seemed erratic, unpredictable. Maybe this time that would work in our favor. Maybe this time, we could get away with a simple kiss.

A loud buzz ripped through the air, and I jolted back in fright before I realized it was the intercom. Greyson blew out a breath and stalked over to the door to check the monitor. “It’s Xavier. I guess I should let him in. Either he doesn’t trust us alone together, or he wants to talk more about the meeting with the witch.”

He pressed the button to release the locks on the building’s entrance.

I thought back to the moment we’d had before Xavier had interrupted us. I yearned for Greyson so much. And so much was riding on the meeting tonight going according to plan. But when did any of our plans ever work out smoothly?

“Greyson,” I said softly. “What if the witch won’t help us?”

**Episode 2395**

GREYSON

Cali’s question broke my heart.

But I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t been worrying about the exact same scenario—that, even after everything we’d done, we wouldn’t be able to convince the witch to help us break this curse. It wasn’t as if the Aysel seduction plan was going particularly well. Our options were limited.

But that didn’t mean I was going to give up on this. I would *never* give up on my future with Cali.

“Greyson?” she pressed.

I sighed. “I don’t know, love. It’s… possible that the witch won’t help us. That we’ll be left to our own devices. But for now, all we can do is keep taking it one step at a time. Keep pushing forward, keep trying everything, until we find the solution we need.”

There was one thing I did know, one thing that, for now, I was keeping to myself.

I wasn’t planning to try to seduce Aysel anytime soon. The first attempt had been nothing short of a farce, and things had veered out of control almost before I’d realized what was happening. Going down that route was playing with fire—and I wasn’t the only one at risk of getting burned. Cali would be hurt just as much if things went wrong.

No, I wasn’t going to go back to Aysel unless I had no other options.

Cali’s face fell, and I pulled her close. “I promised you that I would break this spell, and I meant it. We’ll figure it out.”

My arms were still wrapped around her when there was a sharp knock on the door, followed by several more in quick succession.

*Jesus Christ, Xavier.*

What did he think we were doing? Fucking each other’s brains out on every surface of my apartment?

*I mean… if it weren’t for this curse…*

He didn’t have anything to worry about. The curse was the best chaperone in existence. I couldn’t even *kiss* Cali, for god’s sake. We were stuck in this G-rated circle of hell.

Reluctantly, I released Cali from my arms and went to open the door.

My brother stood on my doorstep, breathing hard. *Did he seriously race up the stairs instead of waiting for the elevator?*

I smiled. Xavier *had* run up the stairs—as fast as he could, from the look of it—and I knew exactly what had driven him to do so. Maybe this was a good time to get my brother back for the way he’d been a complete asshole at the restaurant—trying to needle me in front of Maren, even though Cali had been there too.

“You thought we were hooking up, didn’t you?”

He scowled. “No.” Then he brushed past me and into the apartment, making a beeline for Cali.

She was bright red. “Oh my god. You did! How could you even think we’d do that right now? First of all, there’s the revulsion spell. And do you seriously think we’d do that while you were downstairs waiting for us?”

My brother wasn’t half as contrite as he should have been. “You were just taking a while, so I thought I’d better check on you. Make sure you were okay,” he said stiffly, but he couldn’t seem to stop shooting dirty looks my way.

My smile grew to a full-on grin. *You’re caught now, asshole.*

Cali sighed. “We should get going.”

I nodded in agreement, though I couldn’t tell if she wanted to leave because she genuinely wanted to head over to the meeting place, or because she was trying to keep this situation between Xavier and me from escalating any further.

We’d been on course for a Battle Royale all day—though in my defense, I wasn’t the one dragging out an old flame and rubbing her in Cali’s face. Nope, that was all my brother. If there was a silver lining to any of this shit, it was that Cali had a front row seat to Xavier’s true self.

*Maybe by the time we get this revulsion spell reversed, Xavier will have dug his own grave with Cali.*

If such a thing were possible, I knew the best thing I could do was sit back and let it happen. If Xavier could be trusted to do one thing, it was to be a complete and total asshole.

A few minutes later, we were all loaded up in my car and heading toward the meeting site. The tension between Xavier and me, which had been on a slow, steady rise all day, had ebbed now that our focus was back on our meeting with the witch.

“Do you recognize the location?” Cali asked me from her spot in the passenger seat. “Do you know what’s there?”

I shook my head, never taking my eyes off the road. “Only that it’s in an industrial part of town, near the river.”

I glanced at Xavier in the rearview mirror. He was glaring at me from the back seat. Now that I thought about it, he’d been quiet since we’d loaded up in the car and left. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe the tension wasn’t ebbing. Maybe he was just pouting because he was stuck riding in the back seat.

He leaned forward, bracing both hands on the seats in front of him. “We should drive past it first, see what it’s like, scope out possible escape routes.” He was clearly in full-on mercenary mode now.

Cali did a double-take at that. “*Escape?* What do you think is gonna happen at this meeting?”

I slid my hand up the steering wheel, freeing my other hand to reach out and squeeze her thigh. “It’s just for planning. To be prepared.”

You know, in case this turned out to be some kind of horrible trap.

Had it been a mistake to bring Cali along on this trip? It had made sense at the time—after all, the curse wasn’t just affecting me. But now that there was a very real chance that she’d end up in danger, I wasn’t sure. The last thing I wanted was for Cali to end up in some mysterious witch’s crosshairs, which I wouldn’t put past her. Cali could be a little unpredictable at times. Sometimes she could fully hold her own, and other times…

I thought of Xavier’s magically totaled car and smiled.

But hearing Xavier mention escape routes did make me edgy. I knew Xavier was simply bringing his wealth of experience to the planning, and that we were lucky to have him with us on this trip, but I didn’t love the idea of putting Cali in a dangerous situation.

Then again, if things worked out the way I was hoping they would, this would be more like a business deal than anything else.

There might not be any trouble at all.

Xavier leaned forward again, his eyes skipping from the navigation app on his phone to the site ahead of us. “That’s it.”

I recognized the area—an empty, overgrown parking lot just off the Willamette. A run-down, abandoned building that was missing the glass in most of its windows stood off to the side.

“Why would this witch want to meet in an abandoned parking lot?” I asked.

“Haven’t you ever seen a movie?” Xavier muttered. “Keep driving, but go slow.”

Cali frowned at the structure. “It looks so run-down, like it’s haunted.”

I hoped to hell it wasn’t. I’d had enough ghosts and poltergeists to last a lifetime.

“There are exits and entrances on all four sides of the building,” Xavier observed. “If anything goes wrong, head for the closest one.”

I wanted to say “no kidding,” but I let the comment slide. Xavier was a mercenary—he’d been in far worse situations than this one, so it was only reasonable for me to defer to his experience. Up to a point.

We drove around the structure that took up the entire block, and finally I parked the car across the street from it.

*Should I ask Cali to stay in the car while Xavier and I go investigate?* Scoping things out might be easier if I didn’t have to worry about her. But then again, when had she *ever* hung back when I’d asked her to? Even just once?

Naturally, she was already getting out of the car. I’d been an idiot to think I could stop her.

I unbuckled my seat belt, and as I reached for the handle on the door, Xavier grabbed my shoulder. “No matter what, we protect Cali.”

I shook my head. “No kidding. You know you don’t have to remind me.”

We got out of the car and flanked Cali as we all headed toward the building. The closer we got, the more ominous it seemed.

Nearby, a car door opened and shut. *Weird. The place looks abandoned. Why would someone park here?*

Cali pointed at the entrance on the north side. “There’s someone over there.”

We slowed our steps as a man walked out of the structure. He paused suddenly, then changed directions, heading straight toward us.

Cali’s hand tightened around mine, and I mind linked with her.

*Just relax, love.*

The guy didn’t seem to give two shits about us and passed by quickly, ignoring us.

I let out a sigh of relief, and then the man stopped, did a double-take, and stalked toward us.

He got in Xavier’s face. “I recognize you. You’re the merc wolf. You were there in Vancouver.”

**Episode 2396**

XAVIER

This asshole’s first mistake was getting in my face.

“Get the fuck away from me.” I shoved him so hard he stumbled back a few steps, well out of my personal bubble. I scanned his face, his words still ringing in my head.

*Vancouver? His face doesn’t ring any bells.*

But that one word alone, that one reference to a shitshow of a merc job, told me everything I needed to know about this bastard. I had to be careful, because if this guy had been involved in the Vancouver job, chances were he was supernatural. And one of the lucky ones, too.

He’d lived.

In my peripheral vision, I saw Greyson shove Cali protectively behind him. My brother was an ass, but he wasn’t screwing up his one job—to protect our mate. In fact, he’d probably provide pretty damn serviceable backup if I needed it.

“Who the hell are you?” I demanded.

The guy ignored my question—the second strike against him. “You’re a mercenary.”

“Thanks, I hadn’t noticed. Now tell me, what are you doing out here? What do you want from me?”

“And answer his question,” Greyson added. “Who are you?”

The guy backed up, his hands raised in front of him, but I had a feeling that wasn’t a sign of surrender. He was a magic user, I realized, and raising his hands was as good as flipping the safety off a loaded weapon and pointing it in my face.

“This isn’t Vancouver,” he snarled. “Nobody’s gonna swoop in and save your ass.”

“If you chill out, nobody’s gonna need to be saved,” I said. “Now, what do you want?”

He laughed, a nervous sound that bounced off all the layers of cement around us. “Did someone send you? Did *she* send you? How much did she pay you?”

Whoever this dude was, he was on the defensive, on edge, a wild card. He could turn tail and book it out of here, or attack at the slightest provocation. My best bet—and my safest one—was to try to remain levelheaded. To keep things from escalating any further.

“I think you might be mixing me up with someone else,” I said. “I’m not working for anyone. And whatever I’m doing here, it’s none of your business.”

He gestured around the abandoned parking structure. “You didn’t come here for the views, so why *are* you here?”

It felt like I was stuck in a time loop of each of us asking the same questions over and over again. Neither of us was giving an inch, and with every passing second the guy was looking more and more like he was going to go AWOL.

Patience had never been my strong suit, and already I felt it slipping through my grasp. All I wanted was to slam the guy into the cement, to get him to answer my goddamn questions, even if I had to beat those answers out of him.

I pulled in a deep breath, hoping for something resembling calm. Cali was here. I couldn’t put her in danger, and antagonizing this guy would certainly do that.

“You need to mind your own business,” Greyson said. “Go on your way, and we’ll do the same.”

A thick, tense silence settled between us, neither side giving an inch, but both parties trying to feel the other one out.

Finally, Cali let out a groan and pushed forward. “Enough of this. We’re meeting someone here. It has nothing to do with you, fella, and trust me, you don’t want to upset either of my companions. So just go, okay?”

I mind linked with Cali. *Get back, please. Behind Greyson.*

I tried to keep my voice calm, to be kind to my mate, but I poured all the dominance of my inner Alpha into the words so she knew I wasn’t fucking around. I was barely hanging on to my control as it was. If this guy so much as looked at Cali the wrong way, there would be no saving him.

She gave me a curious glance, but she tucked her body behind Greyson once more.

I focused on the guy again. His eyes went wide. “It was her, wasn’t it? Aysel sent you.”

Well, *that* was unexpected. How the hell did this guy know Aysel? Was he her friend? Or—

My train of thought was interrupted by a blast of powerful magic slamming into me. All three of us tumbled to the cement as the guy took off at a sprint, heading back toward the cement structure.

My ears were ringing, and my body ached from where I’d landed on the pavement, but I scrambled to my feet and immediately went to Cali.

I took her hand, helping her to her feet. “Are you okay?”

She looked a little scraped up and disheveled, but nothing serious. “I’m fine. What do we do now?”

“We stop the guy. He must know about the witch. Stay here.”

Greyson and I took off after him, our superior werewolf speed quickly making up for the guy’s head start. Slower footsteps sounded behind us, and I glanced back to see Cali trailing after the three of us.

“Go wait by the car!” I snapped, then turned my head forward just in time to avoid another blast of magic.

I ducked out of the way, and in my peripheral vision, I saw Greyson duck under the opposite side of the blast. A large chunk of concrete fell from the ceiling, sending a cloud of dust up into the air.

“Son of a bitch.” I wiped the dust from my eyes and whipped around to make sure Cali hadn’t been hit. If that concrete had fallen on her, it could have killed her. We never should have brought her along.

Fortunately, her human speed had kept her far behind us—and out of the way of the falling cement.

“Are you all right?” she called.

“Stay back!”

I turned back to the guy, feeling like my head was on a fucking swivel. A car door slammed nearby, and an engine revved. Through the sea of dust, I could just make out a car screeching toward us.

Greyson’s body slammed into mine, and we crashed across the concrete. He’d pushed me out of the way of the car just in the nick of time, but my relief was short-lived, because the car was still barreling toward Cali.

“Cali, run!” I screamed.

This was a living nightmare. Not only had bringing Cali along put her in danger, but now she was staring a car down head-on. She was standing directly in the car’s path, the crazy-ass driver wasn’t slowing down one bit, and she wasn’t even *trying* to get out of the way!

Terror pouring into my veins, I mind linked to her. *What the hell are you doing? Get out of there!*

*I’m doing the shield!*

My mind short circuited, and fear and rage tangled together into one toxic knot. *Forget that! Get out of the way!*

She didn’t listen. *She never listened.* Instead, Cali raised her hands, and a sharp, thunderous sound boomed through the structure. The guy’s car lurched like it had been hit by lightning, and it careened off to Cali’s side, coming close enough to hitting her that I screamed.

But the car didn’t hit her, not even a glancing blow. Instead, it smashed through a chain link fence, heading straight for Greyson’s car before it swerved and crashed into a telephone pole with a crunch.

Greyson and I raced toward Cali, making it over to her in mere seconds. Her hands were shaking when she looked down at them. She raised her gaze to look at us, shock and pride flashing in her wide eyes.

She wasn’t hurt. Not so much as a scratch—at least, not from the car. She was still banged up from the first blast of magic the guy had sent our way, but beyond that, she was just fine.

Relief didn’t even begin to describe how I felt.

I turned my attention to the car, which was smoldering in a crunched heap, the occasional spark raining down on it from the downed telephone pole.

Greyson and I met each other’s eyes, and without words or mind linking, we knew exactly what to do next. It was time to put a pin in this guy.

We hurried over to the car just as the guy—dazed, with a gash across his cheek—climbed out of the wreckage through a broken window. He made it about two feet before I was on him. I tackled him to the ground with far more force than was strictly necessary, and I didn’t feel an ounce of guilt.

Still, he struggled. The guy just didn’t know when he was beat. I pinned him to the asphalt. He wasn’t going anywhere.

Greyson knelt down next to the guy. “So, what do you think we should do with you?”

I snarled and pulled the guy to his feet by the front of his shirt. “Here are the options. You talk—now—or I go merc on your ass. What’ll it be?”

**Episode 2397**

After facing down a guy who’d low-key tried to murder me with his car, adrenaline was pumping through my veins. I felt like I could run a marathon. Like I could take on the world.

I mean, the whole thing would have been even cooler if I’d managed to use my shield, but it was kind of hard to concentrate when a crazy stranger was trying to run you down with his car. Who would have thought? At least I’d had the sense to use my magic. A single blast of power had still managed to do what the shield couldn’t—knock the guy and his whole freaking car on its ass.

I jogged to catch up to Greyson and Xavier, who had the guy pinned to the ground. He was bruised and bloodied from the intense collision his car had been forced into. Somehow, I didn’t feel bad. He’d tried to kill me.

Whoever he was, the guy clearly had powers of his own. Was he Fae? Or… a wizard?

*Do we have wizards? Or are those actual fiction?* It was hard to keep track. Maybe he was a warlock. I had no idea if there were warlocks or not, but not for any other reason than that I hadn’t met one yet. But if we had witches, then warlocks seemed well within the realms of possibility.

I slowed as I approached the wreckage. The guy was pinned to the ground next to his busted car, and Xavier was threatening to “go merc” on him.

*Wait… if he* is *a warlock, then… maybe* he’s *the person Aysel used to put the revulsion spell on Greyson and me?* I stared him down. He certainly seemed to think we had some kind of connection to Aysel. What were the chances he knew her *and* was just some random guy who happened to be in this location right now? The witch’s voice had been distorted on the phone, so really, there was no reason this couldn’t be who we were coming to meet.

It was strange to think I could be face-to-face with the person who’d caused Greyson and me so much grief. All of this had felt so impossible, so out of our hands for so long. And now… it was all thanks to this guy, who looked like he was about to pee himself?

*Hmm… Not so threatening now, are you?*

The guy struggled, and Xavier tightened his grip, pressing him into the asphalt so hard I could have sworn I heard the guy’s bones creak.

“Okay, okay!” he cried out. “I’ll talk. I’ll tell you whatever you want to know. Just ease the fuck up!”

Xavier didn’t ease up. “If you lie, I’m going to peel your skin off while you watch. Can you promise to tell the truth?”

All the blood drained from our captive’s face, and he nodded meekly.

“Good.” Xavier hauled him to his feet and let go, stepping back as the guy tried to find his balance.

The man brushed himself off, breathing heavily. The three of us stood and watched until Xavier stepped forward.

“First off,” he said, “who the hell are you?”

The guy spat out a mouthful of blood, then wiped his mouth. “Charon.” His eyes tracked from Xavier over to Greyson. “Xavier, I recognize. So you must be Greyson. The one who’s unlucky in love.”

Greyson growled, stepping up beside Xavier. “Watch what you say, or like my brother said, he’ll go merc on you.”

Charon tried to look strong and unfazed, but that was a tough job when he was already beaten to hell. “He said he wouldn’t resort to those methods if I talked.”

Xavier crossed his arms. “Did I say that? Funny, I don’t remember those exact words.”

Charon swallowed audibly. Whatever powers he had, he was outnumbered by two wolves and a Fae.

*He should’ve walked away when he had the chance.*

“What are you?” I asked.

He scoffed, like somehow I’d offended him. “Haven’t you ever seen a warlock?”

“Right now, I’m just looking at a jerk.”

Charon rolled his eyes. “Enough. If Aysel didn’t send you to kill me, then what the hell do you want?”

“Why do you think Aysel would have sent us to *kill* you?” I asked.

His expression flattened out. “No reason.”

*Right.*

“We wanted to meet to discuss the spellwork you did for Aysel,” Greyson said.

Charon sneered. “Well, unless you’re going to pay me for what she did, I’m not talking.”

Xavier closed the space between them in a split second, his broad hands slamming down on the warlock’s shoulders. Charon winced.

*Maybe we need to take another approach*, I thought. *This guy’s already beaten to a pulp, and he’s still not telling us everything we need to know. And if he really is a warlock, there’s no telling what he’s capable of.*

“Listen, Charon, I think this is all a big misunderstanding,” I said gently. “We wanted to meet with you because Aysel did us dirty. Greyson and I, we’re mates. I don’t know if that means anything to you, but it does to us. And this revulsion spell is… impossible to live with. We don’t want to hurt you, or anyone else. We just want the spell reversed so we can go on with our lives.”

Instead of softening, the warlock just rolled his eyes. Rude!

“Look, I get that you have a sob story, but everybody has a sob story these days. I can’t go around reversing paid spellwork. It’s bad for business, you know?”

“But we can’t live like this! We need this curse to be broken. Please!”

He sighed. “Whatever your name is, I get where you’re coming from, but let me be very clear about this—I do not give one single shit about your love life.”

My jaw dropped. “What the hell?”

Xavier’s hands dug into Charon’s shoulders, and he shook him around like a ragdoll. “You need to put an end to this shit!”

I was so shocked by Charon’s flippant response—and more than a little pissed off—that for a moment all I did was watch the warlock flop around.

Finally, I came to my senses. “Xavier, stop.”

He froze, and Charon winced. “Jesus, dude. You’re worse than the car wreck.”

“Aysel’s trying to force something she shouldn’t,” I continued, desperate to make this guy change his mind. “You can’t force love. Isn’t that, like, one of the number one rules of witchery or something?”

Charon gave me a sardonic smile. “No, the number one rule is to ask for payment upfront.”

*Oh my god. He’s just like Big Mac—only like ten times worse.* There was no reasoning with him. I looked at Xavier. “You know what? This isn’t going anywhere. You should probably just go merc on him. Maybe then he’ll be more considerate.”

Xavier turned back to our captive with a feral grin. “Gladly.”

Charon’s eyes flickered with fear. Finally, something more than his smartass persona.

“Not so fast!” Charon winced. “Maybe you’re being a little rash right now. Surely we can work something out?”

“What do you have in mind?” Greyson asked.

“Well, what do you have to offer?”

“Uh, no.” I shook my head. “We’re not bargaining with you. How can we possibly trust someone who would cast a spell like this on people he doesn’t even know? You need to reverse that spell, and then we’ll talk.”

“No, you don’t understand. I had no choice.”

“Nice try,” Greyson said. “But you’re gonna have to work a little harder to convince me. There’s always a choice.”

I privately disagreed. The *due destini* sure seemed to think otherwise. It wasn’t like *I* could choose.

“Sure, there’s always a choice. When someone like Princess Aysel asks something of you, you can’t even hesitate. Because your choice is to agree to do it, or die.” Charon swallowed. “Excuse me for choosing my own life over the lives of people I never expected to meet.”

“And what did she promise you in return?” I asked.

“Cash.”

At our surprised expressions, he shrugged. “What? Warlocks have to pay rent, just like everybody else. I can’t actually make money grow on trees.”

“How much?” Greyson gritted out.

“I’m not allowed to say. It’s against the rules.”

Xavier shook him again. “We make the rules now.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s already done.” He looked over at Greyson. “I assume that you weren’t being sincere when you arranged this meeting. You’re not really going to pay off Aysel’s debts.”

“And you’re not as stupid as you look,” Greyson said. He yanked the torn tarot card out of his pocket and shoved it in Charon’s face. “Look at this—I want this curse broken. And if you refuse, I’m not leaving here until something else is broken. You understand?”

Charon swallowed convulsively. “There’s no need for that. If you want the curse broken, we can work it out. And if Aysel’s not going to pay me, then fuck her. Princess or not, I’m not going to let the spell stand. So I’ll work with you to remove it—but I’ll need a favor first.”

**Episode 2398**

MARTA

I paced up and down the hallway, waiting as Torin tried to heal Lilac’s wound. I could just make out Torin and Lilac’s voices inside Lilac’s bedroom, but I couldn’t tell what they were saying.

I glanced over at Violet and Charlie, who were also waiting in the hallway. We’d all left with the intent of giving Torin some space to work, but now I was seriously regretting it. I wanted to be in there with Lilac, holding his hand while Torin worked on him.

*What if he’s scared? What if it’s painful? What the hell is going on in there?*

“Has anything else happened?” I asked. “I don’t understand how Lilac’s wound could have opened up again. Hasn’t Plum been inside with him all day?”

Violet nodded, her expression solemn. “They’ve both been resting. Lilac hasn’t put any pressure on it. Nothing. He’s just been sitting in there, trying to relax. I don’t know what could have caused this.”

I heaved out a breath. What was wrong with my boyfriend? I should never have left him. Maybe if I’d just been up here with him instead of outside doing that useless training with Okorie, none of this would have happened. Or, at the very least, maybe I could have done something to help. Maybe I would have caught something, seen something that could explain why this was happening.

Anything was better than this. The waiting. The pacing. All the questions going unanswered.

Charlie pushed himself off from the wall and faced us. “Lilac’s going to be okay. I know this is scary, but there’s got to be an explanation for why the wound opened. And whatever it is, we’ll find it and take care of it. Okay?”

“Okay,” Violet mumbled, avoiding his gaze. I didn’t even reply. I wished I had even half of Charlie’s optimism, but right now it felt impossible.

The door opened, and Torin came out. Violet and I rushed over to him, so fast he’d barely made it past the threshold of the door before we were on him.

“How’s Lilac?” I asked.

Over the top of me, Violet asked, “Is he okay? Did you heal his wound? Is he fixed?”

Torin gave us a shaky smile—the kind of smile that preceded bad news—and my heart lurched.

“He’s stable again, but I think I need to talk to Big Mac or Kira.”

Alarm bells were going off in my head. As far as I knew, neither one of the witches was particularly well versed in medical spellwork, so a thousand other possibilities spun through my mind.

*Is Lilac cursed? Or does this have to do with my pulling him back from the spirit world? Is his body more fragile now or something?*

“What do they have to do with it?” I asked, breathless.

“Well…” Torin looked down and pulled in a deep breath. The fact that he seemed just as deeply troubled as the rest of us was *not* comforting. “I can heal him, but his wound isn’t staying healed. Not completely.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

He sighed. “You can go in and look for yourselves, but be careful. Lilac is sensitive right now.” Tori sidled past us. “I’ll be back with one of the witches.”

I didn’t hesitate to race into Lilac’s room, with Violet right alongside me and Charlie close behind. Lilac saluted us as we hurried in. He looked so, so pale.

“Wassup, y’all?” He smiled. “Don’t even worry. Thanks to Torin McMagicHands, I’m good as new.”

I gingerly perched myself on the edge of the mattress, and he chuckled.

“Whoa, easy now,” he said. “Buy a guy dinner first.”

His leg was propped up on a pillow and freshly bandaged, but already fresh blood was beginning to wet the bandages. Suddenly, Torin’s words made a lot more sense. He was healing Lilac, but Lilac wasn’t staying healed.

I leaned over and kissed him gently. I didn’t care that Violet and Charlie were in the room.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

I already knew the answer. Lilac was decidedly *not* okay. There was no ignoring the pallor of his skin, or its sweaty sheen. It was strange—when I’d first met Lilac, he’d been a ghost, and yet I’d never seen him looking worse than he did now.

I looked down at my bracelet-shackled hands. *God, I feel so useless. Even if I* could *access my magic, it wouldn’t heal him. It would probably hurt him even worse.*

“Do you need more Fae blood?” I asked.

He grinned at me, his dry lips cracking under the strain. “I’m fine. I swear. We should all watch a movie or something.”

Violet shook her head. “Did you feel anything when the wound opened back up? Was there another shadowy demon thing? Did you sense a presence?”

“No?” His response didn’t inspire confidence, but he shook his head. “Besides, if something like that happened, wouldn’t you have seen it too?”

“Yeah, but…” Violet sighed. “I guess I was just hoping I missed something obvious.”

We were all hoping that. We needed an explanation for this, but we were coming up short.

Torin came back into the room with Big Mac and Kira in tow, and the witches looked over the wound. When Big Mac peeled back the bandages to take a look at the wound, I had to stifle a gasp. It almost looked fresh. Torin’s magic wasn’t helping at all!

Big Mac frowned. “I see.”

“Lilac, can I make you a potion to help with the pain?” Kira offered.

“Sure.” He shrugged. “Hit me up—and make it a strong one.”

*Why is he acting like this?* The wound had to hurt. It hurt just to look at it. I couldn’t imagine what it *felt* like. My stomach twisted as realization struck. Lilac was putting on a show for the rest of us, trying to put us at ease.

“I’ll help,” Big Mac said, and the witches left. They were our two strongest, most knowledgeable sources of power in the house, and all they could was offer him a painkiller?

“Can’t wait.” Lilac laid back and smiled.

I couldn’t take it anymore. “Why are you acting this way?”

“Like what?” he asked.

“Like you don’t give a shit!” Violet snapped. Apparently I wasn’t the only one who’d noticed.

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Are you kidding me?” I groaned. “You need to take this seriously. You’re hurt, and you’re afraid to admit it. I get that, but how can you be afraid to be honest with Violet and me? You know we’re here for you. No matter what.”

He looked away. “You’re overreacting.”

“OVERREACTING?” Violet was about to go nuclear.

Charlie put a hand on her shoulder. “Hey, let’s take it easy, okay? Like you both said, he’s hurt and—”

Violet cut him off. “Marta is right. My own brother is too chickenshit to admit that he’s scared.”

“I am not scared!” Lilac insisted.

But he was lying. I could see it. I could feel it. He was just as frightened as the rest of us.

I leaned over him and gently wrapped my arms around him. “It’s okay.”

“I’m fine, Marta.” He tried to wriggle out of my embrace, but I refused to let him go.

“And I’m telling you, it’s okay. Even if you’re not.”

He shuddered and whispered. “It’s Plum. I’m worried about losing him.”

A wave of guilt and fear rose up inside me, and I swallowed it down. Charlie was right; I should have gone easier on Lilac.

“We’ll figure it out,” I whispered. “Together.”

The door burst open, and Okorie stormed in. “Where were you? We’re still practicing outside. You can’t just leave—this is court-sanctioned, and Dani is still out there. You have a certain number of mentor hours that you have to clock, and so do I.”

*Oh my god.* I could not have cared less about this right now.

I jerked him out into the hallway. “How dare you come into Lilac’s room! Can’t you see how sick he is? Don’t you have any tiny ounce of respect for anyone besides yourself? How am I supposed to train with you when my boyfriend is sick and we can’t fix him?” My voice rose with each word. “Would it *kill* you to show some compassion?”

It was a good thing the bracelets were on, because I was so pissed at Okorie I was pretty sure I could have turned him to dust with half a thought.

To my surprise, he didn’t yell at me or storm out. “Do you want me to take a look at him?”

“What?”

“I’m not really that kind of witch, but—”

“But you’re a prodigy?” I finished for him. “I’ve heard.”

He let out a dry laugh. “No, I was going to say ‘but I know a few things about werewolves.’ Because yes, I am a prodigy, and I went to a fancy school. So do you want me to take a look, or what?”

I honestly wasn’t sure this was the best idea, but I didn’t have any better ones. I nodded stiffly, and we returned to Lilac’s room.

Okorie was silent as he looked over the wound. He pressed on it gently, and Lilac winced. Then he did the same to Plum’s wound.

Okorie looked pensive when he stood and turned to me. “So, there’s a problem here.”

“What is it?”

“The longer Lilac is separated from his wolf, the more his condition is going to deteriorate.”

**Episode 2399**

GREYSON

I narrowed my eyes at Charon, not liking the prospect of owing this guy any favors. We’d only just met him—and not under the best circumstances, at that—so being indebted to him was the last thing I wanted. “What exactly do you have in mind?”

Charon flashed a satisfied grin, clearly ready to scheme. “There’s someone that I’d like out of the picture.”

“You want someone dead,” Xavier said plainly.

Xavier had taken the words right out of my mouth. Charon was obviously bad news, so there was no use mincing words when it was written all over his face. I looked at Cali and could see that she was alarmed, which was no surprise since it wasn’t every day that someone asked that we take someone “out of the picture.”

I turned my attention back to Charon, who might as well have been licking his chops. “Okay, so just spit it out. No use playing a guessing game. What’s the deal?”

“Right to the point. I love it. There’s a witch who recently set up shop here in Portland, and she’s been sucking up all my business.” Charon’s expression changed from satisfied to irritated as he continued. “Normally, I wouldn’t complain about a little competition. I mean, that’s the nature of our business, of course. But this woman—Lakini is her name—she’s literally going out of her way to steal my customers. It’s total bullshit, not to mention unfair.”

I looked at him, resisting the urge to tell him how petty this all sounded. “Like you said, competition’s the name of the game in your world. Why don’t you just deal with it, like any businessperson worth their salt? That’s what I would do. The best product or service always wins, right?”

“Sure, and that would work under normal circumstances, but she doesn’t play fair,” Charon said, almost shouting in frustration. “I’ve caught her lurking around, poaching customers as soon as they leave me, undercutting me, telling them that I don’t know what I’m doing. She’s a total asshole! Besides, I’m not asking you to agree with me, I’m asking you to get rid of her. So that’s my proposal. Deal with Lakini, and I’ll remove the spell.”

Cali simply stared at the three of us for a beat before she turned to Charon. “Wait, are you seriously saying that we have to *kill* your business competition, or you’re not going to help us?!”

Charon shrugged. “Pretty much. So, do you want the curse lifted or not? Up to you.”

Cali threw a glare at Xavier and me. “Sidebar!” She tugged us both over into a corner out of Charon’s earshot. “We obviously can’t just up and kill some random witch for this guy! That’s literally nuts!”

I looked at her, biting my lip and trying to choose my response carefully. I saw where Cali was coming from, and I didn’t disagree with her at all. I wanted the curse removed, but not like this. The thought of having to go to such lengths to lift this curse, which was all Aysel’s fault, only served to make me dislike her and the Vanguard pack even more, if that was even possible at this point. I looked at Xavier, who shrugged almost imperceptibly, before I trained my attention back on Cali. She was tapping her foot and glaring, waiting for one of us to say something.

“Guys! We can’t kill some random lady. Right?”She looked me right in the eye. “*Right?*”

I looked Xavier, and Xavier looked at me. I could tell that he was definitely considering the prospect. It wasn’t like it was such a stretch from the work that he used to do, after all… And I wasn’t shy about a little dirty work myself, but I knew neither of us wanted to admit that to Cali. She had an inkling of what we were capable of, but I didn’t think she’d be able to handle getting a taste of it up close.

“Right,” I finally said, deciding to take the easy route for the moment.

“Yeah, right!” Xavier said, at almost the same time.

“But let’s not say that to Charon right now. Maybe we can find a way to get rid of the witch without killing her. That would be okay, right? That way we all get what we want,” I said.

Cali shook her head slowly, still not sold on any of it. I could see that she was nervous. “Okay. I won’t say anything to Charon.”

“Okay, just follow my lead,” I said.

I led the way back over to where Charon stood waiting.

“So? You three fine folks able to come to an agreement?”

“Yeah. We’re in. What do you need from us?” I asked.

Charon looked beyond pleased. “Pull out that tarot card again for a second.”

I pulled the card out and handed it to Charon.

“That’s the one. The Lovers card,” Charon said under his breath as he turned the card over in his hands, studying it. “Only thing is, I’m going to need the other half of the card.”

That hit me like a ton of bricks. “Wait, what? Aysel has the other half.” I shook my head. “I don’t think I’ll be able to get it. There has to be a workaround.”

Immediately, my pulse quickened at the thought of falling right back into Aysel’s clutches. She’d been stuck to me like glue, and sheer luck was the only thing that had gotten me away from her. I didn’t think I’d have that same luck twice.

Charon shook his head. “If there were a workaround, I wouldn’t have told you to get the other half of the card. Duh. You have to bring me the other half—unless you don’t want the spell lifted?”

I cursed under my breath. “Obviously I do, that’s why we’re here! But are you absolutely sure there’s no way to do it without the other half? For all I know, you could just be stalling, or jerking me around.”

“Listen man, don’t insult me. If I tell you I need the other half of the card to do the thing, then trust and believe that I need the other half of the card to do the thing. Period.”

“Fuck! Why is nothing ever easy?” I hissed, turning away from him.

I could tell that Cali was as distressed by this newest revelation as I was. She didn’t want me to deal with Aysel anymore, and I for damn sure didn’t want to either. I’d be happy to never see Aysel’s face again, honestly. Unfortunately, it was clear that Charon meant what he said, and even if there *were* a workaround and he just wasn’t telling me about it, it wasn’t like I was in any real position to challenge him or push him on it. He had me over a barrel. I gritted my teeth and pushed down the urge to tell him to fuck off and that I’d find another way to lift the curse.

“All right,” I said. “I’m on it.”

Charon’s grin widened. “Great.” He reached under the counter and slid a business card over to me.

I picked it up and read it out loud. “The Rusty Wrench.” I flipped it over and saw the woman’s name and business address. I sighed and handed the card over to Xavier. *Guess I’ll be seeing you soon, Lakini.* I felt like the angel of death.I looked at Charon. “How do we know that if we do what you want, you’ll actually help us?”

I thought back over all of my experiences with witches in the past. To say they could be tricky—and downright untrustworthy—was an understatement. Plus I didn’t know Charon at all, so there was no way for me to even assess the risks of him reneging on our agreement. This was not a good position to be in.

Obviously taking note of the distrustful expression on my face, Charon’s expression softened. “Trust me, if you take care of Lakini for me, I’ll be more than happy to help you out. I know this seems like a lot or overkill or something, but I’m telling you, Lakini is not someone to waste your pity or your guilt on. She’s evil, manipulative, cutthroat, and every other shitty name you can think of. You getting rid of her won’t just help me, but the entire Portland area. Believe me.”

“Cool it, we get it,” I said. “We don’t need you to go off about her again. We get the picture.”

Cali stepped forward. “So, we take care of Lakini for you, we get the other half of the card back from Aysel, and you’ll break the curse, right?”

Charon nodded. “Right.”

Cali took a deep breath and looked right at me, and we shared a nice moment where I knew that we were both thinking about the same thing—how much we missed being intimate, touching, kissing, and everything in between. I longed for her, and I couldn’t wait to feel her touch all over my body again. In that moment, I felt like I’d literally do anything to break the curse, even just to kiss her again.

“Okay,” Cali said, looking Charon in the eye. “We’ve got a deal.”

**Episode 2400**

LOLA

Torin and I laughed and joked as we decorated the mantel with stockings, tinsel, and lights. Torin had put together a playlist specifically for decorating, and loud brass Christmas music filled the air, giving the entire place a cozy, festive feeling. Torin might not have celebrated Christmas before, but he was already better at it than anyone I’d ever met.

“So, what types of things did your family like to do, specifically, to celebrate the holidays?” Torin asked as he threw a mound of tinsel on the mantle and stood back to inspect his work.

I smiled, realizing it was my turn to be interrogated. He’d been going around the pack house asking everyone about how they’d spent the holiday season in previous years. He was kind of obsessed.

“We loved this time of year,” I said. “What did we do specifically? It was a little different every year, but it was always pretty amazing. We gave Hanukkah presents that were always really thoughtful, my dads would cook big dinners—delicious latkes and roasted chicken and super tasty desserts. There was lots of singing and just spending time with one another. I have some pretty good memories.”

As I reflected on previous years, I couldn’t ignore the undercurrent of worry in the house as everyone did their best to rally around Lilac. We were all being positive, but it was hard to keep it up when Lilac was in such bad shape. He was in his bedroom resting at the moment, but he was on my mind even now. Despite Torin’s excitement about putting the final touches on all the decorations, I knew he was having a hard time with it all, since he was the one who’d been working so hard to heal Lilac. I only hoped that hanging stockings and setting up little Santa and reindeer figurines—and correcting the placement of every ornament I dangled from the mantle—was helping to take his mind off Lilac, even a little.

“Hey, you two, how’s the decorating going? Looking good!” Jay said as he came jogging in, dabbing at his face with the towel he had slung over his shoulder.

“Thanks…” I said. I was a little distracted by him being all shirtless and sweaty, with his hair all messy. I gave him a long, lingering glance, unable to tear my eyes away. “Um, Torin, I’ll be back in a bit.”

“Sure,” Torin said, not even looking at me as he arranged and rearranged a rope of garland along the top of the mantle. “I’ll keep working on this. It has to be absolutely perfect,” he added, more to himself than to me.

“Sounds good, Torin. Come on, Jay.” I took his hand and led him upstairs into our bedroom. I shut the door behind us before turning to get my fill of how absolutely gorgeous Jay looked right now.

“I’m happy to see you, too,” Jay joked.

I took a step closer to him. “You look like you had a good workout.”

“I sure did.” He smirked, no doubt picking up on the hungry look in my eyes.

I could feel the desire burning in my stomach like a wildfire, and I took another step forward to close the distance between us.

“You’re so sweaty.” I ran a finger down the ripples of his abs. “You’d better get in the shower and clean up. I can help.”

“I bet you can,” Jay murmured as he leaned forward to kiss me.

He pulled me close and picked me up. I wrapped my legs around his waist as he pinned me against the wall. He nudged my lips apart and slid his tongue into my mouth as he deepened the kiss, moaning a bit. He reached up and ran a hand through my hair, giving it a gentle tug before trailing his hand down to cup my ass.

“So, about that shower,” I said between kisses.

“Let’s do it.”

He carried me toward the bathroom, our tongues still entwined and my heart beating fast. I could just picture it now—the water running down his chest while I caressed his warm, wet skin. His rough, strong hands exploring every slick inch of my body…

He put me down, and I broke away from him just long enough for him to slide off his shorts, and for me to peel off my clothes. He started the shower, and we lingered outside the stall, kissing and touching and taking a moment to enjoy each other. Finally, we broke apart and were just about to get in the shower when my phone rang. I yelped in surprise and tumbled backward into the shower.

“What the hell? Are you okay?” Jay said, reaching down and helping me back to my feet as I tried to untangle myself from the shower curtain.

“I’m fine! That’s my dads’ ringtone! Don’t you recognize it?”

“Uhh… I’ll be honest, I wasn’t really paying attention to anything but you being naked.”

I grabbed a towel and made a beeline back into the bedroom, dove onto the bed, and answered the phone just in time.

“Dad? Hey! Pops?”

I was so thankful that it wasn’t a video call, since I was soaking wet and half naked.

“Lola, honey! How are you doing? How are final exams?” my dad asked. “It’s that time, right? We wanted to send you a little care package full of cram session goodies!”

“Thanks,” I said, feeling a pang of guilt. “That’s so nice of you, but I’m okay. I promise I have all the snacks I need.”

“Oh, okay. Well, when does your break start? We’d love for you to come home. You should really start looking into tickets before they get too expensive. It’s already December, so they must be through the roof right now.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. *Shit.* I couldn’t remember if I’d told my dads if I would be home for break or not, but at this point, I was probably going to be staying at the pack house for the holidays. *Damn it!*

“You know it’s just been so intense… Studying and all. I’m actually not sure if I’ll be able to make it back. This one class has an exam *right* before New Years!”

“What? I’ve never heard of anything like that.”

“I haven’t either! So weird, right?” I felt like a total asshole for lying. “I’m so sorry that I won’t be able to make it… And for the late notice.”

“Aw, don’t apologize, honey. We understand. School is important.”

They were trying to be cheerful, but I could hear the sadness in their voices.

“Thanks for understanding. I’ll give you a call soon to let you know how everything went.”

“Okay, honey, love you!”

“Love you, too!”

I ended the call, feeling guilty as hell. *I’m not even in school! I’m just lying in every way.* I sighed and buried my face in the comforter. *Maybe I should talk to Jacqueline again about enrolling as me… I have to do something to make it up to my dads.*

“Lola, you okay?” Jay called from the shower.

I went into the bathroom just as Jay popped his head out of the shower and looked at me.

“You okay?”

“No,” I admitted. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Well, I might have just the thing to make you feel better…” Jay opened the shower curtain the rest of the way, revealing his soaking wet body, which looked ever better than it did in my fantasies. He reached for me, and I took his hand and stepped inside.

He wasted no time pulling me close and walking me under the deliciously hot water, our bodies pressed together, his hands traveling lower and lower…

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All dried off from our shower, Jay and I were both snug in our bathrobes as we returned to the bedroom.

“That was an unexpected treat,” he said with a grin.

I smiled back. “You know me, I like to keep you on your toes.” I went to my dresser and started smoothing lotion onto my legs. I could feel Jay’s eyes on me.

“So… I know you said you didn’t want to talk about it, but how did the conversation go with your dads? Did you happen to talk to them anymore about… things?”

I shot him a look. I could hear that there was something behind his words. “What things?”

Jay gave me a look right back. “You know what I mean. About school. Have you made any decisions yet?”

I was a bit irritated. “You know as well as I do that I’ve already made a decision. I’m not going back to school, and that’s that.”

Jay frowned at me and shook his head before opening his mouth to say something else.

“What? What do you have to say?” I said, cutting him off. I couldn’t believe that he wanted to talk about this again. In my mind, it was all a total non-issue.

But before he could continue, my phone rang. Grateful for the distraction, I rushed to pick it up off the dresser. I gasped.

“Jay, look!” I shoved the phone in his face.

Jay stared at the phone with a blank look. “I don’t know what I’m looking at.”

“It’s that girl Perrie from the Samara pack! She just checked in at a coffee shop nearby. We have to go there!”

**Episode 2401**

A strange feeling passed through me. I couldn’t quite describe it; it was like a pulsing in the back of my head, a swirling feeling in my stomach—I even felt a little light-headed.

I could feel everyone staring at me, probably because I was making a weird face while I tried to get my bearings. *Or can they feel that too?* Xavier and Greyson stepped toward me, clearly concerned. I smiled at them but waved them away, not wanting them to worry.

Charon took a step closer to me, squinting. Was he trying to memorize my face or something? Whatever he was doing, it was creepy.

“Holy shit,” Charon said suddenly, his eyes wide. “You’re Fae, aren’t you?”

I didn’t say a word. My mother had told me to never tell anyone that I was Fae, but if Charon had already figured it out… I swallowed roughly, unsure of what this meant for all of us—including the warlock.

I looked up and met Charon’s gaze, wondering how he knew.

A grin spread slowly across Charon’s face. “Guess that means the contract is binding, then. Can’t believe my luck!” Charon punched his fist into his palm with glee. He looked like he’d just won the lottery.

*Shit. At least now I know why I was feeling so weird just now: I just made a Fae promise.*

Charon had a look of smug satisfaction on his face. “Now you three *have* *to* take care of Lakini, fair and square.”

I was even more worried now. It was clear that Charon wanted Lakini *gone* gone. Like, *Gone Girl* gone. I shuddered at the implication. *What has Aysel gotten us into, now?* I had no intention of murdering some random witch—even if she was as evil and manipulative as Charon claimed. It didn’t help that Xavier and Greyson were still just standing there, watching me. Worried.

Greyson stepped forward to take the half of the tarot card back from Charon and put it back in his pocket. “We’ll be in touch when we have everything.”

Charon nodded, clearly pleased with how things had turned out. I on the other hand, was disgusted at how excited he was at the thought of his rival being taken out.

*What would the world be like if everyone just killed their competition? Maybe this guy just isn’t cut out for this “business” of his.* I wanted to say that to him, to insult him, to let him know that we were only even considering doing this because he’d put our backs against the wall—but I was still quite thrown by the whole “Fae promise” shit, and I kept my mouth shut.

*It is what it is. If we want the curse lifted, this is what we have to do—but is this something that we* can *do? That we can live with? And even if Xavier and Greyson are willing to do it, am I?*

I was still lost in thought as Xavier took my arm. “Come on, Cali, let’s go.”

I nodded, barely hearing him, and walked out with my mates on either side of me. Usually being protected and insulated between them made me feel like nothing could touch me, but today I was so preoccupied that I felt exposed and out of sorts. I couldn’t believe that this stupid revulsion curse had brought us to this.

Once we were out of Charon’s earshot, I shook off Xavier’s hand and looked at them both. “What the hell was that?”

I looked back and forth between them as they exchanged a look.

“Are you okay?” Xavier finally asked. “That was a lot back there.”

“You look a little shaken up, love,” Greyson added.

The fact that they were so worried about me only served to raise my concern. “I’m fine. But was that really a Fae promise I just made in there?”

In the past, when I made one with Artemis about the spell book, she called it a Fae promise. That had been binding, just like the one I’d promised my mom not to say I was Fae. But the thing was, I’d made other promises before, and they didn’t end up being Fae promises.

Greyson and Xavier both looked equally baffled. Greyson was the first to speak. “It’s all right, love. We were going to make the deal anyway, Fae promise or not. It doesn’t change much for us, other than now we have to make sure to honor our word.”

“Which, again, we were going to do anyway,” Xavier said.

I had to laugh at that, but my laughter was quickly eclipsed by another wave of concern. “But he wants us to… you know… *kill* her, right? We can’t do that! What about the police? Or being caught, or retaliation, or the simple fact that it’s wrong to kill someone just because someone told us to?”

Xavier and Greyson shared another look, and then both of them stared at their feet, rocking back and forth on their heels a little. It wasn’t lost on me that their concern seemed more aimed at me than at what they had to do. I knew that they both had pasts, but surely they were as shaken as I was at the prospect of harming someone just because that asshole Charon had told us to?

“Well, Charon didn’t exactly ask us to kill her, but we also don’t know who we’re dealing with,” Xavier said.

“On either side of things,” Greyson added. “The most we know about Charon is that he struck a deal with Aysel, and we know what kind of person she is, so there’s no telling what kind of person this Lakini woman is, either.”

I wasn’t liking how any of this sounded. “So what are we going to do?”

I was panicking but doing my best to keep from showing it. I knew that getting beside myself wasn’t going to help the situation, but I felt so out of control—especially since I’d upped the ante by making a Fae promise, of all things.

“It’s not what *we* are going to do, Cali. It’s what Greyson and I are going to do.”

Panic rose in my stomach. “But I’m the one who made the Fae promise.”

“Love, it’s okay! We’ll handle it.” Greyson reached out and squeezed my hand before letting it drop and shoving his hands back in his pockets. I could tell he was at a loss, and that scared me, too.

I wrapped my arms around myself and took a deep breath. I was just so worried about them both, and about how all of this was going to unfold. It was bad enough to think about whether they might get caught, but what if Lakini was more than they bargained for and they got hurt? Or worse yet, what if Charon didn’t hold up his part of the bargain once it was all done? There were just so many unknowns.

Greyson looked back and forth between me and Xavier and sighed. “We don’t have to make any final decisions now. It’s been a long-ass day. Let’s just get back to the pack house and go from there.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Xavier said.

We started back toward Greyson’s car, and I could feel the tension between us. I knew that they were both still worried about me, and I had to admit that going back home and thinking all of this over sounded like the best idea. I was shaken up, and I wanted to talk to my mom and Artemis about this whole Fae promise situation.

It just didn’t make sense to me. What was it about the wording that had created a Fae promise? More than that, how could Charon have known? Had he experienced some sort of strange feeling? Was this something new? If I promised to call someone back or take out the trash every day for a year or something little like that, was I going to be bound to that promise forever?

Greyson and Xavier were both still watching me with concern.

“You okay?” they both asked at the same time, before shooting each other annoyed looks.

“I’m fine, guys. Seriously.” I said it with confidence because I wanted them to believe me and not worry any more than they already were, but I wasn’t fine. Not by a long shot.

We returned Greyson’s car to the parking garage and then made our way back to the woods. We were still tense and quiet as we walked deep enough into the woods for them to shift safely. The tension wasn’t helped by the awkward beat where I tried to decide who to ride back home. I’d ridden on Xavier on the way because of the revulsion spell—so even though I would’ve preferred to ride Greyson home, I knew that Xavier was the best option right now. I avoided Greyson’s gaze as I situated myself on Xavier’s back and held on, and then without another word, we took off.

The quiet solitude of the woods was nice, and I closed my eyes and enjoyed the feel of the wind in my hair as Xavier ran. I kept thinking about how incredible both of my mates were, and how this was by far my favorite mode of transportation. They were both so fast, so agile, so graceful.

Then, out of nowhere, Xavier and Greyson hit a patch of ice. They both lost their footing, and I went flying off Xavier’s back.

**Episode 2402**

XAVIER

Greyson, Cali, and I went flying through the air, then I landed hard on an incline and went sliding into a ravine. It didn’t exactly hurt—I’d landed way harder than this before, and was used to taking punches, kicks, bites, and everything in between—but I was disoriented and could no longer see Greyson or Cali.

*Cali!* I mind linked.

Everything had happened so fast; I was just behind Greyson when we’d hit the ice, and then Cali had gone flying, and all I could think about was how delicate and fragile she was. I only hoped that she was okay. I couldn’t believe I’d just put her in danger like that. A little ice shouldn’t have been enough to trip me up like that—I was a werewolf, for shit’s sake.

After sliding for what seemed like an eternity, I landed with a thud at the bottom of the ravine and was back on my feet instantly. I was a little dizzy as I struggled back up the icy embankment, and I immediately scanned the area for any sign of them.

*Cali, where are you?* I mind linked again as I scented the air for her. I turned at the sound of twigs breaking, and relief flooded my body as Cali poked her head out from behind a tree and then made her way toward me.

“I’m okay,” she said. “Luckily I didn’t hit a tree or anything, and a bunch of leaves broke my fall.” She dusted off the snow clinging to her clothes and tried to give me a reassuring smile.

*Good, but are you sure?* I mind linked as I did a quick scan of her body.

She didn’t seem to be injured, from what I could see, but she was shivering quite a bit. I motioned for her to come closer so that she could pick up some of my body heat.

*I’m fine, too. Thanks for asking*, Greyson mind linked dryly. *We need to keep moving. Cali’s cold, and we need to get her back home.*

*I know that!* I shot back. I looked up at Cali and nuzzled her. *Are you okay to climb back on?* I asked.

I dipped a little lower so that she wouldn’t have to do much work to get on, and Greyson came over to help nudge her up onto my back.

“Stop worrying so much about me. I’m good.” Once she was situated, she leaned forward so that her chest was pressed against my back, and I could tell that she was holding on even tighter to my neck this time around.

*We need to hustle*, I said to Greyson. *She’s playing brave, but I can tell she’s freezing. My body heat will help a little, but we need to get her inside.*

*Let’s take it a little easy at first, just in case we run into any more unexpected ice patches.*

*Way ahead of you*, I replied, trying not to get too ticked off at how Greyson, once again, was trying to give me guidance on something that was obvious.

We took off again, both of us being a little more cautious of what might be hiding under the snow. Our little accident had only served to ratchet up the tension between us, and we ran the rest of the way in silence, picking up speed as we got closer to the pack house.

We arrived not too long after that, and I was happy to be back. The temperature had been dropping steadily during the trip, and even though Cali insisted that she was fine, I was getting really worried about her. She was wet from the snow, and the day was cold even for someone who was dry head to toe. Luckily, we’d made really good time. I let Cali off on the porch, and she walked up to the door, limping a bit.

“I thought you said you weren’t hurt!” I said as I shifted.

“What he said,” Greyson added, shifting back too.

“I *am* fine. I might have pulled a little something when I fell, but I’m fine,” she said hurriedly.

Orla came out as we approached the house. “Cali! Are you okay? You’re limping!”

Greyson and I shared a guilty look. I knew that we both felt like we could’ve done a better job of protecting her, but I wasn’t sure how we could’ve avoided something so unexpected. I somehow knew that it was a first for both of us, slipping and sliding on a patch of ice.

Like most werewolves, we were quick on our feet and moved so fast that we usually glided over dangers like ice, or slippery and wet conditions. Living in this area, there was no question that we’d dealt with our share of icy conditions without that sort of thing happening, but there was a first time for everything. Knowing that it probably couldn’t have been helped didn’t alleviate my guilt, though, and Greyson probably felt the same.

“What happened?” Orla asked, pulling Cali into a hug.

Cali pulled away and shrugged, brushing it off. “We slipped on some ice on our way back, and I went flying,” she said with a small smile. “But I’m good, really. I just need to walk it off.”

“Let’s get you inside,” Orla said.

We all helped Cali inside while she protested, insisting that she was okay. “Come on, please don’t make this a big deal, you guys. I was bound to be a little banged up, no surprises there. If it was really bad, trust me, I’d tell you.”

“Yeah, not sure that you would,” Greyson said.

“Ditto,” Orla said as she helped Cali into a seat at the kitchen table. “I’m going to make you some hot tea.”

“Cali, come with me, I want to get you into a hot bath,” I said.

I led Cali upstairs, and Greyson was right on our heels.

We ran into Rishika on our way up, and she stopped Greyson. “Hey, you’re back! I need to talk to you—pack business,” she said.

“Can it wait?” Greyson asked.

“It can, but I don’t think it should,” Rishika said simply. “Hey, Cali, Xavier. You good?”

“Good,” Cali said quickly. “Go ahead, Greyson, I’ll be fine.”

Clearly irritated, Greyson gave Cali a reassuring squeeze before dashing off with Rishika. I led Cali the rest of the way, pleased that I was going to get to spend some time with her without Greyson breathing down my neck.

*Bet you wish you weren’t Alpha right about now, big brother.*

If Cali hadn’t been in such bad shape, I might have said it out loud, but I didn’t want to stress Cali out any more than she already was. We were all distracted by our dust-up in the woods, but I knew she was still a little freaked out over our conversation with Charon.

“Get out of those wet clothes,” I said as soon as we got to Cali’s room. I went into the bathroom and started her bath, my mind replaying the moment Cali had flown off my back.

*Shit. I wish I could’ve done something to protect her from that. Everything just went completely wrong in a split second.*

I knew that I would be beating myself up for what had happened to her for a long time. I only hoped that she was really as okay as she was trying to make us all believe.

I sat on the side of the tub, thinking over the events of the day and trying to calm my thoughts. I zoned in on the calming sound of the water running, which helped a little.

“You ready?” I asked a few minutes later, leaning over to test the water temperature. “The water’s perfect.” I returned to the bedroom, stopping in my tracks at the sight of Cali standing there naked. “You’re so damn beautiful.” I didn’t think that I would ever get over that jolt I got whenever I looked at her, clothes on or off.

Cali blushed. “Stop it, I probably look like a wet rag,” she said, wrapping her arms around her body.

“No, *you* stop it. You look amazing, as always. And you’re still cold.” I stepped forward and ran my hands briskly up and down her arms. She was shivering like crazy, and I picked her up and cradled her in my arms, noting how cold her skin felt against mine.

“You know that this isn’t necessary, right?” She laid her head against my chest.

“Not necessary? You’re cold and wet and banged up from the fall. I think it’s very necessary.” I took my time placing her into the bath, trying to make sure I didn’t aggravate her injury, small as she was trying to convince us that it was.

“You’re right, the water is the perfect temperature. It feels amazing.” Cali sighed and sank lower into the water.

I couldn’t help but notice how her sigh sounded so similar to the noises she made in bed, and I could feel all the blood in my body rushing south.

*I shouldn’t be getting horny right now; I need to be focused on making sure she’s okay.*

But that was easier said than done, especially with the way that she was looking at me, her eyes so big and beautiful, her body striking the perfect form in the water. I wanted her so badly it hurt. I could certainly warm her up.

I cleared my throat as I decided to ask the question spinning around in my mind. “Do you want me to join you?”

**Episode 2403**

GREYSON

“Lilac is in pretty bad shape, not gonna lie, but he and Plum are resting up and we’re keeping them as comfortable as we can. Marta hasn’t left his side other than to work with her mentor, that Okorie guy, who’s actually proven useful. He told us the longer Plum and Lilac are untethered, the worse Lilac’s condition will get, so the quicker we get Lilac to Portland, the better. Let’s see, what else…” Rishika looked up at the ceiling and stroked her chin.

I really appreciated her thorough update, and I was trying hard to focus on what she was saying because it was important, but I couldn’t stop glancing at the stairs and thinking about how Xavier was up there running Cali a bath.

*He takes every chance he can to get her alone. And naked.* I gritted my teeth, unable to stop fretting about what they were doing up there. *He can kiss her, touch her… do things with her that I don’t even want to think about. Meanwhile, I can barely touch her without having to try not to barf all over the place.*

If Cali was feeling even a shred of my sexual frustration, then there was no doubt she would get what she needed elsewhere. From Xavier. Even the thought of them together in that way made me feel like I was going to lose it.

“Greyson? You listening?”

“Yeah, of course. Right, good. Glad that everything’s okay. Thanks for keeping an eye on things, Rishika. Great job.”

Rishika frowned at me.

“Sorry for being a little distracted. It’s just that we were worried about Cali getting too cold on our way back,” I said. The excuse sounded lame to my own ears, but it was the truth, and Cali’s safety—and comfort—were so important to me that when she was out of sorts in any way, nothing else mattered.

Rishika nodded warmly. “I get it. No one died or anything while you were away, we’re basically all good, and we’re figuring everything else out. Glad you’re back, and that Cali’s okay.”

I caught sight of Orla walking up the stairs with Cali’s tea. I rushed over to take the cup from her. “I’ll take it up to her.”

“Oh. Okay. But tell her that I’m here if she needs me,” Orla said, surprised.

“Well, see you later, I guess?” Rishika said, before disappearing into the kitchen.

I knew I was being kind of rude, but I couldn’t help myself. I had to know what Cali and Xavier were up to. I went upstairs and lingered just outside Cali’s door. It was closed, which didn’t make me feel good. I moved to open it and then stopped, my hand hovering over the knob.

*What if I walk in on Cali and Xavier doing something… intimate? Can I handle that?* I hesitated for only a few moments more before curiosity won out.

I opened the door and stepped into the room, holding my breath. The bedroom was empty, and I knew that they were in the bathroom. That door was closed, too. I put my ear against the door and listened. I couldn’t hear a thing. I let out the breath I was holding and pushed the door open. It wasn’t my worst nightmare, but it was bad enough. There they were—Cali naked in the bathtub and Xavier hovering over her.

“Greyson!” Cali exclaimed.

“I—I’m sorry. I was just coming to check on you, Cali, to make sure you were all right.” I held the tea up stupidly. “I brought the tea your mom made…”

Xavier gave me a knowing look as he straightened and stood up. Cali looked back and forth between us, obviously nervous and clearly a little embarrassed—even though she had nothing to be embarrassed about.

*Xavier should be embarrassed for crowding her when she just needs to rest.*

“Tea sounds amazing,” she said.

“Here you go.” I leaned over and handed the tea down to her.

She took a ginger sip, looking at me over the top of the mug.

“Thanks, Greyson, this is really good. My mom makes the best tea,” she said with a nervous laugh.

An awkward beat passed between us as I hovered, not knowing exactly what my next move should be.

*Say something, Greyson. Ask her if she’s ready to get out and hand her a towel… No, that won’t work. She just got in from the looks of it. Tell her that you need to talk to her in private! Do something to stop this!*

I hazarded a glance at Xavier. I could tell that he was getting more pissed by the second, and I didn’t care one bit.

“So, you brought her the tea—is there something else you need?” Xavier crossed his arms and arched his eyebrows at me. He looked like he wanted to grab me and toss me out the window.

*I’d like to see him try.*

Cali met my gaze. “I’m fine, Greyson. Really.”

I nodded, feeling like I was being dismissed. I didn’t like it one bit.

I turned to Xavier. “You and I should go check on Lilac. Rishika was telling me that he’s having a rough time of it. We should make sure he doesn’t need anything, and see if there’s anything we can do to help.”

*I can’t leave them alone together again.*

Xavier gave me a slow smile and met my gaze head-on. “Sounds like a job for the Alpha, no?”

I gritted my teeth, biting back every scathing remark that popped into my mind. Cali was on edge, looking back and forth between us and clearly waiting for the other shoe to drop. She’d had enough anxiety for one day, and I didn’t want to make it any worse. Even though every fiber of my being screamed out for me to do something, anything, to keep whatever I’d interrupted from continuing, I turned to leave.

“All right then,” I said. “I’ll see you later, Cali. Enjoy your bath.”

I made sure to avoid Xavier’s gaze as I left, since I didn’t know what I’d do if I saw even a shred of satisfaction in his eyes—and I knew that it was there.

I closed the door behind me as I left Cali’s room, using all of my self-control to keep from slamming it shut. There was no use throwing a tantrum. This was the way things were, and I just wished that I could get used to it, even a little bit.

I went to Lilac’s room, where Marta, Violet, and Kira were all seated around his bed, fussing over him. He was awake and alert, and I was happy to see it. He looked exhausted and a little pale, but he was all smiles as he looked at me.

“Greyson! Hey! So good to see you. Welcome to the Lilac get well party!”

“Lilac. Good to see you, too. How are you holding up?”

“I’m doing fine.”

Violet and Marta gave me a look that said that he was anything but. I knew that Lilac was putting on a brave front, and I wished I could do more to help, but I had no idea what that would be. I was the Alpha of the Redwood pack, but that didn’t mean that I could solve all its problems.

*Hell*, I thought, flashing back to the image of Cali naked in the bathtub with Xavier hovering over her, *I can barely solve my own.*

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A little later, I was downstairs in the living room mulling over Cali’s Fae promise. I kept wondering what it meant that she’d made the promise in the first place, and what would happen if we weren’t able to fulfill it. I thought about the tarot card, and how half of this whole agreement with Charon hinged on my getting the other part of the card from Aysel.

*Not looking forward to seeing her again. I barely got out of there with my clothes on the last time.*

Xavier came downstairs and froze when he saw me. Clearly, I was the last person he wanted to talk to. He looked like he wanted to sprint in the other direction, and I didn’t want to speak to him any more than he wanted to speak to me, but we had business to discuss.

“Hey, Xavier, glad you’re here. We need to talk.”

Xavier rolled his eyes and then cleared his throat and ducked his head to cover his reaction, which was kind of surprising, since there’d been a time when he would’ve made sure I saw every expression of annoyance that he had to give.

He moved into the room and leaned against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest. “Yeah? So talk.”

“How’s Cali doing?” I asked stiffly.

“She’s asleep.”

I nodded and looked up at him. “So, this Lakini person…” Xavier and I exchanged a look. “You do realize that we’re going to have to take care of her without telling Cali, right?”

**Episode 2404**

XAVIER

I hated that Greyson was right.

But I nodded. “I know. We definitely can’t tell her our plans for Lakini,” I said grimly.

I’d been thinking the exact same thing all the way back to the pack house. The thought of going behind Cali’s back was painful, but I really didn’t see an alternative. Not only would she try to stop us from going through with it, but she’d be so upset and probably disappointed in us.

I was between a rock and a hard place. I didn’t want to get involved in whatever Charon had up his sleeve, since I had absolutely no desire to help him settle his trivial scores. Not to mention that the whole revulsion curse that was hanging over Greyson worked in my favor. Ever since the curse, I’d felt a sense of relief that Greyson couldn’t touch Cali. Even so, I didn’t like the idea of Cali being under any kind of witchy influence—especially at the behest of one of those kooky, moon-obsessed Vanguards—so I was willing to do whatever it took to release her from its hold. *But am I willing to kill for it?* I didn’t know.

I sighed and collapsed into an armchair across from Greyson. “If the Fae promise hadn’t been made, we maybe could have found a way around it, but now we can’t risk violating her promise. We don’t even know precisely what happens when a Fae promise is broken—what happened to Artemis might not be the same as what might happen to Cali.”

With the way our luck was set up, Cali would suffer dire consequences if we didn’t fulfill her promise, and that wasn’t an option no matter what. I had nothing against this Lakini woman, but if I had to choose between taking Lakini out to protect Cali or sparing the woman’s life, I would choose Cali in a heartbeat.

“I just don’t like the idea of killing someone we don’t even now, *for* someone we don’t even know,” Greyson said.

I nodded. “I don’t, either, but what choice do we have? It never feels good to be under the thumb of someone like Charon, who gets off on having the upper hand. I wonder how long he’s been looking for someone to take her out, because he definitely wasted no time shoving it off on us.”

“Tell me about it. Today was his lucky day, for sure. The only thing we’ve got going for us is that we never actually promised to kill Lakini, just to ‘take care’ of her. That could mean anything.”

“Anything at all,” I agreed. “To start, we’d better run some recon on Lakini when we take Lilac to Swift. That way we’ll know exactly what we’re up against. Charon made her sound pretty formidable.”

I’d learned long ago to never underestimate a target, and although I didn’t know Charon enough to trust him much—if at all—I’d kind of believed him when he’d said that Lakini wasn’t a great person. I guess it didn’t matter in the greater scheme of things whether she deserved it or not, since she was the key to releasing the curse.

Greyson rubbed his eyes and yawned. He looked as tired as I felt.

“I agree.” He got up and stretched and yawned again. “I still need to figure out how I’m going to get the other half of that tarot card from Aysel,” he muttered to himself. A wince of worry passed across his face.

*I don’t envy you, brother.* I smirked at the thought of Greyson having to meet up with Aysel again. He’d escaped her the first time, but I had a feeling that it might not be so easy the next time around. Our little moment of understanding broken, I decided to twist the knife a little.

“So, you going to ask her out on another date? Maybe this time you can take her out to a fancy dinner? This really nice place just opened up downtown. I heard they have really private dining booths—you know, enclosed with velvet curtains and all that? If you two wanted to, you could probably get down and dirty right there at the table, and no one would know.”

Greyson gave me a dark look. “Stop with that already. You’re enjoying this way too much. You know as well as I do that I have absolutely no feelings for Aysel.”

I grinned, unable to help myself. “If you say so, big brother. But the heart wants what it wants.”

“What in the hell is that supposed to mean? You’re not even making sense.”

“Why so touchy, big brother? I’m just joking around.” I left Greyson then, chuckling to myself as I went. I could feel Greyson’s gaze burning into my back.

*I couldn’t care less. I’m just glad I’m not the one who can’t stomach being near my mate.*

I headed back upstairs to check on Cali. I was still pretty pissed about how Greyson had interrupted us just as I was about to join her in the tub. Once Greyson had left, the mood between us had been totally ruined—just as he’d anticipated, no doubt. Cali had clearly felt guilty about Greyson’s puppy dog look as he’d come up, offering his pitiful cup of tea. I nearly laughed out loud as I pictured him wrestling the cup of tea away from Cali’s mom so that he could bring it up.

I cracked open Cali’s door and peeked inside. I smiled at the sight of her sleeping peacefully, the moon hitting her beautiful face just right. Sometimes just the sight of her took my breath away. I gently closed the door, not wanting to wake her. I turned and jumped at the sight of Kira standing right beside me in the hallway.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” she whispered. “I didn’t mean to startle you. I was coming to tell you that I think I should come along.”

“Huh?” I had no idea what she was talking about, and my heart was still racing from her sneaking up on me like that. It was rare for me to be taken by surprise that way.

“When you take Lilac to see Swift, I mean. I should come with.”

“Oh… right,” I said, nodding my head slowly.

“Lilac keeps insisting that he’s okay, but it’s clear that he’s still in a bad way. I think it would be best for you to have some kind of healer along to make sure that he’s stable enough for the trip. It might take a lot out of him.”

I nodded. “You’re right, good idea.” I hesitated, wondering how much I should tell her. “We aren’t going to Portland just for Lilac—just so you’re aware. There’s some… business… we’re going to need to take care of while we’re there.”

Kira looked at me closely and then grinned. “Merc shit?” She waved it off. “Don’t worry, I won’t get in the way of that.”

“Great. Well then, I’ll make sure to let you know when we’re heading out.”

“Sounds like a plan. Good night,” she said, giving me a small wave as she moved off down the hall.

“Night.”

It hit me then how bone-tired I was. The day had been long and strange, and I just wanted to go to bed. Mentally, I was toast, too. I’d been so worried the whole trip back about Cali and the Fae promise she’d made to Charon that I felt drained and dead on my feet. I glanced back at Cali’s door. I wanted nothing more than to join her in bed, pull her close, and hold her tight all night, but I knew that she needed rest after everything that had happened, and that it was best if I didn’t disturb her.

Reluctantly, I went to my own bedroom, stripped down, and slipped into bed. I closed my eyes. As I tried to fall asleep, I couldn’t help but think back to the conversation I’d had with Greyson about Lakini. I let out a heavy sigh as I thought about Cali and how adamant she was that we not hurt anyone. I only hoped that she would never find out what we planned to do. It would tear her apart, and I wondered if she would forgive us. I shook my head. She would never need to know—for her protection, more than anything. But I had to admit that maybe it was more to protect her from knowing what her mates were capable of—which, if we played things right, wouldn’t be murder, at least.

I tossed and turned for a bit. I was restless as hell, and my brain just wouldn’t turn off long enough for me to fall asleep. I lifted my head and fluffed my pillow a few times before sliding my hand underneath it, trying to get comfortable. I frowned when my hand hit something hard beneath my pillow.

*What is that?*

I got up and turned on my bedside lamp.

I lifted my pillow and stared down at what appeared to be sticks and herbs tied together in a bundle. It looked, for lack of a better phrase, witchy as fuck.

So what the hell was it doing under my pillow?

**Episode 2405**

I jolted awake in the middle of the night, momentarily confused when I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. I sat up, alarmed until I realized that it was Xavier. He’d set up a little bed on the floor next to me.

He looked up at me when he noticed that I was awake. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“What’s going on? Why are you sleeping on my floor?” I asked around a yawn. I was happy to see him, but my sleepy brain was having a hard time processing why he was creeping around on my floor.

“I had to come check on you.” He looked like he was about to say more but thought better of it.

“What?” I said, slowly waking up more. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, of course. I’ll deal with it in the morning. It’s late. You should get some rest. Sorry again for waking you.”

He flipped back the blanket on his “bed” and slid underneath it, making himself comfortable—though I couldn’t imagine that the floor was made any softer by the stack of blankets and the single pillow he had. In my opinion, he was angling for a backache from hell.

“Still not getting why you’re sleeping on the floor.”

“I didn’t want to disturb you, that’s all. Go to sleep; pretend like I’m not even here.” He was moving around a lot, adjusting and readjusting and wincing.

“Don’t be silly. Get up here.” There was no way I was going to let him sleep down there. He was trying to put on a good face, but I could tell that he was uncomfortable as hell.

Xavier got up and slid into bed beside me, sighing as he nuzzled his face into my neck.

“Was this your plan all along?” I joked.

“No, but I can’t say I’m not psyched about how it turned out. Now get some sleep. You had a long day, and the last thing I wanted was to wake you up.”

“Trust me, I’m going to be asleep in seconds.” I was extremely tired, and while I was holding a conversation with him and all, I was still barely awake.

I sighed and snuggled against him, reveling in his warmth and the sensation of his strong, muscular body pressing up against mine. There was no way in hell I was going to let him sleep on the floor when he could be right here in bed with me, holding me.As soon as that thought crossed my mind, Xavier wrapped his strong arms around me and drew me in even closer. Content, I allowed my eyes to drift shut.

I was still half asleep, but I couldn’t help but wonder what he could have found in his room that had freaked him out enough that he’d come in to watch over me—from the floor. But before I could think too much about it, I drifted back to sleep.

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I woke up to sunlight streaming in through the window. I sighed and pressed back against Xavier, luxuriating in the feeling of having him here with me. Despite the minor interruption during the night, I’d slept well, and I felt rested and alert. I was sure that having Xavier sleeping next to me had helped. There was always that added layer of protection and warmth that sleeping with one of my mates gave me that was unlike anything else. A wave of guilt washed over me as I thought about Greyson, knowing how much he’d hate that Xavier was here. For what had to be the millionth time, I wondered if I would ever *not* feel guilty about spending time with one of my mates over the other. We’d abandoned our attempts to formalize the time I spent with each of them, since that had never worked, but this freeform way of doing things wasn’t much better—especially since Greyson was currently getting the short end of the stick due to the curse. *Ugh. That stupid curse! Damn you, Aysel.*

“Morning,” Xavier said as he pulled me close and pressed a kiss to my forehead.

“Morning.” I pushed my guilt and all thoughts about the curse aside and decided to enjoy the moment. Here I was, waking up to a gorgeous man who adored me and who was willing to sleep on the hard floor just so he wouldn’t wake me up, and I was busy worrying about all the bad stuff that was going on. With things being as crazy as they were, I needed to do better with enjoying times like these.

I ran a hand down Xavier’s bare chest, enjoying the feel of his taut, warm skin and the muscles under my fingertips. He really was a sight to behold. Having him so close was turning me on a little bit, and I threw a leg over his and moved in to plant a kiss on his lips. Then I remembered why he was here in my bed in the first place, and all my sleepy questions from before came flooding back.

I pulled back. “Wait, what happened last night?”

Xavier hesitated, and I knew that he was trying to decide how—or how much—to tell me. “I found something… strange… under my pillow.”

“What?” I asked, confused. I knew it had to be really freaky if it had shaken him up enough that he’d come to be by my side in the middle of the night.

Xavier’s expression darkened, and he shook his head. “I’m not quite sure what it was. I was hoping to ask around and find out more today.”

He threw the covers back and got out of bed. He padded across the floor to where he’d slung his clothes across a chair and started getting dressed. I got up and did the same.

“Will you show me what it was?”

“Soon—but I left it right where I found it. It looked like some sort of witchery to me, so I didn’t want to bring it in here. But I don’t want you worrying about it. It’s my problem, and it’s probably nothing. Knowing the folks in this pack house, it’s probably a joke or something.” He lunged forward and gave me a peck on the lips, lingering for a moment. “Go downstairs and grab some breakfast. I’ll bring the thing down later and ask around.”

“Okay,” I said, feeling curious—and nervous.

I went downstairs, hoping that it wasn’t anything too bad. Vague witchery never failed to be ominous.

*Big Mac wouldn’t do anything like that, right? Neither would Kira… But who would’ve had the audacity to go into Xavier’s room and put something in his bed?*

It was hard to feel like anything was wrong as I entered the bright, sunny kitchen, which was already buzzing with activity.

“Good morning, Cali,” Greyson said, looking up and smiling when he saw me.

“Morning, Greyson.”

I was grateful, now, that Xavier and I hadn’t come down together. I knew it would have torn Greyson up to see us together first thing in the morning, and undoubtedly, he would have drawn all the wrong conclusions. There was enough going on right now without stabbing Greyson in the heart and twisting the knife.

“How are you feeling?” Greyson patted the seat next to him.

“I want to know, too,” my mother said. “I was going to come check on you yesterday when I brought up your tea, but Greyson jumped in and took care of that for me.”

She shot Greyson an amused look, and his cheeks colored for a moment before he gave her a sheepish smile.

“I’m fine, for the hundredth time.” I gave them both a good-natured, if exasperated, look.

“Okay, I’ll take your word for it,” my mother said.

Greyson picked up a plate and loaded it up with a stack of pancakes, then set it in front of me just as Artemis sidled over.

“Hey, Cali. How’d the trip go? Did you get the answers you were looking for?”

Greyson and I looked at each other, and my heart sank as I replayed our trip to Portland in my mind. I’d been so hopeful that we’d find a way to break the curse right then and there, but no, we’d only found new complications and more problems.

“No, not really,” I said glumly.

“Oh, no?” Artemis arched an eyebrow.

I glanced over at my mother, who was sitting with my dad, and made a mental note to pull her and Artemis aside later. I needed to ask them more about Fae promises and what the implications were, but I didn’t want to bring up the subject in front of everyone.

“Let’s talk later,” I said to Artemis, who nodded and went off to join Rishika.

I’d just started in on my pancakes when Xavier came into the kitchen and glanced around, noting that most of the pack was there. He strode over into the thick of things and dropped a weird bundle of twigs and leaves on the table.

*He wasn’t lying about it being witchy. In fact, that might be one of the witchiest things I’ve ever seen.*

Everyone stopped talking and stared at it as Xavier looked around at them all. “Does anyone know what the hell this thing is?”

**Episode 2406**

XAVIER

I searched everyone’s faces, particularly Big Mac’s and Kira’s, since I suspected that my little under-pillow surprise was witch-related. I didn’t know why either of them would be creeping around in my room, but who knew what drove the actions of witches? I sure didn’t, even after spending so much time with them and living with them, at that.

My eyes combed the room, but I wasn’t getting even a flicker of recognition from anyone. Everyone just looked blank, like they had no idea what the thing is.

“Let me take a look,” Big Mac said as she got up to inspect the object.

“Looks like some sort of talisman or something,” I said.

Big Mac nodded as she picked it up and examined it closely. She turned it over in her hands, nodding to herself before she looked up at me. “Where did you find this?”

“Under my pillow. Definitely an unpleasant surprise,” I admitted. “I’m worried that it’s some kind of curse or something.”

I could see Cali out of the corner of my eye, reacting to that possibility. I could practically hear her eyes shouting, ‘*another* curse?’, and I was right there with her. The thought of yet another curse plaguing one of the three of us was almost too much to bear. If this talisman was indeed another curse, we’d probably be able to get in a record book or something for being the most cursed people in history. It would’ve been kind of funny if it wasn’t a big scary pain in the ass.

Big Mac shook her head and held up the bundle. “Nah, it’s quite the opposite. It’s a protection charm. Quite well made, too.”

I sighed with relief. “Well, that’s good to hear, but it still doesn’t answer my question as to how it got there.”

I hadn’t wanted to worry Cali, but I’d been genuinely freaked out by it. Sure, I lived in the house with witches and vampires and all manner of supernaturals, but that still didn’t soften the blow of finding a creepy talisman hiding under my pillow.

“So what kind of protection charm is it?” I asked, looking around. “Who put it there? Did one of you do this?”

I looked around, searching everyone’s faces, but again I was only met with blank stares. No one was going to fess up. Maybe they really didn’t know anything about it.

“I didn’t do it. Not my style, anyway,” Big Mac said with a shrug. “Rest assured that whoever put it there didn’t do it with bad intentions. It’s not another curse—which you and your brother are so prone to.” Big Mac put the talisman back on the counter and returned to her seat to continue eating. “So no biggie. Count yourself lucky that someone thinks enough of you to take the time to put this together for you. Too bad they don’t know how pointless it is to try to protect someone who always finds himself in trouble, no matter what. They’d need to make a talisman for every damn day of the week when it comes to you, and that one over there,” she said, giving Greyson a look.

“Be nice!” Mrs. Smith said, giving Big Mac a little swat on the arm.

“What? It’s true. He’s a magnet for trouble. Where’s the lie?” Big Mac shrugged and shoved a bite of pancakes into her mouth.

“Thanks, Big Mac,” I said, deciding not to go back and forth with her about something that she wasn’t entirely wrong about. Little did she know, I was as tired of being in the middle of turmoil as she was of being drawn into it. The important thing was that Big Mac didn’t seem concerned at all, so my tension eased a bit.

I nodded at no one in particular, letting it go, for now. I still wasn’t happy about some mystery person sneaking items into my bed, though. I lingered, waiting to see if anyone might speak up, and then I started to worry about the possibility that someone had snuck into the pack house and made it all the way to my room undetected. We had so many safeguards around the property and in the pack house to ensure that that couldn’t happen, but if no one from the pack house had put the talisman under my pillow, we needed to consider the alternative: we’d been breached.

*I should pull Greyson aside to see what he thinks.*

I looked at Greyson and suppressed a shudder. I definitely didn’t feel like dealing with him right now. He’d probably get all “Alpha” about it and end up barking orders at me.

Deciding to put it on the backburner for now, I set the talisman aside. Everyone had moved on quickly from my little interruption and had returned to eating and chatting. I poured myself a big cup of coffee. After glancing at the way Cali and Greyson were sitting sickeningly close and giggling and talking in the way that lovers did, I went out to the porch to get some air.

The air outside was cold and crisp, and I took in a deep breath, enjoying it. It seemed to clear my head a little, and thoughts about my little witchy surprise melted into the background. I sipped my coffee and surveyed the grounds. My grounds. I realized then how rare it was for me to just stop and smell the roses, so to speak.

The door opened, and Kira came out and sat next to me. She let out a long breath before saying, “It was me.”

I turned to look at her. “What was you?”

“It was me. I’m the one who put the protection charm under your pillow.” She looked down at her hands, clearly embarrassed.

“I’m confused. Why didn’t you just say that in there?” I made a mental note that Kira had a hell of a poker face. I’d suspected her—or Big Mac—initially, but she’d been so convincing.

Kira flushed. “Because I felt stupid—and there was no way I was going to admit that in front of everyone. Talk about awkward. It’s just that with everything that’s been going on—the revenants, the curses—I was just worried about you. That’s all.”

“Well… Thank you?” I chuckled. “You seem sincere, and I’m touched. Really. That was a kind thought.” Mostly, I was just happy that it was Kira and not some strange outsider. I looked up at her. “The next time you want to protect me, though, let me know first. I practically had a heart attack when I found that thing.”

Kira grinned. “Deal.”

That was a weight off my chest, for sure. It felt good to have one less thing to worry about, and the last thing I needed right now was anything else that required me to look over my shoulder all the time. I already had whiplash from having to do that so much as it was.

“Sorry again,” Kira said, rising to her feet.

I looked up at her, squinting against the sunlight. “Really, it’s fine. Thanks for looking out for me,” I said with a wink.

“Anytime—with a warning, of course.” Kira went back inside.

I sat back in my seat and took another large gulp of coffee, deciding that relaxing out here sounded like a great idea at the moment. The morning was peaceful, the wind felt good on my skin, and I was in no rush to go back in and see Greyson and Cali gazing into each other’s eyes.

Before long, my mind drifted back to the Portland trip, and I felt a twinge of regret as I thought about Lakini and Cali. The talisman might have been a false alarm of sorts, but I had so much on my plate even without it. No wonder Kira was going behind my back trying to protect me from outside forces.

Big Mac’s words about how I attracted trouble echoed in my mind. As always, her delivery hadn’t been the best, but she’d hit the nail on the head. Things were a bit of a mess at the moment, and it did seem that it was always one thing after the other. It was draining, to say the least, but what could I do? I just had to continue taking things as they came with the hopes that one day in the near future, things would calm down and I’d get to spend more of my time relaxing like I was right now.

I took another swig of coffee, nearly draining my mug. I was going to need all the caffeine I could get today.

The door swung open again, and Jay and Lola came bounding out, giggling and whispering about something. I smiled. They looked so happy and conspiratorial.

“What have you two gotten into?” I asked with mock severity.

They exchanged a mischievous glance.

“We should tell him,” Jay said.

“Tell me what?” I asked. “Don’t tell me that you two have gotten the pack embroiled in something else. I don’t think I could handle that.”

Lola shook her head quickly. “No, no, nothing like that—nothing bad.” She stepped closer to me, her eyes sparkling. “We’re stalking the Samara pack.”

She looked back at Jay, and they giggled.

From behind Lola, Cali spoke up. “You’re doing *what*?”

**Episode 2407**

GREYSON

In an attempt to take my mind off of things, I started cleaning up the kitchen.

*You know things are getting dire when chores are what’s gonna get you through the day.*

I was desperate for anything that would distract me from the disappointment and frustration that Cali and I were both feeling. It was such a tease, seeing Cali, smelling her, wanting her, but not being able to do anything about it. It was torture, and it was really starting to take its toll. At least we could still talk to each other, flirt, fantasize about what we’d do the very moment the curse was lifted—but that wasn’t enough. I wanted more. Needed more.

The trip to Portland was supposed to have led to the revulsion spell being broken, but instead it had only proven that nothing could be solved so easily. There were so many obstacles in front of us that the moment when we’d be able to hold each other again seemed so far out of sight. We just wanted to be together, that was all. I’d felt the longing surging between us this morning, but neither of us had been willing to take the chance. Even holding hands with Cali was fraught with risk.

“Shit!” A plate nearly slipped from my hands, and I only just managed to catch it before it hit the floor. I hadn’t been paying attention, preoccupied with how I’d let Cali down, and probably would again before this whole thing was over.

*I have to get my hands on the other half of that damn tarot card so that we can break the curse, which means I have to pay Aysel a visit.*

That was maybe the worst part of it—even taking Charon’s Fae promise with Cali into consideration. I couldn’t imagine that Aysel was going to let me get away from her so easily next time, and I knew I couldn’t count on another important engagement pulling her away in the nick of time. There was no question that Cali didn’t want me to spend even another second with Aysel, and I didn’t want to, either, but I had no idea how to get around it. I could only hope that some kind of loophole would present itself, and I wouldn’t have to go through Aysel relentlessly throwing herself at me in order to get it. That was the last thing I wanted to endure. Again.

I was starting to feel overwhelmed. I’d wiped down the same section of countertop three times before I realized what I was doing.

*I’m so damn distracted. Why does everything have to be such a mess?* I took a look around the kitchen. On the bright side, it was spotless now. *Who knew being miserable and in over your head could turn you into a cleaning machine?* I took a deep breath and tried to calm my racing thoughts. *One thing at a time, Greyson. First things first: Lilac.* Lilac needed us, and it was a bit of a relief to focus on pack business rather than all the problems and turmoil in my romantic life.

I turned on the dishwasher and went upstairs to look in on Lilac.

“Hey, all,” I said as I walked into his room where Marta, Violet, Charlie, and Kira were sitting at the young wolf’s bedside. *Lilac’s looking a little pale. We need to get him help, fast.* They were watching some TV show, laughing and chatting, clearly trying to keep Lilac—and themselves—in good spirits.

“Hey, Greyson,” they all chimed in near unison.

“Here to watch some TV with us? We’re binging that new show about the man with superpowers who doesn’t know he has superpowers,” Charlie said.

“Yeah, he just thinks he’s able to lift cars and throw them because he’s been working out extra hard at the gym,” Violet said with an eyeroll.

“That sounds… awful. But no, actually Lilac, I need to talk to you about some things.”

Lilac gestured around. “Anything you have to say to me can be said in front of my family and friends, oh great Alpha.”

I smirked. *Maybe he’s not feeling all that bad if he can still crack jokes.*

I took a seat at the foot of Lilac’s bed, just as Big Mac came in to check on the patient.

“How’re you doing? Hanging in there?” she asked in her slightly stilted way. She was as gruff as ever, but I could see the concern written across her face.

“Good, not quite a zombie just yet.” Lilac checked his imaginary watch. “But there’s still time.”

“That’s partially what I wanted to talk to you about, Lilac,” I began.

“What? *The Walking Dead*?”

“No. About what happened to you and Plum.”

Lilac’s face dropped. “Oh.”

“I may have found someone who can help reunite you and Plum… But it means that we have to take you both to Portland.”

“Who?” Violet interrupted. “Who are you taking my brother to see?”

“A guy who apparently helped Xavier a while back when he was separated from his wolf. He put them back together. He’s a parapsychologist—don’t ask, because I don’t exactly know what that is, either. But I’m hoping he’s exactly what we need to get Lilac squared away and good as new.”

Violet looked hopeful. “Do you really think that this para-whatever guy could help? That this could really work?” She shot a glance at Lilac.

“I don’t know, but it couldn’t hurt to have him take a look—as long as Big Mac thinks it’s okay for Lilac to make the trip.” She and Kira had been working to manage Lilac’s symptoms, using spells and salves in tandem with Torin’s efforts to keep Lilac as comfortable and pain-free as possible, but there was only so much they could do. We had to get a real, permanent fix for Lilac’s issues—soon.

“Lilac and Plum are both more stable, but that doesn’t mean that either of them are out of the woods yet. I suppose that as long as you all don’t start screwing around with the spirit realm again, it’s worth the risk,” Big Mac said, aiming a pointed glance at Violet and Marta.

Marta was shaking her head. She looked skeptical. “But who *is* this guy? How do we know he’s legit? I don’t want some hack poking at my boyfriend.”

“All I know is that he runs a healing shop in Portland, and his name’s Swift. And that Xavier endorses him, kind of.” I flashed back to how Xavier had pretty much bullied and scammed Swift into agreeing to help us with Lilac. I didn’t always support Xavier’s methods, but I couldn’t say he wasn’t effective.

Kira chimed in. “Hold on, did you say this guy’s name was Swift?” Her eyes narrowed. “Chad Richardson?”

“Uh… Maybe? I only know him as Swift.” Kira’s reaction definitely had me concerned. “What do you know about him?”

Kira took a deep breath. “I’ve heard of him. Never worked with him personally, but back when I worked for Iñigo, there was talk of using Chad as a distributor. People adjacent to the supernatural world who had a foot in the human world were perfect for that kind of thing, and Chad fit the bill. He has some kind of back room or something that isn’t part of his main tea-slash-yoga shop.”

“So that’s what his store is? Some kind of front for unsavory activity?” Hearing that he used to work with Iñigo wasn’t encouraging, either.

“I don’t know exactly who he is, or if he’s just kind of morally grey and not necessarily a bad person. He’s an opportunist, maybe. I don’t think the deal between him and Iñigo ended up going through. But now that Iñigo is gone, I’m not sure who took over the business, or if they ended up making a deal with him in the end.”

I took all this in. “Well, I’m not thrilled to hear that he worked with Iñigo, but it’s not a nail in the coffin—ha—by any means. I mean, there are plenty of people who do what they have to do to get by, and I can’t judge them for that. I’ve dealt with all types. If Swift can at least do what he says he can, then it’s worth it as far as I’m concerned. I’m all for putting the risk on someone else for once, instead of one of our own. We only need him for this one thing, anyway. It’s not like we’re about to go into business with him.”

Big Mac looked at Marta. “I like the sound of that. What about you?”

Marta hesitated. “Well, we need to do *something*, and I don’t think we have any other options… So I suppose I’m good with it.”

“Same here,” Violet said quickly. “I just want my brother to get better. If we need to take a few risks and deal with some shady people to get there, so be it.”

“Well, it’s settled, then,” I said, buoyed by how hopeful Violet seemed. “We’ll take Lilac and Plum to see Swift as soon as possible.”

Lilac shook his head. “No. I’m not going.”

**Episode 2408**

VIOLET

I did a double take. “What do you mean you’re not going? I can’t believe you’re refusing help! What’s gotten into you?”

“I’m with Violet, Lilac. What other options do we have?” Marta said.

“I’ll tell you what the other options are—there are none,” Big Mac said, shaking her head.

“I know it’s not exactly my place, but you’re being kind of difficult for no reason,” Charlie added.

“You’re right, it’s not your place. It’s my decision,” Lilac said. He turned to Marta. “You’re supposed to be on my side, remember?”

“I am on your side—that’s why I’m trying to get you to take the help that’s being so graciously offered to you!” Marta shot back. “Don’t you realize how serious this is? If you don’t get reconnected with Plum… I don’t even want to think about what might happen!”

“Well then don’t think about it. I’ve thought about it enough for the both of us!”

People were starting to raise their voices, and I was worried that all of this tumult was only going to make Lilac and Plum worse.

“I’m not sure you have a say in this, Lilac,” Greyson said. “I’m the Alpha, and you need to do as I say. Though of course I’d prefer it if you just agreed.”

Charlie pulled me aside. “Is there anything I can do to help? I probably shouldn’t have even said anything at all, but I just… I want to support you both in any way I can.”

“No, I appreciate it Charlie, but I don’t think there’s anything you can do. I think I just need to discuss this with Lilac one-on-one. Everyone!” I said, cutting through the arguing. “I need you all to leave. I’m going to talk to my brother and Plum alone.”

Big Mac threw up her hands. “Whatever. Come on, Kira.”

“Right behind you,” Kira said as they both left.

“You sure?” Charlie asked me.

“I’m sure. I’ll come find you later.” I gave him a peck on the lips.

Marta leaned over and kissed Lilac. “I’ll be just outside if you need me.” She pulled me aside on her way out. “If you can’t convince him, I will,” she whispered before she left.

Greyson was the last to leave. “Lilac, we’re going to be leaving soon, just so you know.”

“I understand, Greyson,” I said. “Hopefully it won’t come to having to drag my brother out kicking and screaming.”

“Lucky for all of you, I’m way too weak to do that,” Lilac said bitterly.

Greyson shut the door behind him when he left, and I waited a beat before turning to face Lilac.

“Don’t even waste your time,” Lilac said, crossing his arms and looking away. “I’m not going, and that’s final.”

I raised my hand to smack him, but then I stopped myself. “If you weren’t sick, I’d smack you in the arm like we used to do. But with the way you’re acting, dumping a bucket of ice-cold water over your head might be the better move.”

Lilac rolled his eyes and said nothing.

“I don’t get it, Lilac. Why are you acting like this?”

“I’m not going to some para-whatever the hell to let him do some fake spells on us.”

“I know it all sounds a little kooky, but what other choice do we have? Maybe this Swift guy is a fraud, but he did help Xavier—why can’t he do the same for you?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not going.”

“Wow, you’re *impossible*! I don’t get why you’re being so pigheaded about this. You’re acting like you’re afraid or something!” A light bulb went off in my head. “Wait… *Are* you afraid?”

Lilac snorted. “Please. Why would I be afraid of some New Age dude with a goofy name? What, is he a failed race car driver or something? What kind of name is Swift?”

I was about to light into him for going off on a tangent at a time like this, but I paused to calm myself. I knew my brother. All the joking and the denial he was throwing our way was to deflect from his fears. I softened, deciding to take a more understanding approach. He deserved that much.

“Are you worried about hurting Plum?” I asked.

Lilac didn’t answer. He just stared out the window, avoiding my gaze.

“Lilac, talk to me.” I sat down on the bed beside him and took his hand in mine. “Look, I know there’s a lot of uncertainty, and I know how much you love Plum and how much you want to protect him. But I love you, too—and the idea that you could die because of the separation… Well, I just can’t go through that, Lilac. Not again.”

Lilac still wouldn’t look at me, but I could sense the smallest shift in his demeanor. Or maybe I was imagining it. I just wanted him to hear me out.

“I know you’re a rational guy—when you’re not being a jerk, that is. To me, the choice is obvious. Either you do nothing and stay here with Plum, forcing me to watch you both die a slow, painful death, or you and Plum bite the bullet and go see Swift. Sure, he has an awful name, but that doesn’t matter in the greater scheme of things. Not when he might be able to help keep both of you alive. Don’t you want things to be like they were before? When you and Plum were together as one? Tell me, where’s the argument in that?”

Lilac glanced down at Plum. “I don’t want to see Plum die.”

“I don’t either!” I stood up and pulled Lilac to his feet. “I’m not going to just sit around while you waste away. You’re going to Portland, whether you like it or not. Now get dressed!”

A few minutes later, Lilac, Plum, Marta, and I were downstairs, ready to go.

“I’m so happy you agreed to this, Lilac,” Marta said.

“I didn’t really have a choice, but I’m glad you’re glad.”

I could feel how unsteady Lilac was on his feet, but I tried not to make a big deal out of it—even though I felt like crying. Lilac had been through so much already, and he was already scared about going. Maybe it was my turn to make light of things?I tried to come up with something funny to say, but I was too drained to do anything but help support Lilac’s weight.

“Greyson’s waiting for you in the living room, Lilac,” Marta said. “I’m going to go grab a few things so I can go with you guys.” She turned and ran upstairs.

“Come on, let’s go.” I took Lilac’s arm, and we started toward the living room, Plum following behind. “You’re going to be okay,” I whispered in Lilac’s ear. “I’ll be right there with you.”

“Thanks, sis, I know.” Lilac gave my arm a squeeze. “I’ve decided to go to Portland because my sister is worried about me!” he announced as we walked into the living room, where Greyson, Charlie, and a few others were standing around, waiting to see Lilac off.

I knew Lilac was saying that to save face, but I still wanted to smack him. “As soon as you’re healthy again, I’m going to open the biggest can of whoop-ass and cover you with it from head to toe.”

Lilac stuck out his tongue at me, but at least he was smiling. Plum whimpered and nuzzled Lilac’s leg.

“He wants to go outside,” Lilac said.

“Do you think that’s a good idea?” Charlie asked me.

“Of course it’s a good idea. Plum just wants to get some fresh air before the trip!” Lilac snapped.

“I guess it’s okay,” I said. “Plum is still weak; it’s not like he can go very far.”

I left Lilac on the couch in the living room, and as Charlie and I went to let Plum out, Okorie came in.

He looked past me and saw Marta coming down the stairs with a small bag. “Where does she think she’s going?”

“Oh, hey, Okorie. I’m going to Portland with Lilac. He’s really nervous about it, and—”

Okorie held up a hand, stopping her. “You’re not going anywhere. You and Dani have a lot of training to do. That’s why I’m here. I’m under an obligation to track and report your training hours—do you really want me to tell the council that you’ve taken a day off when we’ve barely started training? I don’t think they’ll look too favorably on that. Might even be a violation of sorts…”

“But—but—I still have a life! I know I need to train and get my powers in check and all—and believe me, I respect that—but Lilac’s my boyfriend, and I need to be by his side through this!” Marta looked like she was on the verge of tears.

I felt bad for her. I knew how much she wanted to be by Lilac’s side to support him, and I knew that Lilac was probably banking on it as well. But I could tell by the look on Okorie’s face that he wasn’t going to budge.

“Of course it would be good for you to come along,” I said, “but you have your training to think about, and you don’t want to end up back in hot water with the council.”

Marta frowned. “I know… But—”

“Don’t worry!” I said quickly. “I’ll look after Lilac, and I’ll keep you updated. I’ll send text updates every hour, on the hour.”

“We need to get going,” Greyson interrupted.

There were hugs all around and well wishes for the trip and lot of requests for us to keep everyone updated on Lilac’s progress. It felt good to know that the entire pack was so invested in Lilac getting better. It was all I could do to hold back tears.

Okorie stood off to the side, watching it all with a look of bored impatience on his face.

“I need a coffee,” he grumbled before disappearing into the kitchen, brooding the whole way.

*That guy is the worst. It would be so much better if he weren’t around. Especially at a moment like this. He clearly hates being here. What kind of mentor is he, anyway?*

I tried to forget about Okorie as we all stepped out onto the porch.

Lilac, pale as a sheet and looking tired, glanced around, panic slowly flooding his eyes. “Where’s Plum?”

I scanned the yard, already frantic. “Plum!” I called out. “Plum! Where are you?”

“Plum!” Lilac called out, clearly too weak to call out as loudly as I was.

I ran out onto the lawn and looked around, but Plum was nowhere to be found.

He was gone.

**Episode 2409**

I stepped out onto the back porch, confused. Lola turned to look at me, and I could see the flushed, caught look on her face.

“What the hell is going on here?” I demanded. “What’s this about the Samara pack?”

*Has Lola been scheming with Xavier?*

But I could tell by the look on Xavier’s face that he was just as confused as I was.

“Wait, back up a minute, Lola,” Xavier said. “What do you mean you’re ‘stalking the Samara pack’?”

Lola pulled out her phone and showed it to Xavier. “This is a ‘check-in’ app. That girl Perrie’s on it, and I saw that she was nearby, so Jay and I are going there!”

Lola and Jay exchanged a mischievous glance. They were definitely the ultimate partners in crime.

Meanwhile, I was still in the dark and just standing there, waiting to be let in on the secret. “I don’t get it. Isn’t the Samara pack still in shambles? And why are you stalking a coffee shop?”

I felt a pang of envy at how Lola had enough time on her hands to randomly go off on a wild goose chase after a girl that she barely knew, just for shits and giggles. I was way too busy with drama of my own to go stirring up any drama for anyone else.

“Did you talk to her after she sent you that message?” Xavier asked Lola.

Lola’s face fell. “Well, no, but as soon as she saw it was us, she made a rude comment about the Redwoods and ended the conversation.” She brightened. “But the point is, we made contact!”

I was still lost. “But why? Why have you been keeping tabs on them at all? Why are you so interested in this Perrie person?” I looked at Xavier, just as a knowing expression began to dawn on his face. *Oh, so he* does *know what Lola’s up to.* I was starting to feel irked, like I’d been deliberately left out of the loop. “Will someone please explain to me what the hell is going on here?”

Xavier glanced back into the pack house and motioned for us to move farther away from the door and out into the back yard.

“Remember who’s a member of the Samara pack?” Lola whispered as we walked.

“Who? Leroy?” I said, still not getting it. “The guy whose eye I took out?”

I shivered a little at the memory. That hadn’t been one of the most pleasant moments in my life, but I’d done what I’d had to to protect myself.

Lola rolled her eyes. “No! *Ava!*” Lola shook her head. “Leroy? Really? Why the hell would I be bringing up Leroy, of all people?”

“I don’t know! I thought you meant OTHER than Ava!” I said, annoyed. The tone of Lola’s voice implied that whatever she was getting at was obvious, but I was still missing the point. I looked between her and Xavier. “And?”

Lola threw up her hands and made a motion like she was tearing her hair out.

Xavier stopped once we were far enough away from the pack house, but he still kept his voice low. “*And,* if we can figure out what all of the Samara pack members are up to, we might be able to put a bug in Ava’s ear about getting the pack back together and convince her that *that’s* where she belongs. Not here, bothering us. Get it now?”

My mouth fell open. “*Oh*, okay. I get it now… Sneaky, sneaky! I love it!”

Lola and I shared an evil cackle. I was so relieved to finally be up to speed. *I am really, really liking the sound of this!* The idea of Ava leaving the pack house once and for all cheered me up like nothing else could. We’d tried so many times to get rid of her, down to outright telling her to get lost, and yet she was still here, lurking and slinking around, making goo-goo eyes at Xavier every chance she got and trying—often successfully—to get under my skin. I’d started to make peace with the fact that she would always be around, especially since I had much more pressing issues to deal with these days than my mate’s obsessed ex-girlfriend.

I smiled even harder as images of an Ava-free pack house floated through my mind. “Now this, I can get behind.”

“Don’t do anything hasty, Cali. We need to be very surgical with this whole thing,” Xavier said. “But dammit Lola, good job. I think this could really work.”

Lola nodded. “Oh, I know! And seeing Perrie is obviously just the first step. Once we make contact with her, there are endless possibilities! All kinds of ways we might be able to get the ball rolling even faster. Then, bye-bye Ava!”

Jay and Lola high-fived.

I was barely listening, I was so damn excited!

*Maybe I can help with this plan! I could work with Lola, and we could track the Samara pack together! We had that mystery club when we were kids; it could be just like that!*

I wanted to say all of this to Lola, but I didn’t want Xavier to get all worried that I was getting ahead of myself, which I was, but how could I help myself? This was the best news I’d gotten in days! Weeks, maybe!

“God, how amazing would it be to see her packing her bags? I can see it now: her throwing all her too-short shorts and midriff tops and barely-there bikinis into a bag and getting the hell out!” The mere thought of her getting the hell out of here—and taking her annoying, pitiful fixation with Xavier with her—was enough to make me dance! “Could anything be sweeter than seeing her leave for good?”

Sure, I’d still have to deal with being stuck between my two mates, but with Ava out of the picture, things would become a lot less volatile, and right now, that sounded amazing. I’d had enough volatility to last me a lifetime. I was ready to just deal with my normal level of drama—and I certainly had plenty of that without having to deal with a crazy ex to boot.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Cali. I see the look in your eyes,” Xavier said. “If this is going to work, we have to be careful and do it right. You’ve seen how Ava has thwarted every attempt we’ve made to get rid of her. This might be our last chance, and we don’t want to blow it.”

“I get it, I get it, be careful. But I do wonder… What would Ava do if she went back to the Samara pack?”

Xavier shrugged. “Who fucking cares? All that matters is that she’ll be out of our hair.”

Lola nodded briskly. “And how much fresher the air will be without her walking around and insinuating herself where she doesn’t belong.”

“I’m not so sure,” I said. “What if Ava becomes the Samara Luna? She could manipulate the Samara pack then, use them to take revenge on us.”

“Slow down,” Xavier said. “You’re getting way ahead of yourself. The Samara pack is fractured. They don’t even have an Alpha right now. Nolan’s dead, and the pack disbanded without replacing him. Ava would have her work cut out for her just building the numbers and getting things back on track—and who’s to say they’ll even be able to do that, or how long it would take? That’s not our problem, anyway. The important thing is, she’ll be gone. Don’t even waste your time worrying about all that.”

“I hope you’re right.” I wanted to believe him, but I wasn’t sure. Maybe he didn’t quite understand what all Ava was capable of, but I certainly did. There wasn’t much I would put past her.

“So, Lola,” I said, “what’s the plan exactly? What will you do when you find Perrie?”

“I hadn’t really gotten that far, to tell you the truth. We were just going to head over there and improvise, suss out whether she’s been in touch with other Samara pack members. Maybe we can get some gossip from her about who might be next in line to become Alpha—you know, preliminary stuff.”

“Even if we do talk to Perrie and convince the stragglers to bring the pack back together, it won’t happen without an Alpha,” Jay said.

“He’s right. Maybe that’s where we should focus our attention. If they have a strong Alpha in place, it’s more likely that the pack will reunite and be attractive enough to lure Ava away,” Xavier said.

I considered that, but now something was really starting to worry me. “If Ava falls for this scheme, she’ll definitely want to be the new Alpha’s Luna, right?”

“I assume so,” Lola said slowly. “She loves power, that’s for sure.”

“I know that, but I also know that Ava loves something else much more than she’ll ever love power.” I looked at Xavier. “She loves *you*. What if we get Ava to rejoin the Samara pack and then she asks you to be their Alpha? Would you do it?”

**Episode 2410**

GREYSON

“Plum!” Kira called for the wolf, followed by Violet, then Marta and Charlie.

This wasn’t good.

We couldn’t leave without Plum, obviously. We needed to bring the wolf to Swift and find a fix for Lilac. Lilac, who, by the way, looked about as lively as a dried-up leaf. Was it because he was stressed about Plum’s disappearance, or because of his physical condition?

“What’s going on?” Xavier rushed up to me. “Why is everyone shouting?”

“We have to find Lilac’s wolf, right now,” I said.

Xavier nodded without another word and gestured to Rishika, pointing at the forest. She was quick to shift right along with him, and both of them raced off into the trees. It was good to see that Xavier recognized the gravity of the situation, and that he hadn’t argued with me about following orders like a petulant little brat. He deserved a pat on the back for that, though I was sure he wouldn’t appreciate one from me.

Either way, it was good to feel certain that with both Xavier and Rishika out there, Plum would be found. The pack seemed to be dealing with this pretty well, actually—everyone falling into a role during a crisis. Kira had led Lilac over to the porch bench. She was actually doing a great job of keeping him distracted, rambling about *Grey’s Anatomy*, of all things.

“Can you believe they killed him off?” Kira said. “Like, how long can that show possibly stay on the air? How have the people not rioted yet?”

Lilac nodded seriously before his gaze flickered up to me. He’d been distracted from being distracted, and I regretted approaching the two of them now. “Greyson, hey. Do you have any idea where Plum might be?”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” I said, making sure to keep my tone confident. “He probably got distracted by a squirrel or something.”

Lilac laughed, but it was nervous. “Yeah. That happens.” He swallowed, looking me up and down. “What about, uh, the trip?”

“We won’t let anything bad happen when you two meet with Swift,” I said. “We’ll be with you the whole time.”

“Greyson’s right,” Kira spoke up. “Now, if you could just sit there and breathe deeply through your nose and then out through your mouth, we’ll get going as soon as Plum comes back. Think about all the people *Grey’s* has killed off in the meantime.”

Lilac followed Kira’s advice, breathing in and out while she encouraged him, just as Violet arrived. She stared between Kira and her brother, pressing her lips together, her worry evident.

“What’s going on?” I murmured.

Violet softly gripped me by the elbow, pulling me to the side.

“Look at Lilac,” she whispered. “He’s so pale. He looks worse.”

Lilac did look worse. Much worse. There were dark circles under his eyes, his hair wasn’t as fluffy as usual, and his lips were a weird greyish color. I wasn’t about to say that to Violet, though.

“We’re gonna fix this,” I said. “That’s why we’re making this trip, right?”

Violet stared up at me like a sad kitten, sniffling. “Right.”

“Hey,” I said, placing my hands on her shoulders. “The pack is gonna help Lilac. Promise.” I looked over at the driveway, then in a louder voice, I said, “Let’s start loading up the car—Plum can’t be far, and we need to be good to go the moment he arrives.”

“This isn’t the kind of road trip I had in mind when I came back from the dead. Feels like too much of an adventure,” Lilac said wryly while Violet helped him to his feet.

Marta rushed to his side as well and gave him a fond, long-suffering look. “Can you please focus on staying upright instead of being a sarcastic little—”

Lilac wobbled all of a sudden, his eyes rolling into the back of his head before he collapsed into Violet’s arms.

*Fuck*.

“Lilac!” Violet exclaimed.

Many things happened at once.

“I’ll have to do a spell, be right back,” Kira told me instantly, rushing inside while Marta and Violet lowered Lilac to the ground.

My blood went cold when I realized I couldn’t hear him breathing.

“Who knows CPR?” I shouted, looking around.

A second later, Charlie jumped into action. “I’ve got this!” he said, and he started going through the motions.

Marta was on her knees next to Lilac, holding his hand as she whispered over and over, “Please be okay, please be okay, please be okay…”

“We need to bring Plum back!” Violet called, looking over at the forest. “The further away he is, the weaker Lilac gets!”

“Oh my god, what’s going on?” Cali’s voice made me snap to attention, turning to face her.

“Lilac,” I said, and that was all the answer she needed.

Jay and Lola followed Cali, hovering over Lilac till I snapped my fingers and told them to let Charlie do his thing. Lilac had a pulse, but it was weak. I looked around, peering at the tree line. Where the fuck was Xavier? What was taking him so long to find Plum?

The wolf was weak as hell—how hard could it be to bring him back?

“Out of the way,” Kira called. She was back, and I made room for her to kneel down beside Lilac. It looked like she’d crushed some witchy things into a bowl. Charlie kept doing CPR while Kira rubbed Lilac’s forehead with some herbs.

Marta quietly sobbed. Violet was holding her tight, quiet tears streaming down her cheeks.

If this kid died on my watch, I had no idea what the fuck I’d do.

*It’s gonna be okay*, Cali mind linked, reaching out to squeeze my hand. I nodded, looking off into the woods.

Where the hell was my brother?

I should go find him. I should go help him find Plum before it was too late for—

A howl interrupted my thoughts, and I raced to the edge of the porch. A second later, I saw Xavier and Rishika’s wolves emerging from the forest, and loping after them was…

Plum.

I’d never been happier to see a wolf.

“Plum!” I shouted. “He’s here!”

Everyone breathed a collective sigh of relief. I dropped down to Lilac’s side, just as Charlie stopped doing CPR.

“He’s breathing again,” Charlie told me, panting.

“That’s because his wolf is close again,” I said, looking up at Violet and Marta. They were still holding each other, and I said, “You two can come closer now.”

As Violet and Marta fussed over Lilac, Rishika and Xavier walked up, shifting back to human.

“I should’ve known this would happen,” Xavier said gruffly. “I should’ve seen it coming, but none of us have ever been separated from our wolves in quite this way.”

I nodded curtly, swallowing. Xavier looked pale with worry too. I knew that he cared about Lilac and Violet—fuck, *I* cared about them, and I hadn’t been through half the shit Xavier had dealt with with the twins by his side.

“Who…” Lilac was coming to. I watched, relieved, as he stirred, and then he grumbled, “Who just kissed me?”

“Just me.” Marta, her face all blotchy with tears, wrapped her arms around him. She flinched back when he let out a grunt of pain.

“Oh my god, did I hurt you?” she asked.

He chuckled, shaking his head. “I’m fine. Just messing with you.”

“Lilac!” Violet huffed in outrage, wiping her eyes. “No more jokes! You should never worry us like that again!”

Lilac sobered up, looking between the two girls. His voice came out low. “I’m sorry this is happening.” He reached a hand out, and a second later, Plum came to his side. The wolf whimpered and bumped his head against Lilac’s palm. Lilac spoke to him in a hushed tone.

They were both alive.

Thank fuck.

“We should get Torin,” Cali whispered urgently, tugging on my sleeve. “Or better yet, take Lilac to a hospital, make sure he’s okay! I’ll go get my phone to make the call—”

“It’s not necessary,” Kira said, blocking Cali’s way. “I did one of my old healing spells. Lilac is stabilized.”

“Stabilized” didn’t seem like good news in this case.

“Plum,” I told the wolf, “you stay close to Lilac.”

The wolf whined and nosed Lilac’s hand.

“I need a word,” Kira said, pulling both me and Xavier to the side.

“I need a word too,” I said. “We literally have no idea what we’re dealing with—Xavier never experienced symptoms like this while he was separated from his wolf.”

“I’d never died, though,” Xavier said.

“Yeah, true,” Kira said. “This is very different from what happened to Xavier. We have no idea how much worse this can get, since no one has ever heard of a werewolf dying, then coming back to life severed from his wolf.”

“Lilac is a unique case.” Xavier nodded.

“If we want to get this Swift person to help,” Kira said, “we have to do it as fast as possible, before this happens again and Lilac’s condition worsens. We need to leave *right* *now*.”

**Episode 2411**

What had happened with Lilac had me shaken up. We needed to get him help *yesterday*. Greyson started calling for everyone to get to the car.

“Maybe I should come too?” I said, eyeing him and Xavier. “After all, technically we have a Fae promise to keep.”

My two mates shared a look of silent and non-lethal communication, which meant that they’d united in something.

*Which is not a good sign right now!*

Just as I’d predicted, Greyson said, “We promised that we’ll handle it, love. Don’t worry, we won’t do anything that you wouldn’t agree with.”

“But Lilac—”

Greyson took his hand in mine. “I know you’re worried, Cali. We’re going to take care of Lilac before we do anything else—the revulsion spell can wait. Right now, Lilac is my priority.”

“Of course. Lilac’s safety is what matters most right now.”

I felt a lump form in my throat as I looked over at Lilac. Marta and Violet sat beside him, and Plum’s head was on his lap. My chest tightened.

“Thank you, Greyson,” I whispered, reaching to hug him. Thankfully, no nausea hit.

He hugged me back tight, whispering in my ear, “I love you.” After quickly letting go, he turned to Xavier. “I’m getting everyone ready to hit the road.”

Xavier nodded in Greyson’s direction before facing me. “Come here.” He pulled me into a hug, softly kissing my cheek, then my mouth.

I watched the two of them head off to the car. My stomach tightened with stress. For the next few hours, the entire pack house would be on edge waiting to hear news about Lilac.

*Poor, poor kid…*

“Wait!” Violet called, dashing to the driveway. “Greyson, I’m coming with you guys. I have to.”

I watched Greyson’s expression darken. How could he say no to such a request? Lilac was Violet’s twin—they’d literally shared a womb. I could see that Violet was clearly upset, though, and I wasn’t sure if that would help Lilac.

Greyson seemed to share my concerns, but in the end, he told Violet, “Go get your stuff.”

“Staying back sucks,” I muttered, mostly for myself to hear, but I had an audience.

“They’ll be okay,” Lola said in a serious tone that was so unlike her. “Lilac is a tough one.”

I looked around. The rest of the pack was hanging out on the porch or looking through the windows as Lilac’s rescue team quickly got ready to leave.

“Everyone’s stressing out,” I mumbled. “How can we help? Maybe we can do something else, like the gingerbread house competition?”

Lola raised a hand. “You don’t have to take care of everyone and come up with solutions, Cali. Please, take care of yourself first. I get how stressful this is—hell, I’m a wreck myself.”

I noticed Lola’s red eyes. She’d been crying.

“There are so many things happening at the same time,” I whispered. “The revulsion spell, Lilac, Marta and Dani’s annoying mentor—it’s all just—”

“You know what we need?” Lola asked, looping her arm through mine. “A distraction. Do you want to come to the coffee shop with Jay and me?”

Lola’s distraction suggestion sounded good—definitely better than trying to feign being happy when no one was really feeling it.

“Maybe Perrie is still there,” Lola added. “It would be so great to bring the Samara back together.”

I swallowed. I needed a win right now. “You think so?”

“I *know* so,” Lola said. “We’d have a new ally, and hopefully Ava would rejoin the Samara pack too and get out of our way.”

“Now that would be a relief,” I said. The way Ava was sniffing around Xavier felt like a never-ending hell. “But do you think there’s a chance that Ava could use the reforming of the Samara pack to gain power? Xavier doesn’t think that’s likely, but I’m not so sure.”

Lola shrugged. “It’s possible. But it’s not the main issue right now. Our number one concern is getting that chick out of the pack house.”

I nodded sharply. “She’s been making my life even messier ever since she stepped out of that mirror.”

Lola raised an eyebrow. “Maybe we should just shove her back in.”

I snorted. “Don’t let Big Mac hear you say that.”

Lola chuckled. “Let’s go inside, have some tea and discuss.”

Once we were in the living room, I noticed Artemis and my mom by the lit fireplace. I turned to Lola. “I’ll help with the Samara research later, okay? I need a moment to talk to my sister.”

“Cali,” my mom said quietly, after I sat down next to them. “What did Greyson and Xavier say about Lilac?”

“We’re hoping this trip will fix things,” I said.

She squeezed my hand, and Artemis said, “He’s a good kid.”

“Yeah, he is. He’ll pull through this,” I said, just for all of us to hear, and tried to focus on what I’d had in mind earlier. “Actually, I’m glad you’re both here. I had a question about Fae promises. Because I sort of kind of accidentally made one.”

My mom’s eyes widened.

*Uh-oh.*

“What did you promise?” Artemis asked me cautiously.

Quickly, I explained the deal my mates and I had made with Charon. I avoided mentioning the part about potential murder, even though Greyson said that was a grey area.

*It’s not like “deal with her”* has *to mean murder… Does it?*

Oh my god, were my mates secretly mobsters?

“Were those the exact words used?” my mom asked, interrupting my thoughts. “‘Deal with her’?”

I nodded. “I’m pretty sure. Why?”

Artemis raised an eyebrow. “If I know Greyson and Xavier, they really will handle it. You shouldn’t worry.”

“And even without the Fae promise, it’s true that doing a favor for Charon is the easiest way for him to break the curse,” my mom said. “It sounds like there’s plenty of wiggle room regarding how to complete your end of the bargain.”

“Ambiguity is great,” Artemis told me. “You can find a million loopholes in every deal. We are Fae, after all.”

She said that so casually that it was a little alarming.

“Do you have a deadline?” my mom asked.

“No, we just need to complete our end of the bargain first,” I said, “then he’ll remove the curse. But I didn't even realize that by agreeing, I was making a Fae promise—that was really weird! Is there a way to actually *know* that I’m doing it?”

Artemis shrugged. “It’s just part of being Fae. It probably happened because it was a literal deal, and those were the words you used. This is why so many Fae are cagey about bargains. You have to be careful.”

My mom raised her index finger. “Especially around strangers who you know might not have your best interests at heart.”

I swallowed roughly. This sounded like so much responsibility. I shot a look at my sister—she’d nearly died after accidentally breaking a Fae promise of her own. I wished so badly that I hadn’t been so quick to say those damn words.

*Too late now, though! I’m fucking stuck!* I thought, smothering slightly hysterical laughter.

“I can tell you’re stressing yourself out right now,” my mom told me.

“Is it that obvious?” I asked, wincing.

She raised an eyebrow. “Cali, I know you. Please don’t worry. Greyson and Xavier are very serious about protecting you.”

“I don’t care about me—I’m worried about *them*,” I said. “I know they can go to extremes, and that freaks me out, but at this point…” I swallowed roughly. “It’s not like we can back out.”

“Right. A promise is a promise,” Artemis told me. Her face was unreadable, and I wondered if she was thinking about her own promise she’d made to our mom not too long ago. That promise had affected her magic in a big way. Who knew what could happen if we didn’t honor this promise?

“It’s fine,” I said. “Greyson and Xavier will deal with this. It’ll all be fine,” I repeated, mainly for my own sake.

Artemis gave me a serious look. “You know, I’m happy to help you fulfill the bargain. How hard could it be to get rid of this Lakini person?”

I choked on my spit. “Artemis, no! That’s—*no*.”

I shook my head. I didn’t want a bounty hunter getting involved. Artemis meant well, but she could be a chaotic tornado. This situation was complicated enough as it was. Besides, I already had a mercenary—Xavier—and an ex-Rogue with the reputation of a ruthless fighter—Greyson—to take care of things.

“I told the boys that I’d trust them, and I’m going to stick to my word,” I told my sister decidedly. “Everything is going to be—”

I didn’t finish my sentence.

A scream echoed through the air. We all went still.

*Oh my god…*

“What the hell was that?” I asked breathlessly.

Artemis didn’t answer. She just grabbed my hand, and the two of us charged outside.

**Episode 2412**

Artemis and I raced out into the yard to find Dani all frazzled, standing in front of a charred stump.

“Didn’t that used to be a tree?” Artemis whispered at me.

I nodded solemnly, eyeing Dani and Marta and Okorie. He looked annoyed, but didn’t he always look annoyed? It was just part of his sparkling personality.

“What just happened?” Artemis asked. “We heard a scream.”

Okorie shot Dani a pointed look, crossing his arms over his chest. “Well, *someone* is having a problem turning off her faucet.”

Marta, who was still red-eyed from crying after what had happened with Lilac, had marched over as well, and was pointing at Okorie accusingly. “You’re not being fair—I know Dani is trying!”

Poor Marta. She already had so much shit to deal with, with the Lilac situation, and if that wasn’t enough, her mentor was being a pain in the ass.

“I did exactly what Okorie wanted,” Dani said, looking guilty.

“Hah, maybe we should ask the tree about that… Oh wait, you can’t!” He scoffed. “Because the tree’s been blasted to bits!”

“Like that’s helping them at all,” I said under my breath.

“Excuse me?” Okorie said, eyebrows arched. “What are you mumbling over there?”

I smiled tightly. “Just wondering if your sarcastic tone is helping anyone right now.”

He dusted off his shoulder. “It’s helping *me*, actually. It’s good for my soul.”

“If you even have one,” I said under my breath again, and Artemis, Dani, and Marta laughed.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Do you *really* think that I didn’t hear what you just said?”

“I’m sorry.” I wasn’t sorry. *Asshole*. “I’m just trying to figure you out—do you think that bullying is the best way to get through to your students?”

Artemis inspected the charred remains of the tree. “They do need a lot of teaching.”

“Haven’t you heard of tough love?” Okorie sniped at me. “I have my methods, so you’d better stop trying to butt in when no one asked you.”

“All I’m saying is that perhaps you should try offering suggestions instead of deriding the people you’re supposed to be helping,” I declared.

“Exactly.” Marta nodded. “Because right now, you’re just the worst mentor in the world.”

Okorie sneered. “And you two are the worst students I’ve ever had.”

“I thought they were your first ever students?” I asked.

“Same difference.” He wrinkled his nose, gesturing at the destroyed tree. “This is a waste of my extraordinary talent—it’s beneath me.”

“You’ve already mentioned that five thousand times,” I said. “And don’t worry—nobody wants you here either, so the sooner you help the girls, the sooner you can go. So why not use some of that extraordinary talent and get this over with?”

Okorie groaned, looking up at the sky.

“I’ll get rid of him if we need me to. Make sure he doesn’t come back here,” Artemis whispered in my ear casually. I elbowed her.

“Okay!” Okorie barked. “Your overprotective friend who won’t shut up, what’s her name?” He gestured at me dismissively.

Marta glared at him. “It’s Cali.”

“Right. What’s-her-name-Cali has a point. We have to get this over with so we can all be free. You two will be free to stay here and continue being wildly mediocre, and I will be free to run away and—”

“Use your sarcasm elsewhere?” I asked dryly.

He smiled, and it was both disturbing and pretty. “Exactly.” He turned to Dani. “Let me explain this again, Dani. There’s a faucet…”

Okorie started rambling about faucets as Artemis and I approached Marta.

“If I hear *one more* water analogy, I’ll put him in a bathtub and drown him,” Marta told us, her teeth clenched.

I winced. “Hang in there.”

“It’s just hard to even think about any of this while Lilac is so sick,” Marta said, shaking a little, and Artemis rubbed her shoulder.

“I feel like this whole thing would be easier if you had a better mentor—like one who *actually* mentors,” I said.

Artemis eyed Marta and me. “Are you guys sure you don’t want me to cut his tongue out? I have ways to deal with jerks like Okorie. Nobody will miss him.”

I sighed deeply. “Artemis, please. Don’t do anything rash. After all, the guy is a powerful warlock. Supposedly.”

All three of us turned to look at him as he made hand gestures that indicated turning a faucet on and off.

Artemis scowled. “He needs to go.”

I shoved my sister and turned to Marta. “Ignore her. Have you thought about filing a complaint with the witch council? Maybe you can request a new mentor.”

“Wait, could she really do that?” Artemis asked.

“It’s how things sometimes work in the human world,” I said. “My friend Alex had a professor who kept calling him Alan and accused him of cheating, so Alex requested joining the same class but taught by another professor.” I turned to Marta. “Could you do that?”

She sighed deeply. “I’ve already thought about it, but who’s to say we wouldn’t get someone even worse?”

I gasped in horror. “Even *worse*?”

“I don’t think witches and warlocks are known for their well-meaning and nurturing temperaments,” Marta said, rubbing her forehead.

Artemis cringed. “True. Even Big Mac barely has any patience.”

“She’s nice with you, though!” I told Marta hopefully.

“That’s because she got to know me,” Marta said. “I wish she could be my mentor.”

I scowled. “I wonder why the council didn’t set it up that way.”

“Who the hell knows why they do anything they do,” Marta said bitterly.

I pressed my lips together. “I’m really sorry all this is happening while Lilac is so sick.”

“Thank you. I just wish we could skip this whole ordeal,” Marta muttered. “I’m worried about Dani, too. She tries so hard, and Okorie doesn’t even appreciate that much.”

“Is there a chance that *you* could work with Dani?” I asked Marta. “Maybe you could help her control her magic?”

Artemis cleared her throat. “Yeah, I’m not so sure about that. Remember Xavier’s car?”

Marta groaned. “Thank god he wasn’t mad about it.”

I snorted. “Don’t worry. We’ve ruined enough of Xavier’s cars that he doesn’t blink an eye anymore.”

Marta shook her head. “Thank you for saying that. And I appreciate all your concern, and the fact that you’re sticking up for me and Dani.”

“It’s the least I can do,” I said.

“And I could get rid of him,” Artemis said. “If you know what I mean.”

I huffed. “Oh my *god*, Artemis! Stop it!”

Artemis shrugged.

“The point is,” Marta said, sighing, “as much as I hate this, I got myself into it, and I’ll get myself out of it.” She glared over at Okorie. “Even if that means putting up with the worst mentor in the world.”

All three of us turned to look at Okorie as he and Dani engaged in what had to be a staring match.

“Please let me know if there’s anything else I can do,” I told Marta.

“Let me know if you change your mind about my suggestions, too,” Artemis said.

Marta snorted. “That’s very kind of you.”

Artemis grinned devilishly.

I was alarmed. “Oh my god, don’t encourage her!”

“Dani, I need you to focus,” Okorie demanded as we walked past him and a fed-up Dani.

“I *am* focusing!” Dani said in a louder voice.

“See?” Okorie told me, pointing at Dain. “She’s yelling at me! *She’s* the one bullying me! She’s lucky she’s still alive!”

Artemis stepped forward. “Was that a threat?”

He rolled his eyes. “A man can’t even make a joke around here.”

“We don’t like those kinds of jokes,” I snapped.

“We do, actually,” Artemis said.

“None of this is fair, and you know it.” I glared at him, my irritation climbing. “And you’d better cut the bullshit, because you’re not the only one around here with magic. We’ve got a veritable Fae army and two witches, so you’d better try to be a little less of an asshole.”

Okorie glared at me fiercely, but he didn’t say another word.

*That’s right!* I thought.

I was still boiling when we got back into the house, though Artemis was grinning from ear to ear.

“You should’ve seen Cali out there!” she told our mom, all excited. “She just knocked Okorie down a few notches.”

Mom looked between us. “It’s nice that you two are sticking up for your friends, but I think I need to remind you to be careful around Okorie. He’s a warlock, and they can be very volatile. Especially someone like him, who’s—”

“A prodigy, we know,” I said, rolling my eyes. “He’s told us only a million times.”

Mom sighed. “Don’t pick fights, Cali. Don’t you have enough to deal with right now?”

I grumbled my agreement just as Torin called for my mom—apparently, he had a Christmas question that only she could answer.

Once we were alone, Artemis flipped her hair over her shoulder and turned to me. “Mom might be right, but we should keep an eye on Okorie just the same.”

“I agree.” I paused. “By the way, all this talk about mentors and learning to control magic reminds me: have *you* had any time to practice your magic?”

Artemis shook her head. “No. It’s been a little busy around here.”

I snorted. “Understatement.”

“Cali!” Lola barreled into the living room all of a sudden, Jay in tow. “We’re going to the coffee shop on our secret mission. Are you coming with us?”

**Episode 2413**

GREYSON

As everybody else got settled in the car, I picked up a few things for the trip myself—namely a bunch of granola bars and apples, and a few throw blankets for Plum. I set them in the back seat of the car and turned to look at him. He was sitting on his haunches, and even though he looked tired and weak, his gaze was intense on me.

“I know that’s a lot of blankets,” I said defensively. “But you might get cold. You shouldn’t have run off without supervision.”

The wolf huffed something that I could’ve sworn sounded like a laugh. I shook my head at him and waved Rishika and Ravi over. “Hey! Come help me pick up Plum—he’s too weak to jump up himself.”

Plum made an indignant noise that we all ignored as we settled him comfortably in the back seat, blankets and all. The wolf looked haggard, as if the movement had tired him out further.

I gave him a pat on the head. “Hang in there. We got you.”

Plum made a whimpering noise, and Ravi winced as I closed the car door.

“Plum and Lilac look pretty bad,” Ravi said, his expression thunderous.

“Are they gonna be okay?” Rishika asked me.

“We’ll do everything we can when we get to Portland,” I said. “I’m committed to their recovery—whatever that might mean for the two of them, separated as they are.”

Ravi pressed his lips together, nodding as Rishika said, “We appreciate your speedy action. Ravi and I will watch over the others.”

“Thank you both,” I said, looking between them.

“Lilac will be in everyone’s thoughts,” Rishika said.

“Just bring him and Plum back in one piece. I don’t like worrying,” Ravi said.

I thought back to what I’d said to Cali—that Lilac and Plum were the priority, despite how much I wanted to dive right into Lakini and reverse the curse Charon had put on us. Lilac and Plum needed to get better above all else, because the risk was too high to ignore.

“I’ll do my best to fix everything,” I told Rishika and Ravi.

When I moved to the front of the SUV, Xavier and Violet were fussing over Lilac, who seemed pretty excited for someone who looked like he hadn’t slept in days.

“Is this one of those fancy cars where you press a button and a TV drops from the ceiling?” he asked.

Before I could reply, Violet shoved a pillow in Lilac’s face.

“Can you please stop fidgeting? I’m trying to make a fort here,” she said, settling on the left side and arranging a bunch of blankets around Lilac, who was sitting in the middle seat.

As the siblings bickered about who would get the window seat, Kira got in on the other side, carrying a witchy-looking bag.

“Got all you needed?” I asked.

Kira nodded. “All emergency items. We’re good to go.” She frowned, glancing over at the grumbling twins. “Where is Lilac finding the energy to fight with his sister right now?”

“From what I’ve heard, he was annoying as a ghost, too. It’s unavoidable,” I told Kira.

She nodded solemnly, and I closed the door for her.

“Ready?” I asked Xavier.

He gave a stiff nod, just as Cali, Lola, and Jay headed over.

“Why haven’t you left yet?” Cali asked.

“Kira had to get a bunch of witch stuff to take care of Lilac and Plum, just in case there’s another incident like the one that happened earlier,” I explained.

Cali looked between Xavier and me, her expression pained. “Are you guys sure that there isn’t anything I can do?”

“The best thing you can do is stay safe and keep Marta company,” Xavier told her.

I nodded. “We’ll take care of Lilac every step of the way.”

Cali sniffled, looking a little emotional. “One last hug before you guys go,” she whispered, then reached over to Xavier. He squeezed her against him, kissing her softly on the mouth. The pang of jealousy I felt was a standard thing by now. I batted it away as Cali stepped closer to me next.

Hugs were usually okay between us, but we never knew when the revulsion would hit.

Unfortunately, this was one of the times when we weren’t even allowed a fucking hug.

“Let’s save it for later,” I told Cali, stepping back. Her wince was obvious, and I knew that she could feel the nausea. “I promise we’ll get rid of all this soon enough.”

Cali nodded, looking up at me with huge eyes. My heart ached with how much I wanted to kiss her.

Once she was gone, Xavier and I exchanged a look.

“What?” I barked.

“Nothing,” he snapped.

Silence.

“Who’s driving?” Xavier asked.

I scowled. “It’s my car, so I’m driving.”

Xavier shrugged, for once not acting like a jerk, and took the passenger seat. A few moments later, everyone was settled in and we were finally ready to hit the road. As I was about to pull out, though, I heard someone’s loud voice.

“Wait!”

In the rearview mirror, I saw Marta running toward us. Lilac rolled his window down and raised an eyebrow at Marta. “How many goodbyes do you need?”

“Just one more. I hate that I need to stay here to deal with this damn mentorship,” she said with a sniffle, then pulled him in for a soft kiss.

The car had fallen silent. I hated to feel like I was imposing on something so personal, but neither Lilac nor Marta seemed to realize there were other people around them.

“Be safe,” Marta whispered. “I love you.”

“I love you more,” Lilac murmured, kissing her palm. “Like, I’d be dead without you. Literally.”

Marta laughed a little, caressing his cheek as she wiped her eyes. “You’re so ridiculous.”

Lilac kissed her one last time before they said goodbye, and he rolled up the window. Marta waved at Plum in the back seat, and Lilac sniffled a little.

Nobody spoke for a beat, and he cleared his throat. “What? You’ve never seen a man say ‘I love you’ before or something stupid?”

“You guys are so cute,” Violet said, blowing her nose with a tissue.

Kira snorted. “Young love, what a plague.”

“For real,” Lilac told her casually. “When was the first time you fell in love, Kira?”

“Well,” the witch started, “the year was 1832—”

Violet gasped. “Wait, how old are you?”

As Kira bullshitted the twins into believing she was immortal—I’d have laughed if I wasn’t so fucking stressed—I drove down the long winding driveway and then toward the street. The back was pretty chatty, to the point where I was certain that whatever Kira had done to Lilac was definitely working.

While the three kept on chattering, and Plum seemed to be asleep, Xavier and I remained silent. Until a few minutes later—after the twins had realized that Kira wasn’t two hundred years old—when Xavier turned to me.

“We need to talk,” he said.

I glanced at him. “About what?”

“I think we should divide and conquer,” he said. “When we get to Portland, one of us should go do some recon on Lakini, and the other should stay with Lilac. I know from personal experience that the whole thing with Swift can take hours, so it’s better not to waste any time.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said. “I’ll stay with Lilac, and you go case Lakini’s place.”

Xavier shook his head. “I want to be the one to stay with the kid.” He glanced over his shoulder, where Lilac listened intently as Violet said something about *The Vampire Diaries* and Kira rolled her eyes. “This is… important to me. I’ve known Lilac for a while.”

I paused, taking in his words. I knew that Xavier saw the twins as his little siblings, and that mattered. Much like Xavier was my little sibling. Even when I hated him, I just couldn’t stop myself from caring about him.

“Besides,” Xavier added, “I know what it’s like to be separated from your wolf, and I’ve done this with Swift before. So.”

“It’s cool—I get it,” I said.

We paused while the other three in the back kept chattering on. I looked at Lilac through the rearview mirror. He was still pale, but he looked better.

Gazing at the open road again, I mind linked with Xavier. *The kid’s gonna be fine. We’re gonna take care of him.*

Xavier’s exhale was sharp. He didn’t make eye contact, but he nodded sharply, looking out the window. I knew this was affecting him more than he let on, but I trusted him to deal with it. Despite everything, it felt good to trust my brother about something.

“Are you gonna be okay with the Lakini situation?” he asked, then.

I nodded. “I’m more familiar with Portland anyway. Should be easy to scope out Lakini, and then I’ll report back to you.”

“Sounds good.”

It did. It was a good plan in theory, but I knew better than to expect things to be simple. Lakini’s business card felt like it was burning in my pocket.

What fresh hell would be in store for me at that address?

**Episode 2414**

Jay was driving, Lola was in the passenger seat, and I was in the back seat, looking out the window. We’d been in the car for a while now, and I still wasn’t sure if this was such a good idea. Didn’t help that it was far too late to mention that now. I was suddenly doubting whether Lola’s plan made any sense at all, actually.

“Is this Perrie girl even at the coffee shop anymore?” I asked Lola. “And if she is, why would she be willing to talk about the Samara pack with us?”

Lola gasped. “Cali, don’t lose hope.”

Lola then started chattering on about the brilliance of her anti-Ava plan, and how we had to focus and see this as a long con, et cetera, et cetera. This whole thing was a little nonsensical and far-fetched, if potentially effective—very much a classic Cali and Lola caper—but I was not totally feeling up to it. I was trying to share Lola’s enthusiasm, but I was worried about Lilac.

And I was also worried about Greyson and Xavier.

I always felt antsy when I was away from my mates, and this time the feeling was even more intense. The deal we’d made with Charon—the one I’d accidentally gone ahead and turned into a Fae deal, love that for me—was weighing on me. I didn’t trust Charon, not after the fight we’d had in the parking lot. His energy had been dark and unsettling, all wrong.

*There’s just something weasel-like about him*, I thought. *Or rat-like. Though that might be offensive to weasels and rats.*

I wished I’d gone with Xavier and Greyson. I liked being helpful—it was my favorite thing to do—and I also liked keeping an eye on my mates at all times. Was that so bad? Did it make me overbearing? Well, I didn’t give a damn—it was how I felt, dammit!

*I think this feeling you’re experiencing when you’re away from your mates is called co-dependence, Cali*, I told myself. *Or something of the sort. Wait, where did I read about this, though? Was it* Cosmo *or* Psychology Today*?*

“Cali!” Lola barked, snapping her fingers in front of my face. She’d just interrupted my self-reflection, quite rudely I might add. “I said, what do you think of my plan?”

I had literally not heard a word she’d said.

“Uh,” I said. “What plan?”

Lola groaned, rolling her eyes. “Oh my god, if you weren’t serious about helping out, why did you even come?”

The word “help” seemed to activate something in my head. I had to focus here. “I’m sorry—I was distracted. What do you have in mind? I thought we were just going to talk to Perrie and figure out how she feels about Ava?” I asked.

Lola scoffed. “That’s too obvious.” She reached into a bag and handed me a pair of massive red sunglasses.

“Subtle,” Jay deadpanned, glancing at me through the rearview mirror.

I choked down a laugh. “Why exactly do I need these?”

“You need a disguise, obviously,” Lola explained. “Look at mine.” She put on a similar pair, only orange, and Jay smirked.

“You’re unrecognizable but always gorgeous, babe,” he said in that same deadpan tone.

Lola grinned. “See?” Then she frowned. “Wait, are you messing with me?”

Jay laughed as Lola smacked his arm.

“Lola, this is too much,” I said. “What will Perrie think when we walk in wearing these? Aren’t we going to be obvious?”

“That’s the point!” Lola exclaimed. “We’ll look so obvious that Perrie will never suspect us.”

Jay tapped at his temple. “Genius.”

Lola preened, clearly not registering that Jay was still messing with her.

I squinted at her. “And what is Perrie going to suspect us of? Why can’t we just talk to her?”

“Ugh!” Lola groaned, flicking Jay’s arm. “Jay!”

“At your service.”

“Will you explain this to Cali? She’s being so difficult.”

Jay glanced at me, smirking a little. “I can’t explain anything. This is all you, babe.”

Lola huffed and rolled her eyes. “Cali, just trust me on this, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, because I was too mentally exhausted to argue.

And then we pulled into the parking lot.

“At the very least,” I said as we headed into the café, “even if Perrie isn’t here, we can have coffee or tea—I looked this place up, and they’re supposed to have awesome Chai lattes.”

“Right, right,” Lola said, waving me off. “Don’t forget your sunglasses.”

I adjusted them, and after Jay looked at both of us and confirmed that we looked eye-catching and fashionable, we all went inside. Lola took the lead, of course, and surveyed every table while trying to be subtle.

And failing.

“Which one is she?” I whispered in Lola’s ear.

“Not sure,” Lola said gravely. “Look for a teenage girl.”

The sunglasses were too dark, so I had to lower them to see, and Lola nudged me.

“Stop ruining your disguise,” she hissed.

“There could be lots of teenage girls in here, Lola,” I said impatiently.

Lola frowned. “Really? Wouldn’t they be in school? Isn’t it a school day?”

“Yes. No. Wait, what day even is it?” I asked.

“How am I supposed to know?” Lola huffed. “Jay! What day is it today?”

Jay yawned. “Gonna get an espresso, does anyone want anything?”

I opened my mouth to happily order that Chai latte, perhaps a cookie or a doughnut, maybe a fruit bowl as well to keep my engine running and avoid scurvy—

“Cali!” Lola hissed, bumping me. “Is that Perrie?”

I lowered my glasses again. I had no idea what Perrie looked like, but that was a teenage girl, indeed. Lola grabbed my hand and led me to a corner table, where we could watch the girl in the mirrored wall. Meanwhile, Jay had wandered off to get his coffee, taking with him my opportunity to have a nice treat.

I wasn’t sure I liked this mission very much.

“Cali!” Lola fucking hissed, *yet again*. “Stop looking so obvious.”

“But you said it was okay to be obvious,” I said.

Lola raised a hand, clearly offended. “That’s not what I meant. I said it’s okay to be obvious, but you’re being *too* obvious.”

I wasn’t sure what the difference was, but debating with Lola was like arguing with a wailing siren, so I just went along with her scheme and slumped down in the chair. “Better?”

Jay came back then—with no treats for me because Lola had ruined my chance to order any—and Lola glared up at him. “Move, Jay. You’re blocking our view.”

Taking a seat, Jay grumbled, “How long is this gonna take? Did you even find Perrie?”

I was suddenly certain that none of this shit made any sense, because even Jay was starting to get annoyed and impatient.

Lola shushed Jay and gestured at the mirror. “I think that’s her.”

“But what’s the plan, exactly?” I asked. “Did we drive here to stare at her like a bunch of creepers, or are we actually going to talk to her?”

Lola raised her index finger. “First of all, we observe and see who she associates with. *Then* we can decide what to do.”

I glanced at the girl. “First of all, we don’t even know if that’s her. And second,” I added, “the only thing that girl is associating with is her phone. And some kind of tea.”

Jay suddenly looked interested. “What kind of tea?”

I frowned. “No idea. Is that important?”

Jay shrugged. “It looks good. Maybe I should go change my order?”

I leapt at the opportunity. “If you do, could you please get me a Chai latte and a chocolate chip cookie?”

“Oh my god!” Lola said under her breath, glaring. “If you two aren’t going to take this seriously, we should just go!”

Jay sighed. “Lola, I am taking this seriously. But I think Cali is right. Maybe we should just talk to her. What if it turns out she’s not even Perrie?”

“But if it were Perrie, wouldn’t she just smell us?” I asked, worried now. “Wouldn’t she know that there are other werewolves in here? And you’re a vampire, Lola! Werewolves can smell vampires.”

*Oh my god…*

The more I thought about this, the more it seemed like a bad idea.

“Yeah, maybe we should go,” I said, about to stand.

Lola gripped my wrist, keeping me down. “Stop freaking out. Nothing’s going to happen as long as we keep our cool.”

Jay shook his head. “Okay, I’m done with this. If you want to try to get the Samara pack back together, hiding in the corner isn’t going to do it.” He got up, and Lola gasped.

“Jay! What are you doing?” she demanded.

“I’m going to talk to her,” Jay said seriously.

“He’s right,” I agreed, ready to take my sunglasses off. They were making my eyes itch—just where had Lola gotten these things from?

“Jay, you can’t—” Lola didn’t finish her sentence.

The café door opened, and a familiar face walked in.

*Ava.*

**Episode 2415**

MARTA

After Lilac left and took half my heart with him—dramatic, but true—I had to return to my damn class with Okorie. I needed to be with Lilac, to make sure he was okay. And yet, here I was, stuck with *that* guy, who so very clearly didn’t want to be my mentor.

Spectacular.

Okorie hadn’t even been on time today for Dani’s and my class, and he had the nerve to talk about us punching in hours! This was a nightmare—Lilac was in trouble, and I knew I’d never forgive myself if something happened to him and I wasn’t there to help. Anxiety gnawed at my insides just at the thought, and the idea that I could actually perform any type of magic right now while feeling this way was fucking *ridiculous*.

“Marta!” Someone snapped their fingers in front of my face.

Okorie.

Of course.

“I don’t see you practicing,” he said in an obnoxious sing-song voice. He then gestured in front of me. “Why aren’t you focusing on your flowers?”

He meant the murder flowers. The flowers that he had conjured up for me to try not to murder. Right after I’d said goodbye to the love of my life, who had almost died today.

“Do you even have any idea of what’s going on in my life right now?” I snapped.

Okorie sniffed. “Don’t know, don’t care. Try to not murder the plants.”

“Well, you’d better start caring!” I declared. “I just had to say goodbye to my boyfriend who might be dying, so I’m sorry if I’m not feeling up to killing some plants.”

Okorie raised an eyebrow. “Well, the point is that you’re *not* supposed to be killing the plants.”

I threw my hands up in the air. “*Whatever!*”

Okorie raised his hands in a shockingly appeasing gesture. “Okay, look. I’m not as cold-hearted as you think I am.”

I paused, glaring at him.

“Okay, that was a lie,” Okorie said.

I scoffed. “I was thinking that you’re probably even worse than I thought.”

He nodded. “An astute observation, but enough about me. Let’s focus on the matter at hand. If you’re refusing to practice because of your boyfriend issues, then you should at least do it to help Dani.”

He gestured at the girl, who sat a few feet away, staring miserably at the burned-down tree.

“Look at poor, poor Dani,” Okorie said, feigning sorrow. “The sadness. The heartbreak. The tears, ready to spill. You’re all she has. She needs you.”

I glared at him. “I know you’re trying to manipulate me.”

“I am,” he said blandly, “but it’s the truth. If you two focus, hopefully you won’t blow up anything else, and we might actually get some training in. And then I’ll finally be able to get the hell away from here.”

Him leaving sounded incredible, actually. And he was right—I did need to help Dani, because I was all she had. *Dammit*. His guilt-tripping was working on me, but he had a point. It was clear that Dani needed guidance, especially after what had happened earlier. Okorie had been trying to get her to stop channeling his magic, and she’d just ended up blowing up a tree.

“I get what you’re saying about Dani. But I can’t focus when the most important person in my life is away and dealing with grave danger, Okorie,” I said.

Okorie remained impassive. He clearly didn’t give a fuck about the pack house’s… well, anything. “I promise that all you’ll have to do is sit there and try not to kill all of these flowers.” He snapped his fingers, and a dozen planter boxes appeared in front of me.

I groaned.

“Don’t give me that. You have to try,” he chided. “Just go box by box. It will be Dani’s job to stop you from killing more than one flower. Her magic will amplify yours, and then she’ll have to turn it off.”

I stared at him. “This is not a good idea. Last time Dani held my hand, at the witch council, I took out a bunch of plants all at once.”

Okorie chuckled. “I heard about that—what a brilliant little trick! Way to get the council in your corner.”

I wanted to smack him. “I fail to see how any of this is constructive.”

Okorie waved me off and called Dani over. “Dani! Stop brooding—come on over and listen, please.”

Well. At least he’d said please. I doubted that was progress, though.

“Like I said,” Okorie started, once Dani arrived, “Dani’s going to stop your flower murder spree, Marta. She will be turning off the amplification of your powers. Got it? Are we ready?”

I exchanged a glance with a nervous-looking Dani and sighed. Loudly. I knew this wasn’t a good idea, but at least I knew that I wouldn’t kill Dani. Much like I hadn’t killed Okorie when I’d touched his hand the day before.

Even though I wouldn’t have minded injuring him, just a little.

“Okay, let’s go,” Dani whispered, and she took my hand.

Immediately, all the plants around us started to die, almost faster than Okorie could make more. But he still said, “It’s fine. Keep going!”

It kept happening, and Okorie just kept saying, “Dani, focus. Turn off the amplification.”

But Dani couldn’t do it. The flowers were dying the second after Okorie created them. I hated the fact that I was killing them, one by one, pinks and yellows and blues disappearing into grey, all of them dead because of me, and I just…

I couldn’t do this.

I couldn’t look at my powers and remember all the bad they could do after I’d fought so hard to do something good with them—to help the pack defeat Letifer, to bring Lilac back from the dead. I hated seeing myself as a *bringer* of death.

I hated seeing what this was doing to Dani, too.

Her lips were trembling, and no matter how hard Okorie yelled and urged her, nothing fucking worked.

“No,” I said harshly, ripping my hand away from Dani’s.

It all stopped, and I could breathe again.

The last set of flower boxes that Okorie had created was still alive, but he wasn’t happy at all. “Why did you stop? Is nobody listening to me?”

“Dani was upset, didn’t you see?” I asked, my irritation rising.

Okorie scoffed. “So what?”

I gritted my teeth, and the irritation felt more like pure anger now. I marched up to him. “Are you serious? How can you just ignore the way she feels?”

“I’m so sorry,” Dani said, her lips still trembling. Her voice cracked. “I’m really trying here.”

Okorie looked between us sharply. “Jesus Christ, this isn’t kindergarten. The only way you two are going to get better is if you push and test yourselves!”

“That doesn’t mean you should treat us like we’re robots!” I shouted.

“That *means*,” he bit out, “that you can’t just stop every time you’re upset. Because in the real world, if you get upset, there isn’t an option to stop—do you understand?” He pointed at Dani. “Dani, are you even listening to me?”

“I’m sorry, I—” Dani stammered, and that only seemed to aggravate him further.

“My god, stop apologizing and start listening,” he snapped. “It’s not all rainbows and sparkles out there—when you find yourself in a fight, you will have to act, you will have to stop someone from trying to use your magic against you!” He marched up to Dani, pointing at her. “And then what are you going to do, Dani?”

“Hey!” I barked, getting between him and Dani. “Back off, and stop yelling at us—better yet, go to your hotel. We’re done here; no more lessons for the day.”

“This is ridiculous—I can’t believe you’re both giving up when there’s real danger out there!” Okorie’s face twisted into a grimace. There was a sudden urgency to him that made me feel… unsettled.

It was almost like this *wasn’t* one of his manipulation tactics.

As if he truly believed every word that was coming out of his mouth.

“Dani,” he said sharply. “Don’t you want to see your sister again? You have to figure out how to control your powers if you have any hope of meeting her again—do you understand?”

Dani gasped, suddenly full of hope. “Do you know where my sister is?”

“No. But guess what? Neither will you if you don’t get this under control! You’ll never see her again!” He sneered, his tone of voice and sarcastic expression so acute that even I felt the jab of his words.

Tears spilled from Dani’s eyes.

He was mocking her, underestimating her, and I—

I knew all about that.

I’d been trapped in Bert’s house for decades, and I’d been repeatedly treated like I was *less* *than*.

Until my new friends had freed me.

Right now, I was free to defend both myself and Dani.

“That’s enough!” I snarled at Okorie. “Leave Dani alone!”

I didn’t mean to do what I did, but I was so blinded with anger—the whole day was getting to me. First with Lilac, then with these lessons that seemed to go nowhere, and now with Okorie’s constant pressure. I did the only thing I could think to do to get it to stop: I slapped him clean across the face.

**Episode 2416**

I ducked as Lola yanked Jay back.

“Turn around,” she hissed. “Block us so Ava can’t see!”

“On it,” Jay said, apparently taking his role very seriously.

*Because this is serious, Cali! Oh my god*!

What were we going to do? How would we lie our way out of this one? Could we tell Ava that we’d just accidentally driven miles to get a coffee while there were a million and one horrible things happening at the pack house?

Besides, even if Ava didn’t see us—she was most definitely going to smell us! For fuck’s sake, she *lived* with us!

*Wait, why hasn’t she spotted us yet?*

I frowned in confusion, looking up at Jay.

“Hey, does coffee make werewolf noses confused?” I asked.

Jay nodded. “Any strong smell can make it difficult, especially if you’re not trying to separate the smells. This place is pretty strong-smelling, between the coffee and someone wearing Axe body spray.”

Oh, god. This was a nightmare.

“What the hell are we gonna tell Ava if she spots us?” I hissed.

Lola scoffed. “Why should we have to make up an excuse? What is *she* even doing here?”

Jay shrugged. “Maybe she wants coffee?”

I shook my head. “Oh, Jay, you sweet summer child.”

Lola sighed, resting her elbow on the table and her cheek in her hand. “He is, isn’t he?”

“This place is way too far away from home to justify a trip for no reason,” I continued. “Plus, this is too much of a coincidence. Why would Ava show up to the same coffee shop right after we do?”

Lola gasped. “Do you think she followed us?”

“But if so, why?” I asked, twirling my imaginary detective’s moustache.

Weirdly enough, though, Ava still hadn’t noticed us. Either she was very good at pretending she hadn’t seen us, or her obliviousness was real.

“It’s not too late for us to sneak out and head back to the car,” I suggested.

Lola huffed. “Why should we retreat? Ava’s standing near the door anyway; we can’t risk it.”

“But—”

“Jay!” Lola grabbed him by the hand and adjusted his position. “Don’t move. We can’t be seen.”

Jay raised an eyebrow at her. “Just an FYI, I’m not going to put up with this for much longer.”

Lola pouted. “But why? You usually put up with everything.”

Jay sighed. “Lola, *please*. I haven’t even had my coffee yet.”

And then I saw Ava wave at the girl we’d been watching and head straight to her. To my utter shock, the girl *hugged* Ava in a way that made me feel like they knew each other very, very well. It was like they were good friends. Or even sisters.

*Gross—who would want to be Ava’s sister?*

How could this be? Ava had never been a friends kind of person before. And as far as I knew, she didn’t have any siblings left, now that Nolan was dead… Or did she?

“This is such a fascinating turn of events,” Lola whispered.

Jay rolled his eyes.

“What on earth is going on?” Lola said, squinting at Ava and Perrie. “What could Ava be up to?”

“Not sure,” I grumbled. “But we both know she must be up to no good. She never is.” I looked between Lola and Jay. “What are they saying? Can’t you guys hear?”

“Not before I drink my coffee,” Jay said.

Lola huffed, reaching over to the other side of the table to grab Jay’s coffee and shove it into his hands.

“Lola—”

She shushed me. “I’m trying to listen, give me a second here!”

We paused for a moment, the only sound at our table Jay’s contented sigh while he enjoyed his coffee. Then, Lola said, “It sounds like the girl is thanking Ava for coming.” She gasped. “Oh my god, do you think Perrie invited her?”

I was relieved. “Maybe. At least this means Ava didn’t follow us.”

Lola nodded seriously. “Now Ava’s asking about Perrie’s family. That means I was right—she *is* Perrie.”

Jay, who felt invigorated after a few sips of coffee apparently, shushed Lola’s enthusiasm. “Stop flailing. She’s not done talking.” Jay turned to me. “Now Perrie is saying how much she misses her pack.”

I blinked in alarm. “What’s that even supposed to mean?”

Jay added darkly, “And now they’re talking about you, Lola.”

“I’m not sure if I should be flattered by that,” Lola remarked.

It was so unfair that I didn’t have wolf hearing—the suspense was killing me. “What are they saying now?”

Jay frowned. “Perrie is telling Ava that someone named Lola tried to contact her about the Samara pack…”

And suddenly, Ava burst out laughing.

“Lola?” she said, loudly enough that even I could hear her. Then she waved a dismissive hand, rolling her eyes. “You got nothing to worry about. Lola’s weird but harmless.”

Lola jumped up from her seat, pointing at Ava. “Rude!”

*Oh my god, Lola!*

The outburst, of course, drew Ava’s attention, and she spun around to face us, her expression thunderous. “What the hell are you guys doing here? Did you follow me?”

Lola sneered. “We were here first—maybe you followed us!”

Ava rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

“Jesus Christ, sit down!” I hissed, grabbing Lola’s arm to push her back into her seat. My friend’s attitude wasn’t helping, but I also didn’t like Ava making accusations, especially not about my bestie, who yes, was very weird, but since when was weird a bad thing?

Being weird was great, actually!

“Can I sit down now?” poor Jay asked, but I was out to fight a war here. I stood up myself, staring Ava down. “Why are you having a secret rendezvous with a rival pack member, Ava?”

The entire café was looking at us now. On the upside, at least humans had no idea what the hell was happening. Ava, though, just to make things worse, laughed at me. My face turned bright red with a mixture of anger and humiliation.

And then she marched up to our table, her stance proud, and so confident that I wanted to smack her.

“Who even are you, to make such accusations?” She pointed at the girl, waiting at the table a few feet away. “The person I’m meeting with today is a Samara pack member—and so am I. What about you, Cali?”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” I snapped.

She smiled mockingly. “Are you really a part of the Redwood pack? Or are you more like an honorary member? Because being the woman the Alpha sleeps with doesn’t make you a werewolf.”

I bristled. “I’m Greyson and Xavier’s mate. Two Alphas, both mine. Does that answer your question about who I am?”

“I bet it does,” Lola said, giving Ava her best mean girl look. “But you just don’t like hearing the truth, do you?”

Ava laughed, looking between us. “Both of you are so ridiculous it’s just—”

“Why are you here, Ava?” Jay spoke up, cutting her off. His voice was low but imposing, and even though Ava was tall, Jay was at least three inches taller and obviously much bigger. He was also Xavier’s best friend, and I was certain that Ava wouldn’t just dismiss him like she could dismiss me or Lola.

I was right.

She gave Jay a tight smile. “I’m just helping out a young, scared werewolf who lost most of her pack and family. Are you going to turn me in for that?”

Jay stared. “Turn you in?”

Ava stared at me. “What’s your next move, Cali? Are you going to go tattle to Xavier? I’m sure he’s really into your conspiracy theories.” She gasped theatrically. “But oh wait, he’s not with you! He’s on his way to Portland—without you.”

First of all, how the hell did Ava know that? She hadn’t been at the house this morning. Second, screw her.

“Yeah, Xavier had to leave—but we had a very heartfelt goodbye beforehand,” I said. “Did he even say anything to you today, other than his usual ‘go to hell’?”

Ava’s eyes flashed dangerously, but before she could speak, someone else spoke up.

“Ava?” Perrie had walked over to us. She looked confused. “Do you know all these people?”

“Obviously she does,” Lola told the girl wryly.

Ava glared at Lola before turning to Perrie. “They’re from the Redwood pack.”

Perrie gasped, taking in Lola’s face as if she’d just noticed her. “She’s the one who contacted me! I didn’t recognize her at first with those ridiculous sunglasses.”

Lola preened and turned to me, like, “*Didn’t I tell you?*”

Jay let out a long-suffering sigh while Perrie squinted at Lola suspiciously, then at all of us. “This is so freaking weird—what are you guys even doing here?”

Ava smiled sharply, turning to me. “That’s a good question, and I’ll add another one of my own.” She pointed between Lola and me. “Why are you here, and why have you been bothering my friend?”

**Episode 2417**

MARTA

After I’d slapped Okorie, I’d grabbed Dani’s hand and marched inside.

He was left alone in the yard, not moving, not speaking, just…

*Standing.*

I’d expected him to explode at us—literally or figuratively—but he’d just turned into an iceberg. I had been ready for a full-on brawl if he’d dared attack, but he hadn’t. My hand was stinging now, but it was well worth it, and I felt invigorated. How dare he treat Dani that way?

Dani had been quiet after we’d reached the living room, crying a little, and I tried to be a comforting presence. *Tried* being the key word here, since I wasn’t sure if I was doing that good a job.

I hugged her and patted her shoulder. “Everything’s gonna be okay.”

That was a lie.

Perhaps Okorie had been too shocked to retaliate earlier, but I doubted everything would be okay. Not with our mentor being such an asshole and the witch council throwing punishments at people. I hadn’t been able to stand for that kind of treatment, though.

I’d hated seeing Dani cry. It had brought up all these horrible memories.

“Here,” Torin said a moment later, placing a plate of cookies before us. “Sweet treats make everything better.”

I didn’t ask Torin how he knew something had happened. He fluttered away instantly—something about a kitchen emergency—and it was just me and Dani and all the Christmas decorations in the living room. As we munched away at the cookies, I realized that Dani was eating, at least, which felt encouraging. Who could resist Torin’s cookies?

As the moments passed, though, and Dani stayed silent, her eyes downcast, my stomach started twisting itself into knots. I looked outside—was Okorie still out there? Had he finally gotten the hint and gone back to his hotel? Would he call the council and tattle?

Anxiety started to settle in.

And then…

*Guilt.*

I couldn’t believe I’d actually *slapped* a super powerful warlock like that.

I’d hit someone! Like, another human being! I had been brought up in the age of peace and love, had always believed that violence was never the solution, but…

But when I looked over at Dani as she sadly picked up a spritz cookie—how could a spritz cookie be associated with sadness?—I felt my resolve return. Okorie had treated Dani horribly, and he should be the one to apologize to her.

“Would you girls like a mocha?” Torin asked, reentering the living room. “Mrs. Smith is making some right now.” Before either of us could reply, Torin lowered his voice and bent down to speak, looking conspiratorial. “She let me watch her make it, but I didn’t dare try it just yet. I want to make sure that when I do eventually make my own I get it absolutely perfect.”

Dani blinked up at Torin with what had to be genuine bewilderment.

Torin patted her shoulder. “Anyway, mocha? Tea? Water? Juice?”

Dani shook her head, and I said, “No thanks, we’re good.”

After Torin left again, though, I turned to look at Dani. I was pretty sure we weren’t *good*. We hadn’t spoken to each other for the past few minutes, but I told myself that that was okay. Sometimes you just had to sit with your feelings.

*Right?*

I couldn’t help but feel myself starting to get antsy, though. Clearing my throat, I turned to Dani and gently asked, “Do you want to talk about what happened?”

Dani sniffled, looking like a hurt puppy, and hugged her knees to her chest. Then she started nibbling on that sad spritz cookie. Quietly, she said, “Yes. Sort of… Not really.”

“I get it,” I said, leaning back against the chair. “Okorie was such a jerk to you, though. It’s okay if you’re angry.” Then I paused and admitted, “I shouldn’t have slapped him, though. That wasn’t okay. I hope I didn’t make things worse.”

Dani shook her head, sighing. “I know you meant well.”

“Before he makes some sort of report, maybe we should report on him first and ask for a different mentor, though,” I said.

Dani’s eyebrows rose slightly.

“What?” I said defensively. “I’m just trying to do damage control here. Besides, there’s got to be someone better than him. Someone who won’t belittle us, and who’ll care about what’s going on in our lives.”

Dani said, “I know you’re really hurt about Lilac, Marta. Okorie should’ve listened without pressuring you to practice. This is a life-or-death situation, and he just completely ignored it.”

“*Exactly*,” I said, feeling vindicated.

Dani was silent for a few seconds before adding, “I know what Okorie did wasn’t that great, but at the same time, I think he’s actually right about some things.”

I sat up, scowling. “How was what he did to you right? He was so cruel!”

“He didn’t do anything to me,” Dani said quietly. “He just told me something I didn’t want to hear. Something I already know to be true. If I don’t get my magic in check, someone could always come and try to use it. Then what? How will I find Tabitha?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but Dani wasn’t done talking.

“And even if I do find her, what if someone comes and tries to separate us again? Okorie is harsh and sarcastic, but he’s not a liar.”

I took a moment to process Dani’s words. I hadn’t thought of it from her perspective. I realized that she was a lot more insightful than she let on, and now I felt even worse for slapping Okorie.

“Ahem.” Someone cleared their throat. When I looked up, Okorie was standing at the living room entrance. My stomach dropped. He was holding a tray of mochas. Wrinkling his nose, he said, “The fella who’s always disturbingly chipper told me to bring these over here?”

*Goddammit, Torin!*

The Fae knew that we were having issues with Okorie, and he’d decided to meddle.

“You’re not going to yell at us again, are you?” Dani asked awkwardly.

Okorie walked into the living room with his head held high and put the tray down on the coffee table. Maybe a little too hard. Then he grabbed one of the mochas and tried it.

And then he grimaced.

“That’s *so* sweet, yuck!” He gagged. “How do you all drink this?”

And here I’d *almost* wanted to feel bad for slapping him. Oh, well.

“What do you want?” I asked, glaring. “Why are you here?”

Dani, apparently having changed her mind about wanting a mocha after actually seeing it in all its glory, picked up a mug. She took a sip as Okorie rubbed the cheek that I’d slapped, and I felt a twinge of guilt once more.

He sighed. “Perhaps I was a bit harsh earlier.”

“You think? I told you my boyfriend might be dying, and you didn’t give a damn. And then you made Dani cry!”

Okorie rolled his eyes. “Okay, fair. But it’s not like I’m trying to be cruel to you girls. It’s just… It’s the way I learned to overcome some of my own shortcomings.”

I grabbed my own mocha—I wanted it even more now that he’d judged it—and shook my head. “I thought you were a prodigy. How does a prodigy have any shortcomings?”

Okorie took a seat, shooting me a glare. “Do you want to listen, or are you going to keep throwing snarky questions my way?”

“Both,” I said stubbornly. Screw peace and love—I wanted respect.

“Can you chill with the attitude?” Okorie rolled his eyes at me. “Need I remind you that you were the one who slapped me? I believe I’m owed an apology.”

“Okay, I *am* sorry about that—I shouldn’t have let myself go that far,” I said. I meant it. “But you owe Dani an apology, too.”

Okorie took a deep breath and turned to Dani. “I may have been… mildly overbearing. I’m sorry.”

Dani blinked at Okorie, obviously shocked. And then, she quietly asked, “Why are you like this?”

*Why are you like this?* was really a very good question. Dani kept pleasantly surprising me.

“It might be because of the way I was taught,” Okorie said, shrugging. “If you don’t think of the things you have to overcome, if you don’t fight through them, how else are you going to beat them while you learn your craft?”

The earnestness on Okorie’s face was unprecedented. This felt like the most real he’d been with us since he’d arrived.

“That’s… not a horrible thing to say,” I told him, still processing. “Did it have to come down to a blow-up for you to be a little more honest with us?”

Dani nodded at my words. Okorie chuckled, looking both awkward and… bitter? Was he bitter? He took another sip of the mocha he’d declared too sweet and unfit for his refined palette, made a face, and then shook his head.

“Fine, then,” he muttered. “Perhaps I haven’t been as honest as I could’ve been about why I was assigned to be your mentor.”

**Episode 2418**

XAVIER

After the initial chatter and fun in the back seat, the car had fallen silent.

Lilac was starting to fade.

“You’d better drive faster—we need to get to Portland fucking *yesterday*,” I told my brother. He nodded sharply and stepped on it.

Kira had done all her witchy things to Lilac again, but there had been no significant improvement, and Violet was starting to freak out.

“Why is he getting worse so fast? He was fine just fifteen minutes ago!” she asked Kira desperately.

Kira shook her head. “Lilac’s condition is extremely unpredictable.”

Violet turned to my brother. “Greyson, please, you need to go faster—”

“I’m going as fast as I can without spiraling out of control,” Greyson said. “There’s still some melted ice and snow on the road—if we crash, things are gonna get much worse.”

“Before we left the pack house,” Kira piped up, “Big Mac told me how I could transport the entire car. If you agree to that, we could get there faster.”

Everybody turned to look at Kira, gaping. Greyson stared at her through the rearview mirror, clearly shocked.

“What the fuck?” I snapped. “Why didn’t you lead with that?”

“Seriously!” Greyson scoffed, and Kira winced.

“The risk of side effects is huge in that kind of spell,” Kira explained guiltily. “It requires a lot of magic, and Big Mac’s done it before. But I haven’t done it at all, ever, so I’m not sure if I can teleport something as huge as a car and five passengers, plus a wolf.”

Violet squeezed Kira’s hand. “What kind of side effects are you talking about?”

Kira cringed. “Like, someone being left behind. Or someone’s limbs being left behind. People getting split in two.”

Violet choked in horror.

Jesus fucking Christ.

“Kira, listen to me,” I said, twisting around to face her. “You are a powerful witch. I saw you take out more than twenty vampires and werewolves at once—remember?”

Kira stared at me impassively. “Do you really think it’s a good time to remind me of a fucking murder spree?”

I shook my head at Kira. “The point is, you have a lot of power. If you channel it, we both know you can do this. I need you to believe you can do it. Do you understand?”

Greyson nodded. “You were the one who told me that we needed to get Lilac to Swift’s ASAP, so a little teleportation would definitely be useful.”

“You need to do it. What if Lilac doesn’t last the whole car ride?” I asked.

Violet’s eyes filled up with tears. “Xavier! Don’t say that!”

All of us turned to look at Lilac. Both he and Plum had fallen asleep. I could hear them both breathing, but their pulses weren’t as steady as I would’ve liked.

“I’m sorry, Violet,” I muttered, feeling horrible for her. “But Lilac looks really bad, and we need to consider every possibility.”

“Is nobody here worried about the side effects thing Kira mentioned?” Greyson piped up. “Lilac won’t ever join with Plum if he’s literally split in half.”

I shoved my brother. “That’s not a real possibility, not with Kira. You have no idea what I’ve seen her do—she’s like a fucking tornado.”

“Can you please not talk about me like I’m not here?” Kira snapped.

“Then shut up and do the goddamn spell like we both know you can!” I snapped back.

“Fine!” she barked.

“Fine!” I barked back.

Kira closed her eyes and appeared to be concentrating, scowling at the same time.

“Is pissing her off a good idea?” Violet asked me shakily.

“She always does her best work while under threat,” I murmured.

“We’re all gonna die,” Greyson said casually, and I punched his arm.

A few beats passed, and Kira remained silent and scowling. Nothing was happening, but then…

There was a strange humming sound, and I felt a pull like I was being sucked into a black hole. With a spiraling blip that made me feel like I’d been thrown in a washing machine, the car thudded onto the shoulder of a road.

Before I could blink or even realize what the hell was happening, Greyson was jamming on the breaks and shouting, “FUCK!”

We were both panting.

When I twisted around to look at the back seat, I saw three green-looking faces.

“Is everyone okay?” I asked, still panting. “All limbs present?”

Everybody moaned, “Yes.”

Plum let out a whimper.

My stomach still twisting with nausea, I turned to Kira. “That was… good. But let’s not go through it again until you learn how to do it better.”

Kira flipped me off, and I turned to Greyson.

“Are we in Portland?”

He nodded, looking around. “Yeah, I recognize these cross streets. We’re in a quiet residential area right now, but I can get us to the more commercial district really fast.”

“Right,” Kira said sarcastically. “I tried to get you to the city but failed—excuse me for not being a good enough GPS!”

“I’m just glad we’re in one piece,” Greyson told her seriously. “Better to drop us somewhere with no witnesses, anyway.”

“Thank you, Kira.” Violet squeezed Kira’s hand, sniffling, which seemed to appease her.

As Greyson got oriented and kept driving, Kira gave us all leaves to chew, saying, “These will help with the nausea.”

I eyed mine but took it. As I chewed it, I realized that it was actually helping and leaned back, closing my eyes in relief.

“I knew you’d save our asses, Kira,” I muttered in the quiet of the car.

Kira snorted. “Just shut up and chew your leaf.”

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Ten minutes later, Greyson finally pulled up in front of Swift’s shop. “We’re here.”

I looked in the rearview mirror at Kira, Violet, and Lilac, who had woken up. “Are you guys ready?”

Kira and Violet nodded, and Lilac gave me a tired thumbs-up.

I turned to Greyson and paused before awkwardly saying, “Be careful.”

Greyson cleared his throat. “Yeah, you too.”

“I guess we should check in with each other in two hours?”

Greyson nodded. “And if we don’t hear from each other…”

“Well. We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. Hopefully we’ll all be alive,” I said.

“Hopefully,” Greyson repeated wryly.

We all climbed out, with Violet and Kira helping Lilac. I scooped up Plum, who was like a furry limp noodle, and draped him over my shoulder as gently as I could.

We needed to help Lilac. I hadn’t even thought that there would be a possibility of losing the boy again after the miracle of getting him back, but now the risk was huge. If anything happened to Lilac on my watch…

It felt like losing him would make the pack fall apart again.

I had to protect the people who depended on me.

Lilac looked so pale—he couldn’t even walk without Kira and Violet supporting him. Plum was completely limp, unlike any other time I’d picked him up, so I struggled to hold him while opening the shop door for them.

At least the yoga-like shop didn’t have any customers.

There was a hipster girl with blue hair at the counter, chewing bubblegum.

Where the fuck was Swift?

I walked up to the counter. “Where’s your boss?”

The girl, looking all chill, popped her gum again and said, “He’s busy in the back with a customer.”

I leaned forward, flashing her a smile that I hoped was both charming and threatening, if she was into that. “It’s urgent.”

The girl frowned. She glanced at Plum. “Your dog looks sick, and we’re not a vet.”

“I’m not here for a vet visit,” I said. “I’m here to see Swift.”

She pointed at a sign. “No pets allowed. If my boss knew—”

“He’s not a pet,” I said sharply. “*Get. Swift.*”

The girl glanced at Lilac, still being held up by Violet and Kira. She still seemed hesitant, but it was clear that she was wavering.

“Swift is expecting us,” I said impatiently. “Tell him not to run this time, because I’m not fucking around.”

The girl chuckled awkwardly. “Swift does have a habit of running, huh?”

“Jesus H. Christ, I cannot take anymore useless chitchat!” Kira snapped from behind me. “You, with the blue hair—go get Swift before this kid dies in my arms! *Right the hell now!*”

The girl hurried into the back at once, and I turned to Kira. “I had her, you know.”

Kira rolled her eyes. “Sure.”

“Lilac, how you holding up?” I asked.

He didn’t speak, just gave me another weak thumbs-up.

“Hang in there,” Violet whispered to him. She was clearly holding back tears, but I had to give Lilac credit. He was putting on a brave face.

“Hey!” Swift had come stumbling out, the counter girl on his heels. “It’s you guys! Glad you made it.”

“This is the boy,” I said, gesturing at Lilac. There really wasn’t any more time for chitchat.

Swift moved forward and looked Lilac up and down. Plum let out a low growl, his limp noodle body going shockingly rigid against me.

Swift looked between the boy and the wolf, shaking his head. “It’s worse than you described, Xavier. You got here just in time.”

**Episode 2419**

My mind went completely blank. How could I answer smart-ass Ava’s question without giving everything away? I didn’t want to say anything that would sound stupid.

“Cat got your tongue?” Ava snarked.

I bristled. “Did it ever occur to you that we came here to have one of the café’s super famous Chai lattes? Of course we weren’t spying on Perrie!”

Ava suddenly grinned. “Then how do you know her name?”

*Oh my god, CALI, YOU IDIOT!*

Sometimes I hated myself.

Ava smirked. “Exactly.”

“Maybe I did come looking for Perrie,” Lola declared, taking off her sunglasses dramatically.

“I’m gonna have to sit down for this one,” Jay said and sat, taking a sip of his espresso.

Perrie looked worried as she eyed Lola. “Why would you come here for me?”

“I found you online completely by accident,” Lola said, “and when I realized that you were a Samara pack member, I wanted to reach out.” Lola placed a hand over her chest, sighing deeply. “It must be really hard, being so young and losing your pack.”

I immediately got a whiff of where this was going. Lola’s forlorn motherly look said it all.

“Lola was just being neighborly,” I said. “It’s just who she is, you know?”

Jay covered his snort with a cough.

Ava sneered at me. “Really? Like you were neighborly to me? I also lost my pack! Where was your sympathy then? You’ve shown me nothing but hostility and suspicion—”

“—and let you stay in our home and eat our food and have your own bedroom!” Lola huffed. “Oh no, poor you!”

“You still treated me like shit,” Ava declared, crossing her arms over her chest.

“That’s probably because you’re not Perrie,” I snapped. “Perrie didn’t murder Xavier’s mother. And Perrie isn’t trying to steal my mate. She’s just a girl out in the world all alone, whereas you’re a ruthless stalker who’s obsessed with Xavier!”

“Oh, damn,” Jay said under his breath. Perrie flinched at my words, and Ava turned red with anger.

“If you’re really worried about Perrie,” Ava said, “you can save your tears.” She gestured at the exit. “*I’m* here to talk to Perrie. I’m her friend, and you’re just strangers—you can collect your lattes and hit the road.” She raised an eyebrow at me mockingly. “Because those lattes are why you *really* came here, right?”

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I was fuming as we got back into the car. I handed Lola the disguise sunglasses. “Guess we didn’t need these.”

Lola was radiating aggravation. “I have never hated Ava more! UGH!”

Jay shrugged. “Don’t take it too personally. Ava’s smart, and she’s not afraid to get into the thick of things.”

“Why was she here at all?” I asked suspiciously. “Should we really believe that she was just checking in on Perrie? Since when is she the nurturing type?”

Jay shook his head. “She doesn’t have to be nurturing to do something like that. Being a member of a pack does create a sense of loyalty and belonging that even Ava wouldn’t be able to ignore.”

“I hate this,” Lola grumbled.

“Actually, this is good for your plan,” Jay told her, and Lola looked confused.

“Wait, how?”

“It’s the whole reason you came up with your scheme to reunite the Samara pack, right? That Ava will be so loyal to her pack that she would want to return to them?”

“He’s right!” I said, gripping Jay by his very muscular arm. Damn, look at his brain doing cartwheels—he wasn’t just a one-eyed pretty boy! “This *is* a good sign,” I continued, nodding at Lola intently. “All we have to do now is get the rest of the Samara pack.”

Lola hummed thoughtfully. “Actually, perhaps I could reach out to Perrie again. Since I told her that I was there to help her, there’s a chance she’d be willing to meet with me and talk.”

Jay unlocked the car, and as we all settled in, he said, “The Perrie ship has sailed, Lola. Don’t count on her for any of your schemes.”

“But why?” Lola pouted as Jay pulled out of the parking lot.

“Even if Perrie wants to believe in your good intentions, there’s no way Ava will let this go,” Jay said. “Who knows what she’s gonna tell Perrie to completely discredit you?”

Lola scowled. “You’re right.”

I sighed, rubbing my forehead. “What are we going to do now, then?” I pressed my lips together, shaking my head. “Ava needs to go—seeing her today only reinforced that.”

“Remind me again why Xavier won’t just kick her out?” Lola asked me conversationally.

“Don’t go there,” Jay said, huffing. “Xavier’s wolf is tricky. Last thing we need is him leaving Xavier because he banished Ava.”

My stomach clenched at Jay’s words. He was right. This whole thing was fucking horrible, and the jealousy felt like a radioactive green monster inside me.

“She needs to leave on her own,” I said determinedly. “But how the hell are we going to get the Samara members to regroup?”

Jay glanced at me through the rearview mirror. “That’s going to be hard without an Alpha to connect everyone in the pack, Cali.”

Lola sighed. “He’s right.”

All three of us were silent for the rest of the trip home.

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By the time we got back to the pack house, I was feeling like shit. Like all my Ava-banishment hopes and dreams had been crushed.

*This just isn’t fair! I just want my mate to be MINE! IS THAT SO BAD?*

I wondered if this was how Xavier and Greyson felt all the time. Like, literally all the time. A fresh wave of guilt hit me so hard that my stomach hurt.

*Don’t think about those things right now, Cali!*

“I’m going to get a glass of water,” I told Jay and Lola, heading into the kitchen.

A moment later, I was sipping it, refreshing my messages. Neither of my mates had texted me. When would we get an update on Lilac? Above all else, I needed to know that he was okay. That he’d gotten better, at least.

I walked out of the kitchen and roamed the house a bit—I had to go find Marta. She most definitely would know if there had been any new developments. The sweet girl was so devastated, and she’d been stuck here with Okorie for mandatory witch bullshit. I would’ve been fuming if I were in her shoes.

Was she still outside, practicing?

*Maybe I should go check—*

“Cali!”

I’d run smack into Lola after turning around, and even though I was startled, she looked surprisingly impassive for someone who loved being dramatic. “Sorry, I—”

“It’s fine,” she said, gripping my hand. “We have to talk.”

“About what?”

Lola dragged me into the living room, where Jay was munching on a plate of cookies. I reached out to get one, and Lola smacked my hand.

“Ouch!” I snapped, but she waved me off.

“Cali, focus!” She huffed. “I thought about what we were talking in the car, and I have an idea.”

I looked at Jay. He silently gave me a cookie, and I offered him a smile. Chewing on the cookie, I told Lola, “Go on.”

“The solution to our problem is simple,” Lola exclaimed. “We have to find someone to be the Samara Alpha.”

I squinted. “That doesn’t sound very simple.”

“It’s actually not, yeah,” Lola said wryly. “I just did some quick research, and there aren’t many Alpha candidates remaining in the Samara pack. Many of the pack members are either dead or too young. Or just not Alpha material.”

I sighed, swallowing the last of the cookie. “This is getting harder and harder. Maybe we need a different plan.”

“Yeah, I’ve been feeling that for a while,” Jay commented, popping another cookie into his mouth.

Lola shoved him. “I just wish someone in the Redwood pack would take a hit for the team, you know?” she said. “That would be *so* noble!”

I rolled my eyes just as Ravi came up to us. He raised an eyebrow. “What’s up? Are you guys forming a baseball team?”

Lola offered a deep sigh. “I wish that were the case.”

“What’s going on?” Ravi asked, sitting across from us, his brows furrowed.

“Dude, you don’t wanna know,” Jay said to Ravi, and Lola shoved him again.

Jay gave me another cookie, so I still considered him a great man with outstanding values. Lola was so lucky to have him.

“Seriously, what’s going on?” Ravi asked. He looked curious, but also amused.

“It’s a long story, so I’ll cut to the chase,” Lola said to Ravi primly. “Basically, we need someone from the Redwood pack to sacrifice themselves and become the Alpha of the Samara pack so we can have an ally in the position.”

Ravi paused. Nobody spoke for a moment.

And then Ravi said, “I’ll do it. I’ll be the Samara Alpha.”

**Episode 2420**

GREYSON

I drove away from Swift’s shop, heading toward the address we’d been given for Lakini.

I really, really hoped that Xavier and the others were going to be all right. I’d wanted to stick around, but this was what Xavier and I had agreed was best. Divide and conquer—a good strategy technically, even if I was struggling emotionally. I reminded myself that Xavier was equipped to handle this, and that this was the best idea.

Shoving all my worries about Lilac aside, I took a deep breath and dug through my pocket.

The business card that Charon had given us for Lakini was a little smeared, but it still had the Rusty Wrench’s address on it. I wondered if going to the location on foot would be smarter, since the car might be conspicuous on a low-profile, quiet street.

After a bit of internal debate, I decided to park by my old apartment and just walk the rest of the way. But after getting out of the car, I looked across the street at something sparkling in the light.

Many somethings were sparkling in the light, actually.

Had that jewelry store always been there?

I tried to remember and realized that I’d walked past it a bunch of times, but I’d never gone in. Why would I, after all? After Maren and I had crashed and burned, there hadn’t been anyone in Portland for me to buy jewelry for.

Things were different now, though.

I had Cali. I fucking adored Cali, and I saw myself growing old with her—both of us wrinkly and white-haired, holding hands. I knew it was a cheesy fantasy to have, but I didn’t give a fuck—I wanted it so badly I could taste it. And actually, it would be nice to get Cali a present after I was done with all this Lakini business. She’d been feeling really low lately, thanks to the revulsion spell, and cheering her up would definitely cheer *me* the hell up too.

As I passed by the jewelry store, checking the window and making a mental note to come back later, someone spoke up.

“Well, good morning to you, young man!” An older lady with an outfit that looked like it had sprung straight out of the sixties beamed at me. She was selling jewelry on the street, right in front of the official shop. “Are you shopping for a gift for someone special?”

“Not right now,” I said, but the woman shook her head.

“There’s no such thing as ‘not now’—jewelry is all about creating an instant connection with a piece!” She held up a wooden board holding several items, shoving it in my face.

I was about to tell her to leave me the hell alone when something caught my eye.

I could easily picture Cali wearing this piece.

“Ah,” the woman said, grinning from ear to ear, like a shark that had sniffed out blood in the water. “I see you’ve found something you like!”

I shook my head. “I’ll come back some other time.”

The woman scoffed just as I was about to walk away. “Oh, dear! You know this piece of art will be gone by the time you return!”

I paused. Goddamn, this lady really knew how to fucking sell.

I huffed, turning to face her, then examined the piece.

It would look really, really good on Cali. Something that I’d bought her, on her.

“You know,” the lady said, “jewelry always holds a special place in a lover’s heart. It’s like a sign of ownership and connection when one wears a piece their partner has gifted them. It is romance in its truest form.”

I eyed the lady, shaking my head. She was really good at this, wasn’t she?

“Okay, you’ve got me,” I said, and she laughed. I handed her my credit card briskly and said, “Please, make it quick.”

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After I was done with the pushy jewelry lady, I pocketed the gift, pretty happy with my choice, then quickly made my way to the address on the business card. I’d done reconnaissance before—I’d just scout out the building and figure out if there were any risks.

That was the number one priority, but it would also be good for my plan if I could get a glimpse of this Lakini person, get an idea of her vibe. She was a witch, which meant she had to have some tricks up her sleeve. Perhaps I could just casually walk in and pretend to be a potential customer, looking for a spell.

I wondered if there was a way for me to use the curse Charon had put on me for Aysel as leverage, to get an in with Lakini. Presumably, Lakini hated Charon as much as he hated her, so there was a possibility that I could turn the tables here.

I could play off of their jealous rivalry and maybe get more information on the curse. Killing two birds with one stone was an optimistic take on the situation, but I was worried that Charon wouldn’t break the curse, even if we did take care of Lakini.

I shook my head—I had to focus here, and take it one step at a time. There was no room for dwelling on negative outcomes at the moment. But it was still good to have a Plan B.

When I arrived at the brick building, I realized that the ground floor was a bar, of all things. There wasn’t a lot of clientele, but then again, it was early—I’d have been worried for anyone hanging out in there at this time of day.

I went in, ready to pretend that I had some problems of my own and needed a drink—and to be honest, I really did. The place looked like an average dive bar, and the bartender looked bored. It felt like that was a ruse, though, because I could feel his eyes following me across the floor. Either he could sense that I was a werewolf, or he was about to ask for my number.

I sniffed the air cautiously to see if I could sense any other supernaturals. Everything smelled human, but the scent of stale peanuts and beer was really strong in the air, and it might’ve been fucking up my radar.

When I got to the bar, the bartender said, “What’s your order?”

The guy was pretty gruff and grumpy, so I ruled out the “asking for my number” scenario. I was also immediately certain that there was no chance I’d get any info out of him, and that trying would probably make me look suspicious.

Better to cut straight to the chase.

“I heard there’s someone here who might be able to help me with a…” I raised an eyebrow. “Problem.”

The bartender kept scowling. “The only people here are Jack, Jim, and Jose Cuervo.” He gestured at the bottles of liquor.

I ignored the asshole’s snarky tone. “The person I was told about goes by Lakini.”

The bartender’s eyes narrowed just slightly, and then, without a word, he disappeared behind a door. Okay, then. Progress. I scooped up some pretzels and threw them in my mouth, then realized that was the most fucked-up decision I’d made all day. The pretzels were stale, and I regretted not having ordered a beer, because my mouth was suddenly really dry.

Thankfully, the smartass bartender returned. He gestured to a door at the far end of the bar. “Over there.”

I made sure to nod my thanks—better to be polite—and walked over to the door. When I approached it, I noticed a camera above the frame, and I heard a low click when the door was opened electronically.

This was more high-tech than I’d expected.

Opening the door, I stepped into a dark stairwell. Sniffing the air for anything suspicious, I searched for a switch, but I found none. Good thing I had werewolf vision on my side. I made my way down the narrow steps—this place would’ve been a death trap for Cali, no joke—and once I reached the bottom, a metal door clanged shut behind me.

At this point, I wasn’t surprised.

Of course a witch who was involved in some kind of territorial dispute with a warlock wouldn’t be taking any chances. Which meant that I was going to have to be very, very convincing in my act. I’d do whatever it took.

“Hello?” I called.

The door at the end of the hallway opened in response.

A beautiful Indian American woman with a shaved undercut walked out and strode toward me. The shining light behind her framed her like something out of an action movie as she came toward me.

I stood my ground as she approached. “Are you Lakini?”

The woman reached behind her back and pulled out a gun. She pointed it at me. “Yeah. Who are you, and why are you looking for me?”

**Episode 2421**

MARTA

My gaze was wary as I looked at Okorie, but I had to admit that I was intrigued by his admission. It sounded like he had a story to tell, and I kind of wanted to hear it. Apart from simple curiosity, I wanted to know why someone so young—not really much older than myself, not allowing for the fifty years I’d been trapped in time, of course—had been sent to teach me about magic. What made him so damn special?

“I thought you were sent to be our mentor because you’re a prodigy.” I narrowed my eyes at him over my mug of mocha. “Isn’t that what you’ve been telling us since you got here?”

Okorie smirked. “Well, that’s true. In part.”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, fine. So what’s the other part?”

The satisfied look faded from his face, and he looked down at his own mug on the coffee table. “Do you remember MacKenzie asking me about the boarding school I went to?”

I nodded. Next to me, I saw Dani doing the same thing.

“That’s where I was until pretty recently—it’s a school for magic. It’s a private school, but not in the way you’re thinking. You can’t just go because you’re rich or well connected, though I guess that helps—you have to be invited to attend this school. I knew about the school, of course, but it wasn’t a place I thought I’d ever end up at.”

“Why not?” I asked.

He snorted. “You should see this place. It’s so tightly wound. They banned *jeans*. Can you believe it? Uniforms only. Every day. It just wasn’t a place I ever saw myself attending.”

“But you were really good at magic, right?” Dani asked quietly. “Why didn’t you think you’d ever go there?”

Okorie ran a hand through his dark hair and sat back in his chair with a sigh. “Because I grew up in nowhere Oregon and helped my mom run her convenience store. My mom, who’s eccentric—even by supernatural standards. It’s not exactly a first-class magical pedigree.”

“So how did you end up there then?” I asked.

Okorie rubbed a hand along the sharp angle of his jaw. “I knew the magic my mom taught me, but it got to a point where I’d grown past what she could teach me. I was figuring stuff out that she’d only heard or read about. And I was good at it. Too good.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “How can you be too good?”

“I didn’t have to try, so I didn’t really understand what I could do. I didn’t fully understand the ramifications. And I started doing magic even when I didn’t mean to.”

He reached for his mocha and took a meditative sip, and I noticed that he didn’t grimace this time. He had to be starting to like it. Which didn’t surprise me. The allure of the white chocolate mocha was hard to resist.

“What do you mean you did magic when you didn’t mean to?” I asked, curious. “How does that happen?”

Okorie looked into the depths of his coffee. “I went to a public high school my freshman year, and there was this girl, Tasha. She was… beautiful, with this long curly hair and these big eyes and these really long legs…” His eyes went a little hazy with the memory. “I had a crush on her—”

“Obviously,” I muttered.

“—a big crush, I guess,” he went on, ignoring me, “and I didn’t realize that I was accidentally weaving a love spell on her.” He paused for a moment, still looking into his coffee cup.

“And what happened?” I asked breathlessly.

“By the time I realized what I’d been doing, the spell was so strong. And it just kept growing. Nothing I did stopped it. She became obsessed with me. It wasn’t her fault, of course, but it got… ugly. The boarding school had to get involved. They had to come in to unspell her. They wiped her memory. Her whole memory. She didn’t even know her name.”

His voice caught, and he looked away, out the window into the grey winter light. He was clearly still upset about what had happened and was trying to hide it from us.

I stared at him, baffled. I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, but the guy actually had feelings after all.

“What happened after that?” Dani asked. “With the boarding school and everything?”

Okorie sighed. “At first, nobody knew what to do with me. After what happened with Tasha, it was obvious how good I was. No one else could have created a love spell so powerful. I was better at magic than most of my teachers—”

“Oh my god,” I groaned. “Are you really *bragging* about that? You were responsible for erasing a girl’s entire past, and you’re bragging about it?”

“Hey!” Okorie snapped back, “I was just a kid when that happened. I would never have done it on purpose. But what I learned was vitally important—I had this natural casting ability so innate, I could use it without even trying. I would just think of something, and it would happen. Even after Tasha, it caused a few problems.”

He looked away again, clearly uncomfortable.

“Like what?” Dani asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said with a small shake of his head.

It was obvious that it *did* matter, and that Okorie was doing everything in his power to avoid talking about it. But—like Dani—I wondered what problems he had caused.

“Anyway,” Okorie said, looking back at us, “I came to realize that if I was going to survive, I was going to have to learn to control that natural instinct within me.” He looked between us. “Just like the two of you.”

“Just like us?” I asked. “Are you saying that we’re prodigies, too?”

Okorie raised a brow. “I am definitely *not* saying that. At all. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves here, okay?”

I rolled my eyes, but part of me appreciated him telling us that story. It made me realize that Okorie might understand Dani and me better than I’d given him credit for.

But did that excuse his outrageous behavior toward us? That, I wasn’t sure about.

“Were you trained to be a mentor?” I asked him, a thought suddenly occurring to me.

He looked at me, clearly confused. “What? Trained? For what?”

“Mentoring means you have to teach,” I explained, “and just because you were some kind of magical whizz kid, that doesn’t mean you’re going to be a good teacher, does it?”

Okorie looked at me blankly.

I turned to Dani. “Have you learned anything since he’s gotten here?”

Dani’s eyes widened, and then she looked at her feet and, finally, shook her head. “No,” she said softly.

I looked back at Okorie. “It’s been two days. When does the actual teaching part start?”

Okorie’s face flushed, and he glanced away. “Maybe if I had better students,” he muttered to himself.

“Excuse me,” I snapped, cutting in, “I’ll have you know that before I was kidnapped by a poltergeist, I was a solid B-plus student.”

He rolled his eyes. “Big congrats on that, Marta.”

I ignored this. “So it’s obvious to me that the problem here lies not with your students, but with *you*!”

Okorie scowled. “Okay, I don’t think this finger-pointing is very productive. I *have* been teaching you. Remember the meditation?” He ignored me when I scoffed. “And working with the flowers, trying not to kill them? Any of that ringing a bell with you? Working with Dani to try to amplify her magic on you?”

“Give me a break,” I said quietly, shaking my head.

Okorie narrowed his eyes. “Maybe if the two of you took this more seriously, you’d be showing more results.”

“We *are* taking it seriously,” I protested.

“The magic is there,” Okorie insisted, “but your heads aren’t right.”

“What does that mean?” I demanded.

“It’s mental. It’s discipline,” he said impatiently. “There’s nothing I can do about that. That’s on you.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know about that. I think there’s a big part of this equation that’s your responsibility, too, Okorie.”

This did not appear to make him happy. “You can resist all you want, Marta, that’s fine by me. But I’ve got a warning for you: if this mentorship doesn’t work out, you’re not getting away scot-free.”

I suddenly felt cold. “What does that mean?”

“It means that if this doesn’t work out, maybe the witch council might just decide to ship you off to a witch school of your own.”

“Why would they do that?” I asked shakily.

“You have to learn to control your powers.” Okorie’s eyes darkened. “Do you really want to be sent away?”

**Episode 2422**

XAVIER

“Okay, in here,” Swift said, waving us toward the beaded curtain that led to the back of the store. “Get them both into the sanctuary. There’s no time to waste.”

As I hefted Plum into my arms and Violet steadied Lilac, Swift shook his head.

“If I had known how severe this kid’s condition was, I would have had you bring them in yesterday,” he scolded. “You should have told me. I can’t help if I don’t know what’s going on.”

I glared at the guy. Like we hadn’t had to manipulate Swift into seeing Lilac at all.

As he drew closer, Swift reached out to put his hand on Lilac’s head, but he stopped himself when Plum growled threateningly.

He laughed nervously, then glanced at me. “What’s with the wolf?”

“What’s with the sanctuary?” Violet asked, adjusting Lilac’s arm across her shoulder. “What exactly happens in there?”

Swift rolled his eyes. “We don’t have time to get into the ins and outs of what makes a sanctuary a sanctuary. It’s fine, okay? You’re just going to have to trust me.”

“I don’t know,” Kira said, hesitating. “I know your history, and you were getting involved in some pretty sketchy things in the past.”

“*What?*” Swift demanded, looking offended. “Like what?”

“Like with Iñigo,” Kira said. “Why should we trust you?”

Swift puffed up like an insulted rooster. “Nothing was ever proven. And anyway, I haven’t seen Iñigo in months.” He shook his head. “Listen, do you want me to help or not?”

Violet looked scared and edgy. “I don’t even know you, man. You’re a total stranger. I’m not going to trust my brother’s life to a stranger.”

“*You came to me!*” Swift shouted, growing red in the face.

“Cool it, everyone,” I snapped. I turned to Violet. “I know this is hard, and that you’re worried about your brother, but this is going to be okay.”

Violet’s eyes flashed, and she held her brother closer. “Tell me what’s going to happen.”

I glanced back at Swift, who clearly wasn’t about to jump in with an assist on the explanation.

“My brother is weak,” Violet went on, addressing Swift now. “I don’t want to risk making him worse.”

I looked at Lilac, who was so pale he was nearly grey. His eyes were open, but barely, like he was only just holding onto consciousness.

“We don’t have much of a choice here, Violet,” I said quietly. “Lilac’s only getting worse, even since we left the pack house. He needs help. That’s why we’re here. If we don’t do anything…” I trailed off. She knew what came next.

Violet’s eyes filled with tears. “I know,” she said, her voice anguished, “but I just want to know what he’s going to do to my brother.”

Swift heaved a sigh. “It’s a delicate process, but it involves aligning his chakras so that his third eye isn’t communicating on some kind of unconscious plane. And then—obviously—ensuring the muladhara is in line with that as well. If he’s been sick, his root chakra is bound to be screwed up. Hopefully we won’t have any metaphysical invaders, which can happen. And then—”

“Okay, enough!” I shouted. Swift’s explanation was not helping, and it was making my head spin. He was full of such shit. I looked back at Violet. “Listen, I know this all sounds weird as hell, but I’ve done what this guy told me to do, and it worked. Just…” I shook my head. “Just ignore everything he actually says.”

“Hey.” Swift looked hurt.

“Are you sure?” Violet asked pensively.

“I wouldn’t have brought Lilac here if I didn’t think it would work.”

Violet hesitated for a moment, then nodded. She turned to Lilac. “What do you think?”

Lilac smiled weakly. “Hey, I’m up for anything. Let’s do this.”

In my arms, Plum whined a little. I wondered if the wolf was aware of what was going on.

“Okay,” Violet said. “Let’s go.”

I was relieved to hear it, and I turned to Swift. “You heard Lilac. Let’s get this thing started.”

I started through the bead curtain, but Swift held up a hand to stop me.

“Not so fast.”

“What now?” I demanded.

“There are a few things we should discuss,” he said. He glanced over at Lilac. “Given the frail condition of the subject—”

“*Subject?*” Violet exploded. “His name is *Lilac*.”

Swift frowned but amended his statement. “Given the frail condition of *Lilac*, there are a few concerns I think you should know about before we begin. Liabilities and all, you understand.”

“I’m going to make you one if you don’t fucking *talk*.”

Swift gulped. “Well, for starters, he could die.”

Violet sucked in a breath.

“He could also wander in the in-between forever. He could be severed from his wolf permanently and spend the rest of his life as a human. Or he could become a wolf, no longer a human in any regard.”

Violet’s breath was coming fast, and she looked on the verge of tears. Lilac’s eyes were hazy, but he frowned as he listened to Swift.

“We get it,” I said. He’d talked enough.

“Those outcomes are very unlikely, but I have to mention the risks, or I could lose my board certification. Hayden,” he called over to the girl behind the counter. “Bring over that waiver, will you?”

Hayden pulled a form out from under the counter and held it out.

Kira took the sheet and scanned it quickly. “We should talk about this first,” she said, her eyes on the waiver.

“Sure,” Swift said. “But don’t take too long. Hayden and I will prepare the sanctuary.”

As he and the girl disappeared through the bead curtain, Kira gestured me closer. I put Plum down and walked over.

“I don’t like this,” she hissed.

“What?” I asked.

“Any of it. I don’t trust this Swift guy at all, and I’m getting a bad feeling about this. Swift isn’t a witch. What exactly are his qualifications?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, “He was recommended to me by a friend in the past, but it’s not like we have a lot of options here. Look at Lilac.”

Lilac was resting against Violet, who looked like she was supporting all his weight. He looked foggy and almost asleep. Plum had curled up at his feet.

“Look,” I started, “I get that Swift isn’t exactly instilling confidence in anyone, but I think the choice is ultimately Lilac’s to make. We should just ask him.”

Kira nodded, and we stepped over to Lilac.

“I know this seems a little rushed,” I started, “but I want to know what you want to do, Lilac.”

Lilac blinked slowly. “I’ll sign anything if it means this will be over,” he said, his voice slurring.

“Are you sure?” Kira asked, her voice tense.

Lilac nodded.

“What about you?” I asked, looking at Violet. When she didn’t answer, I pushed harder. “I know this is scary, but we have to decide now.”

Violet bit her lip, thinking, then nodded. “Yes.”

I snatched the waiver from Kira and grabbed a pen from the glass countertop. I handed it to Lilac and watched as Violet helped him scribble his signature.

“Swift!” I called, taking the paper from them.

Swift reappeared and accepted the waiver. He glanced over it. “Looks good. Bring him in.”

He reached for Lilac to help him through the doorway, and Plum growled again.

“I’ll help them in,” I said, noting Plum’s apparent dislike of Swift.

“Fine by me,” Swift muttered.

I stepped to Lilac’s side and took his weight from Violet. Violet wrapped her arms around her brother, pulling him into a hug.

“I’ll see you soon, Vi,” Lilac said quietly.

I half-helped, half-carried Lilac through the bead curtain into the sanctuary, and behind me I heard Plum following slowly.

The moment I stepped through, I could feel my hands starting to sweat. I looked around, feeling uneasy. I remembered what it had been like to be in here for myself. It was the same dim light, the same sickly-sweet incense smell, the same crystals on the shelves.

I helped Lilac onto the low cot, and Plum lay beside him on the floor.

Swift walked forward with a bronze chalice. “Okay, Lilac. Drink up.”

Lilac struggled to sit up, but he was almost too weak to hold the heavy cup.

I helped him hold it to his mouth, but he pulled back, grimacing.

“It smells gross,” he said, his nose crinkling. “Like dirty socks. Do I have to drink it?”  
 “Yeah,” I told him, remembering. “And it tastes even worse than it smells, but you gotta do it.”

Lilac took a deep breath and tipped the cup back. He gagged, but he was tougher than he looked, and he finished it.

“*Ugh*,” he groaned, making a face as I pulled the empty cup away. “It was worse than I thought.”

Drinking must have worn him out, because he lay back on the cot and closed his eyes. He was pale and absolutely still.

I stared down at him, worry prickling up my spine. Lilac was like a younger brother to me. I’d looked out for him and Violet for so long.

Was this going to cure him, or kill him?

**Episode 2423**

I stared at Ravi as hope flooded through me. “Are you serious? Are you actually open to becoming the Alpha of the Samara pack?”

Ravi shrugged casually. “Yeah, I guess so. Why not?”

“*Ravi*,” I started, relief crashing over me like a wave.

“Being an Alpha seems pretty cool. What would I have to do?” he asked.

“I—I don’t know,” I stammered. “I think there’s some kind of ceremony—”

Lola cut me off. “Basically you’d have to hook up with Ava, go through the Luna process with her, and maybe win a Lupo Finale, depending on if anyone else from the pack wanted to lay claim—”

“Hold up.” Ravi held up a hand to stop her. “Hook up with *Ava*? That’s part of it? I’d have to be with her? Forget it. I’m out.”

“Ravi—”

He shook his head. “No way. I was mostly kidding, anyway.”

I leaned back against the couch, feeling deflated again. For a moment there, I’d really thought he was serious and that the answer to all our problems would really be that simple. “I think you’d make a good Alpha, Ravi,” I said.

“Thanks, but I was just offering as a favor,” he said. “I’m actually really happy being part of the Redwood pack.”

I nodded. I knew Ravi liked being a Redwood, but I also suspected that if Ava hadn’t been involved, he might have gone through with it.

Not that I could blame him for backing out. Ava would be an obvious dealbreaker to any rational person.

“I’m sorry,” Ravi said, seeing the look on my face. “What are you guys doing, anyway? I thought the Samara pack was history. Didn’t all of the survivors scatter after Nolan’s death?”

I shook my head. I really didn’t want to get into it. “We were just hoping to bring the Samara pack back together. There are still wolves out there on their own, without a pack.”

“Well, good luck,” Ravi said. “I’m going to head out for a run.”

“Hey, Ravi,” Lola called after him as he turned to leave. “Keep this to yourself, will you? Not everyone needs to know.”

Ravi nodded. “Sure. No problem.”

Lola flopped back down on the couch as Ravi left. “Well, that went well.”

“I still think it’s worth trying,” I said determinedly. “Are there any other candidates we can think of?”

“I’d give it a shot,” Jay offered.

Lola smacked his arm. “Don’t even joke about that,” she snapped. She looked out the door where Ravi had disappeared. “I wonder if we can work on Ravi. He was open to it, on some level. Maybe he could be again. I wonder if we could get him to change his mind. Maybe you could do some cool Fae mind control thing, Cali?”

I thought about this for a moment. Artemis had been able to do something like that a few times in the past, but Artemis’s magic wasn’t strong at the moment. Besides, the thought of doing any kind of mind control to force Ravi to be with anyone—*especially* someone like Ava—seemed very wrong.

“I can’t do anything like that,” I told Lola. “What about you? Are there any vampy things you can do?”

Lola raised an eyebrow. “You mean other than draining Ravi’s blood? No.”

I flinched. “Yeah, okay, I don’t think we should do that either. Ravi’s a good guy—other than that time he freaked out and stabbed Big Mac. *That* wasn’t so great.”

“That’s not fair,” Jay protested. “That wasn’t really Ravi. It was Letifer.”

It was true. But even hearing the name freaked me out, and I felt a shiver rattle up my spine. I wished I never had to hear it again.

“I’m hungry,” Lola said, getting to her feet and hauling Jay up too, “and I can’t think when I’m hungry. Come on.”

Jay and Lola headed off to the kitchen, and I settled back onto the couch with a sigh. I pulled my phone out and checked my messages, but there was nothing from Greyson or Xavier.

I tapped my fingers against my phone nervously. Should I be worried? I’d told Marta that they’d let us know if there was any news, but what if something had gone wrong?

*Any news?*

I sent the text to both Xavier and Greyson and sat, staring at the screen. But there was no response. The messages had been delivered, but neither of them had read them.

Should I be worried *now*?

They were strong Alphas—I knew that—and they could take care of themselves. Right?

I slipped my phone back into my pocket and got to my feet. Maybe I should go find Artemis. We could practice our magic. Hell, maybe I could even get a few pointers from Okorie. At the very least, it would help take my mind off whatever the hell was happening in Portland.

I just hoped Lilac was okay—

Violet! I could text Violet!

I pulled my phone out and was in the middle of composing a message when Mrs. Smith stuck her head into the living room. “Cali? I have a problem.”

Immediately on alert, I put my phone away.

“What’s going on?” I asked, my heart beating a little fast.

She held up two fabric squares in response. “What do you think?”

I stared at her. “About what?”

“The swatches? Which do you like best? Spiced wine”—she held one up—“or merlot?” she asked, holding up the other.

I looked at the two squares of deep red fabric. “Um, they look like the exact same color to me,” I admitted.

Mrs. Smith frowned and looked at the squares. “That’s what MacKenzie thinks, too. But I think merlot is the better choice.”

“Oh, okay,” I said slowly. I felt like I’d been dropped into the middle of this conversation, so I frantically tried to catch up. “What’s this for?”

Mrs. Smith sighed. “I’m trying to choose our wedding colors, but I’m stumped. So I decided to take a poll.”

“Ah, got it.” I shook my head in amazement. “I didn’t realize how involved wedding planning was. You have to choose the colors?”

“How else would they be decided?” Mrs. Smith asked.

I shrugged. “I guess I never really thought about it.”

“Well, *I* have to choose, because if I left it up to MacKenzie, everything would be black. And we can’t have that. It’s important for a wedding to have the right feel,” she said, looking at her fabric swatches. “It sets the tone for the entire ceremony.”

“Right, I get that,” I said.

Mrs. Smith looked up at me with a smile. “Haven’t you ever thought of what your wedding would look like?”

I thought about it for a moment.

“I guess I’ve never really pictured it,” I said. “I just assumed I’d wear the white dress and carry the flowers and stuff. I’ve seen pictures of my parents’ wedding, and my mom in her wedding gown.”

I used to love looking at their wedding album when I was little. My mom’s dress had been snow white, and the sleeves had had these soft floral designs embroidered into the lace. She’d been so beautiful, and I’d always thought she looked like a fairy princess—little did I know how close that was to the truth. I guess I’d always just assumed I’d have something similar to that.

“In any case, Cali,” Mrs. Smith said, turning to go, still studying her fabric samples, “thank you for your input. I think I’m just going to ask around a little more.”

“For what it’s worth,” I called after her, “I think you and Big Mac will outshine whatever colors you pick. You’ll both be beautiful.”

Mrs. Smith gave me a gentle smile. “Thank you, dear.”

As she disappeared down the hall, I got to thinking about her question, and I wondered why I hadn’t ever tried to visualize my wedding. I didn’t know what kind of dress, venue, music, food, or anything I wanted. Was that normal? It seemed like something most normal girls probably did… so why hadn’t it ever occurred to me? I’d thought about my grooms enough times.

But maybe that was it: maybe visualizing a wedding would involve a choice. Someone would be waiting for me at the end of the aisle—who would it be? Xavier or Greyson?

The thought made me feel suddenly light-headed, and I swayed a little on my feet. Now was not the time to let myself get overwhelmed by that question. There were more pressing things going on. I was supposed to be getting ahold of Violet.

I pulled my phone back out and was just starting the message again when I heard the door open and shut. A moment later, Ava stepped into the doorway of the living room, her eyes blazing. When she saw me, she marched over to me, getting right up in my face.

“Hey!” she snapped, jabbing a finger into my chest. “I know what you’re up to!”

**Episode 2424**

GREYSON

Lakini had the gun aimed right at my heart, so I put my hands up, showing her that I was unarmed. But even as my body moved, my mind was racing, trying to figure out how the hell I was supposed to respond to the woman’s question. Why *was* I looking for her? Should I level with her and explain why I was really there? Or should I be more guarded?

The fact that her first response to seeing me had been to pull a gun didn’t make it seem like calm and rational was the way to go with this witch.

I cleared my throat. “You know, I’d feel a lot more comfortable answering your question if you put the gun away.”

My comfort didn’t appear to be her first priority, and she kept the gun pointed at me.

Her dark eyes scanned down, then back up to my face. “You a super?”

I stared at her, confused. “A what?”

What the hell was a super? A superintendent? A superhero? My mind spun.

“Are you a *supernatural*?” she asked, articulating every word, like she thought my intelligence might be substandard. “Something other than human?”

Fantastic. Another question I didn’t know how to answer. If she’d pulled a gun knowing nothing about me, how was she going to react to finding out I was a werewolf? After all, she was a witch, and historically, we were enemies.

“Why does it matter what I am?” I asked evasively.

She tipped her head to one side. “It matters because if you’re a warlock, you’re as good as dead.”

Her finger twitched on the trigger, so I took a chance.

“I’m a werewolf.”

Her eyes widened infinitesimally, and her grip tightened on the gun. “There are six bullets in this gun. Every single one of them is silver.”

My eyes went to the gun, and I felt my heart rate kick up a notch. I could shift, but if she was telling the truth about the bullets, I’d be dead before I attacked.

“If this is how you treat all your customers, I don’t know how you stay in business,” I said, keeping my voice steady.

“I’m not convinced you are a customer,” she answered. Her black hair brushed against the bronze skin of her bare shoulder. “And I want to know who sent you.”

“You know, it’s a weird quirk of mine, but it’s always been difficult for me to have a friendly conversation with a gun in my face,” I said calmly. “So how about you put it away so we can talk?”

She didn’t seem all that interested in my proposal. “No, thanks.”

I tried to reason with her. “If you are a witch, you shouldn’t have anything to fear from a werewolf, should you?”

“I think I’ll decide that,” she said coldly. “Why don’t you start talking, wolf? Why are you here?’

“Maybe I should just go,” I said. “This seems like a bad time for you, so I’ll come back again when you’re a little less trigger-happy.”

I turned and slowly started toward the door, hoping she wouldn’t shoot me in the back, but just as I reached for the knob, Lakini spoke.

“Stop.”

As I turned around, she lowered the gun. She stared at me for a long moment, then gestured for me to follow her. I weighed my options for a moment, but this is what I’d come here for, so I followed as she led the way down a short, dark hallway. She unlocked a door and stepped into a small room with a desk that took up most of the space. It must have been her office. She sat behind the neatly ordered desk and placed the gun on top of a stack of papers.

She gestured toward the straight-backed chair in front of the desk. “So, are you going to tell me why a werewolf is seeking out a witch? You must need something. A spell? A curse? What?”

I settled back in the chair, feeling a lot more relaxed now that I wasn’t staring down the barrel of a gun loaded with silver bullets. I smiled at the woman. “Why? Do I make you nervous?”

Lakini gave me a withering look. “A wolf? Make me nervous? Hardly.”

“You should be nervous.”

Her hand inched back toward the gun.

“Relax,” I said. “That wasn’t a threat. Not from me, at least. Does the name Charon mean anything to you?”

I had barely gotten the question out when I saw the answer flashing in her eyes.

She looked scared for a moment, but that terror was quickly replaced with a seething anger. “How do you know Charon? Did he send you?” she demanded.

She reached for the gun, but, anticipating that, I clamped my hand on top of hers, pinning it to the desk.

“Charon wants you dead,” I growled. “But I guess you already knew that.”

Lakini’s eyes flashed. “You’ll want to be careful, wolf. As a witch I could make your life *very* unpleasant.”

I tightened my hold on her hand for a moment, then released it and leaned back. I could tell Charon’s name had rattled her, and I had to see where I would lead me. “I wanted to see what you knew about him.”

“Charon’s a hack,” Lakini spat. “He thinks he’s so damn special—trying to tell me what I can and can’t do. He just walks around thinking he’s better than he actually is, but he’s worthless. Fuck him, and fuck you, too,” she finished, her face flushing.

I chuckled. “I’m not here to take sides,” I said mildly.

“Why *are* you here?”

“I’ve got a little problem, and I just want to help find a resolution that will satisfy Charon,” I explained.

Lakini gave me a beady stare. “Why? What does he have that you want?”

I thought before I spoke. She was savvy, and I wanted to play this right. “Charon put a curse on me on behalf of someone else. In order to break it, I made a deal—”

Lakini started to laugh. She tossed back her head, and her laughter filled the small room.

“And you believed him?” she finally asked, wiping tears from her eyes.   
 “I didn’t have much of a choice,” I said, irritated. “There was a Fae promise involved.”

“A Fae promise?” Lakini frowned, confused. “I don’t understand. Are you a werewolf or a Fae?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, staring to feeling annoyed.

Lakini sat back in her chair and looked at me, her gaze assessing. “Well?”

“Well what?” I asked.

“Well, why should I care? *I* didn’t make a Fae promise. Why is any of this my problem?”

I leaned toward her and raised an eyebrow, threading my voice with menace. “Because I could still kill you.”

Lakini eyed me. “I believe that, I suppose. Is that the promise you made with Charon? He’s been wanting me out of the picture for a while. Kill Lakini, break the curse?”

I sat back. “I’ll admit, I don’t want to kill you. If I did want to, you’d be dead by now. I don’t like killing people, but I’ll do it if there are no other options on the table.”

Slowly, I reached for the gun. Lakini watched me as I opened the chamber and removed the bullets. I dropped each of them onto her desk with a distinct thud, waiting for her response. I knew I was overstating the Fae promise angle, and I was hoping there was enough wiggle room in the promise to avoid killing Lakini while still staying true to the promise and keeping Cali safe. But this woman didn’t need to know that I was looking for a loophole. Not yet, anyway.

“What did that hack tell you about me?” Lakini asked, watching as I set the gun back down on her desk.

I shrugged. “Not much. He implied that you had been ruining his business, stealing his customers. That you’re not a very nice person, overall.” I glanced down at the gun. “I guess I can see where he’s coming from on that one, at least.”

Lakini laughed again, but the sound was cold and bitter. “Ruining *his* business? Stealing *his* customers? He said that? And you believed him?” She shook her head. “You’re not as smart as you think you are, wolf.”

I swept the silver bullets off the table and into my pocket. There was no sense in leaving them there and giving the witch an opportunity to turn the tables on me. I had to keep the upper hand. I had to make this happen and protect Cali from that promise.

“You asked me what Charon said about you—I’m just telling you what he said,” I said evenly. “I’m just relaying information. I never said I believed him.”

Lakini scoffed and shook her head. “I wonder…”

“About what?” I said, as though we were having a friendly conversation.

Her eyes were dark. “I wonder if you want to hear the *real* reason why Charon wants to have me killed.”

**Episode 2425**

XAVIER

I couldn’t blame Lilac for objecting to the drink Swift had given him—I remembered that thing, and it was *disgusting*. Like drinking a hallucinogenic hemp smoothie.

Swift had poured some of the drink into a bowl, but as he bent down to offer it to Plum, the wolf growled menacingly. Swift backed up and looked around at the rest of us.

“I’ll do it,” Violet said, stepping forward.

She rubbed the wolf’s head and set the bowl in front of him. Plum drank a little, whined in protest, but then drank the rest when Violet softly urged him.

Finished, he settled himself back down on the floor.

I looked between Lilac and his wolf, trying to remember how long it had taken for Swift’s drink to have an effect on me, but it was hard to recall. The memories of that experience were muddled, and the whole process blurred together.

Swift moved silently about, and some soft music began to play. It was some dumbass New Age synth sound with someone chanting over the top, and it made my skin crawl.

“Is that really necessary?” I snapped, looking over at the guy.

Swift looked offended. “It’s part of the experience. *Most* of my clients seem to enjoy it. Maybe if you opened your mind a little to some new experiences, you might enjoy it too.”

“This isn’t about me—or you, for that matter,” I growled. “This is about Lilac.”

“My brother doesn’t like this kind of music,” Violet said. “He’s more into the alt-rock sound.”

Swift made a horrified face. “That is not appropriate for reaching the subconscious. I wouldn’t advise it.”

I put my finger on Lilac’s wrist to feel his pulse. It was there, but slow, and his skin felt cold and clammy—almost lifeless. I ground my teeth as anger flashed through me. If Swift killed Lilac, Swift was going to follow him to the afterlife.

As I looked at Lilac’s pale face, I felt myself growing cold. Was this what I’d looked like when I’d taken Swift’s nasty elixir? Had I looked like I was hovering between life and death?

Of course, I hadn’t gone into things already on the verge of death, like Lilac had. Our situations were different in a lot of ways.

I just hoped I hadn’t made a mistake, bringing Lilac here today.

Violet’s face was drawn and pinched with worry, and I reached for her hand.

“It’s okay,” I said softly. “I know this looks scary, but I’ve done this, and Lilac can do it, too.”

Over Violet’s shoulder, Kira was looking doubtful.

There was the soft click of a lighter, and I looked over to see Swift lighting what looked like a thick wand of sage.

“Now I’m going to lead Lilac to the threshold of the state of realization,” he said in a low, airy voice. “I’ll need some room.”

I stepped back, biting my tongue. I just wished Sage would talk like a normal person, but I supposed that was too much to ask for.

Swift waved the sage as he stepped toward Lilac, then knelt next to the cot. “Are you ready,” he began, whispering into Lilac’s ear, “to go on this journey of self-realization?”

Why he was bothering to ask an unconscious man a question was beyond me, but at least he didn’t seem to expect an answer. He took one of Lilac’s hands—which made Plum stir and give a small growl, though he didn’t wake up. Swift hesitated for just a moment, looking over at the wolf, but then he looked back at Lilac.

“Try to open your mind,” he said softly. “Welcome yourself into the world you can’t see, my brother. You will learn to follow the flow, as a wave upon the ocean. You are the river’s current, and the gentle waves that lap at the edge of the lake.”

Swift was getting carried away with his water metaphors, and he seemed to be forgetting that the rest of us were even in the room. I stood next to Kira, who had her arm around Violet and was still looking worried.

“Do you have any idea what was in that drink?” I asked her. “Did it look familiar?”

Kira glanced up at me. “I think so. I caught a whiff—I think it’s got a lot of herbs that I’ve used before, but in very high does. That concentration will definitely knock you out.”

This information didn’t comfort me at all, but it was too late to go back now. I’d had the drink before and come out okay. The kid would too. I glanced over at Violet, who was watching Lilac carefully. I regretted bringing her. If things went sideways and turned ugly, I didn’t want her to see any of it.

Plum growled again but still didn’t wake.

I looked carefully at the wolf. He was motionless on the ground and seemed asleep, but perhaps he wasn’t. His eyes were only slits, but they were fixed on Swift—following his every move—and the wolf’s upper lip curled back.

It wasn’t hard to recognize this behavior. What was the wolf responding to? Was there something about Swift that Plum could sense?

Swift stood suddenly, releasing Lilac’s hand, and turned to us. “It’s not working.”

I shot a glance at Kira, then back at Swift. “What does that mean?”

Swift didn’t answer, but he reached for more elixir, which he’d mixed up in an old plastic jug.

“Hang on,” I said, stepping forward. “Hasn’t he had enough? He’s already knocked out.”

Swift shook his head. “Lilac is stuck.”

“Stuck where?”

“He doesn’t seem to be moving into the in-between.”

Violet narrowed her eyes. “Where *is* he, then?”

Plum growled again.

“He’s in some kind of coma-like state,” Swift said. He looked down at Plum. Maybe that’s why his dog is being so weird. Reacting to the fugue state, or maybe the in-between.”

“*What?*” Violet asked, stepping toward Swift.

I pulled her back. “Listen, man, you’d better explain what the hell is happening here—”

Lilac moaned, as though he were in excruciating pain.

“Lilac?” Violet gasped out. “Are you okay?”

Plum growled again and then raised his head. He turned toward Swift and curled his lip back, exposing his fangs. He kept growling, low and steady and terrifyingly constant.

I stared at the wolf, wondering if he was going to attack something. One thing was clear: something here had the wolf spooked.

“Just bring my brother back from wherever he is,” Violet demanded, her voice shaking.

Swift shook his head. “I can’t do that. It’s not that simple.”

Violet turned to Kira and me, her eyes flashing with panic. “Pull him back! Get him back! *Do something!*”

Plum kept growling and was watching Swift closely.

He took a step away. “That wolf is freaking me out. How am I supposed to concentrate when he’s growling like that? I can’t work like this.”

“Why aren’t you trying to guide Lilac like you did with me?” I asked. “Wherever the kid is or isn’t, he should have a guide, right? He doesn’t know where the hell he is. Who’s guiding him if you’re standing here, bitching about the wolf?”

“I’m telling you, I can’t reach him! I don’t know where—” Swift started, but I didn’t let him finish.

I was thinking about what it had been like when I’d done this, and what it was like for Lilac right now, to be in the in-between, by himself, all alone.

I grabbed fistfuls of Swift’s tunic. “You said you could do this. You said you could!”

Plum rose to his feet. His eyes were still hazy, but his growls were growing louder, more threatening, and he and Swift could have been alone in the room for all the attention he was paying to the rest of us.

“Back off!” Swift yelled, looking between me and the wolf. “All of you! I don’t know what your problem is. I told you there could be complications! I warned you! You signed the waiver—”

“I don’t give a fuck about the waiver!” I snarled, giving Swift a shake that rattled his teeth. “I want you to do what we came here for.”

“I’m trying—”

“Help Lilac get his damn wolf back,” I snapped.

“That’s what I’m trying to do,” Swift said, his face flushing with anger or fear—I couldn’t tell which. “But threatening me isn’t helping anything. It’s throwing off the energy in the room. Can’t you feel it?”

He pulled himself free from me and straightened his shirt.

I looked over at Violet, who had moved to Lilac’s side and was now kneeling beside him. Tears were coursing down her cheeks, falling onto her brother’s chest, but he wasn’t moving. He was barely breathing.

Anger and frustration clawed up my chest and into my throat. *No*. This was *not* happening. I was *not* going to let this happen. I wasn’t going to let Lilac stay in this unresponsive state. Wherever he was, he needed a guide.

“Get another glass of that elixir,” I snapped. “I’m going in.”

**Episode 2426**

Swallowing nervously, I rubbed at my collarbone where Ava had jabbed me. How could Ava have discovered the Samara pack plan? I’d only learned about it myself a little while ago.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I lied, trying to sound convincingly bewildered.

But Ava was *not* convinced. She narrowed her eyes. “You know *exactly* what I’m talking about, Cali. You’re always scheming, always trying to get rid of me. Well, it’s not going to work, so why don’t you and your little cronies just give it up?”

“I don’t know—” I started, but Ava cut me off.

“I’m going to be watching you,” she hissed. “And your friends.”

“Whatever,” I said, trying to sound casual, but my heart was hammering in my chest.

Ava turned to leave but stopped in the doorway. “You know, it’s almost funny how often I can’t help thinking how it would be so much better if *you* weren’t around.”

And without another word, she stormed out, leaving me alone in the living room to let out a long breath.

As I waited for my heart rate to return to normal, a wave of irritation washed over me. Had Ava just threatened me?

I rubbed my collarbone again. Why did Ava have such sharp fingernails? They were like little daggers.

And who the hell was *she* to make threats? If *anyone* should be making threats, it was *me*.

I remembered what Artemis had said—that I should just fight Ava. The idea was kind of tempting… But did I really want to take on a werewolf like Ava? And what would Xavier think of a fight between the two of us?

Part of him might be glad of it—but I still hadn’t fully mastered my magic, and I’d seen Ava in action. She had *definitely* mastered being a werewolf. She was strong and fast, and a fight between us could easily end up being a fairly ugly Fae slaughter.

And my mom wouldn’t like it. She’d get that disappointed look she always got whenever I did something she disapproved of. I could practically hear her voice in my head. *Violence is never the answer, sweetheart*.

Still, it would feel *so* good to blast Ava with all I had.

I had to force myself to stop fantasizing. I had a bigger problem to deal with—I needed to know exactly how much of the plan Ava had discovered, if any. That part—I was sure—would upset Xavier, because I knew he’d wanted to keep the plan on the down-low.

I couldn’t just go to him with nothing but accusations. I would need proof.

“Hey, Cali, are you okay?”

I looked up. Lola was standing in front of me. I’d been so lost in my thoughts, I hadn’t even noticed her walking in.

“I just passed Ava, and she looked pissed, and you looked pretty worried about something. What’s going on?” Lola looked at me anxiously.

“Ava found out about the plan.”

“What plan?” Lola frowned.

“*The* plan! To find an Alpha and get the Samara pack back together. That plan!” I exploded.

Lola looked stunned. “How did she find out?”

“I have no idea,” I admitted, shaking my head. “But she’s pissed, so we’d better be careful.”

Lola paced angrily away. “Well that’s just *great*. I mean, it might not have been the best plan I’ve ever heard, but it wasn’t the worst. It had potential. And now we’ve got nothing!”

“Nothing,” I agreed gloomily. “And we need *something*. If anyone wants Ava to have a reason to hit the road—for good—it’s me.” I crossed my arms across my chest. “Hey—off-topic—do you think I could take Ava in a fight?”

Lola gave me a wide-eyed stare. “*What?*”

“You know, Ava and me, one-on-one. Do you think I could take her?”

Her eyes widened. “Listen, girl, if you’re doing it, sign me up. I’ll be your second.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not going to challenge her to a *duel*, Lola. I don’t think you need a second unless it’s pistols at dawn and you’re a founding father, or something.”

“It’s too bad you aren’t,” Lola said. “But, if you’re actually asking, I think you should probably practice your magic a bit more before you take on Ava. You’re good, Cali, but… You know.”

I sighed.

“What?” Lola asked.

“Nothing. I wish Xavier were here. He’d know what to do. Though he might try to kill Ava if he knew she’d threatened me like that.”

“That’s a great idea,” Lola said, her face lighting up. “You should tell Xavier—”

“Absolutely not,” I said quickly.

“Why not? He’d want to know.”

I shook my head. “He’s dealing with enough as it is.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “Cali, he’s going to be pissed if he finds out what Ava said to you from someone else—”

“I’ll tell him if there’s anything to tell,” I assured Lola. “If Ava’s behavior goes beyond her usual threats.”

Lola flopped down onto the couch. “Fine. Have you heard from Xavier yet?”

I shook my head, remembering I was supposed to be texting Violet. “No, and I’m getting a little worried. They’ve been gone for a while, and I haven’t heard anything from anyone.”

*Wondering how everyone is. Any news?*

The message had been delivered to Violet, but, like the other texts I’d sent, it hadn’t been read.

My mind cycled through a list of possibilities. Had there been an accident? Had something shady happened with that Swift guy? Had there been an ambush by the Vanguards, or some other rival pack?

The more I thought about it, the worse I felt. This was something I really hated about being a werewolf mate—my mates were always in some sort of danger.

“Hey,” Lola said, getting up from the couch and pulling me into a hug, “Don’t get yourself worked up, okay? Greyson and Xavier are more than capable of handling whatever comes at them.”

“I know,” I said quietly. I knew she was right, but it didn’t make things any easier. I looked down at my phone, noting the time. How long should I wait before I started to truly panic?

“Put it away,” Lola said, pushing my phone away. “It’s only making you feel worse.”

Staring at the blank screen—empty of new notifications—*wasn’t* helping, so I slipped it into my pocket.

“So, any idea what I should do about my dads?” Lola asked, trying to pivot the conversation. She sat back down on the couch, looking worried. “They keep asking me about college and stuff.”

“Well, you could try and go back to—”

“No way, not with everything going on. It’s impossible. But I hate lying to them.” She chewed her lip thoughtfully for a moment. “Maybe I need to tell them what I am.”

“*Oh*,” I said, a little startled by this. “Are you sure? I mean… How do you explain that? And think about how they might take that information. And what they might do. I mean, he’s come around, but look at what the news of my being Fae did to my dad initially.”

Lola nodded. “He freaked out, didn’t he?”

“Big time. I know he was mainly just worried about me, but yeah, he freaked. It might be asking a little too much to expect your dads to fully grasp your reality,” I reasoned. “I mean, you’re not *just* a werewolf, but also a vampire.”

“It’s a lot,” Lola agreed.

I nodded. “I think you just want to consider how to talk about it without them freaking out. I’m not saying *not* to tell them, but… it could be messy.” I paused. “I’m sorry. I know maybe this isn’t what you wanted to hear from your friend, but it’s true. If I’ve learned anything, it’s that the supernatural world is this huge secret and there are just some people who are better off not knowing anything about it.”

Lola thought about this for a long moment. “I don’t know for sure how my dads would react, but—based on their history—probably not well.” She leaned back on the couch and stared up at the ceiling. “I hate this. I feel terrible. My stomach is all in knots.”

My mom walked in with a cup of tea. “Hello, girls.”

I turned to her expectantly. Maybe she would have some good advice on how to break this kind of news. Though, maybe not, considering she’d waited twenty years before telling me about my Fae heritage.

But before I had a chance to ask her anything at all, she handed me an envelope.

“This just came for you, sweetheart.”

As I felt the creamy paper beneath my fingers, I felt my heart rate tick up. I knew this cardstock. It was from the Vanguard pack.

I broke the golden wax seal with shaking fingers. Surprise, surprise—it was a message from Lucian, written in his loopy calligraphy. It was an invitation for me to come to the Vanguard palace. Today.

**Episode 2427**

GREYSON

*I wonder if you want to hear the real reason why Charon wants to have me killed.*

Lakini’s dark eyes challenged me, and I was intrigued. I’d already heard Charon’s side of the story, and I had to admit I was interested in Lakini’s. Maybe she’d have something to say that could get Xavier and me out of the obvious way of handling this deal.

“Okay,” I said, shrugging. “Let’s hear it.”

Lakini gave me a hard stare. “The shortest version is that Charon is my ex.”

My eyebrows went up in surprise. Of all the many reasons for witches to be hostile to one another, this seemed the most personal—and maybe the most understandable. But there was more to this—I could feel it. The anger was still coming off Lakini in waves, and I was glad I’d already pocketed the silver bullets.

She laughed. “I can see by the look on your face that you’re surprised. It’s probably hard to picture the two of us as a couple. Am I right?”

“I don’t even want to try,” I admitted, which made her smirk.

“When he and I were together—before things went bad between us—it was good. Great, even. We were a true team. A power couple. We were both ambitious in the same way, and we built up a business that was unrivaled in Portland. Probably in all of Oregon.” She leaned forward. “But you know how it is. You get two witches together like that, and there’s always a favorite. One guess who it was. Most of the magic our clients came in for was my specialty, not Charon’s.”

“What *is* Charon’s specialty?” I asked.

Lakini gave a bark of laughter. “Now *that’s* a good question,” she said, running a hand along the shaved side of her scalp. “The guy’s a showman. He’d probably be better off performing in Vegas than actually trying to help people with magic solutions. He uses easy, flashy magic to impress people who are looking for simple answers.”

I nodded, but not in agreement. Not for the first time, I found myself wishing I knew more about magic—I had no idea how much of what Lakini was telling me was real and how much was bullshit. I didn’t often find myself missing her, but this would’ve been a great time to have Big Mac around.

“Anyway, after about five years of that dog and pony show, the honeymoon was over. He made that crystal clear. So I took off.”

“Where’d you go?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Traveled. Went east for a while. India, Morocco, went pretty deep into the Amazon. I needed to clear my head, get over him and all the bullshit. It took some time, but I managed it. When I came back into town, Charon was still at it. But when my customers heard I was back, they came back to me. I was always better at magic than Charon.” She narrowed her inky black eyes. “I’m not poaching anyone’s customers, wolf.”

“That’s not what Charon believes,” I said mildly.

She rolled her eyes. “He was always jealous of me, but he’d die before he admitted it. But these are *my* customers. They were before, and now they’re just returning for my superior services. That’s called a market economy.” She sat back, and her chair gave a mechanical squeak. “Charon is just bitter. He’s always had an ego bigger than his talent, and he wasn’t expecting that our old customers would choose me over him. It pissed him off, but I haven’t done anything wrong.”

I gritted my teeth. I wasn’t crazy about finding myself in the middle of what was clearly nothing more than a domestic dispute. These two needed a social worker or a couples’ therapist, not a werewolf. “That’s a nice little story, but it doesn’t change the fact that I have to deal with you, based on my deal with Charon.”

Lakini shrugged. “I don’t see how that’s my problem.”

She was lethally wrong about that. If I didn’t get this done, then Cali would be in breach of her Fae promise and at risk, and there was no way I was going to let that happen.

Getting to my feet, I partially shifted and let my fingernails become claws. I dug them into the wood of the desk, making deep gouges in the hard wood as easily as if it were butter.

“It’s very simple,” I said softly. “Either we do this the easy way, and you cooperate, or we do this the hard way.”

Lakini looked down at the desk and my razor-sharp claws, then back up at me. I could see her making some hasty calculations behind her eyes. She was a powerful witch, but even she could see that in terms of speed, all I had to do was swipe at her to slit her throat.

“Fine,” she said, holding a hand up. “You’ve made your point. Maybe we can negotiate.”

“That’s all I’m asking for.”

Lakini thought for a moment. “Tell me the exact words of this so-called Fae promise.”

I studied her face, wondering if this was some kind of trap. Would telling her the phrasing of the Fae promise give her some kind of advantage? I couldn’t see how, but my gut-level distrust of all witches and warlocks made me cautious. I thought through it quickly and couldn’t find any risk. “Charon told us to *deal with* you.”

“Deal with me?” she repeated.

“Those words exactly.”

Lakini nodded thoughtfully. “Was there any explicit reference to murder in the promise?”

I thought about how Cali had naturally assumed that Charon was talking about murder. “No, not explicitly. It was more implied.”

Lakini nodded again, looking visibly relieved. She chewed on her thumbnail as she thought. “Things between Charon and me soured a long time ago, but I knew it would never come to that.”

“What do you mean?”

She shook her head. “He would never actually arrange to have me killed.”

“I’m not so sure that you should be relieved. Leaving out the words *kill her* might just have been an oversight,” I told her. “He wasn’t what you might call complimentary when he talked about you. Based on what he said, and how he said, it, I don’t know if he’d break down crying if told him I’d killed you after all.”

Lakini shot me an angry look, and I raised an eyebrow.

“Would you shed a tear if I killed Charon?” I asked curiously. I’d seen her anger when she talked about him, and somehow, I doubted she would.

It was sad, really. She’d said they were together for five years. That was a long time. They must have been happy together at some point. I couldn’t imagine ever feeling that kind of anger toward Cali, or knowing she felt that way toward me. I’d just never been able to understand how people who’d loved each other could turn so violently against each other.

But then, there was Xavier and Ava. I remembered how they’d been when they were young, before everything had happened. They’d seemed to love each other. But now…

But even Xavier—despite all his anger toward Ava—would never hire someone to kill her.

Though, he had killed her once before, so maybe that wasn’t the best template to use as an example.

I realized I’d been lost in my thoughts and cleared my throat, trying to shake myself out of it. Lakini must have been lost in hers as well, because she looked up when I stirred.

“So, what can we do? Can we resolve this without killing anyone?” I asked.

Lakini gave me a cool look. “This is an odd conversation.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah, you come to me, tell me you have to kill me, and then want *me* to solve the problem of how not to.” Anger sparked in her eyes. “Do you make a habit of killing people you don’t know? Is that who you are?”

“I prefer to not to, but I make exceptions when it’s warranted.”

“When it’s *warranted*?” Lakini repeated, her tone icy.

I nodded. “If you’re wondering, you haven’t crossed that threshold. Yet.”

Her bronze skin flushed, and her eyes nearly crackled with electric fury as she leaned forward. “I don’t like the sound of that not-very-veiled threat, wolf, but I’ll tell you what: I *do* have a solution for you. One that doesn’t end up with you sticking a knife in me. Want to hear it?”

“Shoot,” I said warily.

“Why don’t you scurry back and tell Charon to go fuck himself? Tell him, from me, that he can shove his paltry threats right up his own stupid ass. He doesn’t own this damn town, and there’s no way I’m going anywhere. And if he wants me gone, he’s going to have show his fucking face and take me out himself.” Her eyes were dark as black holes, and she seethed with anger. “How’s that for a solution?”

**Episode 2428**

*Dearest Caliana,*

*I request the pleasure of your company so that we may speak of the holiest Seluna, and so that I may help walk you through the next steps of your journey. I look forward to your presence at my ancestral home before the day is over.*

*Yours always,*

*Lucian*

I stared at the message, baffled. Next steps? This was the first I’d ever heard Lucian speak about next steps regarding Seluna. What the hell did that even entail? And as far as Seluna was concerned, the marks on my back weren’t actually troubling me. They were still there, of course, looking weird as hell, but there’d been no more random burning or debilitating pain, no more terrifying dreams, no additional handprints, nothing.

My thoughts went to the talisman Lucian had given me. The one Swift had told us was a worthless fake. Was that true? If the talisman was useless, had Seluna backing off happened just by luck? Or had the fake talisman had some kind of placebo effect on me?

But that didn’t make any sense. I’d known last night that the talisman wasn’t having any effect, yet I’d slept deeply and soundly, without any Seluna dreams.

My mom had been reading the note upside down, and now she looked up at me. “Oh, Cali. What are you going to do, sweetheart?”

I bit my lip nervously. “What do you think I should do?”

She wrapped her hands around her mug of tea. “Well, my first instinct as your mother is to say you absolutely shouldn’t go.”

I could have guessed that was going to be her answer. And I tended to agree with her, but on the other hand, I wasn’t sure how Lucian would take an outright rejection of his offer. Not well, would be my guess, and the last thing I wanted to do was stir up more trouble with the Vanguard pack.

But what if I *did* go? I considered this possibility. Would I be able to find out more about Seluna? Would I be able to find a way to break Aysel’s damn revulsion curse? I’d never talked to Lucian about what Aysel had done. I wondered if he was even aware that his sister was indebted to an asshole of a warlock. He seemed to be caught constantly off-guard by his sister’s antics, but I wondered how he’d feel about finding out how much she owed. Charon had been very vague about the actual number, but it was probably thousands. Curses didn’t come cheap.

Then again, maybe Lucian already knew what Aysel had been up to. Or maybe he didn’t but wouldn’t care. He was oddly permissive with her.

I tapped the letter against my fingernail as I thought about this. Even if Lucian did know about Aysel and the warlock, and didn’t care, maybe there was still a way to exploit that and get Lucian to help me break the curse.

“Cali?” my mom said, bringing my thoughts back to the living room. “I know that look. You’re thinking of going.”

“I haven’t decided,” I said honestly. “I’d like to talk it over with Xavier and Greyson first.”

My mom nodded. “I understand that. But no matter what they say, I want you to consider not heading over to that strange wolf prince’s home. I don’t trust him.”

I smiled. “I promise, Mom.”

My mom sighed. “Okay.” She smiled, though she still looked worried.

I watched her leave, then pulled my phone back out. There were still no messages. I tried to call Xavier, but it went straight to voicemail.

“Dammit,” I muttered, feeling frustrated and anxious.

I tried Greyson. Voicemail, too.

I could feel my palms starting to sweat. What the hell was going on in Portland? Were all the cell towers down? Why could no one pick up their damn phones?

If I went to Lucian’s house without talking to them—and without them with me—I knew they’d both be upset. But Lucian’s message had said to come today.

*Before the day is over.*

I rolled my eyes. It was *so* like Lucian. So annoyingly royal. He expected everyone to just drop whatever they were doing whenever he wanted something. It would serve him right if I just ignored the message completely.

“Hey, Cali.” Artemis walked into the living room, followed by Rishika. “Mom just told me about that invitation,” she said, tipping her chin toward the card in my hand.

“Are you kidding me?” I asked, appalled. “So much for mother-daughter confidentiality.”

“Hey, I’m part of that confidentiality. Anyway, are you going?” Artemis asked. “Have you decided?’

“I haven’t decided. I’m not sure what to do. It’s just so *frustrating*,” I exploded, dropping down onto the couch.

“What is?” Rishika asked.

“It just feels like there are so many things hanging in the balance all at once. Why is everything happening *right now*?” I demanded.

Artemis sat beside me on the couch. She didn’t hug me or take my hand or anything, but just having her near me felt comforting. “If you go, I’ll go with you. I’ll back you up.”

“Me too,” Rishika added. “Count me in.”

I smiled weakly at them. It meant a lot to me to have them on my side. “Thank you, both of you, but with Xavier and Greyson both gone, somebody needs to be here, looking out for the pack house. And that’s probably you, Rishika.”

Rishika’s mouth pressed into a grim line. “Maybe, but I don’t like the idea of Artemis going back to that house of horrors by herself. Someone else should go, even if it’s not me.”

I thought about this. She was probably right, and I knew I’d feel better. Part of me wished the whole pack could come with me. “Maybe there’s someone else who could come. Ravi, maybe?”

Rishika considered this. “Maybe,” she said, nodding slowly. “I could ask him.”

I watched her as she headed out of the room to find him. I was trying not to feel hopeless, but I really didn’t know what I was going to do.

Artemis pulled Lucian’s card from my hand. “Nice,” she said, brushing the paper with a finger. Then she read through the letter. “Hmm.”

“What does that mean?” I asked her.

She shrugged. “It just seems a little convenient that Lucian ‘requests the pleasure of your company’ while both your mates are out of the picture.”

A thrill of fear shivered down my spine. “Do you think Lucian knows they’re gone? How would he know that?” I glanced quickly around the room. “Do you think he’s spying on us or something? Bugging our phones?”

Artemis frowned. “Why would he put bugs in the phones?” She shook her head. “As for the spying thing, yeah, I think it’s possible. I wouldn’t take any possibilities off the table for the moon prince and his weirdo Vanguard minions. That group is less like a pack and more like a cult. Remember the last time you were there?”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course I do. It’s kind of hard to forget.”

“I’ll bet it is. You ended up locking lips with the prince while standing waist-high in milk. All while his sister kept trying to sleep with your mate.” She shook her head. “That must have been a wild scene.”

I scowled at the memory.

Artemis nodded. “And remember Greyson’s date with Aysel, and how he came back smelling like her perfume? That’s probably not something you want to smell again.”

I rubbed my hand across my eye. “God, Artemis, it sounds so much worse when you say it all out loud. That place really is a house of horrors, isn’t it?”

“Kinda, yeah.”

“But what if Lucian just wants to check the handprints on my back, or something?” I reasoned. “They’re so connected to Seluna over there, and last time he told me that Seluna would reappear. And that it would be a sign to come back and perform that stupid milk bathing ceremony again.”

Artemis frowned. “*Has* Seluna appeared to you again?”

I shook my head. “No, she hasn’t.”

“So why does he want to see you?”

“I—I don’t know. It must be about something else. He said something about next steps. I don’t really know what that means,” I admitted.

Artemis looked down at the letter for a long moment. Then she sighed. “I guess there’s really only one way to find out.”

“I guess so,” I agreed.

Before we could say anything else, Ravi appeared in the doorway. He was breathing hard and pulling on a pair of dark grey sweatpants. “Hey, what’s up? I just ran into Rishika after my run, and she said you all want me to go with Cali to the Vanguard palace?”

Artemis nodded. “Yeah, that’s what we were thinking. For backup. You in?”

“Sounds good,” Ravi said, wiping a hand across his brow.

I smiled. “Seems like your mind’s made up.”

Ravi shrugged. “I guess so. When do we leave?”

**Episode 2429**

XAVIER

Swift barely had a chance to finish pouring the elixir into the chalice before I reached for it. Even before I took a drink, I remembered what it tasted like. The smell was enough to bring the memories roaring back. Lilac had been right about it tasting like dirty socks. But he’d undersold it. It was a like a locker room full of dirty socks. That had been worn by zombies with questionable hygiene. I was about to take my first drink when Violet and Kira both yelled—

“*STOP!*”

Violet reached for the chalice and pulled it away from my mouth. “Don’t do this, Xavier!”

I looked at her, then at Lilac lying motionless on the cot. “Why the hell not?”

Tears were streaming down Violet’s face. “If Lilac isn’t doing well—if he might be lost—we can’t lose you, too.”

Kira nodded. “If you go in, what’s to prevent you from getting lost, too? What if you can’t get out either?”

“Who made you the experts? That rarely ever happens,” Swift pointed out, looking irritated.

Ignoring Swift, I looked at Violet and Kira. “I know what you’re saying, and I appreciate the concern, but you’re forgetting: I’ve been in there before. I can handle this. I know what to expect when I get in there.”

“But what if you don’t come out?” Violet asked, her voice shaking. She looked terrified.

“What are we supposed to tell your brother?” Kira asked.

I rolled my eyes. “I doubt he’ll be all that concern—”

“What are we supposed to tell Cali?” Kira asked pointedly.

This stopped me, and when I thought of Cali, my heart gave a painful thud. I should call her. Let her know I was doing this. Kira and Violet were right—something could go wrong. Swift had warned us what could happen to Lilac for a reason—and made us sign that damn waiver—but Lilac was the reason I *had* to go in there.

In my gut, I knew it was what Cali would want me to do. As crazy as it was, it was what she would do, too.

“Xavier,” Kira said quietly. “Please. Just think about this for a second. We need you here.”

I looked at her, confused. There was something in her voice and her eyes that I didn’t understand. A message I couldn’t quite read.

“Get another cot,” I barked, turning to Swift. “Now. I’m doing this.”

“Xavier—”

“Please, Xavier, stop, you can’t—”

But I waved them off. “I know what I’m doing. I have to do this. This is Lilac,” I said, looking at Violet. “He’s your brother. We lost him once, and if we lose him again—on my watch—I wouldn’t want to stick around anyway. He’s a member of our pack. I’m not leaving him behind.”

“But Xavier—”

Ignoring Violet, I pulled my phone out of my pocket for a quick look. There were dozens of notifications—calls and texts, all from Cali—and I felt my heartbeat speed up at the sight of them. Shit. Was everything all right back at the house?

I scanned quickly through her texts.

*Any news?*

*r u okay???*

*miss you*

*seriously, are you okay???*

*text me when you can*

*why aren’t you picking up?!?!?*

I could see Cali’s desperation growing as the messages progressed, and my heart clenched. Violet and Kira were right. If for some reason I wasn’t able to come back out of this in-between that Swift was talking about, what would that do to Cali? It broke my heart to think of leaving her like that, especially the thought of sending her running into Greyson’s arms.

I felt myself hesitate for the first time as I thought about what to do. What I really *wanted* to do. I didn’t want to leave Cali, and I did worry about her, and that was a strong motivator. But there was something else—there was my rock-solid determination. I looked over at Lilac and felt my resolve strengthen. I knew I was strong enough to get myself and Lilac out of whatever fucking in-between space was holding him. I wasn’t going to let myself get stuck and leave Cali behind. I was going to drink that funky elixir, get inside, get Lilac, and get both our asses out.

*I’m fine. I’ll call soon. No news yet. Lilac’s doing his best.*

I paused for a moment and looked down at the text, then added another line.

*I love you.*

I sent the message and pocketed the phone before she could respond or ask any more questions. And before Kira or Violet could make any more arguments against it, Swift came out of the storage space in the back, rolling a second collapsible cot.

“There you go,” he said, sliding it into place next to Lilac’s. “No more pillows, so sorry about that. Usually I’m more full service, but this is all getting a little catch-as-catch-can.”

“Whatever,” I muttered, sitting down on the cot. “Okay, tell me what I need to do. How do I get to where Lilac is?”

Swift handed me the cup again—I’d put it down on the floor to check my messages. “So, if you’re able to focus on Lilac as you drink and go under, you should be able to find both him and his wolf right away. They should be right there when you arrive, because their physical bodies are right here.”

Swift gestured down at the sleeping figures.

“You see, the in-between is so much more connected to the physical world than any of you could ever really understand. We think of these two planes as being fully separate, but nothing could be further from the truth. Like everything—light, sound, space, reality itself—it’s all a continuum, bent and shaped by our own perception. That’s the thing about connectivity…”

Swift kept going, but I tuned him out. But I was glad to hear that I’d probably be able to find Lilac and Plum in the same place. That would make things easier. It made me feel more positive. I was going to do this. I was going to get into whatever altered space Swift was blathering on about, find Lilac and Plum, and bring them back—connected as one, and good as new.

But when I looked over at the Lilac in the here and now—the physical plane, as Swift called it—I felt a little less certain. He was still pale, but he’d started to sweat and shake. Violet was holding his hand.

My resolve held. I *had* to do this. For them. Lilac was just a kid, and he’d been through so much. He’d died, come back, lost his wolf. Violet had lost a brother, gotten him back, and was losing him again. It was too much, and they didn’t deserve any of it.

I looked up at Kira, who gave me a rueful smile, apparently resigned to the fact that I was going to do this.

“Good luck, Xavier,” she said quietly.

I nodded once, then looked up at Swift. “Guide me in, Swifty, and I’ll guide him out.”

The hippie nodded. “Once you find Lilac and Plum, all you have to do is get them to follow you.”

“That’s it?” I asked.

“That’s it,” he assured me. “Then you’ll wake up here, in the sanctuary, surrounded by your friends and spiritual guide. That’s me.” He smiled down at me.

I rolled my eyes, but I hoped to hell he was right about that part. Then I downed the liquid in the cup. It was thick and gloopy and absolutely disgusting. I leaned back on the cot and tried to center my focus on Swift’s melodic voice. Almost immediately, I felt myself starting to drift away. It felt like being pulled out to sea.

“—and you will disconnect from your physical form, Xavier, and this will free your mind. You will feel weightless, you will feel untethered, you will feel free to be the person you were always meant to be…”

Even as I drifted off, I was annoyed by Swift, so I tried to tune him out and tune into Lilac.

*Lilac! Lilac!*

I tried calling him through the mind link, but there was no response.

“You will feel weightless…” Swift was saying, and then suddenly, I *did* feel weightless.

Completely weightless, like gravity had taken a day off. I felt separate from my body, and my eyes jolted open. I sat up and looked around.

I was in a forest, surrounded my trees. I recognized it, only this time I wasn’t being chased. I looked down, and there was my wolf. Separate from me, but next to me—at my side. That was a relief.

So, now all I had to do was find Lilac and Plum and get them to follow me.

I looked around, expecting to see them nearby, just like Swift had said. But after looking in all directions, I couldn’t find any sign of Lilac or Plum anywhere. I came to one irrefutable conclusion: I was completely, and utterly… alone.

**Episode 2430**

GREYSON

I ground my teeth, frustration coursing through me at Lakini’s furiously stubborn response. What the hell kind of game did this witch think I was playing? What was *she* playing? Whatever the answers to those questions, one thing was clear: I’d been wasting my time trying to reason with her. She didn’t want to help me figure out a way to get around the Fae promise, even if it saved her skin.

“You want me to tell Charon to come get you himself? You really want to me to give him an ultimatum like that?” I growled. “Or are you just testing me? Trying to see if I’d really kill you? Because I’m not sure you want to find out.”

I was mad as hell, but Lakini didn’t even blink as I glowered down at her. Whatever hint of fear I’d seen flicker across her eyes when I’d first shifted was long gone, and her eyes were as hard as flint.

“I think I’ve just figured you out,” she said coldly.

“Is that right?”

“Yeah.”

“And what have you found?” I asked menacingly.

She glared at me, radiating anger like waves of heat. “I think you’re trying to do everything in your power to avoid killing me, no matter what promise you made to Charon. Which tells me that you’re not a natural killer.”

I gave a bark of bitter laughter. “Yeah,” I said, sarcasm dripping off my tongue, “you’ve really got me all figured out.”

She wasn’t completely wrong, but she certainly wasn’t right about me not being a killer. I didn’t pride myself on a high body count, the way some werewolves did, but I’d been around for a long time, and I wasn’t exactly a shrinking violet when the moment called for violence. I’d been raised by Silas, after all.

“The thing is, witch,” I snarled, “I think you’re overplaying your hand. I’m not just a werewolf, I’m an Alpha. And maybe you need me to show you what that means.”

She didn’t even flinch. “You’re trying to scare me into leaving. You think running me out of town will be enough, and you can report back to Charon that you dealt with me, or whatever. Well it’s not happening, Alpha. I’m not falling for it. I’ve got a good life here—I’ve got people who depend on me—and that bastard Charon broke my fucking heart. He tried to take everything from me, and I’m not going to sit back and let him take one more damn thing away from me.” She narrowed her eyes. “Even if he is a coward who tries to hire other people to do his dirty work. So why don’t you go on back and tell that asshole that if he wants to take me out, he’ll have to do it his own damn self?”

She was gripping the arms of her chair so hard her knuckles had turned white, and I groaned inwardly. Why was she being so damn stubborn? Did she *want* to die? I’d just told her that her bastard ex had ordered a hit on her, and she was refusing to do anything about it. Digging in her heels like she had a fucking death wish.

“I’m not your messenger boy, and I don’t ‘report back,’” I snapped. “If you want to tell Charon something, you can tell him yourself. But things don’t have to go this way—”

“*Get out*,” she spat furiously, jumping to her feet. “Get out, wolf, before I force you out.”

I gave her a hard look. This was bullshit. I wasn’t making any progress here. I knew that I still needed to resolve things with Charon, but—as much as I hated to admit it—until I came up with some other angle, I was going to need Lakini to work with me.

“I’ll be back,” I said, shifting my fingernails back to human. “And that’s a promise.” I was going to have to try again when she was less pissed off at the world.

She didn’t say a word as I left the office and walked back toward the stairs. Back in the dim light and fetid smell of the Rusty Wrench, I ran a hand through my hair, feeling frustrated.

“*Fuck*,” I muttered.

That had *not* gone as planned. Not even close. True, I’d learned a few more thing about Lakini—mainly that she and Charon used to be hot and heavy, and that he’d broken her heart—but that didn’t seem extremely relevant to why I’d started this. And I wasn’t any closer to breaking that curse than I had been when I’d gone in.

I thought of Charon’s anger when he talked about Lakini, and of her anger when she talked about him. Now that I better understood the dynamics at play between them, I wasn’t sure if they were ever going to see eye to eye.

Maybe I’d played this all wrong. Maybe I’d been too soft with both of them. I could have been more threatening. I had no intention of going in there and murdering anyone, but neither of them knew that, and I should have capitalized on that unknown element. Maybe I should have gone in there with more menace from the start—it might have scared the witch enough to make her willing to cooperate.

I needed to think through my next move, and I needed a drink, so I dropped into a seat at the bar.

The bartender ambled over to me. “What’ll you have?”

“Whiskey. Neat.”

As he slid a heavy tumbler toward me, I scrubbed a hand along my jaw. Maybe next time with Lakini, I’d handle things differently—*if* I got another chance.

I pulled my phone out and saw a ton of new notifications. There was nothing from Xavier, but I’d missed a bunch of texts and calls from Cali.

I quickly scanned through the texts. She was clearly worried about what was happening, and she didn’t seem to know where I was, which meant she didn’t know that I’d paid Lakini a surprise visit. I didn’t know what to tell her. I didn’t want to lie to her about it—that wasn’t what we’d agreed to.

Taking a drink of my whiskey—which was surprisingly decent—I sent her a vague message in return.

*Haven’t heard from Xavier either. On my way to check on him. How’s everything at the house?*

I waited for a reply, but none came. I wondered if that was because she was mad that I’d taken so long to reply.

I hoped not. Maybe it was something else. Maybe she’d gotten sucked up into one of Torin’s Christmas games.

Taking another sip of my drink, I cast a glance around the bar. It was dim and dingy but fairly full. I wondered how many of these people were here for the drinks, and how many were here for Lakini and her witchcraft.

The bartender was at the other end of the bar, wiping down the bartop with what looked like a filthy dishcloth, a surly look on his face. It was hard to imagine that anyone came here for the atmosphere.

Feeling my gaze on him, the bartender looked over at me. “You finished?” he asked, nodding toward my drink.

I looked down at the glass. I was clearly *not* finished—I’d just started. “Not yet, man.”

He walked over to me. “Maybe you should go.”

I looked at the guy, anger coursing through me like a living thing. Lakini must have said something. I thought about punching the guy in the face. I didn’t like threats—even if they were vague. And I was pissed. Everything with Charon and Lakini was catching up to me. I wished I’d handled it differently, wished I’d had more information going in. I didn’t even want the fucking drink. I was only here—in this fucking dump of a bar, trying to reason with two insane witches—because I wanted to be with Cali. And if I was going to figure a way out this mess, it wasn’t going to involve hitting this guy or sitting in this shithole stewing about my missteps.

“Yeah, I’ll go,” I growled, getting to my feet. “Maybe you can suggest another bar—one that isn’t crawling with disease, and that has a bartender who isn’t an asshole? Know anyplace like that?”

The bartender’s eyes narrowed, and I saw his hands ball into fists, but I just smiled.

“Keep the change,” I muttered, tossing some cash onto the bartop, then I headed toward the door.

I was on the street and heading toward my car when I heard the footsteps behind me. I was sick of this place and everyone in it, so I ignored them. But as I reached for my keys, an arm came around my neck from behind, and I was pulled into a tight headlock.

**Episode 2431**

Artemis and Ravi were both looking at me expectantly. I stared back at them for a moment before the penny dropped: looked like *I* was in charge of this mission.

“We can leave now,” I said uncertainly.

“When did he ask you to be there?” Artemis asked.

I looked back down at Lucian’s card and the note written in dark blue ink. “It’s just says he’s expecting me by the end of the day.” I rolled my eyes. “He couldn’t have been a little more specific? Like, would ‘meet me at five’ have been so hard to write?”

“Well, I’m just about ready. Let me take a quick shower, and then I’ll be good to go. Fifteen minutes, tops.” Ravi paused as he turned to go. “What kind of scene are we talking here? Should I dress up?” he asked, frowning.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “It’s not a party or anything. Besides, it’s not like Lucian ever bothers to get dressed up when I go over there. He’s always in some kind of silk dressing gown or something, like he ordered a costume called ‘sexy man who seduces women.’ Or else he’s just naked.”

I thought back to the moon milk bath with him and shuddered at the memory.

“Yeah, we’ll be ready when you are, Ravi,” Artemis said.

Ravi nodded. “Cool. I won’t take long.”

I smiled after him as he turned to go. I was glad he was coming with us, and I was grateful that I had my sister and the rest of the Redwood pack to back me up on this. I knew it was mostly their loyalty to Greyson and Xavier that motivated them, but I was grateful all the same. The Redwood pack was wild and sometimes a pain in the ass, and there were at least a couple of people who left their laundry in the dryer for days, but they were good people, and I was glad they were on my side.

“Let’s get ready to go,” I said, getting to my feet.

As we headed upstairs, Artemis gave me a sideways look.

“I know Lucian thinks he’s a prince, or whatever, but it’s not your job to be at that guy’s beck and call. You know that, right?”

“I know that,” I said, sighing. “I thought we went over this. I’m going to because there are things I want to know. Figuring out what’s going on with Seluna suits me, too. And I want to find out if Lucian knows that his sister is ordering curses from witches and not paying her debts.”

“Okay. But once you’re there, he’s going to keep acting like he can boss you around. You’re not going to let him, right?” she asked.

“I know what he’s like, Artemis. But I won’t go anywhere in that place without you or Ravi. I promise,” I assured her.

Artemis nodded. “Okay,” she said, looking satisfied with my answer. “You’d better not.”

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Forty minutes later, Artemis and I had our coats on and were waiting by the front door for Ravi.

“How long does it take a werewolf to take a shower?” I muttered, glancing at the time on the grandfather clock in the hall.

“Depends on how dirty they are,” Artemis replied.

I laughed and grabbed at my phone as it buzzed. “Oh my god!”

“What?” Artemis asked, looking over at me.

“Greyson texted back!” I scanned through the message. Wait, *what*? Greyson was going to check on Xavier? Why? Why did Xavier need checking on? I’d thought they were together.

Then I saw that Xavier had texted back, too.

“Are they okay?” Artemis asked, glancing over my shoulder at my phone.

“I think so,” I said slowly.

Xavier had said he was fine, and that he loved me. Which was… normal-ish. I tried not to read too much into it. Maybe there was nothing weird going on. Maybe they had separate errands to run, and they were meeting back up, and that was what Greyson had meant when he’d mentioned checking on Xavier.

Maybe.

God, I missed them. I was glad Artemis and Ravi were going with me, but I wished my mates were both here to help me deal with Lucian. The Vanguards were intense, and I was feeling a lot of anxiety at the prospect of dealing with them all on my own.

I should probably tell Greyson and Xavier what was going on. They might be upset about me going over there, but it wasn’t like I was going alone. I had plenty of reinforcements.

*Got a message from Lucian, and it sounds like I have to go over there tonight. You’re not going to be back from Portland in time. But don’t worry, I’m not going alone. Artemis and Ravi are coming with.*

I sent the message to both of them and waited, expecting infuriated calls, or maybe texted responses in all caps. But nothing came. No response at all.

Which felt extremely odd.

I checked the message. It had been delivered to both of them, but neither of them had read it.

My heart rate kicked up. Were they okay? Was Lilac okay? Maybe they were all fine. Maybe they were driving around Portland with the windows down, bonding.

Okay, that didn’t seem *super* likely, but it was better than any other worst-case scenario I was coming up with. It was really strange that they weren’t responding to my message, considering how both of them felt about Lucian.

I felt my resolve slipping, but I tried to stay strong. I *had* to go—I still wanted answers—but I had a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I gave my head a hard shake. I couldn’t think about that. I needed to be diplomatic about this. If I ignored Lucian’s message, he’d probably freak out. He was super-sensitive and seemed to hate being denied anything, and I had no idea what that would do. No, the safest choice was just to go to the house and see what he wanted.

Even if we called him, he’d probably drag it out so we’d have to go over and talk to him in person anyway. He had to be annoying on the phone, the kind of person who says, “No you hang up first.” Whatever. We’d go in and get out as fast as we could.

Finally, Ravi came down the stairs, his hair still wet. “Ready?” he asked, like we hadn’t been waiting for him.

Artemis rolled her eyes. “Let’s just go.”

“Are you leaving?”

I looked over my shoulder to see my mom coming out of the kitchen. “Yeah, we’re going. Don’t worry, Mom,” I said, seeing the worried look on her face. She always seemed to have that lately. “I’m going to be careful.”

My mom gave me a small smile. “I can’t promise not to worry, but I trust my daughters,” she said, looking between Artemis and me.

Hearing her say that made my throat feel tight for some reason. Tears collected in the corners of my eyes, but I dashed them away. I must have been feeling especially emotional because of that bad feeling I’d just had.

“Thanks, Mom,” I whispered, and she gave my hand a reassuring squeeze.

Outside, we piled into the car and Ravi drove us toward Vanguard land, following my directions.

Pulling up to the Vanguard house, Ravi let out a low whistle. “Wow. You didn’t mention that this place was a fucking palace.”

“Oh, I thought that was implied,” I said, surprised at his reaction.

“But the Vanguards claim they’re royalty, right? This house is like, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* times ten. Their pack’s loyalty is probably Kardashian level, too. Gotta stay true to the family.”

He was leaning forward, peering at the house through the windshield and looking a little spooked.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” he said. “We just need to be careful, you know? I’ve heard things about this pack. They’ve got a bad reputation.”

“Yeah, well, they’ve earned it,” I muttered. I pointed to the guard shack in front of the gate. “Pull up there.”

“Who are you here to see?” the guard asked, looking out his window at us.

I held up the card from Lucian, and the guard opened the gate without another question. Ravi parked the car near the door, and we stepped out.

As we neared the door, it swung open to reveal Andrei.

“Hello, there,” he said, without a drop of warmth in his voice.

“Hi,” I said, feeling tense.

“Come on in,” he said, moving back from the door.

“Thanks,” I muttered, and stepped into the marble-floored entrance hall.

But the second the three of us stepped into the house, a shrill blaring filled the air. It was an alarm, and it was deafening.

I covered my ears with my hands, but that didn’t even come close to blocking out the sound.

I glared up at Andrei. “What the hell is that?”

**Episode 2432**

XAVIER

Swift’s voice faded in and out, a rush of echoing sounds more than any kind of discernible speech. Hopefully whatever the hell he was trying to tell me, it wasn’t crucial, life-saving information.

*But even if he is trying to tell me something, it’s probably useless anyway. Obviously, he was wrong about how easy it’d be to find Lilac and Plum.*

That locker room tang from the elixir still clung to my tongue. Did they have mouthwash in the spirit world? Because it’d be great if I didn’t have to spend the rest of this spirit quest tasting gym socks. Saving Lilac was obviously priority number one, but getting rid of that flavor in my mouth? That could be a close second.

I looked around the forest I’d found myself in upon entering the spirit world. Lots of tall, dark trees, and no Lilac or Plum in sight. The entire world had a washed-out appearance, like it was some sad imitation of the world of the living.

I was at a disadvantage here, being separated from my wolf. I was stuck with the maddening human limitations on my sense of smell and hearing. But I still had my instincts, even if my abilities had gone with my wolf. My years as a mercenary would always yield certain advantages, so I had that going for me, at least. Plus, I could still communicate with my wolf.

I looked around again, scanning the ground for footprints, broken twigs, crushed leaves—the usual signs of someone walking through.

Instead, I got a whole lot of nothing. If this were the real world, Lilac and Plum wouldn’t have gotten far. Lilac and Plum had drunk the elixir only a short while before I’d arrived. Unfortunately, this was pretty much the exact opposite of the reality I knew. Time seemed to have its own nonlinear physics in here.

Lilac could be anywhere by now, honestly, and it was hard to not feel like I’d signed up to do the impossible.

I looked around the forest again, trying to orient myself. The trees stretching as far as the eye could see all seemed to be nearly identical.

*Shit, do I need to come back to this exact place to get back to Swift’s sanctuary?*

Too late. I’d have to deal with that later. I couldn’t bring anyone back if I didn’t find them first. I grabbed a stone off the ground and cut a deep, star-shaped divot into the bark on the side of the tree. Hopefully it would help me recognize this place later.

I looked down at my wolf, who hadn’t left my side since I’d stepped into this creepy-ass *Twilight Zone*. “Find Lilac or Plum’s scent.”

Tracking was the best possible way to find them—sooner rather than later.

My wolf sniffed around the clearing for a moment, knocking up leaves and twigs. My heart began to race. *Don’t tell me scents can’t be tracked in the spirit world…*

Then, *finally*, he broke into a lope and veered off through the forest. I hurried after him, jogging to keep him in my sights. There was a certain familiarity to all of this—it took me back to the last time I’d been here, in this strange in-between world. Back to when I’d tracked my wolf down to try to get him to merge with me once more.

My wolf quickened his pace, and I did the same. Hope bubbled up in my chest. The sooner we found Lilac, the sooner we could get the hell out of here—and get back to Cali.

*I wonder how Greyson’s doing with Lakini right now…* Hopefully he was having an easier time getting the witch to agree to a deal than I was with Lilac and this spirit world fiasco.

The trees ahead suddenly started to thin out, and through the gaps, I could make out a city in the distance. We pushed on through until we reached the outskirts of some strange mirrorverse image of Portland. A Portland in decay.

I looked out over the expansive, crumbling city. “Well, fuck.”

Lilac and Plum could be literally anywhere in that busted maze.

I cupped my hands around my mouth. “Lilac!”

My voice echoed back to me—the only response I heard. I tried again. And again. Until my voice was hoarse from screaming. But still, I heard exactly jack shit.

We continued toward the city. Lilac’s scent was that way, if my wolf was to be believed. Plus, where the hell else could he be, anyway?

*Maybe Lilac headed back to Swift’s Food for the Soul… or at least this shadowy version of it.* It wasn’t much, but at least it was a place to start. Plus, it might be the only part of this shadow Portland that Lilac would know to go to, anyway.

My wolf and I crossed one empty street after another, and with each step we took deeper into this shadow city, the more my stomach tightened. Warning bells were going off in my head, set off by the eerily silent city. It was jarring to see Portland—any version of Portland—this way. To recognize the street signs and even some of the crumbling buildings yet see absolutely no signs of life.

It was so. Goddamn. *Quiet*.

And every once in a while, my wolf paused. Listening to something far out of my ability to hear. Was someone, or something*,* out there watching us? Were we not as alone as I thought?

I couldn’t shake the feeling that my wolf was picking up evidence of that nagging feeling I couldn’t seem to escape.

That not only were we not alone, but that whoever or whatever was out here—they weren’t friendly.

We finally made it to the shop, and a shadow fell over us. I spun on my heel, looking around wildly while my wolf growled at my side.

But there was nothing.

*Jesus Christ, we need to get the fuck out of here.*

Food for the Soul looked as run-down and abandoned as every other building in this godforsaken imitation of a city. The windows were dirty, so dirty it was almost impossible to see the items on display. Not that there was much to display—everything was in that same broken disarray.

*Why the hell is everything so run-down?*

I wiped a spot on the glass to try to peer into the shop. The side of my hand came away a greenish shade of grey. Awesome.

I wiped the spirit world sludge off on my jeans and peeked through the slightly less filthy glass.

The shop looked empty, but that didn’t mean Lilac wasn’t somewhere inside. Maybe in the back?

As I reached for the doorknob, another shadow fell over me, and my wolf let out a deep, guttural growl. This time, I didn’t react. Didn’t spin around or try to fight it. Instead, I glanced at its reflection in the glass.

Something was definitely there. A dark, formless something.

The verdict was in: we weren’t alone after all.

I whipped around as the shadowy form took shape, coalescing into a huge wolf that looked like it was made from dark clouds. My wolf lunged for the shadow creature and, to my shock, made contact. It was a solid thing after all.

My wolf and the shadow creature crashed to the ground, and I jumped into the fray right alongside them. There was no way in hell I was going to let this thing hurt my wolf. One shadowy foot slammed into my chest, and I was thrown backward, through the shop window, shattering it on impact.

Still, I scrambled to my feet. The shadow creature had managed to separate from my wolf and transform into a panther-looking monster. It leapt onto my wolf’s back, and I grabbed a large shard of glass and attacked.

The shard struck true, though it shattered on impact. Still, the panther let out a yowl of pain and fell back. It transformed into a terrifying multi-headed creature, huge and hideous, hissing, roaring, slashing.

“I liked you better as a cat!” I yelled as I scrambled out of its way. I was outmatched. I just couldn’t fight something like this. Not in my human form, and the very last thing I wanted was for my wolf to get injured.

I slung an arm around my wolf’s chest, using the momentum to hop onto its back. “Run! Now!”

We took off with the shadow creature in close pursuit. *Shit. What the hell are we supposed to do now?*

I didn’t understand what that thing was, so I had no fucking clue how to fight it, or how to defeat it. Could we even outrun it?

Maybe if we could put some distance between us and it, we could hide?

But I didn’t know Portland that well, not like Greyson did. We turned a sharp corner and skidded to a stop.

A dead end.

There was only one way out of here—back out the way we’d come in. Back in the direction of the ferocious monster that was racing toward us.

I slid off my wolf. “We’re going to have to fight it.”

My wolf growled.

The creature advanced, swiping, clawing, and snapping its way toward us, forcing my wolf and me to back up.

I tensed, ready to throw myself at it—as soon as I figured out which part of its body to go for—but then the door behind me suddenly gave way, and I tumbled backward and hit the ground. The door slammed shut, and a loud crash echoed from the other side as the creature made contact.

I scrambled to my feet, spinning around as a woman approached. When I saw her face, my entire world shuddered to a halt.

“Mom?”

**Episode 2433**

I clapped my hands over my ears as the alarm thing continued its assault on my eardrums. “WHAT IS THAT THING?”

I couldn’t tell if anyone had even heard my question. I didn’t seem that way, from the way they were all covering their own ears and wincing.

I turned to Andrei, making sure to catch his eye so he could at least read my lips. “ANDREI WHAT IS THAT THING IT’S SO LOUD WHAT’S HAPPENING ARE WE UNDER ATTACK DID SOMEONE DROP A BOMB CAN YOU TURN IT OFF?”

Okay, maybe that was a tall order for someone trying to read my lips. Andrei looked more annoyed than shocked, which I could only assume was a good thing. Annoyance probably wouldn’t lead to my untimely demise the same way, say, shock or horror or worry might have.

“THAT,” he yelled back, “IS LUCIAN REQUESTING OUR PRESENCE!”

Ravi squinted, like he’d be able to hear better if he just looked at Andrei harder. “WHAT?”

I wasn’t sure I’d heard Andrei correctly either. “WHAT? LUCIAN WANTS PRESENTS? WHY?”

And why hadn’t he included that information in our invitation? Was he going to throw a fit because I hadn’t brought him a gift?

Andrei shook his head in disgust, and I had a feeling that look didn’t have anything to do with the alarm or Lucian requesting gifts.

*It’s not my fault I’m not a lip reader. Maybe the Vanguard pack should tone down their alarms if they’re going to expect their guests to understand every crazy thing that happens here.*

Actually, now that I thought about it, they’d have to do a lot more than that.

“LUCIAN WANTS TO SEE US!” Andrei shouted.

“Oh.” I nodded.

Then, just as abruptly as the alarm went off, it suddenly stopped, and the silence that took its place was both blissful and deafening.

Artemis scowled, dropping her hands to her sides. “Why can’t Lucian just *tell* people he wants to see them? Why does he have to do it in a way that causes hearing damage?”

Andrei gave her a look that seemed to say this thought had crossed his mind too. But of course he would never openly disagree with his prince’s decisions. Even if said decision was insane.

I pulled in a deep breath. My heartbeat was finally slowing down after the shock of Lucian’s “come hither” alarm. We’d barely made it past the front door, and already I was regretting coming here at all.

Several other Vanguard pack members hurried along behind Andrei, heading down a hallway I could only assume would lead to Lucian.

“I don’t want to keep the prince waiting,” Andrei said.

“Lucian invited me. When you see him, can you tell him I’m here?”

He glanced over at Ravi and Artemis, then seemed to size them up. “What about these two?”

“They’re my escorts,” I explained. It seemed a reasonable excuse for bringing them along with me. After all, we were literally here to see a prince in his palace. Wouldn’t it be customary for a guest to arrive with an escort?

*When in Rome…*

Andrei said nothing, just turned on his heel and started walking, leaving the crowd of Vanguard pack members behind. He brought us to what looked like a fancy drawing room from a period drama, just down the hall from the entrance.

“Where are you going?” Artemis asked. “I thought Lucian wanted to see us?”

“He wants to see Vanguard pack members,” Andrei grunted. “You three wait here.”

He left us alone, closing the door behind him, and Ravi let out a low whistle, looking around the room with wide eyes. I knew the feeling, as I’d had pretty much the exact same response when I’d come to the Vanguard palace for the first time. There was so much wealth and finery, from the marble flooring to the carpets to the furniture to the over-the-top decor, it was hard to know where to look. Hard to take it all in.

The Redwood pack had plenty of money, but the Vanguard pack had attained a level of affluence that was hard to wrap my head around.

“I knew the Vanguards thought of themselves as royalty,” Ravi finally said, “but I wasn’t expecting this.”

Artemis nodded. “I tried to warn you, but it’s hard to describe this place without making it sound like an exaggeration.”

I frowned. “Why did he use that alarm? Do you think it’s because I showed up? Or because I brought you two with me?”

Ravi shrugged. “All the time you’ve spent here, you’ve never heard that alarm before?”

I shook my head. “Never. Do you think it was meant to scare us off or something?”

“Why would he invite you over and then try to scare you off?”

It was my turn to shrug. “Lucian’s mind works in mysterious ways.”

Artemis crossed her arms over her chest and slumped onto the chaise longue. “Whatever his reasoning, all that alarm did was piss me off. I rely on my hearing to help me when I’m working, and my ears are still ringing.”

“Mine too,” Ravi said.

My ears were fine. *Maybe there’s an upside to having inferior human hearing, after all.*

Ravi examined a suit of armor that was standing near the window. “So, what’s the plan?”

“I don’t have a plan,” I said. “We’re just here to see what Lucian wants.”

Artemis arched an eyebrow. “And what if he wants *you*? What’s the plan then?”

I huffed out a laugh, though my stomach clenched at the thought. “If he wants me, he’s going to be sorely disappointed.”

I was willing to play along in the hopes of ending all this Seluna nonsense, but beyond that? Hell no. I grimaced as I thought back to the milk bath, the kiss, being so exposed and vulnerable in front of people who… Well, they definitely weren’t friends. Aysel, in particular.

*Is she here? Am I going to see her?*

God, I hoped not. I knew Greyson had rejected Aysel’s advances, but what I didn’t know was how Aysel felt about that, and what else she was planning for him. Plus, if she truly thought that Greyson was interested in her, how would that affect her behavior with me? Would our interactions change? Or would she be her usual insufferable self?

I honestly didn’t know which option was better.

The door opened, and Andrei appeared. “The prince will see you now.”

“Great.”

I took a step toward him, Ravi and Artemis close on my heels. We’d only made it a few steps before Andrei held up a hand.

“Just Cali.”

Artemis, ever my vigilant guard dog, immediately got up in Andrei’s face. “No way in hell. I’m not leaving my sister alone.”

Andrei shrugged. “Then I guess you shouldn’t have come.”

I had to admire his fortitude. When my sister got that look on her face, most people tended to get the hell out of her way or give her whatever she wanted. But Artemis was right: I wasn’t going in to see Lucian alone. He was too dangerous, too unpredictable. He might invite me in for tea and offer me an escort home, but he could just as easily lock me up here in his palace and never let me leave.

Ravi stepped up beside Artemis. “We’re coming with her.”

It wasn’t a request.

The tension thickened between Andrei and my “escorts,” and I worried that things would escalate before I could even find out what the heck Lucian wanted to talk to me about. But I had to remind myself not to give in.

*I’m only here because Lucian asked me to come*, I reminded myself. *I dropped everything I was doing and came to the palace. I’m not the bad guy here—especially not for trying to protect myself.*

“Lucian invited me,” I reminded Andrei, “and that invitation didn’t specify that I was the only one allowed to come.”

Andrei sighed. “Fine. But Lucian won’t be happy you’ve brought your friends along.”

“My *escorts*,” I corrected him.

“You don’t look too happy, either,” Artemis added.

Andrei grumbled something about the alarm and led us down the hallway we’d seen everyone else running toward earlier. At the end of the hall was a gigantic solarium. The heat and humidity slammed into me the moment we stepped into the room, and I felt sweat break out on the back of my neck.

*What a great day to wear a sweater.*

For the first time since we’d arrived, Artemis looked around in awe. “This reminds me of the Fae world.”

Ravi didn’t say anything—he was too busy exchanging dirty looks with Andrei. I hoped I hadn’t made a mistake in bringing him along.

We were near the center of the solarium when Lucian suddenly stepped out from behind an ivy-covered pillar. Our eyes met, and his face lit up.

“Caliana! What a pleasure!” he gushed, as if he hadn’t been the one to summon me here.

Naturally, he was wearing another robe, this one a thin linen thing that fell halfway down his thighs and honestly didn’t offer much in the way of modesty.

I lifted my gaze to his face. “Hello, Lucian.”

“I’m so pleased you’ve come.” He smiled. “And you’ve brought some friends!”

“This is my sister, Artemis, and Ravi, a member of the Redwood pack.”

He bowed his head at them. “It is a pleasure to meet you.” Then his gaze turned to me. “Since you’re here, why don’t we get started?”

**Episode 2434**

GREYSON

My assailant tightened his grip on my neck, and I frowned. This headlock was more confusing than frightening, and that was just one of several mistakes this person had made. Their first mistake was in thinking they had a chance against me.

My attacker hadn’t said anything to indicate what, exactly, had motivated this meeting. But if he was trying to rob me, the would-be thief was in for a brutal surprise.

Though it was equally possible—perhaps even likely—that this person wasn’t just a random human criminal. That the person whose arm was locked around my neck had followed me from the Rusty Wrench. That they worked for Lakini.

I willed my body to relax. Yes, I was an Alpha werewolf with years of experience in the fighting ring and generally a mean son of a bitch, but one thing I’d learned was that a hit landed a hell of a lot harder when you waited for the right moment to strike.

The guy jerked me back against the car. “You should be more respectful around witches.”

That answered that question. Thank god. A human mugger or carjacker would’ve been a useless annoyance, but this… Maybe I could work with this.

“I don’t want any trouble,” I said, still not fighting against my assailant’s hold.

“You should have thought of that before you stuck your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

*This guy must work for Lakini.*

“I don’t want to hurt anyone,” I said. “Why don’t we call it a draw and go our separate ways?”

The guy tightened his grip. “Sorry, buddy, but I don’t see this as a draw. I have the upper hand. Why should I give that up?”

I ground my molars together. “Because if you don’t back off, you’re gonna lose that hand—literally. So let me go.”

The guy laughed, and my perfect moment finally arrived.

In a split second, while he was still congratulating himself on beating me, I broke his grip, spun around, and punched the guy in the face three times—*thwack, thwack, thwack*—before smashing his head against the car.

His skull left a little dent in the frame above the driver’s side window, and I couldn’t help but grin. Whoever the fuck he was, he was made of tough stuff.

*This is gonna be fun.*

The guy elbowed me in the gut and used the momentum to break out of my hold. He scrambled back, wiping a spot of blood from his nose. Funny that my fists had drawn blood, but the car’s frame hadn’t.

“I should have known you wouldn’t go down easy,” he ground out.

I cracked my neck and rolled my shoulders. “Yeah, you really should have.”

Then he lunged toward me, and the fight truly—finally—began. I didn’t know who or what this guy was, but the fact that he’d gotten this far spoke to him being above average. He was most likely supernatural, or at least in possession of a potion or some kind of magical object.

But whatever his story was, it didn’t matter. Not really. I was gonna kick his ass either way.

I dodged the guy’s punch, but by a much smaller distance than I’d expected.

*Should I partially shift? Up the ante a little and knock this guy down before he becomes a problem?*

I avoided blow after blow and then took my turn, feinting toward his face to draw his arms up and then landing a strong blow to his diaphragm when his midsection was open. The breath wheezing out of his lungs was the sweetest sound I’d ever heard.

No, my wolf wouldn’t be necessary to win this fight. I could beat him all by myself.

It didn’t take long for me to get the upper hand and slam the guy’s head into the car a second time—a hell of a lot harder, now that I had an idea of how much he could take. He was dazed and mostly limp when I pinned him against the car.

Just to add a fun dose of menace—really more of an aesthetic of death and destruction than anything else—I partially shifted and jammed a razor-tipped paw against the man’s throat.

“You know what? I think I’ve changed my mind,” I said. “Maybe I should rip your throat out right now instead of just taking your hand.”

The guy blinked fast, coming out of his daze. He struggled against my grip, trying to free himself, but I wasn’t gonna give him a chance to squirrel out of this. I tightened my grip and slammed him against the car, hard enough that his bones creaked under the pressure.

“I’ve got a message for Lakini, and I think you’re just the person to deliver it,” I growled. “If she wants to discuss her options, I’m more than open to it. But what I’m not interested in is getting in the middle of a Portland witch-warlock turf war. Now, I’m nothing if not a reasonable guy,” I added as I pinned the beaten man to the car. “And I hope that Lakini is, too. But if she comes after me again, it will be the last time. I won’t hesitate to kill her and anyone else she’s associated with. Did you get that, or do you need me to go over it again?”

The guy glared, and I shoved him hard enough that I heard one of his ribs crack against the unforgiving metal of the car.

He hissed out a pained breath.

“Sorry, I can’t hear you,” I said. “Can you repeat that?”

“I understand,” he gritted out.

“Glad to hear it.” I grabbed the guy by the collar and tossed him away. He flew several feet through the air and skidded across the concrete before finally coming to a stop against another parked car. “And tell Lakini the next time I come for a visit, she’d better be more welcoming.”

I shifted my hand back to human, and the guy scrambled to his feet and ran off. I waited until he was good and out of sight before unlocking my car and getting inside. I let out a long, deep breath as the car purred to life.

*What a fucking shitshow.*

Clearly, Lakini felt threatened by me, which could be a good thing. If we played it right. Big *if*. I’d have to discuss things with Xavier before we made another move.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket, texted Xavier to tell him I was on my way, then dumped my phone in the cup holder and pulled out of the parking spot. It was time to check back in at Swift’s shop. Hopefully at least one part of our mission here in Portland was going smoothly.

I parked across the street from the shop and raced over to it. Xavier hadn’t answered my text, though I wasn’t sure whether or not to be concerned. He wasn’t exactly the most communicative guy, even in the best of circumstances.

When I tried the door to the shop, it was locked. *What the hell?*

I cupped my hands around my eyes and peered in. Were they all in the back of the shop? Or was it possible that they’d already finished and left? No. Definitely not.

I checked my phone again. Still nothing from my brother. But there was one message from Cali. My lips twisted into a frown.

*Shit, she’s going to see Lucian? At least she said she’s not going alone, but still.*

There was no telling what that crazy bastard was up to. I would much rather have been going with Cali to meet the princeling than standing outside Swift’s shop like some kind of creep.

*Be careful*, I texted back, then I tried the door again. I could probably shove it open on my strength alone, if needed, but if the shop had security installed and they *were* all in the back somewhere, I didn’t want an alarm—or worse, a visit from the police—to interrupt what was happening with Lilac.

I called Xavier, but it went straight to voicemail. *That’s weird. Is he okay?*

I shoved my phone back in my pocket and went around the side of the building to investigate and see if the back door was unlocked.

The girl who’d been manning the shop earlier was standing by the open back door, emptying the garbage into a dumpster in the alley. I approached her.

“Hey, remember me?”

She jolted in surprise, then pulled her earbuds out. “Oh, hey.”

“Where’s my brother?”

She frowned in confusion. “Who?”

I pulled in a deep breath and prayed for a shred of patience. “My brother and four others are here for a session with Swift.”

Recognition flashed on her face. “They’re in the sanctuary and shouldn’t be disturbed.”

“Great, thanks.” I strode past her, ignoring her objections. I wasn’t going to disturb whatever Swift was doing in there, but I wasn’t going to just sit around out here either.

I followed a short hallway to the front of the store. Everything seemed empty.

*Where could they be?*

I breathed deep, picking up their mixed scents, then followed them to a back room with a sign that read “Sanctuary. Do Not Disturb.”

*Well, it’s too late for that.*

I opened the door and found Swift leaning over Xavier’s body, which was flickering in and out of visibility. What the hell had I just walked into?

Swift looked up in alarm. “We’re losing him!”

**Episode 2435**

XAVIER

I was only dimly aware of the shadow creature slamming into the door behind me. My attention was focused elsewhere—namely on the woman standing in front of me. The woman who looked so much like my mother.

“Mom?” I breathed, barely daring to voice what I was seeing, just in case doing so would make her disappear. “What are you doing here?”

She gave me a small, tight smile. The one she’d always given me growing up when things were bad but she’d still wanted to offer comfort. That, even more than her appearance, cemented the eerie reality in front of me.

My mother was here. It was her.

“I’ll explain later,” she said, “but right now we really have to go.”

Suddenly, the noise at the door behind me stopped, and the silence was almost as deafening as the slamming sounds had been. *Did that monster give up? Or is it planning something else?*

I was about to point out that the creature was gone when a low growl echoed through the small room. It was my wolf, and I slowly turned to see a dark shadow seeping under the door like a puddle of water, gathering density on this side of the threshold.

My mother grabbed my hand and yanked me away from the gathering shadow. For a split second, it reminded me so much of my childhood, of all the times my mother had pulled me out of harm’s way, that I almost didn’t hear her shout.

“Run!”

I burst into a sprint alongside my mother, my wolf covering us from behind as we ran through what looked like an abandoned, dilapidated grocery store.

“We have to get out of here!” I said, veering toward the front entrance.

Except the front door was chained shut. We were trapped.

*This spirit world is such an asshole.*

I spun around, wildly searching for something to break the glass, but then the monster finally formed at the rear of the store. Our eyes locked—if it even had eyes, I couldn’t quite tell—and it lunged down the aisle, stacked with loose rolls of toilet paper and broken light bulbs, and started sprinting toward us. Once again, it shifted as it moved, transforming into a multi-headed beast that looked like something out of my deepest, darkest nightmares.

Before I could call him back, my wolf sprinted ahead to meet it.

“No!” I called. “Come back!”

My wolf collided with the beast, and rolls of toilet paper went flying as they slammed into the shelf, knocking the whole thing over and creating a domino effect across the entire damn store. Glass cases and jars shattered, and cans clattered, rolling across the floor. Boxes of pasta and god only knew what else exploded left and right.

Next to me, my mother gasped out.

The chaos wasn’t slowing my wolf down one bit. Completely ignoring my orders, it continued to bite and tear at the shadow creature until three of the monster’s heads had been ripped clean off. Each severed head landed on the floor with a wet *thwack* before dissolving into a puddle of dark goo.

The monster let out a cry that raised the hairs on the back of my neck, then it shrank away from my wolf. It must have decided it was outmatched, because it shifted back into an amorphous shadow before disappearing altogether.

I rushed up to my wolf and knelt down next to him. “Are you hurt?”

The wolf shook itself with a chuff. Thankfully, it seemed unharmed.

My mom put a hand on my shoulder. “Thank you.”

This was unreal, but unlike every other aspect of this godforsaken spirit world, seeing my mom again felt too good to be true. It had been so long since we’d seen each other, since I’d last felt her touch, that every smile, every touch sent me reeling back to childhood. Back to all those small moments that I’d never really thought about when I’d been young and able to see my mother whenever I wanted.

But now… Now, each reminder was precious. Slowly, tentatively, I took her hand from my shoulder and entwined our fingers.

I tried to soak in every second. Because I knew better now. I knew this wouldn’t last. Even now, with my mother standing right in front of me, her hand a soothing presence in my own, I was afraid she’d slip through my fingers and disappear like a dream.

She smiled. “I sensed you were coming. I’ve been expecting you, Xavier.”

Emotion clogged my throat. I still couldn’t believe she was here. *I don’t care if this is real or not. It feels real.*

My mom wrapped her arms around me and pulled me into a hug so tight I almost couldn’t breathe. I didn’t mind one bit.

“I’ve missed you so much, son,” she whispered.

I hugged her back with everything I had. I’d never thought I’d be able to hold my mother again, and I wasn’t gonna miss this opportunity.

After far too short a time, she pulled back to look at me. I wondered what she saw in my face, how my appearance had changed since the last time I’d seen her alive.

“I just wish Colton was here, too.” Her smile was teary. “It would be so wonderful to see my twin boys together again.”

I hurried to explain. “Colton and Maya—”

“It’s okay,” she said quickly. “I know. And I also know why you’re here. It was a brave thing you did.”

I sniffed and cleared my throat. “Have you seen Lilac or Plum?”

She nodded. “I have. I found them wandering through the city and brought them to a safe place—as you’re well aware, there are lots of dangers here.” She grimaced, like it physically pained her to acknowledge that the spirit world was an unsafe place for the people she cared about.

I looked back at the spot where the beast had fought my wolf. There were still three puddles of oily darkness on the tile floor. The remnants of the monster’s heads.

I met my mom’s eyes again. “What was that thing?”

“They’re creatures of darkness. Shadow folk. They seek to use the spirits of those who have passed on, or those who are just visiting,” she added, with a nod at me, “to become more corporeal. I know you’re here only for a short while, and the last thing I want is for you to become trapped here.”

“Has it always been like this?”

“No. The shadow monsters are a somewhat recent development. They’ve always been here, but ever since Letifer messed with the Orb, they’ve become more active—and bold. You and Lilac both need to go back to the corporeal world before more of the shadow creatures detect you.”

I nodded. “Fair enough. Stand back, Mom.”

With renewed purpose, I stalked over to the nearest metal shelf, now mostly empty since all of its goods had fallen to the floor, and tossed it through the glass door. Glass sprayed in every direction, but we finally had an exit.

“Watch out for the glass,” I said as I helped my mother through the opening.

Once we were back on the street, she took the lead. “Lilac’s this way.”

My wolf and I followed behind her.

It struck me suddenly how much I missed the little moments like this—something as simple as walking down the street with my mother. I took her hand and entwined our fingers again. Even though I knew I’d have to say goodbye to her again, sooner rather than later, I didn’t want to let go.

*I wish Cali was here with me. That she could meet my mother.*

She gently squeezed my hand. “Be alert, Xavier. That monster might have turned tail and run, but there are hundreds just like it in this city. We need to be cautious. We don’t want to draw attention to ourselves.”

“Why is this version of Portland so decayed? Is this like some apocalyptic future?”

She shook her head. “It’s not the future—I promise. It’s just another after-effect of the Orb. I believe that someday it will return to a more civilized state. It’ll just take time for the spirit world to heal.”

I sure hoped so. I hated the idea of my mom being stuck in a place like this.

She stiffened suddenly. “Quiet,” she said as she pulled me up against the side of a building.

We watched silently, staying still as a shadow creature oozed out of a doorway and drifted down the street.

When it turned a corner and disappeared from sight, I asked, “Can they hurt you?”

“Don’t worry about me.”

This made my stomach lurch, though it probably shouldn’t have. I would worry about her. All of this was just another reminder that my mom was dead. Something that, for the last several minutes, I’d almost forgotten. And yet, here we were together. Able to talk and feel each other.

My mom led us through an alley and down another street until we reached an apartment building. The door to the building was propped open with a brick, and we headed up the stairs to the second-floor hallway. The apartment building seemed to be in the same state of disrepair as everything else. The paint was peeling off the walls, the overhead light was broken, and several of the apartments didn’t seem to even have doors.

She pushed open the door to an apartment at the end of the hall, and we stepped inside. I was immediately met by more peeling paint and some worn-out furniture.

*Is this where Mom spends her time?*

My wolf suddenly yelped and darted over to the couch, where Lilac was talking to two familiar people, Plum on the floor beside them. My wolf and Plum sniffed each other, and Lilac lit up when he saw me.

“You’re here?” he said. “Xavier, come see my parents!”

I’d taken a step forward when my mom suddenly pushed me back and whispered, “They’re not his parents.”

**Episode 2436**

I had absolutely no idea what Lucian was talking about. His card had said that he wanted to talk to me about Seluna and discuss next steps. That was it. It wasn’t exactly a strong plan of action.

*Get started? What does that even mean? And why is it so impossible for him to wear normal clothes?*

At this point, I kind of felt like I’d seen more of Lucian’s body than my own. And that little linen thing, damp with sweat, was doing absolutely *nothing* to cover his—

*Let’s not think about that.*

I looked helplessly from Artemis to Ravi, as if they’d conveniently brought a Lucian translator with them. I’d been standing in front of Lucian for all of a minute, and already my anxiety was roaring inside me.

Artemis and Ravi both just kind of shrugged. Right. I was the one who’d brought *them* here, not the other way around. This was my mess to handle.

I took a deep breath and faced Lucian again, keeping my gaze locked on his face. “Get started?” I asked. “Get started with what, exactly? Your note didn’t exactly give any details about what you wanted to discuss. Or what our next steps might be.”

“Please, sit down,” he said with a broad smile, gesturing us over to a sitting area in the center of the solarium. “May I offer anyone a drink? Some champagne, perhaps? Or coffee?”

“No, thanks,” I said. “We’re all fine.”

Sweat trickled down the back of my neck, and I could tell that Artemis and Ravi were feeling the heat and humidity too, but I’d never forget what happened the last time someone I cared about had drunk something the Vanguards offered.

This situation was maddening enough without the added complication of being drugged.

“Lucian,” I continued, “I’m a little confused about why you invited me here. I thought I was supposed to contact you when or if Seluna appeared to me?”

He sat down, his thighs spread wide.

*Dear god. What a time to manspread.*

“That’s exactly why I called you here,” he said. “What *has* our beloved Seluna been up to lately?”

I blinked. “Um… How would I know?”

He laughed. “Don’t play with me, Caliana. I’m dying to know everything. Have there been any developments?”

This felt like one of those stress dreams where you showed up to the final exam for a class you hadn’t attended all semester long.

“I would’ve told you if there were?” I said, then winced, hating that my own response sounded like a question, hating that no matter how hard I tried, Lucian and his sister never failed to bring out my insecurities. I cleared my throat. “What I mean is, I haven’t heard from Seluna, which you should realize because I haven’t contacted you.”

There. That sounded much more self-possessed. Much more dignified.

“I have to admit, I’m disappointed that Seluna is proving to be elusive. But I have the utmost faith that she will seek you out again, Caliana.”

I could not for the life of me understand what was happening here. He’d summoned me here, referencing some sort of discussion, then he’d… what? Tried to micromanage my connection to Seluna?

This was a mistake. And a huge waste of time. I shouldn’t have come. Anything I thought I could glean from this guy wasn’t going to happen. He was obsessed with Seluna, period.

I stood up. “Is that all you need?”

His brows rose. “Are you planning to leave so soon? You’ve only just arrived, and we have so much to discuss.”

What the hell did he actually want from me? I didn’t know whether to feel gaslighted or jerked around or pissed off or… Actually, those all fit just fine.

If Lucian was disappointed that there was no Seluna news, what exactly did he think *I* was feeling? I was the one with the marks, with the alleged connection to the moon goddess. I’d come all the way here hoping to learn something that might actually be helpful, but clearly I’d forgotten exactly who I was dealing with. Instead of anything even remotely resembling *help*, I was just getting more of Lucian being… Lucian.

And I’d brought Ravi and Artemis along for the whole fruitless ride.

I pulled in a deep breath and tried to find some semblance of calm. Instead of wasting my time here, I could have been trying to find out what was happening to my mates in Portland. They were probably worried sick about me coming here. No, not probably. Definitely. They were definitely as worried about me as I was about what they were getting up to in Portland.

But I knew better than to piss Lucian off by disrespecting him. There was no way for me to ask outright what I wanted—did he know anything about what Aysel had done to Greyson?—without causing an uproar. He acted like he was half an idiot, but his cunning ran deep. Even if I danced around the question, I was getting the sense it would cause trouble. And if I upset him, there would be no mercy for me or my friends.

“We really should go,” I said carefully. “There’s some pack business we need to attend to.”

“That’s right,” Artemis said as she also stood up. “We have to get going.”

Ravi nodded deferentially at Lucian. “Thank you for—”

Lucian gasped, as if scandalized. “Caliana, this will not do! You’ve come all this way. You must stay a while!”

He took my hand, swept back his long, sweat-sticky hair, and guided me back down into my seat. Then he perched himself on the edge of his own chair, still holding my hand tightly even though the hot, humid air had made his grip sticky.

“Lucian, thank you for your concern, but—”

“I really had hoped we could chat a while,” he continued, as if he hadn’t heard me. “After all, you’re the only one who understands what happened with Seluna.”

It took every ounce of self-control I possessed not to yank my hand out of his grip.

A faraway look came over his face. “Being approached by Seluna is an extraordinary privilege.” He smiled, and though I’d seen him smile a thousand different times in a hundred different ways, this one actually looked… genuine? “Few are ever blessed in that way, and it makes you very special.”

*I sure don’t feel blessed. Cursed, maybe.*

“Is Seluna really that beautiful?” Artemis asked.

A low noise slipped out of Lucian’s throat, and my eyes widened.

*Did he just* moan*? Ew.*

“She is the very definition of beauty.”

“Mmm.” Ravi smiled wryly. “She sounds hot.”

Lucian’s smile slipped away. “‘Hot’? That’s quite a crude description. Remind me, what is your name?”

“Ravi.”

“Well, Ravi, you—like so many others—remain ignorant. Perhaps it is my duty, then, to shed some light. Shall I tell you the story of Seluna?”

*I’d rather be forced to imagine Aysel and Greyson’s date.*

I forced a smile. “Sure.”

Artemis sank back against the couch with a sigh. “Why do I have a feeling you’d still tell us all about it, even if we asked you not to?” she asked. I elbowed her, and she shot me a look, then turned to Lucian. “I mean, *please*, tell us.”

The fake enthusiasm was worse than the snark.

Lucian’s brows rose, and he turned to me. “You never told me your sister was such a charming creature.”

I laughed. “Isn’t she though?”

I had to admit, I was curious about Seluna’s story. *All this fascination with a moon goddess has to come from something. And Lucian’s right—we did come all this way.*

Maybe I’d learn something useful after all.

Lucian finally released my hand, now slick with sweat, and stood up like he was preparing to give a speech. With his flowing robe, he looked like something right out of one of those Shakespearean plays I’d seen back when I was in grade school—at least from the thighs up.

I’d never been able to understand what the people in those plays were saying. Hopefully I’d have better luck understanding Lucian.

He gestured broadly at the room around us. “Before all of this, Seluna walked among us. A goddess living with mortals. She fell in love with a human, and when they consummated their love, he was so overcome with passion that he became a werewolf.”

“Wait, what?” Ravi frowned. “You can’t just *become* a werewolf. Not like that.”

Lucian shrugged. “There are different origins for various descendants, and Seluna was a goddess—”

“And you’re descended from Seluna?” I asked.

“I’m not, but my family has been blessed by her, and we have been her loyal followers for centuries.”

“Huh. Well, that’s a great story, Lucian. Thank you,” I said. “But we really should be heading back to take care of that pack business.”

“But I have more to teach you about Seluna. I could spend days.”

“Yeah, I bet you could,” Artemis muttered. She gestured back toward the door. “Let’s go.”

Lucian frowned. “It would be a pity if you left so soon. We’re having a bit of a gathering later on. Nothing like the last one. But you must stay. I insist.”

**Episode 2437**

XAVIER

“What do you mean, they’re not Lilac’s parents?” I whispered to my mother. I scanned the faces of the two people sitting on the couch next to Lilac. “They sure *look* like Lilac’s parents.”

She shook her head. “Looks can be deceiving here. You can’t always trust the things your eyes tell you. Just play along, okay?”

I didn’t argue. I wasn’t from this world, and my mother was one of the few people who had my complete trust. In this case especially, since we were on her territory and I’d left just about everything that was familiar and sane behind in the corporeal world.

“Okay… But if they’re not Lilac’s parents, then who—what—are they?” I asked.

“You must remember Xavier,” Lilac said to his “parents.” “He’s an Alpha and part of the Redwood pack too. He has a twin? You remember them, right?”

They turned to look at me, and I forced a smile as I met their gaze. Something was… off about them. I could see that now. I remembered his parents, and this wasn’t Jemma and Allen Blackburn. When I looked at them, they were blurred around the edges, like a picture just slightly out of focus.

Had something happened to my eyes when I’d crossed over into the spirit world? I rubbed my eyes, blinking slowly to focus my gaze. Still, their faces were soft around the edges. But Lilac looked sharp, real. So did Plum and my wolf.

*Something’s wrong. Very wrong.*

On the floor in front of the worn couch, Plum and my wolf were still checking each other out—sniffing each other and maybe even comparing notes on how batshit crazy their days had been. Hopefully being here in the spirit world—and separate from Lilac and me—wouldn’t make things more difficult when it came time to return to the corporeal world.

“Xavier, what are you doing here?” Lilac asked.

I blinked. Seriously? I’d figured that was the most obvious part of this crazy-ass trip to the spirit world. “I’m here to bring you home.”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about that anymore.” He waved me off. “In fact, you really don’t need to be here at all. I’m with my family now—and Plum. It’s the best of both worlds. So there’s no need for me to go back.”

Right. Like I’d come all the way out here and fought off spirit monsters only to come back empty-handed. Not to mention, if I came back without Lilac, Violet was gonna kill me. And I’d probably let her.

Still, there was something so… un-Lilac about his response. My eyes narrowed on him. He seemed so vacant. So different from the vibrant, playful kid he normally was.

Plus, he would *never* leave Violet if he had a choice. And I didn’t really know the extent of his relationship with the medium, but he’d seemed attached to her too. Could he really leave all of those attachments in the corporeal world to stay here forever?

“Yes, Lilac’s home now,” said the woman wearing Lilac’s mom’s face. “We appreciate everything you’ve done for him, and that you’ve come all the way out here to help, but he’s in good hands now.”

“We’ve missed our son,” Lilac’s not-dad added.

Listening to them speak while their faces blurred was a mindfuck of epic proportions. The voices, at least, seemed spot on from what I could remember.

*Play along*, my mom had said. Maybe that was my best chance of freeing Lilac from whoever the hell these people actually were.

I smiled at them before focusing on Lilac. “I’m so happy that you’ve found your parents, but remember Marta? You’ve got a girlfriend back home who’s eager to see you. And what about Violet?”

At the mention of Lilac’s twin, his “parents” seemed to flicker like images on an old film reel. I blinked, and they were in front of me once more, though still blurry around the edges.

*Christ, I hate this world. I can’t tell what’s real. Can’t tell what’s happening because of Swift’s nasty tea, and what’s happening because these people pretending to be Lilac’s parents might not be people at all…*

I knew one thing for sure: I wasn’t leaving this apartment without Lilac and Plum.

“It’s so nice that Lilac’s sister is waiting for him,” Lilac’s not-mom said. “Hopefully we’ll all be reunited soon.” She took Lilac’s hand and gave it a squeeze, turning her attention to him. “But right now, it’s better that you stay with us.”

Yeah, something was definitely off. I wasn’t the most warm and fuzzy guy out there, but even I wouldn’t have been so quick to dismiss one of my children. It didn’t seem like these shadow parents cared about Violet at all. And the Blackburns I knew had loved their children with everything they had.

A wave of confusion washed over Lilac’s face. “I don’t understand. You want me to leave Violet? But she’s waiting for me. She… If I leave her, she’ll be all alone.”

“It’s so nice that she’s waiting for you. Hopefully we’ll all be reunited soon,” the not-dad said, repeating verbatim the words that Lilac’s “mom” had used, only this time without a drop of emotion. His voice was flat. “Right now, it’s better that you stay with us.”

Well, this had officially crossed the line into hella creepy.

Lilac’s confusion only seemed to deepen. “I can’t just leave Violet. I’ve already left her once before, and I promised her I’d never do it again. She’s alone now—she needs me.”

Frustration flickered—literally flickered—across his parents’ faces.

“Your sister will be fine!” they said, almost in unison.

The flickering worsened to the point that it was impossible to miss. I no longer thought something was wrong with my vision. No, something was wrong with Lilac’s parents. Or at least, the creatures pretending to be Lilac’s parents.

My mom sidled up to me. “We have to get Lilac out of here.”

The “father” took Lilac’s hand. “Come home with us, son. We can take care of you.”

Plum leapt to his feet and snarled at the man. He didn’t let go of Lilac.

“What about Plum?” Lilac asked as they all rose to their feet. “He has to come too!”

“Of course,” the “mother” said easily. “Plum will come home with us too.”

They started to lead Lilac toward the door, but Plum kept snarling. Lilac and his “parents” either didn’t notice or didn’t care.

I stepped into their path. I had no fucking clue what to do here, what his “parents” even were, but I couldn’t just let them take him. I had to at least try to stall them until I figured out a way to separate them from Lilac and escape without anyone getting hurt.

At least, without Lilac getting hurt.

I kept that smile glued to my face. “What’s the rush? It’s been a while. We should spend some time catching up. How’s the afterlife?”

The parents flickered again. It seemed like they could barely contain the forms they were trying to hold.

“Some other time,” the mother said. “Lilac needs to come with us now.”

Her voice had gone cold and menacing.

*Are they getting suspicious?*

My mom squeezed my hand and whispered, “We need to go, Xavier.”

I had to do something, and fast. Maybe Lilac could help. If this was truly all part of a dream state, then Lilac had to be able to control it.

I released my mom’s hand, grabbed Lilac by the shoulders, and shook him.

“This is not reality, Lilac,” I snapped. “You can control it. Remember, we’re in the sanctuary.”

Lilac’s eyes went wide, and the confusion, that emptiness, suddenly dissipated. “Xavier? What are we doing here?”

The parents grabbed for Lilac. “*No!* You belong to us!”

Plum lunged for the mother and sank his teeth into her leg. She hissed in agony while my wolf attacked the father.

My mom grabbed my arm. “Go! Now!”

We raced toward the door with Lilac in tow, but I couldn’t just leave the wolves behind. At the entrance to the apartment, I turned back. The parents’ flickering forms were slowly transforming into a shapeless, dark mass.

*They’re shadow creatures.*

I raced back, grabbing my wolf and then Plum just as the creatures took shape and lashed out.

I stumbled back, struggling to turn on my heel with the movement.

“Go!” I yelled at Lilac and my mother.

I pushed them through the doorway first, the wolves close behind. I was about to follow them out when a cold, sharp grip clutched my shoulder and I was spun around, coming face-to-face with one of the creatures.

“Let go!” I kicked and punched at the monster, and warm hands—my mom’s or Lilac’s, I wasn’t sure—pulled me through the door. I slammed it shut and not a full second later, the creature made contact with the door, letting out a pained howl.

My mom grabbed my arm. “Hurry.”

We raced through the hallway, down the stairs, and then out onto the street. We didn’t stop, didn’t slow down until we’d put at least a mile between ourselves and the creatures in the apartment.

We hid in an alley while we caught our breaths.

“Wait here,” my mom said. “I’m going to look for the safest route out of here.”

She headed off, and I slumped against the crumbling brick wall. Thank god for my mom. I’d have been lost without her.

“Let’s get out of here,” Lilac said suddenly.

“We will, but we’ll get the signal from my mom.”

He grabbed me by the collar. “How do you know she’s not one of them?”

**Episode 2438**

GREYSON

I frowned, looking from Swift’s expression of pure panic down to my brother’s unconscious form.

“I… I don’t understand. How can you be losing him? Xavier’s right there.” I gestured at my brother’s body, laid out on the cot in front of me.

I mean, sure, Xavier was flickering like a character out of an old film reel, which was concerning to say the least, but “losing him”?

*Wait, why is Xavier unconscious on a cot in the first place? This wasn’t part of the plan!*

I looked around the tiny “sanctuary.” Violet was holding Lilac in her arms. He was also on a cot, but he looked completely limp. Pale and unresponsive. If we were in danger of losing anyone, it was Lilac I was worried for more.

*Shit. Lilac’s not dead, is he?*

I looked from Violet’s pale, tearstained face to Kira’s expression of panic and fear as she watched Swift work on Xavier.

“I think some explanation is in serious order.” I rounded on Swift. “What the fuck is going on in here? What have you done to my brother?”

Swift held up his hands. “It was all Xavier’s idea.”

Oh, this was *not* going to end well for this guy. I could already tell. “What was?”

“The original plan didn’t work. Lilac, he…” Swift glanced carefully at Violet before turning his attention back to me. “We have reason to believe he got lost in the spirit world. I couldn’t bring him back with my guidance alone, so Xavier insisted on going in after him.”

Then I noticed the empty chalice next to Xavier’s cot, and reality slammed into me so hard I gripped the wall to stay upright. My brother had gone into a dream state, risking his own life—his own wolf, his *everything*—to drag Lilac and Plum back out.

I grabbed Swift by the front of his shirt, jerking him upright. “I leave for *an hour* and everything goes to shit? My brother wasn’t supposed to guide Lilac, you were!”

I wanted to throw the man across the room and then pick him up and do it again, and again, until he was nothing but a heap of broken bones. The only thing that held me back was the knowledge that we might need him to help guide Xavier and Lilac out.

Swift babbled hysterically about the waiver or some shit, but I tuned him out. Both Lilac and Xavier’s bodies were still present, but both of them were flickering now. So was Plum’s. It didn’t take a mystical master to know that something was terribly wrong.

“Pull yourself together,” I snarled at Swift, “or I’m gonna tear you apart. Because the fact that you might still prove useful is the only reason why all your body parts are still attached right now. So, calm the fuck down and tell me how we can get them back.”

The man trembled in my grip. “I… I can’t promise anything.”

My grip on him tightened, and he let out a pathetic little wheeze-whimper.

“You can do better than that,” I said. “If you don’t find some answers for us, you’re going to be the next one to enter the spirit world.”

“W-Well, there’s n-no guarantee,” he stammered, his face going a sickening shade of grey. “I made that very clear.”

“We’re out of time for excuses. Either you pull my brother and Lilac out to the real world, or I find a way to toss you in after them!” I dropped him to the floor, not feeling the least bit guilty when he whimpered in pain. I didn’t have time to listen to some parapsychologist babble and do absolutely jack shit to help.

I turned to Kira. “Is there anything we can do?”

If possible, she looked even more upset now than she had when I’d walked in. She shook her head and let out a shuddering breath. “I should have talked Xavier out of it. I never should have let him go in after Lilac.”

Admittedly, I didn’t know the witch all that well, but we still lived in the same house, and I’d never seen her like this before. Kira wasn’t just upset—she was emotionally wrecked. On the verge of a major meltdown.

She pressed her palms against her eyes and pulled in deep breath before rising to her feet and pushing past me. She looked down at Swift, who was still gathering himself up from the floor.

“Prepare another drink,” she ordered. “I’m going in after Xavier.”

I grabbed her arm. “Absolutely not. We’re not going to send someone else down this rabbit hole. I get that you’re worried about him, but that’s not how we solve this problem.”

She looked absolutely devastated by my refusal. “But I have to help Xavier,” she mumbled. “I can’t just leave him there. I can’t lose him.”

I tried to keep my surprise in check. “Take a breath, okay?”

*This level of panic is something else.* I’d known Kira and Xavier were friends—he was the one who’d brought her to live at the pack house, after all—but her reaction seemed to go beyond simple friendship.

*If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that witch had some unresolved feelings. Oh shit. That’s the last thing we need right now. Witches with unrequited crushes.*

Violet’s voice broke through my thoughts. “What are we going to do about Lilac? Just look at him!”

Lilac’s body was flickering more frequently now, and with greater intensity. Violet’s arms tightened around him, like she could keep him on this side of the veil through her strength alone.

Jesus, this was a mess. Somehow even worse than my meeting with Lakini.

*We’re zero for two, and this is on the verge of becoming a full-on catastrophe.* But I couldn’t let that happen. Not while Xavier’s and Lilac’s lives were in danger.

I grasped Kira firmly by the shoulders. “Hey, look at me.”

Her eyes were glued to Xavier’s flickering body.

“Don’t look at him. Look at *me*.”

She lifted her teary gaze to meet my eyes.

“There must be something you can do,” I said, the gentlest command I’d ever given. “Help us.”

This seemed to snap her out of her panic, and she nodded, blinking fast. “I… I can try a grounding spell? It’ll keep their bodies here, in our world.”

I was ready to try just about anything. “Great. What do you need?”

She turned to Swift to ask for ingredients, and he raced around the shop to collect what she needed. Finally, he was being useful.

*Maybe I won’t have to turn him into a bloody sack of bones after all.*

I slowly approached my brother’s body. I wished I could just grab him and shake him out of whatever this trance was doing to him. Lilac, too, for that matter. Cali trusted us all to come back unharmed. I’d told her we’d be careful. I’d thought everything would go fine—but how could I have envisioned this happening to Xavier?

Xavier wasn’t just a member of my pack—he was also my brother, and I felt like I’d let both him and Cali down.

Swift passed an armful of supplies to Kira. “I have more in the back if you need them.”

She quickly sorted through the ingredients, tossing some and keeping others. I didn’t know what she was looking for, what set a good ingredient and a bad one apart, so I was no help. I didn’t want to rush her and push her into another panic, but I couldn’t stop checking the time.

I didn’t know the first thing about this dream state nonsense, but I figured the longer Xavier and Lilac were in there, the worse things could get.

Kira arranged the ingredients in a circle. She kept looking at Xavier, who was still lying prone, seemingly oblivious to the events unfolding inside the sanctuary.

“You can do this,” I told her. “I know you can. I trust you.”

Kira wasn’t like Big Mac, who didn’t need or want encouragement. Who would have ordered everyone around and taken control of the situation long before it reached this point. Kira needed a softer touch, and right now, with the way she was holding Xavier and Lilac’s fate in her hands, I was willing to give her pretty much anything if it meant things worked out.

She gestured at both me and Violet. “I need both of you to participate.”

Violet leapt up. “Of course. Whatever you need.”

“Since Violet is Lilac’s sister, and you’re Xavier’s brother, you’ll each serve as anchors, to keep them in our world,” Kira explained.

“I’ll do whatever you want.”

“Anoint yourselves with the oil and dust in the circle,” she said, pointing at the necessary ingredients, “and then hold your siblings by the hand.”

We followed her instructions, and as she began to recite an incantation, I grabbed Xavier’s hands.

It was probably shameful that it had taken something like this for me to connect with my own brother. Then again, if Xavier had been awake, he’d probably have scoffed and pulled his hand away.

But I didn’t care. I needed him to come out of this alive.

“Step back now,” Kira said. “The spell is complete.”

I blinked. I’d expected to see something, feel something. “Did it work?”

**Episode 2439**

Just when I thought Lucian couldn’t possibly get more incomprehensibly maddening, he proved me wrong.

That seemed to be his specialty.

“Wait, you’re throwing a party?” I asked. “If you were inviting me to a party, why didn’t you mention that in the card you sent?”

“I said it was a *gathering*, not a party.” He didn’t look the least bit repentant. “You’re right—I could have told you about it earlier, but I thought you would appreciate the surprise.” He beamed. “Consider it a surprise party for *you*, Seluna’s chosen one. You are our true guest of honor.”

I wondered which parts of my interactions with Lucian had ever made him believe I was someone who a) enjoyed surprise parties, and b) wanted to be the guest of honor at a surprise party.

Either way, he couldn’t have been further from the mark, as usual.

I held up my hands. “Lucian, please. I’m not a chosen one, and the last thing I want is to disappoint you, but there really are things I have to do. I can’t stay here all day for your party.”

“Gathering,” he reminded me with a smug grin.

*Ugh!*

I looked over at Artemis, my eyes pleading with her to back me up.

“She’s right,” said my wonderful, supportive sister. “We’ve got Christmas planning and a trip to New Orleans coming up—lots of things to plan for and a lot to do.”

“My, my, what a busy social calendar you keep,” Lucian said. “Why don’t I rephrase. You do *not* want to miss this little gathering of ours. It won’t keep you from your other plans for very long.”

“That sounds rather like a demand and less like an invite,” I said carefully. This was so exhausting. Why did every single interaction with Lucian have to be a verbal game of chess? “Are you ordering me to attend, or asking?”

“Let’s just say I’m persuasively asking,” Lucian said smoothly, but the thin threat was clear behind his words. “Though if it would make you feel better, we can invite the entire Redwood pack. Or, at the very least, perhaps your Alpha and your mate? Would that help you feel more comfortable?”

I swallowed roughly. I didn’t like the idea of bringing the whole pack here—never mind the fact that there was no way in hell they’d agree to it. I mean, Sage and Zainab had gone through that *Game of Thrones* kick last summer, so we knew all too well how easily a “party” could turn into a death trap.

Plus, neither of my mates was available right now. Not that I had any intention of revealing that fact to Lucian. If he knew I wasn’t within my mates’ immediate reach… Well, I had no idea what he would do, but I knew I wouldn’t like it. At minimum, it would make me vulnerable, and I couldn’t afford that. Not when Lucian was involved.

I looked over at Artemis and Ravi. They both looked tense, ready to bolt or fight. I wished I could mind link with them.

*How the hell are we going to get out of this?*

I met their eyes, and I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that they would do whatever I said. No matter what crazy plan I came up with, they’d back me. They were just as invested in getting the hell out of here as I was.

But what could I even say? I’d already said no multiple times. I’d tried explaining and giving excuses for why I had to leave, but Lucian was refusing to let me go. He was always so insistent. And, being a prince—or at least, *believing* he was one—Lucian wasn’t going to accept any excuses.

So unless I wanted to outright insult him and face his wrath—whatever form that would take—I was stuck. We all were.

*I never should have come here. This was a huge mistake.*

Lucian clapped his hands, shattering the uncomfortable silence and making me flinch. A servant appeared so suddenly I had to wonder if he’d been crouched down among the foliage all this time, just waiting for Lucian to summon him.

“Please take Caliana and her guests to one of the changing rooms,” Lucian said to the servant. He took my hand and lifted it to his lips, and I was struck once again by how sweaty and sticky I’d become. “I look forward to seeing you soon.”

He released my hands, and I wiped them on my jeans as discreetly as possible.

The servant led me, Ravi, and Artemis out of the solarium and down the hallway to an ornate dressing room. It was a relief to step out of the humid solarium, and even in the climate-controlled house, warmed to stay a comfortable temperature through December’s chill, I felt the sweat on the back of my neck begin to cool.

Ravi looked around the room with a raised brow. Apparently, the shock of the finery had worn off. “What are we supposed to change into? I didn’t pack any clothes.”

“We should just go,” Artemis said. “We don’t owe Lucian anything.”

I sighed. *If only it were that simple.*

I poked around the room and found a walk-in closet behind a hidden door in the wall. To my immense shock, the closet was crammed full of nothing but bathing suits.

“Why would anyone need an entire closet dedicated to bathing suits?” I asked.

Artemis came up behind me. “That does seem like a lot. Does the entire pack keep their suits in here?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if they swam in the buff,” Ravi piped up.

“Seriously?” Artemis asked.

“What?” He shrugged. “Werewolves aren’t crazy about wearing clothes. It’s even more constricting to wear them in the water. I don’t even *own* a bathing suit.”

I privately agreed with Ravi. It seemed like Lucian could barely keep his clothes on most of the time. Why did he have so many swimsuits? But then again, there was something very *Lucian* about this private dressing room and its walk-in closet crammed with swimsuits, tucked behind a hidden door.

I sighed. “No, this seems right. Everything is always over-the-top here.”

I noticed my sister’s gaze snag on a teal blue two-piece that would look amazing with her eyes. “Are we supposed to put these on, or what?”

I flipped through the contents of the closet. “It’s just swimsuits in here and…” I found another door a little ways down the wall and opened it up to reveal: “An entire closet full of flip flops.”

A horrifying realization was beginning to set in. This “gathering,” as Lucian had put it, was a pool party. *Ugh*. I did not want to wear a swimsuit with Lucian and the Vanguards all over the place.

*Is this going to turn into yet* another *orgy? Because if so, hard pass.*

The door to the changing room creaked open, and footsteps sounded behind us. I turned to see Aysel walk in. Like her brother, she was also wearing a flowing linen robe and—also like her brother—it revealed way more than it hid.

“I heard you and your friends had stopped by.” Aysel smiled. “How… pleasant to see you again.”

I wanted to scream. Or run away. Or, at minimum, just turn around and pretend I hadn’t even noticed her. But I couldn’t take my eyes off Aysel. I couldn’t stop imagining Greyson being close enough to touch everything she had going on underneath that robe.

Greyson had promised me nothing had happened, but I was certain that Aysel had thrown herself at my mate. I’d been able to smell Aysel’s perfume on him, for god’s sake. How could that scent have possibly ended up on his skin otherwise?

But I trusted Greyson, and the thought of Aysel making a move on my mate and Greyson daring to refuse her? Well, that was just delicious.

I smiled a little. “Hello, Aysel.”

She sauntered in. “Have you found anything to your liking? If not, there’s a whole other collection in the other wing. I can have one of my servants show you the way.”

Artemis frowned. “I’m sorry, is there a reason why you’re here?”

“I was just thinking the same thing about you three—but then I remembered my brother has a weakness for commoners.” Aysel’s smile turned feral. “I look forward to seeing you all later. Caliana, since you and I share similar interests, I’m sure we’ll have so much to talk about.”

With that dig, Aysel turned and left, closing the door behind her. I wrenched a bathing suit off its hanger and threw it at the door in frustration. The more time I spent with that woman, the more I hated her. I had no doubt the “similar interest” Aysel and I supposedly shared was Greyson.

*I can’t wait until this damn revulsion curse is broken! I’m going to bring Greyson here and make out with him right in front of Aysel, just to rub it in.*

Then a new realization sank in.

*Maybe I can actually be useful here while I’m stuck with these Vanguards. Didn’t Charon say he needed Aysel’s tarot card to break the curse?*

I turned to Artemis and Ravi. “Grab a suit. We’re staying. And I’m going to get that tarot card.”

**Episode 2440**

XAVIER

I scoffed at Lilac’s question. *How do I know my mom’s not a shadow creature? Seriously?*

“Do you honestly think I wouldn’t recognize my own mother?” I asked.

“Normally I’d say no, but considering the fact that up until just a few minutes ago, I thought I was having a nice reunion with my parents, I’m gonna ask again—how do you know she’s really your mom?”

*Well, when he puts it that way...*

That brought me up short. I didn’t *think* my mother was a shadow creature in disguise, but how could I truly tell? Lilac hadn’t been able to tell the difference. Thanks to either some magic they’d used on him, or his own willingness to believe he was being reunited with his parents, those monsters probably would have spirited Lilac away if I hadn’t stepped in.

*Could my mother actually be one of those creatures?* I swallowed roughly. I didn’t even want to think it was possible, even though I knew that only made the situation worse. I was clearly just as compromised as Lilac had been.

“I don’t think we should wait around to find out,” Lilac continued. “For all we know, those monsters are all in cahoots and this is some kind of trap.”

I leaned back against the crumbling brick and huffed out a sigh. I felt completely torn between what I *needed* to do and what I *wanted* to do. I knew I needed to bring Lilac and Plum back to the sanctuary. That was the whole reason why I’d come here—to find Lilac and bring him home.

And if Lilac was right, and my mother wasn’t actually my mother, but some shadow beast, then we could be in serious trouble.

*But if he’s wrong, I’d be abandoning my mother here. And who knows when or if we’ll ever see each other again?*

I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t just leave her here. Not without saying goodbye.

I’d already lost her once, in the worst way possible. But now I had the power to choose a different path, and I wasn’t going to lose her again.

“Xavier, come on,” Lilac pressed, looking around nervously. “We need to get back. The longer we wait here, the easier it’ll be to get captured. Or worse.”

I peered around the corner and looked down the debris-strewn street. My mom was coming back.

“Come on!” Lilac tugged at my arm. “Let’s go.”

As my mom approached us, I thought back to my last memory of her. When I’d watched her die.

She smiled at me as she got closer, and despite all the unease churning inside me, I smiled back. Emotion clawed up my throat, and I shook my head as I ducked back around the corner and turned to Lilac. “I can’t go. Not yet.”

“You’re making a mistake.”

“Maybe. But what if I can prove that she’s my mom?”

“And how are you going to do that?” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter anyway. We don’t have time for this. We need to get back. Let’s go before she sees us!”

But it was too late for that.

As he took a step away from my mother, she waved and called out, “I’m almost there!”

I stayed exactly where I was, watching her approach. She didn’t flicker like the shadow creatures pretending to be Lilac’s parents had. Her face wasn’t blurry, either. And neither Plum nor my wolf snarled when she got close, standing just a couple feet away now.

If those weren’t good signs, I didn’t know what could possibly do the trick.

A crease appeared between my mother’s eyes as she looked from me to Lilac. “It looked like you were about to leave,” she said. “Can you feel the pull?”

I swallowed down the emotion clogging my throat. “I… I have to take Lilac and Plum back.”

The words felt like an admission of guilt, though she and I both knew exactly why I’d come here. And, more importantly, we both knew all the reasons why I couldn’t stay here with her. A pained expression crossed her face, and I felt its echo in my chest.

*I don’t want to leave you, either.*

She forced a smile. “Of course you do. You don’t belong here.” She dragged her gaze away from me to look at Lilac. “You have lives to live.”

And hers was over.

My eyes started to burn, and I bit the inside of my cheek. I wanted nothing more than to throw my arms around her. To say goodbye. To tell her all the things I’d never gotten the chance to say before her life had been snuffed out.

But how could I be sure she was truly my mother?

“Tell Colton I miss him, and I love him,” she said, her voice breaking.

“I will.” I paused and cleared my throat. “Do you remember what I used to call Colton when we were little?”

Her face split into a smile, and a few tears escaped her eyes, slipping down her cheeks. “How could I forget? It was so cute. You called him ‘CoCo’.”

Only my mother could know that. *She’s real.*

My heart swelled, then cracked with the knowledge of what I had to do now.

I didn’t hesitate a single second longer. I pulled her into a hug, wrapping my arms around her, trying like hell to memorize every detail so I could keep this moment with me for the rest of my life.

This was the best I was going to get, so I couldn’t forget it. Couldn’t forget her. Ever.

We broke apart, and she kissed my cheek, just like she used to when I was little.

“I love you,” she whispered, more tears pouring down her face. “I’ll always love you. And I’m so, so proud of the man you’ve become.”

I didn’t trust my voice. I could only squeeze her hand, trying to convey all the emotions swirling inside me. *How many times am I gonna have to say goodbye to her?*

Then, as a single tear slipped down my face, I realized what a beautiful gift this had been. It hurt like hell, but I wouldn’t have given it up for anything.

*I hope I get to see her again. Even if it’s to say another goodbye.*

“I love you too. Goodbye, Mom.”

She wiped the tear from my face and stepped back. “Watch out for the shadow creatures. You won’t be safe until you’re back in the corporeal world.”

“What about you?” I asked, but just as the words left my mouth, she faded away right in front of me.

And just like that, my mother was gone.

Again.

As I stared into the empty space, my heart cracked a little more. I touched my cheek, where she’d just kissed me.

*At least I got to say goodbye this time.*

Lilac’s hand landed on my arm and tugged. “Come on. We have to go.”

Clearly, the time to process everything would come later. I pulled in a deep breath and shoved it all down. Lilac was right. We had to get the hell out of here.

I nodded and turned around. “Alright, let’s get the hell out of here.”

As we backtracked first through the city and then through the woods, Lilac looked around warily, tension thrumming through his frame.

*He’s probably worried about running into more shadow creatures.*

Every rustle in the trees had Lilac flinching, and he wasn’t the only one on edge. Every strange sound drew my attention. We were so close to putting this nightmare behind us, and yet this world had never seemed as dangerous as it did now. If we came across more of those creatures, would we be able to fight them off? Lilac was certainly stronger here than he was in the sanctuary, but without his wolf, he was just as useless as I was without mine.

Right now, we were two humans in a very dangerous world. And we couldn’t forget that, not even for a second.

I looked around the forest, trying to get my bearings. The wolves had led the way once we’d reached the woods, trying to follow our scents back to the place where we’d come in. They stopped suddenly, and I turned on the spot, glancing around.

*The tree I marked should be around here somewhere…*

“Did you hear that?” Lilac asked, breaking the silence.

I turned to face him. “Hear wh—”

“*Xavier!*”

I’d have known that voice anywhere.

“*Greyson?*” I looked around wildly. Where was his voice coming from?

“Follow it,” I said to Lilac, and we broke into a sprint, our wolves running right alongside us.

My mind swirled with questions. *Did Greyson come after us? Is something bad happening in the sanctuary?*

My attention snagged on the tree I’d marked, and I skidded to a stop and looked around. “Where’s Greyson?”

Lilac shrugged.

I cupped my palms around my mouth. “Greyson?”

“*Xavier!*”

“I’m here!” I called back. “Greyson, can you hear me?”

“*Xavier!*”

One thing was clear: I could hear my brother, but he couldn’t hear me. I raised my hands to cup my mouth again—only my hands weren’t there anymore.

“What the hell?”

Lilac’s gaze was riveted to his own hands as they started to flicker. “What about Plum?” His eyes were wide, worried. “How do I bring him with me?”

I reached for my own wolf. “Hold on to Plu—”

Suddenly, though I couldn’t see my hands, I felt someone grab onto one of them and *yank*.

Everything went black.

My eyes slowly fluttered open, and I found myself somewhere familiar. I’d made it back to the sanctuary. Greyson and Kira were standing over me.

I sat up with a groan, feeling like I’d been hit by a truck. “Did Lilac—”

Violet’s scream cut through the air. “Lilac’s not breathing!”

**Episode 2441**

MARTA

Another training session, another growing pile of dead flowers. I glanced across the yard to where Okorie was working with Dani. I couldn’t make out what he was saying to her, but she was listening to him intently, ever the receptive student. I hoped he respected that about her, that he showed her the same level of attention she gave him.

As for me… Well, apparently the dead flowers still had plenty to teach me. Either that or—as I’d thought before—Okorie wasn’t a *teaching* prodigy. Which was what we actually needed here.

When the witch council had told me they’d be sending out a mentor to teach me to control my magic, this wasn’t exactly the scenario I’d had in mind.

Actually, it was pretty damn far from it.

Still, I felt better about working with Okorie now that I felt like I’d actually gotten a glimpse of the real him, behind all the snark and superiority. It had been nice to have him open up and tell us a little bit about himself, especially since it seemed like he’d had Dani’s and my profiles memorized from the beginning.

The lopsided knowledge in our student-mentor relationship was already bad enough when it came to our command of magic. It was nice to know that the scales had tipped ever so slightly in Dani’s and my favor, now that Okorie had told us a little about his past.

*It would have been nice if the witch council could’ve given us more of a heads-up about who our mentor was before he just showed up and started ordering us around.*

But from what I’d gathered about the witch council, asking them to be considerate was asking way too much.

Another daisy wilted in my hand, and I sighed, dropping the little flower corpse onto the pile.

*Just turn it off, Marta. It can’t truly be that hard, can it? It’s just like a faucet. Just… imagine the magic pouring out of you, and then just—Turn. It. Off.*

I took a deep breath, gently plucked another daisy—and bit back a curse when it died almost immediately.

“Son of a bitch,” I huffed, and dropped that one to the ground too.

“And how is our resident gardener?” Okorie joked as he approached me. “Ah, you’ve still got a bit of a black thumb, I see.”

“Not. Funny,” I seethed.

I slammed my eyes shut, imagined my gushing magic faucet and a hand reaching out to turn it off, then I grabbed another flower and held it for a solid four seconds—just long enough for me to hope for a new result—before it died in my hand.

“Better,” Okorie murmured. “It died a much slower death that time around.”

I threw the flower down and glared at him. “Is that seriously supposed to make me feel better?”

He shrugged. “It’s motivation, one way or another.”

*Maybe a better teacher would motivate me.* I rolled my eyes and looked back at the flowers. It was a little funny that he kept giving me all these gorgeous, vibrant blooms in the dead of winter. And it was a damn shame that by the time our session was over, every single one of those flowers would likely be dead on the ground.

I looked across the yard at Dani, who was sitting with her legs crossed. Apparently, she’d been tasked with meditating again. That actually sounded nice. Just sitting, not murdering anything with my runaway magic.

I probably wouldn’t be able to clear my mind, though. I’d just spend the whole time thinking of Lilac…

*Wait.* My brows knit together. *Is that why Okorie gave me this stupid task? So I’d have something to keep my mind occupied?*

That was so thoughtful. So… utterly unlike Okorie.

I looked back at the pack house.

*I wish Lilac was inside, on the mend. Or hell, he could even be here in the yard with me, cheering me on. I could use some encouragement that doesn’t involve Okorie breathing down my neck.*

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, imagining for a moment that Lilac was sitting on the ground next to me. My boyfriend and cheerleader.

In my mind’s eye, I just took a moment to look at my boyfriend. To drink in this healthy, glowing version of the boy I cared about so deeply. I hoped that when Xavier and Greyson came back, Lilac would look exactly like this. Healthy. Vibrant. Smiling and happy.

This was the Lilac I’d fallen for.

I sighed, and Fantasy Lilac cocked his head. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know if I can get my magic under control,” I admitted. It was a private fear I hadn’t voiced to anyone, but the thought had been haunting me all through my training. I’d been so hopeful before Okorie had shown up, but now that I was facing the reality of what my training would be, I honestly didn’t know how I’d ever manage to do better. “I don’t want to be sent away by the witch council or anything if I can’t seem to get it under control, but it just feels impossible right now. The magic is too much. It’s overwhelming.”

“But all you’ve been doing is killing flowers.”

“Exactly. A lot of them. If I can’t control my magic in this one simple way, then how can I ever hope to get these cuffs off?”

He didn’t seem to share my concern. “What if killing the flowers is just part of the process?”

I blinked. “Part of the process?”

“Yeah. Do you think it’s possible there’s another reason why you’re struggling with this? I mean, which part of this is overwhelming?”

“All of it!” I insisted. “I have all this power, and I can’t even—”

“But it’s exciting too, right?” he asked. “Learning how to control your badass powers?”

I considered this for a second. *Wait, what* is *the scary part here?* I wasn’t thrilled to be killing all these flowers, but they were just flowers. Flowers Okorie had made appear for the sole purpose of my practicing on them. And if that was the case, weren’t they just fulfilling their purpose? An artist shouldn’t feel bad about using paper to practice drawing. Why was this so frightening?

“My magic is too powerful,” I finally replied. “Making things die? Talking to the dead? It’s kind of a tall order.”

“Maybe for most magic users, but you’ve already brought me back to life. You saved the entire world in the fight against Letifer. That’s pretty cool, right? Plus, bringing your boyfriend back to life—that offers a pretty nice incentive for you.” He made a kissy face, and I laughed. I couldn’t help myself.

“If I’m being honest with myself, I’m just scared,” I confessed. “Just like the witch council was scared of Letifer. I’m afraid the magic will take over, and I won’t know who I am anymore. That’s exactly what Bert used me for, and at times it has consumed me. I don’t want it to do that anymore. That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Fantasy Lilac cupped my face. “I know exactly who you are and what you can do. Don’t hold yourself back.”

I opened my eyes and came back to the real world. A few tears slipped down my cheeks, and I quickly wiped at my face so Okorie wouldn’t catch me getting all weepy. I felt like an idiot—getting a pep talk from Lilac in my head while he was miles away and dealing with his own stuff—but he was such a comfort to me. I cared about him so much. I loved him with everything I had.

Now that I thought about it, it was pretty incredible that I had him when things used to feel so dire. I sat up straight and narrowed my gaze on the flowers.

“I don’t want to kill all of you, okay?” I muttered. At this point, I wasn’t above a little pleading. “So please, just work with me here.”

I took another deep breath and reached for a petal on one of the flowers. I breathed slowly, imagining that magical faucet. Okorie’s voice slipped through my consciousness.

“Focus, Marta. Focus on what you want your magic to accomplish.”

I nodded, not taking my eyes off the flower. Instead, I focused on my goal: don’t kill the flower.

*Control. Life, not death. Come on…*

I caught the petal between my thumb and index finger.

*Please don’t do it this time.*

I held my breath as the flower… lived.

I didn’t move a muscle, afraid of losing my hold on the magic.

*Am I doing it? Am I preventing my magic from killing the flower?*

I watched and watched as what felt like an eternity passed, and still the flower was completely intact, bright and blooming as ever.

*I’m doing it!*

I was about to let go, to turn and make sure Okorie had seen my win, when a second stem bloomed on the flower, right in front of my eyes. In mere seconds, it blossomed completely, a stem with two vibrant flowers.

I gasped.I hadn’t killed the flower, that was for sure, but… had I instead caused it to burst into life?

**Episode 2442**

GREYSON

Kira didn’t answer my question.

“Did it work?” I pressed, looking wildly from her grim expression to my brother’s unconscious face. Even though she’d told me to step back, I realized I was still gripping Xavier’s hand. As if I could somehow pull him back from wherever his mind had gone.

Suddenly, my brother shifted, then groaned. His eyelids fluttered and then slowly opened.

Relief—more powerful and all-consuming than I’d ever felt before—slammed into me. I could’ve kissed Kira. When this was over, I was gonna buy her a fucking house. A diamond tiara. Whatever the hell she wanted. No price was too high to pay in return for my brother’s life.

“Did Lilac—” he started to say, but then Violet’s scream cut through the room, shattering every bit of relief that had washed over me.

“Lilac’s not breathing!” she cried, wrapping her arms around her brother.

Xavier let out a mumbled curse and yanked his hand out of my grip before tumbling off the cot.

“Careful,” I warned him. He ignored me—classic Xavier—and stumbled over to Lilac’s bedside.

I watched, frozen, as Xavier wrapped an arm around Violet’s shoulders. “It’s okay. I was just with Lilac. He’s here. Right where he should be. He’s going to come back.”

I had a thousand and one questions about what the hell had happened while I was gone, both here and in the spirit world, but they stilled on the tip of my tongue. Right now, our focus had to be on getting Lilac back in one living piece—with Plum back inside him or not. I could ask Xavier all the questions in the world later.

“Everyone stand back!” Swift cried, and I jolted in shock. Once I’d written him off as less than useless, I’d completely forgotten the shaman dude was even in here.

He rushed forward and slammed on Lilac’s chest with both fists. The boy’s body bounced on the cot, and Violet lunged at Swift.

“Don’t you dare hurt him! Haven’t you done enough?”

Then, Lilac pulled in a deep, shuddering wheeze of a breath, like he’d been drowning. He pulled in one deep gasp after another, almost convulsing with each moment, his chest dipping down and then arching up with each lungful of air he gulped down.

I took a deep breath myself. *Lilac’s alive. Thank god.* Maybe Swift wasn’t quite so useless after all.

Violet wrapped her arms around her brother again, her embrace gentler this time. Tears ran down her face. “Don’t you *ever* do that again. I’ve never been so scared in my entire life!”

Lilac’s eyelids fluttered as he weakly looked around the sanctuary. He grimaced and clutched at his chest with a shaking hand. “Who hit me?”

Swift raised a hand, looking chagrined. “Sometimes it helps bring people back. It’s like a jumpstart.”

“Sure, but did you have to hit me so hard?”

I looked over at Xavier. My brother seemed to be in one piece, no jumpstart required. I held out a hand and helped him to his feet. “You good?”

He avoided my eyes. “I’ve been better.” Before I could ask any other questions, he turned to Swift. “Have you ever taken one of these mind trips yourself?”

The shaman shifted uncomfortably. “Those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach. I teach.”

Xavier scoffed. “Yeah, well, you might want to warn your future clients that the dream world or the spirit world or wherever the hell you send them isn’t just butterflies and fields of flowers—it’s a living hell. And anyone who goes in should consider themselves lucky to make it out alive.”

Swift paled.

*Well that’s the most chilling thing I’ve heard all week.*

I pulled Xavier aside. “Was it really that bad?”

My brother looked beaten down and exhausted. “I don’t want to get into it right now. Let’s just say there are nasty creatures there.” He turned his gaze back on Swift, suddenly livid, and barked, “Where the fuck is that warning, huh?”

I grabbed his arm and pulled him back before he could do harm to the guy. “Take it easy. You took a risk going there.”

He shrugged off my hand. “I had no choice—it was either that or lose Lilac forever because this fucking idiot”—he gestured at the parapsychologist—“couldn’t do the one thing we hired him to do. And I wasn’t going to let Violet go through losing her brother again.”

I sighed. “Thank you. That was a really stupid thing to do, but it was also brave.”

For the first time since waking up, my brother showed an emotion other than fury. He blinked. “Are you… complimenting me? Maybe I’m still in the spirit world.”

I shrugged. “Credit where credit’s due. But don’t let it go to your already oversized head.”

Xavier smiled. It was a weak one, like he’d almost forgotten how, but it was a hell of a lot better than the exhaustion and anger he seemed to have brought back with him from the spirit world. He glanced over at Lilac, who was talking animatedly with Violet, and then turned back to me. “Besides getting Lilac back, the only good thing about going there was that I got to see my mother again. One last time.” His throat worked, and he looked down at the floor.

My brows rose. A hundred new questions rose to the forefront of my mind, but I knew Xavier was done talking about it.

“I’m glad you got to see her,” I said carefully.

He nodded but didn’t say anything else.

I cleared my throat. “Don’t get too comfortable—we still have a few problems to deal with.”

“Fuck,” he muttered, rubbing his face. “I take it that means things with Lakini didn’t go so well?”

“Not so much. It seems Charon’s version of events doesn’t mesh with Lakini’s, and I’m honestly not sure if either one of them is telling the truth. Or if it even matters.”

“Maybe we should pay them another visit.”

“We probably should, but it can wait for now. While you were tripping and I was up to my elbows in witch drama, Cali accepted an invitation to the moon princeling’s palace.”

His eyes widened. “She *what*? Why are we even wasting time here? We need to go back to the pack house*.*”

*There’s the Xavier I know and love.*

“I agree. But before you go into full panic mode, you should know she was smart about it. She brought Artemis and Ravi along. She’ll be okay until we make it back.”

“Hey.” Kira’s soft voice cut into our conversation. “How are you feeling, Xavier?”

“Um, fine, I guess. All things considered.”

She threw her arms around my brother and hugged him tightly. After a few wide-eyed beats, Xavier hugged her back.

Suddenly I remembered how Kira had nearly been beside herself when Xavier was in the spirit world. Both her reaction then and the way she was hugging my brother now spelled out so much more than just *friends*.

*What’s going on there?*

Swift sauntered over, looking nervous. “Do I get a hug too?”

Xavier stiffened and eased himself out of Kira’s arms. “You get to keep your limbs if you stay the hell away from me.”

I smoothly stepped between my brother and Swift. “Forget about him. Let’s collect Lilac and Violet and get the hell out of here.”

I wasn’t particularly fond of the guy either, but beating him to hell would take time—valuable time that might be better spent heading back to the pack house.

I half-expected Xavier to argue with me—either because he was still pissed off at Swift or because I’d just given him something resembling an order—but to my surprise, he nodded. “You’re right. Let’s go.”

*Well that’s interesting.* It was probably wishful thinking, but had Xavier’s trip to the spirit world caused him to be less… Xavier-ish? For once, we actually seemed to be getting along, just the two of us. With no Cali nearby to try to smooth things over.

I knew better than to expect it to last, but it was a nice change of pace.

Of course, once we made it back to the pack house, I expected that animosity to return in full force, along with all the usual tension between the two of us. Xavier would still want to become Alpha, and I would still want Cali to choose me. The wheel would spin ever onward.

“Violet, Lilac,” Xavier said. “Time to go.”

Violet stood and held out a hand to help her brother to his feet, but he waved her off.

“I feel fine.” He popped right up off the cot and stretched. “See?” Then he did a couple of jumping jacks for good measure. Maybe there was one silver lining to take from this disaster—Lilac seemed healed.

Suddenly, he lurched to a stop and looked around the small room. “Where’s Plum?”

Realization rippled through the room. We’d all been so focused on getting Lilac and Xavier back alive and in one piece that we hadn’t realized Plum hadn’t come back with them.

*Where did he go?*

Suddenly, Lilac let out a cry and buckled over. He fell to the ground on his hands and knees.

“Lilac?” I reached for him, and he let out another scream as his bones started to crack.

“What’s happening to him?” Kira asked, clutching Xavier’s arm.

“It’s okay.” I smiled. “Lilac’s shifting.”

And then we watched as Lilac shifted into his wolf. He was alive and whole once again.

**Episode 2443**

I was eager to set my plan in motion, but I needed Artemis and Ravi’s help if it was going to work. I turned to face them, trying to figure out the best way to explain it so that they wouldn’t immediately object. I could tell that they were as eager to get the hell out of here as I was, but we couldn’t leave just yet.

“I know that staying here doesn’t sound like the best idea,” I said, “but trust me, we have to—because there’s a problem.”

Artemis narrowed her eyes. “Problem? What kind of problem?”

“Yeah, I’m having a hard time imagining what problem could be worse than having Lucian look at you like he wants to sop you up with a biscuit,” Ravi added.

“Oh, it’s much worse than—Wait, does he really look at me like that?”

Ravi’s eyes bugged out in disbelief. “Uh, *yeah*.”

It was no secret that Lucian’s intentions for me weren’t pure, but by now I’d gotten so used to his lusty stares that I barely noticed anymore. But Lucian wasn’t the issue at the moment. “Lucian’s… a lot, but the problem is Aysel.”

“Aysel?” Ravi asked, confused.

“The woman who was just in here—Lucian’s sister, *the princess*,” I said with an eye roll. “So, you know the revulsion spell that Greyson and I are under? Well, Aysel gave Greyson one half of a tarot card that’s involved with the spell. Unfortunately, she has the other half, and Charon—the warlock from Portland who cast the spell—needs both halves to lift the curse. So, since we’re here, I figure we might as well find a way to get it from Aysel. That way Greyson won’t have to deal with Aysel anymore—who, to use your phrase, Ravi, wants to sop Greyson up with a biscuit.”

“Uh huh…” Artemis nodded slowly, taking it all in.

“But how are we going to manage that?” Ravi asked. “It’s a pool party, right? Isn’t everyone expected to be, you know, *in* the pool? It’d be pretty noticeable if we weren’t there.”

“Yes, but Lucian likes to throw big lavish parties, so I’m sure there will be lots of distractions that’ll give me a chance to slip away and find the card, and then we can get the hell out of here.”

I looked back and forth between Artemis and Ravi, not liking how skeptical they seemed.

“You know what I always say? If it sounds too easy, it must be,” Artemis said.

“We have to try. The revulsion spell is taking its toll on me and Greyson, we have to do something to lift it. I’m desperate at this point. So, let’s all find suitable swimsuits and go from there.”

I turned and started going through the options, wondering where the hell Lucian had gotten all of these swimsuits. I felt like I was in an exclusive boutique or something. I couldn’t imagine that he’d gone shopping and picked them all out. My mood soured even more as I assumed the obvious, namely that Aysel had had a hand in curating the collection—especially since all of the options were skimpy as hell and left nothing to the imagination. I held up a bikini—if it could even be called that.

Artemis shook her head and turned up her nose. “Where’s the rest of it?”

“Tell me about it.” I put that one back and pulled out another—which was even worse. It looked like a Day-Glo piece of floss. I cringed at the thought of appearing at the “gathering” in a suit that would let everyone see my tiger marks. I put that one back and sorted through the rest, looking for the one with the most material. Finally, I found a purple one-piece. I went behind a curtain and tried it on, then looked at myself in the mirror, dismayed. It was a one-piece, sure, but it had so many cut-outs that it looked like I was trying to hide myself behind a piece of Swiss cheese.

Artemis wasn’t having much luck, either. She slid one suit after the other over to the opposite side of the rack until she’d seen them all.

“I’m not wearing these,” she huffed. Sighing, she held out a thong bikini and a barely-there one-piece. “I guess I need to decide between naked or partially naked.”

Ravi stepped out from behind a curtain. “You think that’s bad? Look at this.”

“Oh my gosh, Ravi!” I bit my lip, trying to hold back a laugh. He was in a skintight, bright yellow speedo. I sighed. “Surely we can find something that isn’t quite so…”

“Horrible?” Artemis said. “No offense, Ravi.”

“Absolutely none taken.”

We all returned to the racks, searching for more options. I was already starting to question my plan. I didn’t want to appear in front of Lucian in anything like the tatters of stretchy fabric and string hanging in front of us. His interest in me went far beyond Seluna and *due destini* curiosity, that much was for certain. I didn’t want to encourage him, but if putting one of these on gave me the opportunity to get the card and break the curse… Well then, I had to do it. *No matter how humiliating it is.*

I finally settled on another one-piece that still showed more than it should. I could only imagine what Xavier and Greyson would say if they saw me in it. Thinking about my mates reminded me of what was at stake—namely, the revulsion spell keeping me and Greyson apart for the foreseeable future unless I got that card back.

As Artemis and Ravi stepped out in their selections, I apologized. “I know that neither of you wants to do this—or expected this when you agreed to come with me.”

“It’s all good,” Ravi said, pulling at the crotch of his too-short, very tight board shorts. “I’ve made it this far; might as well see it through.”

He was playing it down, but there was no mistaking the look of mild panic in his eyes.

Artemis looked equally displeased, but I was shocked by how stunning she looked. “I’m glad Rishika isn’t here to witness this.”

“Somehow, I don’t think Rishika would object,” I said dryly.

Artemis blushed and ducked her head. “Well *I* object, that’s for sure.”

“So,” Ravi began, clapping his hands together. “What’s the plan, exactly?”

“Um, I’m not sure. I figure we can sort of play along and see how it goes? At some point, whenever the moment presents itself, I’ll slip away and find Aysel’s room and look for the card.”

“And what if you get caught?” Artemis asked.

“Then I’ll just pretend I got lost.”

We all turned at a knock on the door. “The gathering is beginning. Prince Lucian requests your presence.”

*At least they’re not using the alarm this time.*

We all grabbed robes and followed the servant through the halls. I tried to make a mental map as we went. The palace was huge, but I’d already been to several of the rooms: the courtyard, the baths, and the pool. I heard the clamor of guests just before we stepped into the room, which was just as opulent as I remembered. Even though I’d seen it before, the Olympic-sized pool sparkling before us was still a sight to behold.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” Ravi said, clearly in awe. “You could fit the entire pack house in here.”

Just as I’d suspected, the “gathering” was much more than an informal “let’s hang out at the pool” event. It was clear that Lucian had planned this way before he’d invited me—there were too many people for me to believe that it was just some spur-of-the-moment thing.

The servant led us to Lucian, who was lounging on a fur-lined bench. He had a tray of grapes on a table next to him, and I wouldn’t have been shocked to see scantily clad women feeding them to him while they fanned him.

Lucian’s face lit up as he looked me up and down. “You look stunning, Caliana. I’m so pleased that you decided to stay.”

*You didn’t give me much of a choice in the matter.*

I pasted on a smile, until Lucian stood up and let the robe slip from his shoulders. His “suit” was nothing more than a string. I flinched as he leaned forward to kiss both my cheeks before he turned to face Artemis and Ravi.

“Please, enjoy the gathering while Caliana and I… reacquaint ourselves.”

I was instantly nervous. *What the hell does that mean?* I glanced at Artemis and Ravi, who gave me questioning, helpless looks before Lucian looped an arm around my waist and started to lead me back to the bench. *Think quick, Cali!*

“Um, I have to use the bathroom!”

Lucian looked a little surprised by my outburst, but he was gracious. “Oh, of course. I’ll be right here, waiting for you. Hurry back.” He winked at me.

“I will!” I walked quickly away as if heading toward the restroom, but once I knew that Lucian could no longer see me, I slipped out of the pool room and into the hall. I let out a deep breath. The hallway was empty—now all I had to do was find Aysel’s room without getting caught.

**Episode 2444**

XAVIER

We all watched as Lilac shifted in front of us, and now we knew for sure: Lilac and Plum were reunited. *At least one thing has gone right today.*

Violet and Kira cheered and hugged.

“Thank god that’s over!” Violet said, coming over and giving me a hug. I was so happy that Lilac had made it through—especially since it had been touch and go for a minute there.

“How do you feel?” I asked. “Does everything feel normal? No lingering pain or anything?”

I could guess at how he was feeling, given the fact that he was running around in wolf form, clearly excited to be whole again.

Lilac galloped around in a circle, throwing his huge head back and forth, his tail wagging a mile a minute. He hopped up onto the cots and back down again, then twirled around, letting out a loud howl for good measure.

“Be careful, don’t destroy my precious sanctuary!” Swift was saying from where he stood pressed against the wall, clearly nervous. “Watch out! All of that’s pure, enchanted, very fragile—and very expensive!” he added as Lilac came dangerously close to toppling a shelf of shimmering crystals.

*I wouldn’t mind seeing this entire place laid to waste*, I thought to myself, watching Swift cower as his gaze darted back and forth, following Lilac’s every move.

Greyson came walking over to me. “You feeling okay? Did you come back with your wolf intact?”

I was surprised that my brother even cared, but I appreciated the concern. I hadn’t even thought of that—nor did I even want to consider the possibility that I’d come detached from my wolf again. I remembered leaving the spirit world… But was my wolf with me?

I paused and focused inward, taking note of whether everything seemed to be in its right place. Nothing *felt* off, at least, and I could feel my wolf stalking within. I remembered all too well the empty feeling I’d had when my wolf had left me. I never wanted to feel that again, and it pained me to think that Lilac had been going through the same thing.

“I’m all good,” I assured Greyson.

“Good,” he said. “I want to wrap all this up and get back to Cali—and get her out of the Vanguard palace. Every moment that she’s in there, she’s in danger. How convenient that Lucian would reach out to her as soon as we were out of commission.”

“You read my mind,” I replied.

“Shift back, Lilac. We’ve got to go.”

I knew that Artemis and Ravi were with Cali, but I wasn’t convinced that they would be able to hold their own against a crafty force like the Vanguards. They didn’t quite play fair, and they were the definition of unpredictable.

Lilac took another lap around before he shifted back to human. “Already?” he said. “Just a few more minutes! Please?”

“Sorry, man, but we need to get moving. You can run wild to your heart’s content when we get back to the pack house.”

Lilac pouted, and Violet quickly handed him some clothes.

“I just feel so energetic, and powerful!” he said as he got dressed. “I’m so glad to have Plum back. I was making the best of it when he was severed from me, but man, this is *way* better! I can’t wait to show Marta!”

I wondered if Lilac remembered what happened in the spirit world—namely how he’d been tricked into believing that those shadow creatures were his parents. With the way he was acting now, I almost wondered if he’d forgotten the whole thing. I sure hadn’t, and I was almost ashamed to think that I’d doubted my own mother. It had been so good to see her—I hadn’t realized that I’d missed her so much. Part of me wished that I could go back and spend more time with her—or better yet, get her out of that place.

“Hold on!” Swift said suddenly. “I need to do an aura check!”

I scowled. *What nonsense is he up to, now?* It was obvious to everyone that Lilac was good, and I didn’t want to spend any more time in this place than I had to—especially since we needed to get back to Cali as soon as possible.

“I agree,” Kira said. “Both of you need to be checked, just to make sure there aren’t any complications.”

Now I was really confused. “Complications? What kind of complications—”

“Shh, quiet!” Swift said. “Otherwise you’ll disturb Lilac’s energy force and give me a false reading.”

Swift had a crystal in his hand and was moving it dramatically around Lilac, who was bouncing on his feet, eager to break loose and run around.

“Stand still!” Swift said to Lilac.

“I can’t! I’m just so—amped!” Lilac was clearly trying to stay still, but he was still jiggling his knees and wiggling his fingers.

“Amped or not, stay still, or this won’t work!” Swift snapped. “I have to do this aura check to—” He paused for a moment, a look of concern on his face. Then he started moving the crystal around again. “To make sure you’re clear of any lingering effects from the spirit world.”

Lilac scoffed. “I’ve got a great aura, and if ol’ Swifty doesn’t recognize that, well then maybe he’s not such a good parapsychologist!”

Swift was instantly on the defense. “I’ve sent hundreds of people to the in-between, and healed more than that, and I’m known for both my skill and professionalism, I’ll have you know! I’m much, much better than Carlson Greene! That much is for damn sure! If you went to him, he probably would’ve just sent you out onto the street after this whole ordeal, no aura check or anything. You’re lucky you came to me—I’m the definition of thorough!” After a few more minutes, Swift gave Lilac a satisfied look. “Lilac has a good aura.”

I could sense the energy that Lilac felt, and I put a hand on his shoulder. “Take it easy, okay?”

Lilac sighed and calmed a little. “I’ll try. I’m just so damn psyched!”

“I am, too!” Violet said, pulling Lilac into another hug.

Swift turned to me, holding up his crystal. “You’re next!” He started moving the crystal around me with that dopey look of concentration on his face. “Yes, very nice, very nice, ugh, not the best but still within normal parameters, very nice, good, good,” he muttered.

This all seemed like a bunch of nonsense to me, but I played along until Swift was done.

“All clear; your aura’s A-okay.” Swift led the way out of the sanctuary and back into the front of the shop. “Now, all you have to do is settle up.” He gestured to his assistant, and she handed me an invoice. I looked it over and passed it to Greyson.

Greyson stared at it then handed it back to me. “Pay the man.”

I glared at him. “It doesn’t matter who pays, it’s going to come out of pack funds either way.”

I handed over my credit card, miffed at Greyson’s need to bark commands all the time. Behind us, Lilac was bouncing around, clearly still feeling the energy of having his wolf back. Greyson and I shared a smile. We both knew that feeling.

“So, just some discharge notes, as it were,” Swift began as he charged my card. “Both you and Lilac might suffer from the occasional nightmare—nothing to worry about.”

“I’m not worried about nightmares,” I said. “I just lived through one.”

I didn’t think I’d ever forget those shadow creatures, and I wished again that I could get my mother out of that place. On the plus side, she hadn’t seemed to be all that scared of them, and she appeared to have figured out how to avoid them. I only hoped that she was okay, since I couldn’t be there to protect her.

“Is there anything else? We really need to go,” Greyson asked Swift. He was already edging toward the exit.

“Yes, one more thing.” Swift looked at me and Lilac. “The best way to solidify your wolf is to be with your mate.”

I couldn’t help but smile. *I’ll be with my mate soon enough.*

We finished up, and Greyson rushed everyone out the door.

“I haven’t heard from Cali since the text to let us know she was at the Vanguard palace,” Greyson said as we all walked back to the car.

I took out my phone and checked it. “Me neither.” *Fuck.* “I wish she just would’ve waited. I don’t trust that asshole Lucian as far as I can throw him. Let’s not waste time driving.” I turned to Kira. “Can you just take us back to the pack house ASAP with magic?”

“Sure, I can do that,” Kira agreed.

Greyson unlocked the car, but just as I was climbing in, someone grabbed me by the shoulder and spun me around. Charon.

“Where do you two think you’re going? You can’t leave Portland until you finish the job!”

**Episode 2445**

I made my way along the hallway, all but tiptoeing and being as cautious as possible. I had my ears tuned toward the slightest sounds, and I ducked into a doorway whenever I even *thought* I heard something. This was my chance, and I would be damned if I were going to ruin it. I was sure that if something happened and I got caught, I wouldn’t have another opportunity.

The further I got from the pool, the more the sound of the party faded, and the more worried I became about getting lost in this humongous place. The palace had never seemed as big as it did right now. It didn’t help that many of the hallways looked the same, right down to the huge paintings hanging on the walls. I’d tried to memorize them as I passed before so that I could use them as landmarks, but there were just way too many.

I could hear more guests arriving, and I wondered just how big the gathering was going to be. Hopefully, the size would mean that Aysel and Lucian wouldn’t notice that I was gone.

I reached a large foyer where a winding staircase led to the upper floors. I approached the foot of the stairs and looked up. *Surely Aysel’s bedroom has to be up there… somewhere.* However, I knew that this staircase was just one of many. My confidence was slipping by the second. I wished that Artemis were with me—she could probably have used her bounty hunter skills to help, and her moral support would have done wonders for my nerves, which were damn near shot.

A voice came from behind me, startling me so badly that I nearly fainted. “What are you doing here?”

I turned to see a burly, mean-looking guard watching me, his arms crossed over his barrel of a chest. I swallowed roughly, thinking fast. “I’m a guest at the pool party.”

The guard stepped forward and took me by the arm. “This area is reserved for the royal family. You shouldn’t be here.” He looked me up and down, not ogling me, but definitely sizing me up.

I smiled apologetically. “Princess Aysel said that I could use her bedroom to freshen up. She gave me directions, and I thought I had them down—but I’m clearly lost!”

I giggled a little, hoping that the guard would believe me. I had one thing going for me—it was totally believable that someone would get lost in a place like this. It was almost maze-like in its design.

The guard studied me for a moment before he finally spoke. “Come on, follow me.”

He led me up the stairs and down a long hallway to a set of double doors—the princess’s private quarters.

“Thank you!” I said, really meaning it as I stepped inside and shut the door behind me.

I listened for his footsteps, and once they faded, I fell back against the doors, pausing for a moment to catch my breath and steady my nerves. *That was too close for comfort.* I only allowed myself a moment to get my head on straight, knowing that I had to work fast. Lucian wasn’t a patient man, and no matter how many guests came streaming in, soon he would be wondering where the hell I was.

I looked around, taking in how huge and grand Aysel’s room was. There were paintings and plush couches and floor-to-ceiling windows with heavy, velvety drapes. Not surprisingly, right smack in the center of the room sat an imposing-looking bed draped in a luxurious duvet. It looked like it could fit ten people and still have room for more.

*Is this where Aysel lured Greyson in her first attempt to seduce him?*

I couldn’t help but picture her purring and pawing at him, whispering in his ear, touching him in places that she had no right to touch. I tensed my jaw and clenched my fists, but just as quickly, I reminded myself that I didn’t have time to fret over what had already happened. I needed to focus on improving Greyson’s and my future. That was all that mattered right now. I couldn’t let Aysel win, and I didn’t even want to think about what would happen if Greyson and I didn’t break the curse.

*Focus, Cali. Keep your eyes on the prize.*

I took a deep breath, relaxed, and started poking around for the other half of the tarot card. *Where could it be?* There were more drawers in this place than there were in the entire pack house. My first instinct was to try the bedside tables, even though the thought that Aysel might keep it so close to where she slept sickened me.

I tried my best to ignore the bed as I opened one of the drawers, the sickeningly sweet scent of Aysel’s perfume drifting into my nose from every corner. I peered inside.

*Ugh. A velvet sleep mask, a pair of fancy-looking handcuffs… a gold vibrator.* I recoiled. That was the last thing I wanted to see. *That’s going to haunt me for days.* I wondered if Aysel thought about Greyson when she… I cut that thought off before it could fully form. *I can’t think about that right now.*

I rummaged around a bit more before I realized I was looking in the wrong place. *Damn it. Not in here. I guess that would’ve been too easy.* I slammed the drawer shut and started toward the other bedside table, trying to erase the memory of that gleaming vibrator from my mind—

“Can I help you find something, Caliana?”

I spun around, feeling like a deer in the headlights. Aysel was standing there in the doorway, the guard who’d brought me here standing menacingly behind her.

“Oh… I, uh… Didn’t you say I could borrow your perfume earlier?”

Aysel smiled and stepped up to me, backing me up against the wall. I shivered as I noticed that the smile ended at her eyes—which held a cold, steady menace that unnerved me to my core.

“M-Maybe I misunderstood?”

“Perhaps you did,” Aysel said breezily. She lingered for a bit before turning to the guard. “You’re dismissed.” She closed the door behind him after he left, and I wasn’t sure whether I should be relieved or worried as the door clicked shut. “I know you’re lying.”

*Okay, I should be worried.*

“I’m not lying. I mean, maybe you didn’t say it, and I thought I heard that? But I thought you said it—I remember—I think I complimented your perfume—because it really does smell amazing, and then you told me that I could try some on. But you might have said something else!” I threw up my hands and shrugged, hoping I wasn’t digging myself deeper. “Ask anyone, I sometimes don’t hear the best, and it wouldn’t be the first time I mistook—”

Aysel held up her hand, silencing me. “I figured it out when my brother kept asking where you’d disappeared to.” She gave me a knowing look.

I braced myself. *She knows. She knows that I’m here looking for the card. What am I going to do? Better yet, what is SHE going to do? Is she going to kill me? Lock me up somewhere in this—this—fortress of hers? What will Lucian do to me when he finds out I was sneaking around up here?*

“I must admit that I find my brother’s persistence a bit worrisome at times, so I can understand why you might want to hide from him.”

“Y-You do?” I was shocked; that wasn’t at all what I’d expected.

Aysel smiled again, and this time it was a bit warmer than before. She laughed. “You should learn that you can’t hide from Lucian. You can’t evade him, outsmart him, avoid him—any of the above. You can make the occasional excuse, but eventually, he will get what he wants. He always does. The best thing for you would be to realize that. Trust me.”

I wanted to ask her what it was, exactly, that Lucian wanted from me—honestly, it had always been shrouded in moon goddess mystery, and that was confusing. But I said nothing, too afraid to rock the boat and set Aysel off. She was being nice right now, but I knew from experience that she could turn at any moment. Aysel took me by the hand and led me out into the hallway. I glanced back at her door longingly. My chance to find the tarot card was slipping away with every step that we took.

Then it dawned on me. The tarot card always found its way to Greyson’s person. No matter what he wore, no matter what he did, it was always with him.

*Maybe, just maybe, it’s the same for Aysel.*

I looked at her and her skimpy swimsuit. Did she have it on her somewhere? Was there a way that I could get it?

**Episode 2446**

GREYSON

“Hey, get off him!” I said, running around to the passenger side to confront Charon.

“You two tried to trick me! I should have known not to trust you—even if there *was* a Fae promise involved!” Charon yelled. “And you can forget about me breaking your little curse. I wouldn’t help you if my life depended on it!”

*Shit. I don’t have time to deal with this warlock crap right now. We need to get to Cali!*

“Listen, Charon, relax,” I said. “We didn’t try to trick you! Why would we? If anything, you should have been more forthcoming about the reality of your situation with Lakini.”

Charon narrowed his eyes. “What do mean by that? What did she tell you? Because I can assure you, it’s all lies!” he yelled, before I could even say another word. “Everything that comes out of Lakini’s mouth is a lie.”

I chuckled. *Lakini is such a sore subject for him. Might as well use it to my advantage.* “Well, I don’t know—it sounded believable. She said that you were nothing more than a jealous ex seeking revenge. It’s okay, man—I have some exes of my own that were hard to get over—”

“NO!” Charon exploded. “*She’s* the one who’s out to get revenge!”

“I don’t care who’s driving this little lover’s quarrel, you just need to get your hands off me and get out of my way!” Xavier said. He was standing there calmly, looking generally unfazed by Charon’s hand on his arm. I knew as well as he did that he would strike and lay Charon out if it came down to it.

Charon seemed to be unraveling and wasn’t backing down. “How about I just cast a little spell on you two right now?”

“We’ll rip you to pieces before you can say a word,” I said, stepping close to him. It would have felt so good to unleash on Charon right now. I was so frustrated with the entire situation, and the fact that he was standing in the way of me getting back to Cali wasn’t helping. But I knew that I had to play it cool, for now.

Xavier partially shifted his hand. “Sounds like you want a repeat of what happened in the parking lot,” he growled, leaning close to Charon.

There was a flash of fear in Charon’s eyes before he finally released Xavier and backed off. “We had a deal!” His eyes darted over to me. “You three promised me you’d take care of Lakini, and now you’re leaving town! What am I supposed to think?”

“I don’t know what you’re supposed to think, and I don’t care. We made an agreement, and the deal still stands,” I said. “But something came up, and we have to deal with that first. Once we take care of some business, we’ll carry out our end of the bargain.”

*And you’d better carry out your part, or I’ll tear you apart.*

Violet and Lilac got out of the car and ran over to us.

“Is everything okay?” Violet asked, looking at the three of us with concern.

“It’s good, we’re fine,” I said. Violet looked cautious, which made sense, but I was a little worried about Lilac—I could tell that he was itching to shift back and put his excess energy to good use against Charon. I hoped that he wouldn’t. Any sudden move here could wreak havoc, and we didn’t have time for that.

Besides, as much as I hated to admit it, I needed Charon to break the curse, and it was clear that Charon knew that and was going to milk it for all it was worth. *Now I’m caught between a witch and a warlock—never a good place to be.* It was a precarious situation, for sure. If I favored one of them, the other would retaliate.

“Lilac, Violet, we have everything under control. Get back in the car. We’ll be there in a sec, okay?” I said, trying to defuse the situation.

“Are you sure?” Lilac asked as he and Violet hesitated.

“I said get back in the car!” *Why is everyone making this harder than it needs to be?*

Violet jumped and moved to do just that, but Lilac lingered. “Who is this guy, anyway?” he asked with more than a little menace in his voice.

Xavier turned a sharp eye on the young wolf. “Lilac, will you please just do as Greyson said? We can handle this.”

Lilac wasn’t listening, and he was getting increasingly jumpy. Before Xavier or I could stop him, he shifted and made moved toward Charon.

“Lilac, no!” I lunged toward Lilac and crashed into him. We both tumbled to the ground, tangled in each other’s limbs.

Scared, Charon stumbled backward and fell as he raised his hands and shot a fiery magic bolt at Xavier.

“No!” In a blur of movement, Kira leapt in front of Xavier, intercepting the magic bolt. It hit her hard and knocked her back against the car, leaving a dent. She fell to the ground in a smoking heap.

“Kira!” Xavier shouted before turning his gaze on Charon.

*This just went from bad to worse.* I still had my hands full restraining Lilac.

*Stop it, you’re not helping!* I mind linked to him. Then I turned to Charon, who was panting and trembling with rage and fear. “Don’t make this worse!”

Snarling and champing at the bit, Lilac finally shifted back. I glanced at Kira, who was slumped against the car, moaning softly.

Xavier grabbed Charon and hoisted him up in the air by his shirt. “I should rip your throat out right now. Fuck the deal.”

“Xavier, not here! We’re going to draw attention, if we haven’t already!” I said, taking a quick look around. I didn’t see anyone, but that didn’t mean that no one was watching. “We need to get out of here, now.” I turned to Lilac. “There are some clothes in the back. Get them on, and for the last time, *get in the damn car!*”

I kept my eye on Lilac as he finally slinked back to the car.

“What are you going to do to me?” Charon asked, trembling uncontrollably in Xavier’s hold. “You need my help. Don’t forget that!”

“Let him go, Xavier,” I said, still trying to catch my breath after wrestling with Lilac. We’d just had such a great moment with Lilac getting his wolf back, and it was all ruined because Charon couldn’t just chill the fuck out and wait for us to do what we had to do—but unfortunately, he still had the upper hand.

Xavier turned and glared at me. “What if I don’t want to let him go? What if I want to turn him into mincemeat?” Xavier scowled up at Charon, who was twisting in his hold, trying to get away.

“If we kill him, Cali will still be under the curse, and we’ll be left with no way to fix that. Is that what you want?” I asked my brother. “This guy sucks—no argument there—but we have to think of Cali.”

“Fine!” Xavier huffed. He dropped Charon to the ground and shoved him away.

“Nobody wants to hurt anyone,” I said to Charon. “But you need to back off and let us go.”

Charon skittered farther away from us, straightening his clothes. “But what about Lakini?”

“We will deal with Lakini, in our own time.” Charon looked dubious, so I decided to play it up a little. “This sort of thing requires careful planning. If we rush into it, do it wrong, make a mistake, you might be implicated. Is that what you want?”

“No,” Charon grumbled. “Fine. Go.”

Relieved, I watched as Charon headed off. I went to help Xavier lift Kira up off the ground. “Are you okay, Kira?”

“I think so,” she said breathlessly. She still seemed a little dazed, but otherwise she looked fine.

Xavier took her weight and popped open the door while he scolded her. “Why the hell would you do something like that? Jumping in front of me? You could’ve been seriously hurt!”

Kira looked away as Xavier helped her into the car. She didn’t look so good. “I wasn’t thinking, I guess. I just knew that the warlock was going to try something, and I thought I could stop him.”

I watched them both, thinking that there was another reason, and it had more to do with Kira’s feelings for Xavier than anything else, but I decided to keep that to myself. Now wasn’t the time to open that can of worms—we needed to get back to Cali.

Xavier heaved a heavy sigh as he climbed into the passenger seat. He shot a worried glance back at Kira, who had her eyes closed and was lying limply against the door.

“She’s worse off than she appears. I don’t think she’ll be able to warp us back.” Xavier paused, as if trying to come to terms with what he was about to say. “Which means we may not get back to Cali in time.”

**Episode 2447**

I felt deflated and a little panicked as Aysel led me back into the pool room. My plan was officially a bust—and I’d almost gotten caught by Aysel, which would have been way worse. Lucian started gesturing impatiently as soon as he saw us.

Aysel leaned in close to whisper in my ear. “I suggest that you don’t keep him waiting a second longer.” She gave me a gentle nudge in his direction.

“Sure,” I croaked. I continued toward him, my mind racing with what to say and how to put an end to this evening before it got out of hand—well, even more out of hand. I turned at Aysel’s touch on my arm.

“I meant to ask you, Caliana—why isn’t Greyson here? I was looking forward to seeing him again after the wonderful, electrifying evening we shared.”

I gritted my teeth. She was trying to insinuate that she and Greyson had done more than Greyson had admitted to me, and I couldn’t help but picture the handcuffs and the golden vibrator nestled ominously in Aysel’s bedside drawer. She was trying to sow seeds of doubt in my mind, but it wouldn’t work. I didn’t believe her. She could say whatever she wanted, *imply* whatever she wanted, but I knew Greyson, and I trusted him. He’d said that nothing had happened, so nothing had happened.

Right then, a dark voice came to life in the back of my mind. *But what if he withheld the truth to protect you?*

I shook my head. No. We’d sworn that we would never do that—that we would always be open with each other.

*Greyson loves me, I know that, but is it possible that the revulsion spell has done more damage than I thought?* Not being able to really touch each other in a meaningful way, or even hold each other, was definitely wearing on us, but what if it was driving him into Aysel’s arms, as well? *Just as she intended.*

I shook those thoughts away, knowing that I needed to keep my head clear if I was going to get out of this latest Lucian mess.

“You do like to tease me, don’t you?” Lucian said, interrupting my thoughts.

I let out a nervous laugh. “Sorry, this place is huge, as you know. I got turned around, and before I knew it, I was completely lost.”

Lucian shrugged, seeming to let it pass. “No worries. We have the whole night to reacquaint ourselves.”

I squirmed at his words and then hoped that Lucian hadn’t noticed. “The *whole* night? That sounds… wonderful.”

*There’s no way in hell I’m spending another night here.*

I looked around. It was just as I’d pictured: guests frolicking about in and around the pool, wearing next to nothing… and some of them wearing *exactly* nothing. People were making out and dancing and laughing and splashing around. It would’ve been a good time, if not for… well… everything. *And where are Ravi and Artemis?*

I was starting to get worried when I spied Artemis standing off in a corner, watching the pool as if she were on patrol, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. It was obvious that she was as uncomfortable as I was with being here—maybe more so, since I’d already been exposed to one of Lucian’s “parties.”

I looked at Lucian and gave him as gracious a smile as I could manage. “Could you excuse me? I need to talk to my sister.”

Lucian smiled. “Of course, but try not to get lost again.” Another wink.

I smiled and tried to laugh it off with him—even though my laugh sounded strained to my own ears—then I hurried off to join Artemis. I made my way through the guests, many of whom made no secret about undressing me with their eyes.

*Why are his parties always like this? Has he never heard of board games and snacks?*

“Well?” Artemis said when I reached her. “Did you get it? This place is making me itch.”

I sighed and dropped my head. “No. It was an epic failure.”

Artemis frowned. “Well, what else can we do, then? Does Aysel like women? I’d suggest that I try to seduce her to get back up to her room, but I couldn’t do that to Rishika.”

“No, no, that’s not necessary. I’ll figure something out. But first I have to deal with Lucian. Maybe Ravi could try to get lucky with Aysel? Wait, where is he? Have you seen him?”

“Yeah, last I saw him, he was drawing some attention from several of the guests.”

“I get it; he did look good in his suit,” I admitted, feeling even more hopeless.

“I’ll go look for Ravi while you finish up with Lucian.” Artemis turned to head off, but I stopped her.

“Again, I’m really sorry for getting you into this mess. It’s a lot, I know. I promise that we wouldn’t still be here if it wasn’t important.”

Artemis shrugged it off. “Whatever this is, it’s nothing compared to what I experienced in the Fae world, trust me.”

“I can’t even imagine the things you saw there, what you experienced.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t pretty. I just wish the people here would stop hitting on me. It’s non-stop.” Before Artemis could even finish her sentence, a man sidled up behind her, trying to get her attention. I shot him the iciest look I could manage, and he turned heel and walked away.

I gave Artemis’s arm a sympathetic squeeze, then headed back to Lucian. *Where is he?* I looked around, but I didn’t see him anywhere. *He’s not in the pool, he’s not holding court with his guests…* I was confused. Had he gotten so impatient with me that he’d just up and left? He’d told me not to get lost and then just disappeared.

I’d just started toward the door when a servant approached me.

“Excuse me, Caliana?” He gave a slight bow. “The prince requests that you join him in the South Tower.”

*The South Tower? There’s a freaking* tower *here?*

Reluctantly, I followed the guard, wondering what the hell Lucian was up to now. I caught Artemis’s eye as I passed her, shrugging to let her know that I had no idea what was happening. I wished that we could mind link, but we weren’t werewolves. I only hoped that Artemis understood.

Artemis paused for a moment before giving a slight nod.

“This way, madam,” the servant said, leading me toward a narrow winding staircase. *Madam? Seriously?* He stopped at the bottom and held out a hand, indicating that I should go up alone. “You’ll find Prince Lucian at the top.”

“Okay, thank you,” I said, unable to keep my voice from quaking.

I started up the stairs, each step making my heart beat faster. *What the hell does he have up his sleeve, now?* As usual, Lucian had done a bait and switch. I’d thought this was going to be a pool party, not some excuse to lure me into a secret rendezvous in a tower.

*I was so stupid to accept his invitation in the first place!* I could already hear Greyson and Xavier’s admonishments echoing in my head, but I shook it off. I’d known that coming here was a bad idea, but what was I supposed to do? Rejecting Lucian’s invitation could have brought trouble down on the pack that we didn’t need, and I’d thought that bringing Artemis and Ravi would be good enough…

I paused to catch my breath. *How high is this tower, anyway? We talking Eiffel or what? Why wouldn’t someone as wealthy as Lucian have an elevator installed?* Maybe he did this on purpose, so his victims would be too tired to fight back once they reached the top.

At long last, I made it to the top flight, where I was met by a single closed door. *Do I knock, or… The servant did say that Lucian was expecting me.*

I took a deep breath and pushed the door open. Lucian was standing with his back to me, looking out of a tall window. I cleared my throat, and he turned to face me, his robe open to reveal more than I wanted to see.

*Is that Speedo even comfortable for him, or is he just hell-bent on wearing it so everyone can clearly see his junk?*

I think I knew the unfortunate answer to that.

“Ah, Caliana, I’m so glad to see you. Come!” He beckoned me toward the window and stepped aside. “Isn’t it beautiful, Caliana? Come closer! I want you to bathe in Seluna’s glorious light.”

I approached, hesitating, wondering if I should turn and make a break for it. In the end I joined him at the window, looking out at a commanding view of the land and trees. It was quite beautiful, and I might have even enjoyed looking at it under better circumstances. Everything had a silvery tinge to it beneath the moon’s bright light, giving the entire scene a surreal feeling.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” Lucian whispered in my ear.

He was mere inches away from me.

I turned to answer him, just as Lucian leaned in. “I can’t wait any longer, Caliana—I need to see Seluna again.”

Then he kissed me.

**Episode 2448**

MARTA

“I can’t believe it! Not only can I now keep the plants from dying from my touch, I can also, somehow, make them flourish! This is great!” I turned the flower around in my hand, admiring my handiwork. With this kind of talent, I could probably get a job ata florist’s shop instead of being chased out of one after destroying their entire stock…

Okorie groaned. “How many times do I have to explain it?”

“Once more and with feeling this time,” I said. I was in such a good mood that not even Okorie and his sour attitude was going to get to me—though I had to admit that he’d been a bit nicer since sharing a little more about his own story. Besides getting Lilac back from the spirit world, this was the best news I’d had in a long, long time.

Okorie, who was—to my satisfaction—sipping on another white chocolate mocha, laid it out for me again. “Since you’re a bridge, you have more magic than your run-of-the-mill medium. That extra magic you have? It holds the power of life and death.”

*The power of life and death? That sounds scary—and like a lot of responsibility.* “Does that mean that I have the ability to kill with just a touch? Or a flick of my wrist?”

Wow. If that were the case, I was like a movie villain or something—which was the last thing I wanted to be.

Okorie shook his head. “Careful. Don’t confuse death with murder. Death encompasses your communications with the spirits, with the dead. But as you saw a while ago, you can also help inspire life in the living.”

“Wow, I can’t believe this! Does this mean that I’m finally making progress? That I can finally get rid of the bracelets?” I held them up and looked at them. I couldn’t wait to get these things off. They were a pain in the ass in the shower, for one thing.

“It’s a start, for sure,” Okorie said. “But don’t get ahead of yourself. You still have to work closely with Dani to make sure that you both can control your magic in a way that doesn’t cause problems later on.” He leaned in conspiratorially. “What’s the deal with Dani, anyway? She’s so quiet—I can’t tell if she’s still upset about our little disagreement-slash-slapping incident earlier or not. I just want to make sure everything’s okay with her.”

I thought back to how Dani had seemed—which was just as meek and uncertain as usual. But when I really thought about it, though, maybe there was a little more of that there than usual?

“I can’t really tell either,” I said. “I only really just met her myself.”

“Well, she definitely seems comfortable around you. Think you could talk to her? Try to get a read on how things are going?” Okorie asked.

“Yeah, sure.” I said. It was nice of Okorie to even care. Maybe he wasn’t as bad as I thought.

Dani came walking in.

“Welp, back to work,” Okorie said, quickly getting up from the table.

“Okay. We’ll be out in a few minutes,” I told him. Dani and I watched him go.

“You must be really happy—you’re clearly gaining more control over your magic.” Dani said.

*Yes, she definitely seems a little more subdued than usual.* I didn’t know if it was because of her struggles with her own magic, or if she was upset about earlier like Okorie had suggested. Even though she’d said that she agreed with Okorie about how failing to control her magic would keep her from seeing her family, that didn’t make the admission any less difficult.

“I *am* happy, Dani, but we’re both getting better already. And think about it—it’s only been two days! That’s a great sign for both of us!” I was trying to sound super cheerful without overdoing it.

“I guess so,” Dani said simply.

*That’s all I get?* I waited for a moment, thinking that she might add more. When she didn’t, I spoke up again. “Is there something else? Or did Okorie say anything else?”

Dani shook her head. “No. No more than usual. It’s just…” She paused, clearly trying to get her emotions in check. “I just miss my sister.”

I wanted to be encouraging, but how could I? She missed her sister and had lost control of her magic and was now living in a house full of strangers. She was having a tough time of it in general. “Maybe we could try calling her again?”

“I’ve already tried that a few times—I still can’t get a connection with her. Same as before.”

“I’m sorry you can’t get ahold of her, but don’t give up hope. We’ll figure it out, I promise.” I gave Dani a hug, then cast a glance back at the door. “We should probably get out there and join Okorie. Who knows what chutes and ladders he’s planning to throw at us this time?”

Dani smiled, and we went outside. Just in time, too, since Okorie was pacing back and forth, looking like the very picture of impatience.

“Let’s get this show on the road,” he said as soon as he saw us. “I don’t want to let up now that you finally understand what I’ve been telling you, Marta. We need to ride this wave.” He was just about to remove my bracelets when Greyson’s car came screeching to a halt next to the house, almost as if it had come out of nowhere.

My heart swelled. *Lilac’s back?*

I ran toward the car as Greyson and Xavier got out, followed by Violet and Lilac.

*He’s standing!* My heart swelled. He also didn’t look pale and sickly like he had when he’d left. *He looks, dare I say it, healed!*

I rushed into his arms, and he held me tight and swung me around. “You’re back, Lilac!”

Lilac beamed. “Of course I’m back. You know that I couldn’t stay away from you for too long.” He kissed the top of my head. “And I have some news. Me and Plum, we’re one and the same again! I’m back, baby!” he said with a comical fist pump.

I laughed. “Really? I can’t believe it!” I hugged him tighter and buried my face in his neck. “I have a million questions! I thought you would’ve had to go to the spirit world for that! How do you feel?”

“Never better!” he said, scooping me up in his arms to prove it.

He kissed me hard, and my head swam. I felt a little flustered. “Lilac, cool it! Everyone’s watching!”

“I don’t care!” Lilac said. “Can’t I celebrate my return with the girl I love?”

That made me even more flustered.

Xavier leaned into the car and helped Kira out. I watched them, surprised. The witch looked pale and weak.

“What happened?” I asked.

“She got zapped by a warlock,” Lilac said.

“Oh no!” I slid out of Lilac’s arms and ran over to Kira. “Are you okay?”

Kira smiled weakly. “I’m okay, just a little worn out.”

She collapsed, and Xavier caught her before she hit the ground.

“We’d better get her inside,” he said, lifting her into his arms. “We need to have Big Mac and Torin take a look at her.”

“Kira got hit by a magic blast that would have killed Xavier if she hadn’t blocked it. Then, she used the last of her strength to zap us back here,” Violet explained as we watched Xavier carry Kira into the house.

“Really? Wow. That’s so brave,” I said.

“Yeah, tell me about it. And to be honest, it’s the kind of thing a mate would do,” Violet said.

“Agreed,” Lilac said thoughtfully.

Violet, Lilac, and I headed inside. As we walked up to the porch, I couldn’t help but notice that Lilac’s enthusiasm had been tempered—a far cry from how giddy he’d been when he’d first arrived.

“Are you worried about Kira?” I asked him.

“Yes. You didn’t see the size of that blast. She could have been killed, easy. She did so much for us during the trip—launching us back and forth, nearly giving her life for Xavier… Not to mention that she was a strong enough anchor to bring us back from the spirit world,” he said.

“That *is* a lot.” Kira could always be counted on to jump in when needed. I really admired that about her. Then it hit me. “What? So you did go to the spirit world after all?”

My instincts had been right, at least, even if I hadn’t been the one to get him there.

“Yeah, I did,” Lilac said.

“See you two later, I’m going to go look for Charlie,” Violet said before dashing off.

Lilac and I walked upstairs to his room. He paused outside his door and took my hands. “I’m really grateful that I got Plum back, but…”

“But what?” I pressed, getting worried. “Come on, Lilac, out with it. Why do you seem so down all of a sudden? Did something happen while you were in Portland?”

Lilac took a deep breath. “Swift told me something just before we left.”

I was really getting worried now. Whatever this Swift guy had said had really gotten to Lilac. “Come on, Lilac. Whatever it is, just tell me.”

Lilac took a long pause before he finally looked me in the eye. “Marta, if I want to keep my wolf, I have to find my mate.”

**Episode 2449**

XAVIER

I helped Kira down onto her bed while Greyson hurried off to go find Big Mac and Torin. I was itching to go to the Vanguard palace to get Cali out of there, but seeing as Kira had taken a hit for me, I definitely owed her at least a few minutes.

Kira was semi-conscious and had her arms draped loosely around my neck. I gently removed them, and her eyes fluttered open as she smiled.

“Xavier,” she said softly. “Hi.”

“Hi, yourself. Rest,” I said. “Torin and Big Mac should be here soon. And just so you know, I’m not happy that you risked your life like that. I’m a werewolf; I could’ve handled a blast or two from Charon.”

I still couldn’t believe that stupid warlock had tried to unleash on me like that. The whole Charon-Lakini thing was really becoming a thorn in my side. Not only was it taking up time we didn’t have, but it was getting my friends hurt in the process—even if said friend had literally thrown herself into harm’s way.

“I know you’re strong, Xavier, I saw you in action in Seattle, remember?” Kira’s eyes drifted shut as she spoke.

*Is she going to be okay?*

“Then why did you do that, Kira?” I demanded.

If she knew that I could handle myself, what could’ve possessed her to put herself in the line of fire like that? I just didn’t get it. I couldn’t even imagine how bad I’d have felt if she’d gotten killed trying to protect me from something that I certainly could have handled. It would have hurt like shit, yes, but it would take a lot more than some weak warlock’s magic blast to take me out.

Kira was just about to answer when Torin came running in with an elf hat on his head. “Step aside, Xavier. Let me examine her.”

“She’s all yours,” I said, squeezing Kira’s hand before I got up and left her side.

Greyson came in not long after, and I could tell that he was feeling as impatient as I was to get to the Vanguard palace.

“How’s she doing?” he asked.

“You can see for yourself. She’s no better, but she’s also no worse.” I shook my head. “I just don’t get it. That was a stupid thing for her to do.”

“I suppose… But I’m not surprised,” Greyson said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. We should get ready to go. I just need to check in with Rishika before we head out.”

Greyson left just as Big Mac came in and joined Torin. Now that they were both here to watch over her, I felt okay about leaving her. “Kira, I’ll come check on you as soon as I get back. Make sure not to do anything else stupidly heroic while I’m gone.”

“I won’t,” Kira rasped as Torin and Big Mac went to work checking her out.

I headed out, pausing by Cali’s empty room. I pushed the door open and peeked inside, just wanting to see something, anything of hers to help counteract how much I missed her, how much I needed her. I cursed to myself. I just couldn’t believe she’d gone back to the princeling’s palace without either of us. It was like she still didn’t realize that Lucian and his sister were always up to no good when it came to our pack.

*At least she’d taken Ravi and Artemis with her. That was smart thinking on her part.*

Still, the whole expedition was impulsive and reckless—and oh so Cali. I was so eager to have her back in my arms. I thought about what Swift had said about Lilac and me needing to be with our mates to solidify our bond with our wolves. I couldn’t wait to do just that.

I was more than ready to go get Cali out of there, but I wanted to check in on Lilac first, and I felt torn about it. I knew that Cali would want nothing more than for me to look out for Lilac, especially after how bad things had been for him lately, but all I wanted to do—all I could think about—was getting to the Vanguard palace.

I started down the hall and knocked on Lilac’s door, opening it without waiting for a response. Marta and Lilac were sitting together on his bed, and it occurred to me that I might have just interrupted something. I flashed back to the awkward conversation I’d had with Lilac—what seemed a lifetime ago—about his virginity. Maybe I’d done a better job getting him prepared than I thought.

“Sorry,” I said quickly. “I can see that you’re doing okay, just came to check in on you!”

*Was Marta crying?* I thought to myself as I raced downstairs. If I wasn’t mistaken, I’d seen a tear rolling down her cheek. *Maybe she’s just overwhelmed about Lilac being reunited with Plum.*

I ran into Big Mac just as she emerged from Kira’s room, grumbling something or other about a “stupid witch.” She stopped when she caught sight of me. “You’re a lucky son of a bitch, you know that, right? If it had been me there when that warlock tried to blast you, I would’ve let him. Make no mistake about that.”

I watched her stomp off, thinking that she probably wasn’t kidding. Big Mac never kidded. I thought about all the good comebacks I could’ve thrown her way, about how I didn’t need her *or* Kira to take my hits, and how I was perfectly capable of doing that myself.

I recalled what Greyson had said before, about him not being surprised that Kira had taken that hit for me. *What was he getting at, anyway? What was he implying?*

I went to my room and grabbed some clothes to put in my pack to throw on once we shifted back at the Vanguard palace, then I went downstairs to find Greyson. It didn’t take me long to come upon him in the living room with Rishika, talking quietly.

He nodded at me as I approached. “Hey, almost ready.” He turned back to Rishika. “Thanks, I’ll let you know the minute we’re back.”

“Sounds good. Wish I could go with you,” Rishika said. “I’m not crazy about Artemis being there. That place sounds crazy, and the Vanguards seem unhinged. I hope that they’re safe.”

“Honestly, I wouldn’t mind having you come along,” I said. “You’re one of the best fighters we have… But I know the pack will be better off with you here. Some might say that you run the pack better than the Alpha.”

Greyson scowled at me. “Watch it, brother.”

“I’m just joking, Greyson. Get a sense of humor,” I said with a smile.

Greyson gave me a look that said he didn’t believe me one bit, then he turned back to Rishika. “We’ll be careful, and we’ll bring Artemis back safe—or rather, she’ll bring herself back safe. You and I both know that Artemis can more than hold her own.”

“True,” Rishika said thoughtfully.

Greyson headed toward the front door and motioned for me to follow him. Once we were outside, Greyson slung his pack over his shoulder, preparing to shift.

“Wait a second,” I said, stopping him. “What did you mean before? When you said you weren’t surprised that Kira protected me like that?”

Greyson shook his head in disbelief. “Are you really that dense, little brother? That witch has a major crush on you.”

Without any further explanation, Greyson shifted and took off toward the woods.

*She has a crush on me? What?* I was completely thrown. *Kira? Since when?*

I shifted and caught up to Greyson, then reached out to him via mind link.

*You’re kidding, right? You’re full of shit. Kira and I are just friends.*

Greyson chuckled and glanced at me before he replied. *You might think that, Xavier, but you’d be wrong. Very wrong.*

I snarled. Was he amused by this whole thing? I bet he was. He was amused by anything he thought might come between me and Cali.

*I’m just saying*, Greyson mind linked. *You’ve really got your hands full. First Ava, now Kira. How are you going to handle all that?*

I wanted to say something about his situation with Aysel, but I decided against it. At least Kira was someone I liked as a friend. Ava was another matter altogether.

As we picked up speed, I couldn’t help but wonder how I’d missed Kira’s interest. Was I as dense as Greyson said? I guessed it made sense, what with the protection charm she’d put under my pillow and her literally taking a magic bullet for me. Now wasn’t the time to worry about it, though. I’d sort it out later, *after* I pulled Cali out of the hands of the deluded moon prince.

The palace was just coming into view, and Greyson and I slowed to a stop a safe distance away.

*What’s the plan?* I asked Greyson.

*There’s only one plan*, he replied. *We get Cali back.*

**Episode 2450**

I pulled back from Lucian’s kiss just as his lips made contact.

*Oh no, not this again!*

I barely stopped myself from slapping him. Everything was going exactly how I’d hoped it wouldn’t. He’d isolated me from Artemis, Ravi, and everyone else, and had come onto me—or whatever this was—the first chance he got.

Lucian looked puzzled. “What’s wrong?” He pointed at the moon. “Everything’s aligned. Seluna is watching us from afar, blessing us with her light, and here we are, just the two of us, bathing in her beauty and grace. We shouldn’t defy her!”

“I wouldn’t dare defy Seluna,” I spluttered. “But…”

I looked from the moon and back to Lucian, trying to choose my words carefully.

Lucian looked at me expectantly.

*Shoot, what do I do? What can I say? He already told me that Seluna is pissed at me for pretending to be a Luna—what will she think of me now? How will I ever get back in her good graces if I reject Lucian right now?*

“I’m sorry,” I said slowly, trying to stall as a plan began to form in my head. “But I can’t kiss you. Not now, not ever.”

Lucian’s face fell. “Why not? Surely you find me irresistible. Everyone does.”

He puffed up his chest, confusion etched into his face.

I squirmed. *He really does think that he’s the hottest thing on two feet.*

“Of course I do, Lucian! That’s the problem. You’re so, so irresistible—too irresistible if I’m being honest.” I was lying through my teeth, and it made my stomach churn. “But as you know, I’m a *due destini* mate. My heart is being pulled in so many different directions already.”

I wished I’d never come here in the first place. There was no way that Lucian would’ve been so bold if my mates had been here. I thought back to the last time he’d tried this, and the knock-down-drag-out fight that had taken place in the baths.

*I don’t have Greyson and Xavier here to protect me right now, but* *I have to find a way to put my foot down and escape this. Somehow.*

“Oh, Caliana, your heart shouldn’t be torn. My affection toward you is only in the service of the goddess I worship. I’m not trying to remove your mates or replace them. I wouldn’t dream of it. I’m only trying to open you up to receiving Seluna’s infinite wisdom. To do that, I need to sanctify our connection.” Lucian stepped close again, as if he were preparing to kiss me again.

I took two steps back and plastered on a smile. “It would be a far better connection if I didn’t have two—very jealous—mates.”

I cringed inwardly at how mad my mates were going to be when they learned that I’d gotten myself into this mess. They were already going to be upset that I’d come here in the first place, and when they found out that I’d donned this skimpy swimsuit and kind of kissed Lucian again… It wasn’t going to be pretty*.*

Lucian nodded. “I understand your predicament, Caliana, I do. But I warn you that Seluna’s patience, like my own, can wear thin.”

“I don’t want to upset Seluna…”

*Think, Cali! How do I get out of this without insulting the damn moon goddess?*

“And that’s wise. Maybe your hesitation to fully embrace Seluna stems for your ignorance. I want to show you something—if you’ll let me.” Lucian gestured toward a spot in the center of the room, where what looked like a huge compass was set in the stone floor. He took my hand and led me to the center of the compass. “Face the window, Caliana.”

I did as he asked, nervous, but curious about what he was up to. *Maybe whatever he’s doing will actually shed some light on this whole thing. Maybe he has some Seluna testimonials to show me, or maybe some sort of text that describes why he always needs to kiss me to communicate with Seluna. At this point I’ll take any help I can get. I just don’t want to kiss him again.*

Lucian stepped away and approached the window, where he reached up and pulled a cord. The ceiling opened up, revealing the brilliant starry sky—and the moon. It seemed unusually bright, and I had to squint to look at it head-on.

Lucian raised his hands to the sky. “Seluna, we welcome you!” He stared up at the moon, throwing his head back and swaying slightly on his feet.

*What am I supposed to do? Is something supposed to happen?*

I was about to ask when I felt a warmth envelop me, just as two hands seemed to grip my shoulders. The moonlight grew even more intense—blinding, even. Suddenly, the floor gave way, and I expected to fall, but when I looked down, my feet were still firmly planted on the compass. I was rising above it, as if I were leaving my physical body behind. I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound came out—instead, I heard Seluna’s voice.

“Caliana!” Her voice was barely a whisper, but I heard it clear as day.

I braced myself. *Is Seluna going to scold me again? Because if she is, I have a few things to say right back to her! Starting with why she insists that Lucian throw himself at me in order for her to show up. There has to be a better way.*

Then, with a surge of moonlight, Seluna appeared, her long, silken robes flowing around her.

“Why are you here, Caliana?” She hovered in front of me, as beautiful and imposing as I remembered.

I was surprised and confused, and a little nervous. I wasn’t at all prepared for this. “I have no idea why I’m here, Seluna. I thought you wanted to speak to me, or something. Lucian—”

“Lucian is impatient,” Seluna said simply. “And he knows that I will summon you when the time is right. I will not be forced. This is nothing more than a trick of his to make me act before my time. He should know better.”

“When will you know when the time is right?” I was tired of this whole thing dragging on. If she could just give me a hint of when she’d summon me and put an end to this whole thing, I’d be so relieved, and I knew Xavier and Greyson would be, too.

“Like I told you, *I* will summon *you.* Not the other way around. Be sure to remind Lucian of that…” Her words trailed off as she flickered and faded away.

I opened my eyes, not having realized that I’d even closed them, and I found myself standing on the floor again, apparently back inside my body. I breathed a sigh of relief.

*Well, that didn’t go as badly as it could have. Seems like she’s directed her annoyance at someone else, now.*

Lucian rushed over to me. “Did it happen? Did you speak to her?” He was champing at the bit.

I paused, still trying to get my bearings. “Was I here the whole time?”

I looked around and rubbed my arms, just to confirm that I was, indeed, back inside my body.

Lucian gave a brisk nod. “Yes, you never left this spot. I watched you. You looked entranced. Natural, when in the goddess’ presence.”

“Oh, that’s strange. I…”

I was starting to wonder if Seluna’s visitation had really happened. Maybe I’d imagined the whole thing. I hadn’t drunk anything tonight, but maybe standing on this compass was messing with my head or something.

Lucian stepped close. “I demand to know what happened with the goddess Seluna! What did she say?”

He looked agitated and desperate, and I wasn’t sure if I’d ever seen him this way before. It was a little unsettling.

“She seemed upset. With you.” I said it as ominously as I could, hoping that this news would work in my favor.

Lucian’s eyes went wide. He was clearly mortified. “How? How have I so maligned myself in her eyes?”

“From what I understand, it’s because you’re being too impatient.”

I had to admit that I was enjoying this. Lucian’s and Aysel’s lives revolved around Seluna. How would they handle being on her bad side? Hopefully they’d handle it by going back to wherever they’d come from and leaving me, and the pack, alone—but I could only be so lucky.

Lucian looked crestfallen. He shuffled over to the cord and yanked on it, closing the moon roof again.

“We should return to the pool,” he said quietly, not even bothering to look at me.

I almost squealed with joy, but I restrained myself. “As you wish.”

*Yes! No more surprise kisses! Now I can hopefully get Artemis and Ravi the hell out of here!*

Lucian was unusually quiet on our long walk back to the pool. Figuring that right then was as good a time as any, I was just about to announce that I was going to leave when I spotted Aysel all but draping herself all over someone who was leaning against the wall.

My breath caught in my throat as I realized just who that someone was.

Greyson.

**Episode 2451**

GREYSON

*Cali, where are you?*

As soon as we entered the palace, Xavier and I split up to find her. I avoided the guards as best I could and pretended to be one of the guests. I made my way to the pool, where the most guests seemed to be converging, doing my best to look nonchalant and cheerful so that I didn’t draw attention.

I hadn’t really known what to expect—maybe a mass orgy—but I was relieved when I entered the pool room to find that it was just a pool party. The swimsuits the guests were wearing didn’t leave much to the imagination, and I was pretty sure I spotted a few completely naked bodies in the mix, but for a Vanguard party, it was tame. I shuddered, thinking about the night of the ceremony and how raunchy things had gotten among the guests. Without meaning to, I thought back to the kiss Aysel and I had shared that night. I only hoped that I’d be able to keep that from happening again in the future.

I’d started making my way through the crowd on the lookout for Cali, Ravi, or Artemis when Aysel cornered me. It was no surprise that she’d found me so soon. It was like she had a radar that pointed straight to me at all times.

“Greyson! Darling! So happy to see you! I didn’t know that my brother invited you.” She had a twinkle in her eye. “Or, maybe he didn’t invite you? Maybe you snuck in to see me?”

Her skin was wet, her hair was wet, and the swimsuit she wore showed more than it covered—by a large margin.

I tore my gaze away from her and tried to gather my composure. No, it wasn’t surprising that she’d cornered me like this—in fact, I’d expected it—but that didn’t help the fact that she always threw me off balance whenever I was around her.

*This was not how I expected my evening to go. How do I play this? She still thinks I’m into her…*

If I slipped up and did anything that suggested otherwise, I might never get the chance to break the curse. There was nothing I wanted more in the entire world than to have Cali back, and it tore me up that there were still so many obstacles in front of us—including the one standing before me right now.

Aysel ran a finger lightly along my cheek, hovering near my lips. “Do you plan on getting wet, Greyson?” She gestured at the pool. “If it’s too crowded for your tastes, I have a more private pool that only a privileged few have ever laid eyes on. Would you like that? To get wet together in my private pool?”

I didn’t get a chance to respond before I saw Cali staring at me from across the pool. I wanted to push Aysel away and run to Cali’s side to make sure she was okay, but if I did that, Aysel would figure out the truth—that I had no interest in her at all.

*Are you okay?* I mind linked to Cali.

*I am, but what are you doing here? I thought you were in Portland. What about Lilac?* she replied. I could see her taking in the sight of Aysel pressing herself against me, and it pained me that she was seeing me like this, but there was nothing I could do.

*Lilac’s fine—I’ll give you all the details later. I came to get you out of here.*

Cali started toward me. *Looks like I may need to get* you *out of here before Aysel sinks her claws in any deeper.*

Aysel narrowed her eyes. “Is something wrong?” She looked over her shoulder as Cali approached. “Oh. I see. It’s *her*.”

Thinking fast, I leaned in close and whispered in Aysel’s ear. “Remember, she’s my mate. I have to be careful. Play it cool.”

Aysel didn’t strike me as the type to follow the rules, even those I might give her, but I was hopeful.

“Of course,” Aysel purred. “You know how much I like to play games.” She turned to Cali and pasted on a smile that was convincing enough. “Caliana, so good to see you! Are you enjoying yourself? Having a good time? I was just discussing the party with your mate, here.” She turned back to look at me, fluttering her eyelashes. “He’s *so* attentive, but I’m sure you already know that.” She splayed her hand across my chest, and I resisted the urge to flinch away.

“I do. It’s one of Greyson’s many virtues,” Cali said stiffly, barely concealing a sneer.

“Did you and my brother have some fun?” Aysel asked, a little too loudly. “You were gone so long, I was beginning to wonder.”

I didn’t like the innuendo, but I knew what Aysel was up to, and more than that, I knew that I could trust Cali completely. *What did Lucian do this time? If he even touched a hair on her beautiful head…*

Aysel looked back and forth between us, looking bored now that Cali had come and stopped her full-court press.

“I’m going to go take another dip. Feel free to join,” she said as she slinked away.

Cali’s smile dropped immediately. “I want to get Artemis and Ravi out of here.”

“Definitely,” I replied, distracted by how beautiful Cali looked right now. I wished that I could pull her close and kiss her, hold her. *Damn this curse!* I could see Lucian watching us, and I couldn’t help but ask. “Did Lucian do anything to you? Are you okay? Do I need to go and give him a piece of my—”

“Be careful,” Cali whispered. “He’s a little on edge right now, and I don’t want to shake things up when we’re so close to getting the hell out of here. Nothing too bad happened—he brought me up to a tower because he wanted to see Seluna.”

“What?” I didn’t understand what that meant. “Was it another milk bath thing?”

Even the thought of him trying that shit again made my blood boil. I clenched and unclenched my fists, using all of my willpower to keep from running over and decking him.

“No, not exactly. I’ll try to explain later. Can we go?” Cali shot a glance over her shoulder at Lucian, and when she realized that he was staring right at her, she gave him a weak smile.

“Sure, I’m all for it, but we need to find the others.”

“Right. Also, I tried to find the tarot card, but I failed.” Cali dropped her head and laced her fingers together in front of her. “I was so close! I was in Aysel’s room looking through her drawers—and then she caught me. Luckily she didn’t make a big deal about it.”

“Cali, that’s the last thing you should’ve been doing! Do you know how dangerous that was?” I was upset that she’d put herself in such a dangerous situation, but I understood why she’d done it. She wanted the revulsion spell over and done with as much as I did.

“I’m sorry, but I had to try!”

“I know, I get it. Let’s just find the others so we can go.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

I took Cali’s hand, and we made our way through the guests. I was fully aware that Lucian was watching Cali, and that Aysel had her eyes on me. We made it out of the pool room without incident, just as Xavier came over with Artemis in tow.

“Artemis and I ran into each other,” Xavier said, his gaze lingering on Cali for a few moments before he turned his attention to me. “But we haven’t seen Ravi.”

“Really?” I was beginning to get a little concerned. As smooth and even keeled as Lucian and Aysel were—or appeared to be—there was no telling what they would do if they thought the Redwoods were up to something.

“Let’s check some of the rooms along the hall,” Cali suggested.

“Yeah, when we were here the night of the party, they had us wait in one of them,” I said.

We wasted no time starting down the hall, peeking into the rooms as we went. We surprised more than a few guests, catching them in compromising positions.

“Maybe we should split up? This place is huge, and it’s going to take forever to check all these rooms,” Artemis suggested.

“No!” Xavier and I said in unison.

“No, not a good idea,” I reiterated. “We can’t risk losing each other in this maze.”

I couldn’t stop thinking about Aysel and the tarot card. *If only Cali had been able to find it!* Then we would’ve been able to head back to Portland first thing tomorrow and somehow resolve the dispute between Lakini and Charon and then break this fucking spell. If we left without the card today, I would have to come back to the palace—and to Aysel.

*Why not do it now?*

I motioned for everyone to stop. “Xavier, go find Ravi and take Cali back to the pack house.”

Cali stopped. “But what about you?”

“Me? I’m staying.”

**Episode 2452**

MARTA

Lilac’s words hung heavy in the air between us. *He has to find his mate? But what will that mean for us? Ugh, I don’t want to be thinking about this…* An overwhelming sense of dread came over me. I felt light-headed, and my throat had gotten so dry….

“Mate?” It was all I could manage to say out loud. I wanted to say so much more—my head was spinning with millions of questions—but that was all I had, and it would have to do for now.

Lilac looked equally shaken by what he’d said. “Yes, my mate. Swift said it was the best way to make sure that my wolf bond holds, now that I’m back together with Plum. Apparently, the best way to do that is…”

“To find your mate. I heard you the first time.” I looked down at where my hands were sitting clenched together in my lap. I wished that this was a nightmare that I could just wake up from. I’d gotten Lilac back healthy and in one piece, but now I was in danger of losing him anyway. It was like some sort of sick joke.

Lilac nodded solemnly. “I’m not really sure why, but Xavier sort of explained what happened with him and Cali… His wolf was just gone, so it was a little different, but when he found Cali, his wolf stayed—I guess there was more reason for it to stay, once he found his person.”

Lilac’s words stung, even though I knew that he hadn’t meant them to.

*More reason than being with me. I’m not enough for you. For Plum.*

I needed to address the elephant in the room, but I was too scared. Lilac’s words had already taken the wind out of me and scrambled my thoughts pretty badly, and I didn’t think I could take any more. As much as I tried to organize my thoughts and be present so that I could deal with this, I just couldn’t think straight at all.

*Things were just starting to look up. There was a glimmer of hope for everything going on in my life: my magic, my boyfriend, my newfound family… I knew it was all too good to be true. Do I not deserve to be so happy?*

“What does this mean, Lilac? Does this mean that I’m… I’m not your mate?” I hadn’t really thought about it before now, but as I considered the question, I realized that maybe I’d already assumed that I *was* his mate. We hadn’t talked about it or anything, but maybe it had just been wishful thinking on my part. It didn’t help that I wasn’t a werewolf, and I hadn’t even considered what it meant to be someone’s mate before I met Lilac.

Lilac ran a hand over his face and then through his hair, obviously struggling with the question himself. His brilliant eyes connected with mine, filling me with a bolt of attraction. I loved Lilac, and I’d risked my life for him. He’d risked his life for me, too.

He reached for my hand and held it tightly, a gesture that I returned. We were both clearly hurting here, and both clearly lost about what to do.

“I don’t know if you’re my mate, Marta,” Lilac finally admitted, his voice almost too low to hear. “I don’t know, and it’s killing me.” He looked away from me then, like he was afraid to meet my gaze.

My breath caught in my throat. It was just as I feared. Him saying no. Him *not* knowing.

Lilac was getting even more emotional as he rushed to cushion the impact of what he’d just said. “But it could just be that I don’t know what a mate feels like. I love you, Marta. That, I’m certain of. Plum cares about you, too. You saved us.”

“Saved you to be with someone else,” I said harshly, unable to control the shake in my voice.

*You love me, Plum loves me, but you don’t know if I’m your mate. That’s all I can hear. That’s all that matters.*

Lilac shut that down immediately. “*No*. No, don’t say that, Marta. I never should have said anything at all.”

I shook my head. “What? No, you had to tell me. How could you not? Something like this? It would all come out sooner or later, right? There’s no hiding from it.”

I couldn’t stop the onslaught of images running through my head. Lilac with some other girl, hugging her, making her laugh. That girl making HIM laugh. Lilac kissing her… It was a reality that I realized I’d always been afraid of but hadn’t quite articulated in any way until now. I was scared of Lilac realizing that there was so much more out there than me, especially if I didn’t get my magic under control. As things stood right now, I was still a ticking time bomb of magic.

*Who wants to deal with that? Especially if I’m not even the one. Not even his mate.*

I stood up quickly, needing to pace. I needed to clear my head, I needed to calm down. I needed… I didn’t know exactly what I needed. *Other than Lilac. I definitely need him, but clearly that might not be in the cards anymore.*

I went into the bathroom and splashed water on my face.

Lilac followed me. “Please talk to me, Marta.”

“I’m not sure what else there is to say. You said it yourself—you have to find your mate. Clearly, if you’re not sure that it’s me, it’s not me.”

Saying it out loud felt so final, so soul crushing. *I hate this so much!* Honestly, I was still in shock. I hadn’t imagined that when he went to Portland to get help for his condition, he would come back with this news. I felt totally blindsided. I loved Lilac so much, and now I could barely look at him. Even the sight of his face made me think about the amazing time we’d spent together. We’d been through so much and had protected each other, and it seemed completely unfair that I wouldn’t get to be with him now that he was back in the land of the living—and reunited with his wolf. We couldn’t even properly celebrate that, now that he’d given me this news.

“I don’t want to leave you, Marta. I’m in love with you, and if bringing someone back from the spirit world isn’t enough to keep two people together, then what the hell is?” He pounded the door with his fist, causing it to slam against the wall. He jumped in shock at how loud it was and immediately looked embarrassed. “I’m sorry for getting so upset, but I *am* upset. I don’t want to be with anyone else—you have to know that, Marta. I want to be with you, and only you.”

Hearing him say that made me feel good. Really good. But I couldn’t ignore the reality.

“What if you meet your mate and it just clicks for you?” I asked. “You see how Violet is with Charlie, how Cali is with both her mates. It’s like a gut feeling for them, something they just… *know*. There’s no confusion or uncertainty between them like you have when it comes to me. Don’t you see that? What if it just clicks for you? What then?”

Lilac shook his head hard, his jaw set, and his eyes determined. “Not going to happen.” He pulled me into a hug.

“Oh, Lilac.” I buried my face in his chest. My heart was beating quickly, and my breathing was coming just as fast. It was all so overwhelming. I loved him. I loved him, and I couldn’t imagine losing him. This was almost too much to bear. Even though I tried to stop them, more tears came and ran down my cheeks. I couldn’t help it. This was the worst thing I could’ve imagined, and there was nothing I could do about it.

“I love you, Marta. You have to believe that.” Lilac pulled me tighter against him.

“I love you, too.” I was miserable, but it felt good to be in his arms, to hear him say that he loved me over and over. I wanted to be with him, and I didn’t want anything to come between us, but did I have even a shred of control over that? I didn’t know.

Lilac leaned back and then pressed his lips to mine. I kissed him back, matching his intensity while our emotions poured through the kiss, which felt sad and passionate at the same time—almost as if it were the last kiss we’d ever share. I didn’t want to believe that was the case, but how could I not? Lilac ran his hands through my hair, and I slid my hands up and down his back, relishing the feel of it. At the same time, I couldn’t help but think about how things could actually change. Maybe we wouldn’t ever get to share a moment like this again.

I pulled away before the kiss could heat up any further. I was shaking. The question that had been sitting unspoken between us clamored at the back of my mind, demanding to be let out into the open. I looked up at him and asked it, my voice small and raspy.

“Do we have to break up?”

**Episode 2453**

I kept looking back over my shoulder as Xavier tugged me along down the long hallway, now in a rush to find Ravi and get out of the Vanguard palace.

“Where *is* he?” Artemis asked Xavier, exasperated. “Why would he split off from us and disappear like this? He knows that this place isn’t safe! Where could he be?”

Artemis kept ducking her head into the rooms as we passed by them, but we hadn’t had any luck so far.

Xavier snorted. “Hell if I know. You three came together—you should have used some sort of buddy system. Where did you last see him, again?”

“I can’t really remember. It’s like one minute I saw him chatting up some women in the pool, and the next thing I knew, an hour had passed and he was nowhere to be found,” Artemis said.

Probably noticing that I wasn’t joining in one the “where’s Ravi?” talk, Xavier looked at me, and then he shifted his attention over my shoulder before giving me a knowing look.

*Don’t worry. Greyson’s going to be fine*, he mind linked to me. *He can take care of himself. Trust me.*

I blushed, embarrassed that my concern for Greyson was so obviously written all over my face. I couldn’t help it. I *was* worried about him. How could I not be when he was staying behind in this place—the belly of the beast? With Aysel, no less.I looked at Xavier and smiled.

*I know*, I mind linked. Then I cleared my throat and spoke up, wanting to shift the subject away from Greyson. “Artemis, you said that Ravi was chatting up some of the female guests when you last saw him?”

“Yes,” Artemis huffed. “Near the pool or in the pool—one of the two. Some bodyguard *he* turned out to be. Put a gaggle of beautiful women in front of him and he’s toast.”

My mind drifted back to Greyson again. It wasn’t that I was worried he couldn’t take care of himself—I knew that he could. What I was worried about was Aysel. I didn’t trust her in the slightest, no matter how sweet and innocent she acted with me—as if she *wasn’t* trying to steal my mate right out from under me. The thought of Greyson spending any more time alone with her made me crazy. Seeing her hover over him like a salivating panther had burned me up inside. It had taken everything I had not to grab her by the hair and throw her in the pool. *Doesn’t she have any shame?*

I was still lost in thought as we turned a corner, stopping abruptly when we spotted Ravi. He was tangled in the arms of a beautiful woman who I’d never seen before.

Xavier cleared his throat loudly, and Ravi looked up. He smirked at us and then kissed the woman before leaning down to whisper something in her ear. The woman beamed up at him, then batted her eyelashes at him before sashaying off. Ravi sauntered over to join us. Xavier eyed him closely, and I could see amusement and irritation battling for dominance in his gaze. I was amused too, despite all the drama that was going on. Ravi looked utterly ridiculous, and completely full of himself.

“Time to get back to the pack house, lover boy,” Xavier said with a smirk.

“Sure, but I need to get my clothes. There’s no way I’m going back in this,” Ravi said.

Xavier grabbed Ravi. “Well, you should have thought of that before you went AWOL.”

The three of us made our way back out to the car as Artemis tore into Ravi. “Consider this your punishment for not keeping an eye on Cali. Trust me, it could be a lot worse.” The threat was barely there. In fact, Xavier was practically grinning at the mild hazing he was putting Ravi through.

“Sorry, sorry, I got a little caught up in the spirit of the party,” Ravi said sheepishly as we all climbed into the car.

Xavier pulled off toward home, and I zoned out completely, preoccupied with thoughts of Greyson and Aysel. As much as I hated to admit it, Aysel’s innuendo about her night out with Greyson had gotten to me. Greyson hadn’t told me much—though I trusted him—but it still nagged at me. It hadn’t helped, seeing them together at the pool party. I knew that Greyson was still probably playing it up to keep Aysel thinking that he was into her, all so that he could get to the tarot card—but somehow that didn’t make me feel any better. Aysel was a snake.

*Just like Ava*, I thought bitterly. *Why are women always trying to steal my mates? Is there some sort of mate shortage that I don’t know about?*

When I really thought about it, Aysel might have been even worse than Ava—mainly because Ava *did* have a link and history with Xavier, as much as I hated to admit it. When it came to Aysel, she had no link to Greyson except wanting to get in his pants.

I took a deep breath and tried to push my doubts away. No matter what Aysel wanted from Greyson, it wasn’t like Greyson was going to give it to her. I had to keep that in mind, as it was the only thing that was keeping me sane.

“You really were useless in there!” Artemis shouted, still reaming Ravi out.

“Well next time, don’t bring me to a raging pool party full of beautiful women, then!” Ravi said. “There was a lot of temptation there, and I never said I was a beacon of self-control. Besides, why are you going on about it? Cali’s fine, isn’t she? She’s sitting right there!”

“That’s not the point!” Artemis hissed.

Xavier was shooting concerned looks my way, probably wondering why I was being so quiet, but I tuned them all out, still kicking myself for not being able to locate the damn tarot card. If I had, Greyson wouldn’t be in this predicament and I wouldn’t be worried about him.

*I’d be heading back to the pack house with both my mates, not sitting here wondering if my other mate will be able to resist Aysel throwing herself at him all night.*

I noticed with a start that we were already back at the pack house. I’d been so lost in my thoughts that I hadn’t even realized.

We all got out of the car and headed into the house. Everyone was in the living room, working on Christmas crafts with Torin. A chorus of hoots and laughter broke out as soon as we came in.

“What?” I said, confused. Then I looked at Artemis and Ravi and realized that we were all still decked out in our barely-there swimwear. I blushed and wrapped my arms around myself, feeling self-conscious.

Xavier handed me a blanket, coming to my rescue, as always. Rishika came and pulled Artemis away, and I wondered whether she was jealous or turned on by her girlfriend’s skimpy swimsuit. Ravi’s little dalliance seemed to have changed his attitude about his too-short board shorts, and he got into it, strutting around with his hands on his hips while everyone clapped and pretended to throw money at him.

It was actually a relief to come home to such a light mood in the pack house. The Christmas spirit was definitely in the air—there were Christmas carols playing and a fire raging in the fireplace, and I could smell cookies baking. It was nice and cozy, and everyone was so happy and full of laughter and having a good time. It was almost enough to make me shove my concerns about Greyson aside… But I couldn’t stop thinking about him and Aysel together. Greyson would resist her attempts, just like I had with Lucian, but Aysel wasn’t as high-minded as Lucian was. She was obviously hell-bent on bedding Greyson.

Lola walked over, waggling her eyebrows as she pulled the blanket open and took me in. “Ooh, hot! Where on earth did you find this little number?”

I snatched the blanket closed, annoyed. “Long story.”

Lola grinned. “I tried for years to get you to buy sexier swimsuits. Guess all it took to get you to change your tune was being summoned by werewolf royalty, huh?”

I groaned. Lola was in high spirits, and it made me think about the Samara pack plan.

*I wonder how that’s going?*

It would be great to be rid of Ava once and for all, and it was clear that Lola was psyched about the prospect of a “mission” to do just that. I was about to pull Lola aside to ask her about it when Jay came up to ask her something. At the same moment, there was a knock on the door. I looked around, but everyone else was too absorbed in their own worlds to even notice.

Sighing, I wrapped the blanket tighter around myself and fastened it so that it would stay shut, then I opened the door. I frowned when I saw the strange woman standing there, tapping her foot a little impatiently. *Who is this? Why is she here?*

“Can I help—”

Xavier swooped in from behind me and addressed the woman. “Who the hell are you, and what are you doing here?”

**Episode 2454**

GREYSON

I stood, looking toward the door where Cali and the rest of the crew had disappeared. I was relieved that Cali was out of this fucking palace, but I was still unnerved by the fact that she’d been invited at all. And what had she meant about Lucian wanting to talk to Seluna?

It wasn’t hard to remember the last time we were here, when Lucian conned a kiss from Cali under the guise of some bullshit moon ceremony designed to—funnily enough—talk to Seluna.

My hackles rose at the memory of his hands on her, but I forced myself to calm down. I needed to talk to Cali about what had happened tonight before I jumped to any conclusions.

“Cocktail, sir?”

I looked over at the uniformed servant who had appeared at my elbow, holding a tray of drinks.

I was on the verge of saying no, but I stopped myself.

“Sure. Thanks,” I said, taking one of the tumblers full of brightly colored liquid. I figured it’d be easier to blend in if I looked like I was here to enjoy the party.

But I had no plans of drinking whatever was in this mystery cocktail. This was the Vanguards we were talking about—who knew what kind of potions the thing contained. I needed to stay sober and keep a clear head if I wanted to find that damn tarot card.

I glanced around the huge ballroom, hoping to spot Aysel and put my plan into action, but instead I locked eyes with Lucian. He was heading right for me.

Figuring he was probably going to ask how I’d managed to get into the party, I gripped my drink, bracing myself for the conversation.

But when he reached me, he smiled graciously. “Good evening, Greyson. It’s always so nice to see the Redwood Alpha. I hope you’re enjoying yourself. Can I assume that you are here to see Aysel?”

“Yeah,” I said, trying to sound casual. “I am.”

Lucian nodded knowingly. “I heard the two of you enjoyed quite an evening together.”

“Yep,” I said quickly. “Have you seen her around?”

Lucian scanned the crowd. “Not recently, but you know how she is. Aysel likes to entertain herself, and there’s no telling where—or with whom—she might be.”

“That’s… okay,” I said, trying not to look as weirded out by his answer as I felt. Lucian and Aysel had a very odd brother-sister dynamic.

“In the meantime,” Lucian went on, “you should just mingle with the other guests. Enjoy yourself!”

“Yeah, I’ll do that,” I lied. “But since I’ve got you here, I wanted to ask you about something—I understand you invited Cali over here for another ceremony?”

I watched Lucian’s face closely, trying to gauge his reaction to my question, but his expression stayed neutral.

“Yes, I did. Seluna wished to speak to Caliana again, and I simply conveyed the message.” He glanced over my shoulder and around at the room. “Speaking of that lovely lady, where *is* Caliana?”

“She’s gone,” I said shortly.

Lucian’s gaze moved back to me, and I saw his eyes narrow for just an instant. There was a flash of disappointment in them, as well as something else. Maybe anger? It was hard to tell for sure, but it was nice to know that I was ruffling the princeling’s feathers.

“She left so soon?” he said smoothly, recovering himself quickly. “A pity. I didn’t have a chance to say goodnight.”

I had to stop myself from smiling at this.

“Well,” Lucian said briskly, “I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening, Greyson.”

As he turned back to the party, I watched him warily. Why hadn’t he been surprised to see me? Or asked me how I had gotten in? Did that mean that he’d been made aware when Xavier and I had arrived?

That would make some kind of sense, I supposed. It would explain how we’d gotten past the guards so easily.

I watched the prince as he threaded his way through the guests. Everything about him was strange, but this felt different. It was like he was playing some kind of game.

A soft hand fell on my shoulder, and I turned to see Aysel’s bright blue eyes looking hungrily at me.

“Hello, Greyson,” she breathed. “I wondered if you’d like to join me in the pool. The water’s perfect. Or, if you prefer, the offer still stands to go somewhere more private.”

She took a long sip of her drink, never taking her intense eyes off me.

I needed to play this very carefully. I needed access to Aysel’s room, but I didn’t want to go through another seduction song and dance with her. If I got into that situation and had to turn her down again, it would be hard to explain, and things could get ugly—fast.

“I’d love to,” I said, thinking fast, “but I didn’t bring a suit.”

Aysel laughed, tossing her head back and exposing her long, smooth throat.

“Such modesty.” She giggled, looking back at me, then she gestured at the party. “Look around, Greyson. Do you think anyone here cares that you forgot your suit?”

I followed her gaze around the room. Most guests were in bathing suits, but there were plenty who were unabashedly naked.

“Besides,” she purred, smiling up at me, “it’d be such a shame to hide your assets.”

She reached for my belt, but I grabbed her hand, stopping her.

“I’d prefer to wear a suit,” I said firmly.

Aysel leaned back with a pout. “That’s fine, I guess. I can find one for you. Come this way.”

She led me toward a door, where we were met by another servant.

“Show my guest to a changing room,” she said imperiously.

As I followed the servant down a hallway, Aysel called after me.

“Don’t take too long—the water might get cold!”

The servant showed me to a dressing room—a space the size of a large closet. I shut the door and thought hard. I only had a few minutes to look for the tarot card before Aysel got suspicious. I knew that Cali had looked through Aysel’s room and come up with nothing. That was what had happened to me, too.

The possibility that Aysel had it on her seemed high, but I wanted to exhaust all my other ideas before going with the nuclear option. Still, it was a huge task. If the tarot card wasn’t in Aysel’s room, it could be literally anywhere else on the palace grounds.

There was a window in the changing room, and I glanced out at the sprawling lawn. In the distance I could see the little cottage Aysel had taken me to try to seduce me that first time.

A thought occurred to me, and I glanced at the changing room door. If I hurried—and didn’t get caught on the grounds—I could sneak out the window, search the cottage, and be back in five minutes. It was a risk, but I had to take it.

Throwing the window open, I launched myself over the low sill and landed on the soggy ground. I sprinted toward the cottage, my heart hammering in my chest. But when I reached the door, it was locked.

That could be a good sign. Maybe Aysel had locked the door to protect something inside—like the tarot card.

I circled the cottage until I found an open window, then pulled myself through. I stood for a moment, letting my eyes adjust to the darkness, and looked around. I was in the bedroom, and I got to work, searching everywhere. I pulled open the dresser drawers and rifled through the lacy lingerie.

Nothing.

I moved to the bedside table and yanked open the drawers there. Still nothing, but as my eyes moved to the bed, I felt myself growing cold. I remembered being chained to the frame, and Aysel moving on top of me.

I shook my head, trying to push the memory away. I only had a few more moments, and I couldn’t lose focus. I moved to the closet and pulled the door open, running my hands along the high shelves, but still nothing.

The tarot card was nowhere to be found.

As I looked around the dim room, I felt frustration pressing on my chest. This was bullshit. I’d taken a huge risk tonight, and I was coming up completely empty. If I walked away from this empty-handed, was I ever going to have another chance to find the card? My plan to take it to the source had blown up in my face, so did that mean I was fated to be repulsed by the person I loved more than anything, forever?

“Fuck,” I muttered, running a hand through my hair. A thought was running through my head, and it froze my blood.

The alternative possibilities were shrinking, and it was becoming clear that the thing I didn’t want was the only way to get what I *did* want.

Was I going to have to hook up with Aysel to find that tarot card?

**Episode 2455**

XAVIER

My eyes narrowed on the woman standing in the doorway. She was slim, with straight black hair shaved into a badass undercut. She was dressed in black from head to toe, and her dark eyes were wary. She looked between Cali and me, taking us in.

“I’m Lakini,” the woman said. “I’m here to speak with the Alpha of this pack.”

Lakini? The witch?

*Fuck.*

I looked over at Cali, who looked baffled by this woman’s sudden appearance. Then I glanced over at the rest of the pack, still in the living room, and wondered if they’d noticed the stranger’s arrival. But no one had. Ravi was still dancing around in his Speedo, and the rest of the pack was still laughing and hollering and so consumed by his impromptu swimwear fashion show that they didn’t seem to have noticed anyone at the door.

*Go back to the others. I’ll deal with this*, I told Cali, anxious to get her away from this witch.

But she shot a stubborn look up at me. *Lakini? You’ve got to be kidding me. I’m not going anywhere.*

I shook my head with a sigh. Cali was impossible, but I couldn’t help but love how fierce she was—even when it was a pain in my ass. I should have insisted that she leave dealing with this to me, but it was clear from the look on her face that no matter what I said, she wasn’t going to be dissuaded.

The rest of the pack was still wrapped up in their own merriment, and I didn’t want to draw any attention to our visitor, so I put my hand on the small of Cali’s back and guided her out onto the porch with Lakini, closing the door behind us.

“Okay, you’re Lakini. So what are you doing here?” I asked, trying to keep my tone in check. I was pissed that she’d had the nerve to show up at the pack house unannounced like this, but I was acutely aware of Cali next to me. The last thing I wanted to do was alarm her, so I forced myself to stay calm.

Lakini was a witch, and—if Charon was to be believed—one who used her powers in some pretty questionable ways. My anger at her sudden entrance seethed just below the surface, but I needed to consider the variables. I’d never met this woman, and I didn’t know what she was capable of. In my experience, witches were easily offended, and I didn’t want her getting pissed and trying anything crazy with Cali so close.

The woman looked up at me and met my eyes. “I gather you are part of the same pack as the wolf who accosted me in my shop? I was able to cast a tracking spell that led me here. I believe there was some arrangement made—”

“Yes,” Cali interrupted, “we may have had something to do with that.” She smiled nervously.

Lakini nodded. “Ah. I see. Well, I came because I have a proposal.”

Cali looked between Lakini and me, a frown creasing her forehead. I could practically feel the curiosity rolling off her in waves. “What kind of proposal did you have in mind?” she asked.

Lakini gave Cali a cool stare, then looked back at me to answer, as though Cali hadn’t spoken. “I want to flip the deal.”

I regarded Lakini for a long moment. “Flip the deal? What the fuck does that even mean? Do you think you’re playing on a game show here? There’s no ‘flip the deal’ option, witch.”

I had no idea what Lakini meant by flipping the deal, but I had a gut feeling I wasn’t going to like it. There was a Fae promise on the line here, and those were deathly serious. Whatever bullshit Lakini wanted to do could complicate things with the agreement Cali had made with Charon.

*Do you think talking to her is a good idea?* Cali looked up at me anxiously. *Maybe we should just wait—*

*Don’t worry*, I assured her. *I’ve got this. I won’t let anything happen to you—just let me do the talking.*

Cali have me a stony look. *Are you kidding me, Xavier?*

*Because of the Fae promise*, I added quickly. *The one you made. Ring any bells?*

She rolled her eyes*. Ugh. Fine.*

I looked back at Lakini. “Well? I’m waiting. What do you want from us?”

Lakini shifted her gaze to Cali, giving her a quick once-over. “You’re not a werewolf. You must be the Fae who started all of this.”

“You’re going to want to keep her out of this,” I snarled, stepping in front of Cali, blocking her from Lakini’s glaring eyes. “Why don’t you tell us what you want, or get the fuck out of here.”

“I only came by to talk to Greyson,” she said, shrugging, looking unbothered by my threatening tone.

“About what?” Cali asked.

Lakini’s jaw worked, and when she spoke, it looked as though the words cost her. “I wanted to tell him that I am now more amenable to having a discussion with him. Upon reflection, I realize that I may have come off a bit harsh when he came by this afternoon, but I’ve thought about what he said, and I’ve decided that I do want to work with you all.”

Cali frowned. “Greyson? This afternoon? Wait.” She looked at me, then back at Lakini. “You talked to Greyson this afternoon?”

I felt a small twinge of guilt, watching Cali’s confusion. Greyson and I hadn’t told Cali we were going to talk to Lakini when we went to Portland with Lilac. We hadn’t lied, exactly, but we definitely hadn’t been forthcoming with that information. And as I looked down at Cali’s confused face, I knew that was the reason.

*I’ll explain later.*

Cali shot me an icy glare.

“Greyson’s not here,” I said, turning to the witch. “So you’re just going to have to leave a message with us.”

Lakini made a dismissive noise and shook her head. “No way.”

“What?” I asked.

“I came to talk to Greyson. I’m not going to say anything more if he’s not here,” she said decidedly. “And I don’t leave messages.”

“Whatever,” I said, rolling my eyes. “But I’ll tell you right now that whatever your proposal is, we’re not doing anything that might risk breaking the Fae promise we made to Charon. I don’t know what Greyson told you, but I know he’s going to feel the same way. So if that’s what you’re proposing, you’re wasting all our time.”

Lakini glared at me. “Of course I know that. What I have to suggest doesn’t violate the Fae promise and isn’t anything that would put anyone at risk.”

“So what is it?” I asked, starting to feel fed up. After everything that had happened today, I wasn’t in the mood for some witch’s games.

She thought for a moment before she answered. “I believe there’s a loophole.”

“What kind of a loophole?” Cali asked quickly, stepping out from behind me.

Lakini shook her head.

“What kind of loophole are you talking about?” Cali asked again.

“No,” Lakini said, folding her arms. “That’s all I’m willing to say about it while I’m not on my own turf.”

I gave her a long look. “Okay, maybe you believe there’s a loophole, but why the hell should we believe you?”

Lakini looked up at me with sly smirk. “You don’t have to believe me. Not right now.”

What the hell did that mean? And why the hell was she acting so damn smug?

Lakini reached into the pocket of her jeans and pulled out a business card. She handed it to me. “Think on it. And get in touch.” She shook her dark hair away from her face and raised an eyebrow. “But don’t take too long. I’m not known for my patience.”

She turned to walk down the porch steps, but when she was halfway down, there was a small pop and the air around me gave a strange shudder. Lakini had disappeared, vanishing into thin air.

“Whoa,” Cali breathed, looking at the place where the witch had just been standing.

Impressive exit or not, I was glad she was gone. I didn’t like witches in general, and I didn’t love the idea of them just popping by whenever they felt like it. This was a pack house, not a safehouse for supernaturals.

“Like… whoa,” Cali said again, still staring at the porch steps. She looked up at me. “Did you see that? That was… *something.*”

“I saw it.” I reached for her hand. “Let’s go inside and get some rest. It’s been a really long day.”

But before I could take a step toward the door, Cali snatched her hand away from mine and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Um, no,” she said, her voice cold. “We’re not going anywhere until you tell me everything that happened in Portland.”

*Shit*.

Cali’s eyes narrowed, like she could sense my unease. “Sounds like you all had quite a time out there. Besides visiting Lakini, did you and Greyson do anything else behind my back that I should know about?”

**Episode 2456**

Xavier was starting to look shifty, but I held my ground.

“From what I had been led to believe,” I started frostily, “you two were supposed to drive to Swift’s store, help Lilac get reunited with his wolf, and then come back here.” I tipped my head to the side. “Can you tell me how visiting Lakini the witch factored into that?”

Xavier ran a hand through his hair, looking uncomfortable. “That *is* what we did—”

“So how did Greyson end up seeing her?”

“We just wanted to find out who Lakini was,” Xavier explained. “Charon seemed like a douche, and we’d only heard his side of the story. We didn’t want to take his word about her without doing some research of our own.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine! But why didn’t you tell me about it?”

He gave me a look. “When exactly would I have had a chance to do that today?”

I had to admit he had a point. We’d been moving at a pretty breakneck speed all day. There hadn’t been a lot of moments to debrief.

“Besides,” Xavier added, “there really wasn’t anything to tell. Greyson only wanted to see what kind of person she was, and—”

“And what happened? She said she lost her temper with him?” I pressed.

Xavier shrugged. “I’m not sure. I wasn’t there, but it sounds like maybe things got a little out of hand.”

“*Out of hand?*” I snapped. I blinked back some angry tears. I hated that I felt so out of the loop. “I can’t *believe* you left me in the dark on this. You should have told me. I’m the one who made the Fae promise to Charon. I should be involved in fixing things.”

Xavier took me gently by the shoulders. “Cali, listen to me. Everything I’m doing right now is for you. To protect you, to keep you safe. Everything I do is always for you. You know that, right?”

In spite of myself, I felt my anger draining away. It was hard not to respond when he looked at me like that, his blue eyes intent on mine. It just reminded me how much I loved him, and my heart fluttered.

“I know that,” I said quietly.

He nodded. “I know we need to be cautious with this Fae promise, and I’m *being* cautious. I want you to trust me. I would never do anything that would risk hurting you.” He looked at me for a moment longer, then pulled me close, wrapping his arms around me.

The last of my anger faded as I hugged him back, pressing my face against his chest. Why was it so hard for me to say mad at my mates?

I took a deep breath—breathing in Xavier’s comforting scent—and pulled away to look at him. “But what do we do about Lakini?”

Xavier frowned. “I’m not entirely sure,” he admitted. “Greyson told her that there could be some wiggle room in the wording of the promise you made with Charon—something that would keep her alive.”

I nodded, but I felt worry creeping in. “I promised Charon that we would deal with Lakini. Could that mean to *strike* a deal,or something? Change the deal? I don’t know,” I said, nervously biting my lip. “The idea of trying to find some kind of minor technicality with the wording really freaks me out. What if we’re wrong and the whole things goes sideways?”

“We’ll have to be careful,” Xavier agreed.

“I think I want to talk to my mom before I make any decisions. She’s had way more experience with Fae promises than me. She’ll know if there’s room for these kinds of changes.”

“That makes sense. Talking to Orla’s a good idea,” Xavier said.

We walked back inside, and Xavier glanced toward the stairs.

“I’m going to go check on Lilac while you track down your mom,” he said.

“Okay,” I said, and headed toward the kitchen.

My mom was sitting at the counter with a cup of tea, looking down at an open book, but she looked up when I walked in.

“Sweetheart!” she said, hoping off her stool to give me a hug. “You’re back! I’m so glad to see you.”

“Thanks,” I said, hugging her back.

She peered anxiously into my eyes. “Did everything go okay?”  
 I thought about the night—Lucian’s attempted kiss, and Seluna’s sudden appearance—and just barely suppressed a shudder.

“Well, it didn’t go as well as I’d hoped, but I handled it,” I said with a shrug.

“Well, I’m glad you’re home,” my mom said, looking relieved. “And I heard that Lilac got his wolf back, which is wonderful news.”

“Yeah,” I said. I was trying to match my mom’s enthusiasm, but the encounter with Lakini was weighing on my mind. “I have a question, Mom.”

“What’s that?” she asked, taking a sip of tea.

“Remember that Fae promise I accidentally made to Charon?”

My mom’s mouth pursed, and she gave a tense nod. “Yes. What about it?”

“What would happen if I made a deal with the other witch involved in the promise?”

My mom’s eyes widened with alarm. “You didn’t make *another* Fae promise, did you?”

“No, of course not,” I said quickly. “The other witch—Lakini—showed up, and she made kind of a counter-offer. I just wondered how that might work.”

“I don’t know.” My mom shook her head, her expression dark. “I think considering anything like that would be a very bad idea. It’s one thing to work within the parameters of the deal you already made—Fae can be tricky, and they like to play with wording—but what you’re talking about sounds like something else. To try to double-deal on a Fae promise…” She sucked in a breath. “That sounds like courting trouble.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, trying to take that in.

“You’re still relatively new to your Fae powers, sweetheart. They’re still quite raw and volatile. You could risk losing them if you broke the promise.” Her hands tightened around her mug. “Or something even worse.”

Like how Artemis had lost her powers. That had nearly destroyed my sister.

“I haven’t agreed to anything to do with Lakini,” I said, trying to reassure my mom. “I’m just… exploring my options.”

My mom nodded. “All right. Just be careful. Please.”

I leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Thank you. And I Fae promise not to do anything without letting you know first.”

My mom frowned. “That’s not funny, Caliana.”

I glanced at the time on the oven’s display. It was late, and I was starting to get really worried about Greyson. How much longer was he going to be?

I hadn’t wanted him to stay behind at the palace—especially after seeing Aysel’s room. And her bed. And the contents of her bedside table.

My hand tightened on the back of the chair, just thinking about it. What if she was trying to bring Greyson back to that room right now, as I stood there thinking about it?

If only I’d found that card, Greyson wouldn’t have to be there. He wouldn’t have to risk being with Aysel anymore.

I forced myself to take a deep breath. I had to stop worrying—I had to trust Greyson.

“I’m going to check on Lilac,” I told my mom, who nodded and turned back to her book.

But upstairs, I found Lilac’s door closed. I stood for a moment and considered knocking, but… Marta was probably with him.

Maybe I’d just check on them tomorrow.

As worried as I was about Greyson and Lakini and the Fae promise with Charon, I really was glad Lilac and Plum had been reunited. It was a big relief for everyone, but I knew it would especially take some of the stress off Marta.

I turned toward my own room and saw Xavier walking toward me down the hall.

“Hey, have you heard anything from Greyson?” I asked.

Xavier didn’t bother to mask his annoyance. “Greyson’s a big boy. He’s capable of taking care of himself.”

I sighed to myself. I knew that Greyson could look out for himself. I also knew that anytime I spoke to one of my mates about the other—no matter how innocuous the question—there was always going to be some friction.

It was obvious that Xavier didn’t want to talk about it, but I was too nervous to let it go. “I know he can take care of himself, but the more I think about it, the more certain I am that we made a mistake leaving him there like that.”

Xavier frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I’m just really worried.”

Xavier eyed me. “So, what? Are you saying that we should go back for him?”

**Episode 2457**

GREYSON

I was getting angry. I was looking everywhere in Aysel’s cottage bedroom and finding nothing.

Flipping up the mattress, I ran my hand along the bed frame underneath, feeling for the small, torn card, but there was nothing. I dropped down to the floor and looked at the dark space under the bed.

Nothing but dust.

“Fuck,” I muttered to myself, my frustration mounting. “This is like looking for a fucking needle in a haystack.”

The tarot card was tiny. It could be absolutely anywhere. And for all I knew, Aysel had it on her person.

Or—and my heart dropped as I considered this—she could have just thrown it away. The thought scared the shit out of me, but it made sense. Why hang onto a token like that if you had no intention of reversing the spell? If she had gotten rid of it, there was no way I’d ever be able to find it.

My thoughts went to Cali. This curse was so hard on her. It was hard on me, too. I could feel desperation starting to claw at me as I thought about how unimaginable life would be without being able to touch her. Without being able to kiss her or hold her or make love to her.

*No*. Shoving the thought away, I stood up straight. I was *not* going to let that happen. Aysel was a psychopath, and psychopaths kept souvenirs. It had to be around here somewhere.

I cast my eyes around, taking one last look at the room. I’d looked absolutely everywhere—every lingerie-filled drawer, every closet shelf—and found nothing. If the tarot card was in this room, I would have found it.

I ran a hand through my hair and walked to the dresser, closing the drawers again and making sure nothing looked out of place. I didn’t have much time, but I rearranged the bed so it looked like it had when I’d come in. I didn’t want Aysel to know I’d been in here.

I walked out through the front door—locking it behind me—and headed toward the house. As I walked, I glanced in the direction of the pack house. I couldn’t see it, of course, but I could feel it drawing me back. All I wanted was to go home and see Cali, but I knew that wasn’t an option. I had to keep up the ruse with Aysel for a while longer.

When I snuck back into the dressing room, I realized I’d been gone longer than I’d intended. I need to hurry before I attracted Aysel’s suspicion. I grabbed the bathing suit that had been left for me and pulled it on without really thinking about it. But as I opened the door and stepped out, I realized too late that I’d grabbed a fairly small, fairly revealing Speedo.

“Dammit,” I muttered, but before I could disappear back into the dressing room, I spotted Andrei across the room. He was striding right toward me, his expression dark.

I groaned internally. I was exhausted and irritated, and the absolute last thing I was interested in was getting into some kind of turf war with Andrei.

As he strode closer, I held up my hands. “Hey man, I’m just here for the party. I’m not looking for any trouble.”

Andrei’s eyes flicked to the Speedo, then back to my face. He did not look pleased. “Why’d you come, Alpha?”

I allowed myself a moment of amused irritation at the irony of the moment: Andrei hated me because he thought I was interested in Aysel, who he clearly had a thing for. If I could just tell the guy the truth, we wouldn’t have an issue. But it wasn’t like I could just tell Andrei that I was only here to manipulate something out of Aysel, so I had to come up with something else.

“I’m just visiting. Not that it’s really any of your damn business,” I said curtly.

Andrei took a step closer, getting in my face. “Like it or not,” he growled softly, “Aysel *is* my business. And if you do anything to hurt her, you’ll have to answer to me.”

“You’re going to want to back off,” I said steadily. Ruse or not, I wasn’t intimidated by Andrei’s clumsy attempt to threaten me, and if he didn’t get out of my face, he was going to find out why.

He narrowed his eyes but took a half-step back.

That was enough for me, and I moved past him, jostling his shoulder as I walked past.

I headed deeper into the house, keeping an eye out for Aysel. I didn’t see her anywhere, so I started moving toward her bedroom.

At her door, I took a deep breath, then knocked.

“Come in,” Aysel called.

She was lounging on her bed, dressed in a lilac-colored silk robe, but she sat up when I walked in, her eyes alight.

“Greyson,” she said in her velvet voice. Her smile widened. “It’s you.”

“I hope I’m not intruding—”

“No,” she said quickly, “I was just lying here, hoping you’d find me.” She patted the bed next to herself, a satisfied smirk on her face.

I shook my head, trying to look sad. “I’m afraid I can’t. I was just coming to say goodnight.”

Aysel’s smirk faded, and she stuck out her bottom lip in a pout. “No! Surely you don’t have to leave!”

I nodded, trying for a regretful expression. “I do. My brother called, and he needs me back at the pack house.”

This was a lie—and Xavier would lose his shit if he ever found out I’d made up a story about him needing me—but Aysel didn’t need to know that.

“Greyson,” she whined, crossing her arms over her chest. “This does not make me happy.”

“Or me,” I lied. “But I am the Alpha of my pack, and you know what that means. Duty calls.”

She pouted for another moment, then swung her legs around and slid off her bed. “I’m sorry to see you go,” she said, padding across the thick carpet toward me. “When will I see you again?”

She let the silken robe fall open as she moved toward me, and I focused hard on her eyes, trying my damnedest to avoid looking at the bright pink bikini she was wearing. The top was more like two postage stamps covering her nipples, and the bottom wasn’t much bigger. It was fucking sexy as hell, and she knew it.

I let myself think about Cali for a moment, and how much she would *hate* everything about this, and I had to force myself not to take a step back as Aysel stepped closer.

She tipped her head, waiting for my response to her question, and I plastered a smile onto my face. I hated that I was stuck playing a role with this lunatic, but I just couldn’t think of any other options.

“Soon,” I said. “I’ll see you soon.”

But I was hoping to hell that wasn’t true.

“Oh, Greyson,” she whined, “I wish you could stay.”

She slipped her arms around my neck. As she moved, the pocket of the robe gaped open for a moment, and I saw a flash of something that could have been paper.

*Holy shit.*

My heart was hammering in my chest. Could that be the tarot card?

For fuck’s sake, why hadn’t I thought of that before? The tarot card was always with me—Aysel’s half could easily be doing the same with her.

But getting to it would mean getting closer to her. Really close.

My stomach sank, but I knew what I had to do. There was no other way.

I pivoted and pushed Aysel against the bedroom wall, pressing my body against hers and caging her with my arms.

Her eyes widened, and her breath caught in her throat, and in an instant, I knew I’d gained the upper hand.

“I came to say goodbye,” I growled.

She stared at me, her eyes wide and confused, like she didn’t follow.

I grabbed her chin and lifted it so she was looking up at me, our lips millimeters from each other. “Aren’t you going to say it back?”

She turned to liquid against me. I could feel the heat radiating off her as she lifted herself onto her tiptoes and pressed her lips to mine. Her kisses were nakedly hungry, and she clung onto me for dear life. As her lips parted against mine, I ran my hands down the sides of her robe, feeling the curves of her body beneath the silk.

She moaned into my mouth and pressed her body even closer to mine.

Keeping one hand moving as misdirection, I dropped the other into the pocket of the robe, where I thought I’d seen something.

And there, under my fingers, was the rough edge of torn paper.

Holy shit. *Got it!*

**Episode 2458**

XAVIER

Cali’s expression was anxious as she looked back at me and nodded. “I just keep thinking that we should never have left Greyson over there. I’m worried about him. I just have a really bad feeling.”

I suppressed an irritated sigh. Cali didn’t need to hear it—it wasn’t her I was mad at. Not even for being concerned about Greyson—that was just her way. I was just frustrated with our whole damn situation.

“Listen to me,” I said, working to keep my voice gentle, “Greyson is going to be fine. Believe me. You know as well as I do that he can take care of himself, in any situation. Right?”

She took a shuddering breath and nodded. “Right. I know.”

“And he’s not in any particular danger,” I reasoned. “It’s not like we left him in the middle of a fight. It’s just a party.”

This reasoning did not seem to have a soothing effect on Cali. When I mentioned the party, her frown deepened, and I suspected she was thinking about Greyson being at the party with Aysel.

I studied her face, and it occurred to me that even though she wasn’t saying so, she might’ve been less worried about Greyson’s physical safety, and more worried about what he might be doing with Aysel. For a moment, I allowed myself to feel a kind of petty satisfaction. It made me grimly happy to know that Cali didn’t fully trust Greyson. I wondered if he knew that, too.

But then I stopped myself. Cali looked genuinely worried, and I hated to see her like that, no matter what. She was upset, and I needed to stop being such a dick about it.

I put my hands on Cali’s shoulders and gave them a gentle squeeze. “He really is going to be fine. He knows how to handle himself, in all circumstances,” I added, slightly regretting my earlier pettiness.

“I know,” Cali sighed. “I know you’re right.”

She let me pull her close, but she held herself stiff against me. For a moment, it felt like hugging an ironing board.

I dropped a kiss onto her hair and stroked my hand down it. I could feel the worry and tension in her body, and I wanted her to relax. I wanted her to feel safe and secure.

After a moment she leaned against me, and I felt her body melding into mine. Holding her close felt like heaven. I’d wanted to comfort her, but she was comforting me, too. I dropped my face into her hair and breathed deeply, drinking her in. I felt a wave of love wash over me. There was no one like Cali—no one with her heart or her spirit… or her ass.

I pulled her closer, and she slipped her arms around my waist. I was so lucky to have this woman in my life, and in my arms.

That petty part of me reared up again, laughing at how Greyson couldn’t hold Cali like this anymore. I loved that I had her all to myself. But… would that change? That was what Greyson was trying to achieve, over at the Vanguard estate. If he found the tarot card, would he be able to break the spell?

I traced my hand down Cali’s face, feeling her velvet skin beneath my fingers. And, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear, I looked down at her. She looked beautiful but completely exhausted. She was pale, and there were dark circles beneath her eyes.

“You should get some sleep,” I said.

She hesitated for a moment, and I could guess what she was thinking.

“I’m sure Greyson will be back by the time you wake up,” I said softly.

She smiled and gave a nod. “I know.” She reached up onto her tiptoes. “Goodnight,” she said quietly, and pressed a kiss to my lips.

I held her close, letting the kiss linger as my hands slid down her body.

When she pulled away, her cheeks were flushed, but she turned and headed toward her room.

As I watched her walk away, every cell in my body begged me to follow her. I was exhausted, too, but I wanted to get into bed with her, pull her close, kiss her, and…

I gave my head a shake. There was something else I needed to do right now, though I was dreading it.

I turned down the hallway leading toward the south wing of the house and tried to psych myself up to initiate what promised to be a truly awkward conversation. I could do this. More importantly, I *had* to do this.

When I reached Kira’s door, I took a deep breath and knocked.

For a moment, there was no answer, and I let myself get hopeful. Maybe she was already asleep, and I could put this off for another day. Or another few days. Or forever.

But then I heard an answering voice.

“Hello?” Kira called. “Who is it?”

My heart hammered in my chest. What the hell was my problem? I didn’t get his nervous going into *battle.*

“It’s me,” I said, and—with another breath—pushed the door open.

Kira looked up. She was in bed, and the room was dim. She was dressed in an oversized T-shirt that read “Caturday Nights”. It looked like something Lola had given her, which would make sense, as she hadn’t arrived at the pack house with any luggage. The only light in the room was the lamp next to her bed, which she’d been using to read.

“Xavier?” she said. “What’s going on? Is everything okay?”

She put her book down and pulled the blankets back. She clearly thought that my appearance meant there was some kind of emergency, and she swung her legs to the ground, ready to go.

“No,” I said quickly. “Everything’s fine, don’t worry.”

The anxious look on her face relaxed for a moment, but it was replaced almost immediately with a look of confusion and then a glint of something in her eyes that looked almost like hope.

She looked up at me. “Then what is it?”

I hesitated, realizing that I wasn’t sure what I wanted to say, or how I wanted to say it. I probably should have thought this through before this moment, but here I was.

“I think we should talk,” I started.

Kira’s eyebrows rose. “Okay,” she said slowly. She motioned toward the chair near her window. “Have a seat.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, dropping into the chair. I looked at my hands for a moment, then up at Kira. “First of all, I don’t know if I said it at the time, but I wanted to thank you for what you did.”

“What did I do?” she asked.

“Jumping in front of me and protecting me from that warlock’s blast.”

Color bloomed in Kira’s cheeks.

*Shit*. Greyson had been right.

Clearing my throat, I looked down again. “There was something else, too. I might be wrong about it, but I wanted to talk to you.”

“What is it?” Kira asked, her eyes wide.

“You know that I really respect you, right? You’ve helped this pack a bunch of times, and I’m really grateful to you. And I’m really glad that I met you…”

I trailed off, and Kira looked at me, clearly puzzled.

“Um, thanks, Xavier,” she said after a moment. “I’m happy that I met you, too.”

There was a beat of silence.

“Good,” I said, when I couldn’t stand the quiet awkwardness anymore.

Kira gave me a small smile. “Good.”

“And I like you,” I went on. “You know, as a *friend*.”

The smile slid away, and Kira looked a little taken aback. For a moment. Then color started to rise in her cheeks, and she looked down at her lap.

“I like you as a friend, too, Xavier,” she muttered, refusing to meet my eyes.

The energy was changing in the room, and no matter how dense Colton always said I was about feelings, I could tell that Kira was getting upset. I didn’t want to embarrass her, or hurt her in any way, but I’d come here to get my point across, and I wasn’t going to leave until I did just that.

“And is that all? *Just* as a friend?” I pushed. Was I really going to have to say it?

She looked up suddenly, her eyes flashing. “What do you want me to say to that? Where is this coming from?”

I was going to have to spell it out, wasn’t I? It was the last thing I wanted to do, but I knew I had to just come out and say it. It was going to make me sound like a self-absorbed asshole—and if I was wrong, it was going to be humiliating for both of us—but it was the only thing to do. I needed to know what was on her mind.

I took a deep breath and looked Kira right in the eye. “Don’t you have a crush on me?”

**Episode 2459**

MARTA

I wished I could snatch back the words I’d just spoken. Breaking up with Lilac was the last thing in the world that I wanted. My heart was saying *no, absolutely not!* My head was screaming at me—why had I even asked that question?

But now I had to wait for his answer. What if he said yes? What if he *did* want to break up with me? What if he said that being with me just wasn’t worth all the trouble? And that finding his mate—his true mate—just seemed like a much better idea. What was I going to do then?

He met my gaze, and as I looked into his eyes, I felt like I was going to burst into tears.

“Don’t say that,” he said.

My heart was pounding so hard it felt like it might explode. “What?”

“I don’t want to break up, Marta. Why would I?”

I laughed, but the sound was choked and raw. “Because you need to find your mate?”  
 Lilac shook his head. “I don’t want to hear you say that,” he said, frowning. He stood suddenly. “Can I show you something?”

I stared up at him, a little startled by the abrupt topic change. “I guess.”

Lilac stepped into the center of the room and took a deep breath. For a moment, nothing happened, and then—all at once—there was a sound like bones cracking, and Plum was staring back at me. Lilac had shifted into his wolf.

I was amazed. I’d seen the other pack members shift, of course, but this was the first time I’d seen Lilac do it. It was true. I was seeing it with my own eyes. Lilac had been reunited with Plum.

Standing, I walked toward him. I couldn’t help it—I was overcome with the enormity of the moment. Tears filled my eyes and coursed down my cheeks.

There was the cracking sound again, and Lilac shifted back.

“Marta, what’s wrong?”

I looked at him, now standing naked in front of me, and felt my cheeks start to burn. It wasn’t like this was the first time I’d seen Lilac’s body. We’d had sex before. But this felt different.

This *was* different.

I reached for him, putting my hands on his shoulders and sliding them down his arms. “How was that? How do you feel?”

“I feel fine,” Lilac assured me.

I nodded. “I just want to make sure that you’re okay.”

He caught my searching hands in his. “Marta, I feel better than I’ve felt in my whole life.”

Then, as if to prove this, he leaned down and kissed me.

My cheeks were still damp with tears, but I slipped my arms around his neck and kissed him back. Emotions were running unchecked through me as he held me close—joy, relief, curiosity, fear, and dread.

It was so incredible to have him with me again, alive and well and healthy. And to see him reunited with his wolf was unbelievably wonderful. But even as Lilac kissed me, my thoughts went back to what he’d said about needing to find a mate, now that he had his wolf back. Had he been telling me it was time for him to move on? That we’d had fun together, but he wanted to be with someone who was also a werewolf?

Lilac deepened the kiss, but I stepped back.

“I think we should probably keep talking. We have some more stuff to work out.”

Lilac’s face was flushed, but he nodded in agreement. “Okay.”

There was a part of me—a big part—that didn’t want to keep talking. I wanted to take Lilac at his word and keep that happy look on his face. But I knew there was more that needed saying.

Lilac took my hands again. “Do you know why I showed you that?”

I shook my head. I didn’t know, but I could barely even think about his question. I was looking down at our joined hands. If he broke up with me, was this the last time I would hold his hand in mine?

My heart ached at the thought.

“I wanted to show you what’s now possible in my life, because of you,” Lilac said quietly.

I looked up quickly. “What?”

He nodded. “Yeah. *You*. You’re the one who brought Plum and me back from the spirit world. If it wasn’t for you, we’d still be there. Maybe even trapped there. I wouldn’t have been reunited with my sister, or with my pack. I’d be dead, and I never would have met you.” He gave me a long look. “You’re the reason why any of this is possible. You’re the reason why I was able to be reunited with Plum. Before you, there was nothing to reunite. Thank you, Marta.”

I dashed the tears from my cheeks with the flat of my hand. “You’re welcome. But what does any of that have to do with your mate?” I bit my lip. “Don’t you want to find your mate?”

“Marta—”

“Aren’t you curious?” I asked. “You opened the can of worms, and now the cat’s out of the bag, right? And I need to know what all of this means.”

He smiled. “If you’re asking me about your mixed metaphors, I have no idea what *any* of that means.” Then he sighed. “As for the rest of it, I don’t know. Right now, it doesn’t mean anything.”

“Right now?” I pressed.

“Yes, right now,” Lilac said. “I haven’t met my mate, but I’ve met you. And I want to be with you. Isn’t that what matters?”

I could see the conflict in his face, and I felt for him. This was hard for him—I could see that. But it was hard for me, too. Somewhere out there, Lilac had a mate, and it wasn’t me. Would that mean I would lose him at some point? Was it just this inevitability?

I cast my mind back, trying to remember everything I’d ever heard about werewolf mates. “The mate connection is what solidifies your wolf bond. Isn’t that right?”

Lilac nodded. “Yes.”

“So if you met your mate, but you were with me instead, wouldn’t that mean you’d lose your wolf again?” I asked. The thought of that sounded horrible.

Lilac ran a hand through his hair. “Maybe,” he said miserably. “But it’s just a speculation from this guy who sells weed in Portland. How much can he really know about how werewolves work?”

My heart ached, and the pain was sharp and constant. I thought about how glad Lilac was to have Plum back. *Ecstatic* was a better word for it.

“I can’t be responsible for that,” I said softly. “I won’t be.”

“Marta, let’s not—” Lilac started, but I shook my head.

“You mean so much to me, Lilac. You know that, right?” I asked, looking up at him. He nodded. “I would never want to be the reason why something bad happened to you, or caused you pain. I would never want that.”

Lilac bent a little so he was looking me right in the eye. “Hey, Marta, look at me.” He tipped my chin up. “There are a lot of things I’m unsure about, but the one thing I do know is that right now, I want to be with you. *You*. And there’s no way in hell that I want to break up with you.”

He gave me a look that made my heart pound.

“Is that enough for you?” he asked.

I looked into his eyes, which looked dark in the dimness of the room. I didn’t want to break up with him either. It was the last thing I wanted. I’d thought I’d lost him once, and I’d nearly given my life to get him back. I couldn’t lose him again. The thought was nearly unbearable. So I didn’t even have to think about my answer to his question.

“Yes,” I breathed. “Yes, it’s enough for me.”

I pressed up onto my tiptoes and kissed him. His lips parted. I’d kissed him hundreds of times before, and it always felt like this—like the first time. He smelled like wind and woodsmoke, and I could feel his skin burning beneath my hands. I twined my fingers into his hair, and my heart pounded against my ribs as I leaned greedily into him.

He slipped his hand beneath my shirt, and his fingers ran lightly down my back. I felt him smile against my lips when I shivered.

But the smile disappeared when I slid a knee between his legs, and his breath went ragged. The kiss grew deeper and hungrier, and he backed me up until we hit the bed, then tumbled onto it, still kissing and grasping at the clothes standing in our way.

The doubts in my head were quiet now. My only thought was *Lilac, Lilac, Lilac*. Whatever waited for us in the next moment, in this one, we were together—and I never wanted it to end.

**Episode 2460**

XAVIER

I couldn’t believe I’d just said that.

I couldn’t believe I’d just asked Kira if she had a *crush* on me. Like we were sitting in the back of the bus on a sixth grade field trip. My hands curled into fists at my sides. I’d said it because it had to be said, but I’d started regretting the question the moment the words left my mouth.

And I really wasn’t the kind of person who got nervous about hurting anyone’s feelings. Before Cali had come along, Colton had taken it upon himself to parade a steady stream of girls past me, thinking it would help me after Ava. It hadn’t helped, of course, but none of them had ever been shy in telling me that they were attracted to me. And I hadn’t been shy in shutting them down. Hard.

When I looked back on it, I realized that I’d probably been too harsh a lot of the time. If Cali knew about how brazenly I used to dismiss these women, she’d probably smack me for it. I’d never had a problem telling any woman to take a hike—sometimes I’d even enjoyed it—but this was different.

This was Kira, and I couldn’t just blow her off. I wanted to be more careful—*if* it was even true. Greyson could’ve been trying to start trouble for all I knew.

She still hadn’t answered my question.

She looked at me, her expression puzzled and a little worried. The moment was deeply awkward, and I was starting to look for a way out when she spoke.

“Who told you I had a crush on you?”

I paused before I answered, trying to parse her question, trying to determine if she was admitting that I was right, or trying to deny it. But no matter how I looked at it, the question seemed neutral.

Already deeply uncomfortable, I started to feel hot with embarrassment—something I didn’t feel often. Was it possible I was completely off base, here? Greyson had seemed sure, I supposed, but if he’d set me up to look like an ass—and embarrass the hell out of Kira in the process—I was going to make that asshole pay.

I cleared my throat. “No one told me. It was just kind of… a vibe I was getting from you,” I finished.

My gaze flitted to the door, and I wondered what would happen if I just bolted. Maybe Kira would be relieved.

“You weren’t supposed to figure it out.” Kira was looking down at the blanket bunched up in her lap.

I stared at her, my mind racing. Wait. Had I just heard what I thought I’d heard? Was I *right*?Did she have a crush on me?

Even though she was looking down, I could see that her face was bright pink with embarrassment. I was stunned. It was true? She *did* have a crush on me? How had I never noticed? How was it that Greyson of all people had noticed this when I’d missed it?

“Um…” I started, without any idea of what I was going to say next. “Listen, Kira…”

Kira shook her head, her face still burning. “I want you to know that I had no intention of acting on these feelings. I know you don’t feel them back. And I know that everything within that *due destini* relationship is really complicated. I know that I’m older than you by a few years. And I know that we’re not the same in so many ways, and that you’re—”

“That I’m a werewolf?” I cut in, my eyebrows raised.

Kira glanced up at me and somehow went even redder in the face.

That couldn’t be good.

She shook her head. “It wasn’t anything I expected, either. I used to hate werewolves, because of everything that happened to me. I was pretty passionate about it, actually.”

“No, I remember,” I said. “You made that very clear on our first meeting.”

Kira nodded, apparently remembering it too.

I’d been being held prisoner, and she had come in to heal me, but she’d only come because Iñigo had forced her to. We’d both been held against our will by that murderous vamp and had both been looking for a way out.

“You helped me out of that hellhole, Kira,” I said earnestly. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Afterward, when she’d come to the pack house, she’d been skittish for days. Cautious of everyone. And I felt a certain amount of pride that I’d been the wolf who’d brought her around to werewolves.

She’d certainly been the one who’d made me more open to witches. If I’d come around to them, it certainly wasn’t because of Big Mac’s diplomacy.

“I appreciate you as a friend, Kira,” I said softly. “You’ve been a real asset to the pack. I appreciate everything you’ve done to look out for us since Seattle and Spokane. You’ve been a good fighter and a good friend.”

She tensed as I said the word *friend*.

*This* was what I’d come to say.

“I’m with Cali,” I said. “I want to make that clear, no matter how fucked up the *due destini* situation looks from the outside. Cali is my heart. She’s my whole life.”

Saying the words out loud to someone else felt strangely good, though it was clear that Kira didn’t feel the same way.

I got to my feet. “Listen, I’m going to get out of here.” I hesitated. “Friends?”

Kira glanced up at me. “Yeah, friends,” she said, nodding.

I wasn’t sure what to do, and in the end, I stepped forward and gave her an awkward pat on the shoulder.

But as the door shut behind me, I could have kicked my own ass.

*A pat on the shoulder?*

Really nice move.

As I started toward my room, I pinched the bridge of my nose, feeling stress tighten my shoulders and my neck. I still couldn’t believe I hadn’t caught on sooner that Kira had feelings for me. However big or small, it was something I should have noticed. When I thought about it in retrospect, the signs were clear.

I took a deep breath and rolled my neck, trying to loosen it up. Hopefully our conversation had been worth the excruciating awkwardness, and everything was now resolved. And she wouldn’t do anything stupid in the future. I really didn’t need anyone throwing themselves in front of me anymore. I was more than capable of handling whatever was thrown at me—metaphorically or literally.

Halfway down the hall, I stopped. *Shit*. Was this something I needed to tell Cali about? I wanted to be open with her, but I wasn’t sure if this qualified as something that needed to be discussed. It wasn’t as though Kira had made any kind of move on me. She hadn’t even wanted to talk about it. And it certainly wasn’t anywhere near Ava territory.

I shuddered just thinking of Ava and her laser focus on me.

Still, I didn’t want to keep this from Cali, so I turned and walked back toward her room. I knocked lightly on the door, but when there was no answer, I pushed it open.

I was surprised to find her in her pajamas, on the bed, dead asleep. It had been clear she was exhausted, but I might have underestimated how tired she really was. She’d made it to the bed, but she hadn’t made it under the blankets before she’d passed out.

I stood for a moment, gazing at her as she slept. Her face was so peaceful and beautiful, it was hard to turn away. She looked calm and almost happy—her mouth was turned up a little, as though something in her dreams had made her smile. The light from the bathroom hit the bed, and the golden light fell across her cheeks like a ray of sunlight.

I didn’t want to wake her—this conversation could certainly wait until morning—so I stepped closer to the bed and bent to press a kiss to her temple. She didn’t even stir, so I figured I could probably get her under the covers without waking her up. I swept my arms beneath her and lifted her into the air. With one hand, I pulled back the covers and settled her underneath them, tucking them snugly around her. The December wind was whipping tonight, and the room felt cold.

I turned off the light in the bathroom and walked back across the dark room. Moonlight shadowed her face, and I stared down at her, drinking in the sight of her. My heart gave a happy kind of ache as I brushed a lock of hair away from her face.

“I love you, Cali,” I said quietly. “You have no idea how much. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.”

I bent and pressed a kiss to her forehead, feeling the warmth of her skin beneath my lips.

She stirred this time and rolled toward me, softly murmuring, “Greyson?”

**Episode 2461**

GREYSON

My heart was racing as I pulled the piece of paper from the pocket of Aysel’s silk robe. I opened my eyes and looked down—Aysel was kissing my neck and moaning, too busy to notice that I’d stopped paying any attention to her—and I almost shouted. It *was* the tarot card! I had it! Finally!

I moved slowly, transferring the card to my right hand, hiding it behind my back. I had no pockets to put it in because I was wearing this ridiculous swimsuit, but I had to think of something.

Aysel—still not noticing my distraction—ran her hand slowly up my chest. Her long fingernails pressed painfully against my skin. “I’m sure your brother can handle the pack, Greyson. For at least another hour—unless we need more time,” she purred, and glanced suggestively toward her bed.

I took a step back. “I’d like to, but my brother isn’t the Alpha. I am,” I said firmly, trying to make the hand hidden behind my back look natural. “And I have to get back to them. Now.”

Turning toward the door, I’d just reached for the knob when Aysel spoke again.

“When will I see you again?” she asked again.

I gritted my teeth, biting back the words I really wanted to say. Now that I had the tarot card in my possession, there was no reason to keep up this absurd charade. I was never going to have to see Aysel again, which was a huge relief. But I still had to get out of this hellish palace, so now wasn’t the time to be honest.

I glanced over my shoulder. “I’ll be in touch,” I said vaguely. My mind was racing too fast to think of a better excuse to get away.

Aysel’s lip jutted out in a pout—clearly displeased with my response—but I ignored it, and her, and pulled the door open.

I started into the hallway, intent on keeping the card hidden from view. I passed a number of party guests—drinks in hand—but no one noticed me. The Speedo was too tight and too revealing, but it did allow me to blend in pretty seamlessly.

I was praying I wouldn’t run into anyone who might slow me down or keep me from leaving, like Lucian or Andrei. I just wanted to get back to the house and show Cali that I’d gotten the card back. I was so desperate to see the relief on her face that I felt like any impediment could prevent that completely. Like I was going to lose the card if I paused for even a second.

So when I made it outside, I felt a surge of absolute triumph. I had made it. Now, to get back to the house with my prize.

Putting the card carefully between my teeth, I shifted and started running back to the house. When I reached the lawn and shifted back to my human form, I practically sprinted up the porch steps and into the house. I couldn’t wait to tell Cali that I’d gotten the tarot card and that we were one step closer to lifting this damn curse. One big step.

The house was quiet when I got inside. It looked like most people had gone to bed already—it had to be later than I’d thought. The Christmas tree was the only light source in the empty living room.

Cali had to be up in her room. Even thinking about that made heat run to the southern region of my body. Soon I was going to be able to touch her, to kiss her… and even more.

I was just about to head up the stairs to tell her when a voice came from behind me.

“She’s asleep.”

I turned around. Xavier was standing in the doorway of the little office next to the front door. The room was dark, which was probably why I hadn’t seen him when I came in.

We looked at each other for a moment in the dimness of the hall.

“How’d it go?” Xavier asked, his voice emotionless.

I was annoyed that he was holding me up—I wanted to see Cali—but I swallowed down my irritation. Xavier needed this information, too.

I held up the card, feeling pretty damn satisfied with myself. “I got it.”

Xavier’s eyebrows pulled down, and he strode over to me. “Are you sure this is it?”

I snorted a derisive laugh. “It’s a torn-up tarot card. How many do you think there are, hanging around that place? Yeah, I’m sure.”

Xavier nodded, his expression oddly flat. “Well, that’s one step taken care of.”

I didn’t like this response. It highlighted that there was still a big hurdle to jump before the curse was actually lifted. I grunted in response and turned back toward the stairs.

“Lakini was here.”

I whipped around to look at my brother. “*What?*”

Xavier nodded.

“She was here? Here at the pack house? Are you serious?” Why would she come here? What was she hoping to achieve?

“Yep. Just showed up on the doorstep.”

“What did she want?” I asked.

Xavier passed a hand over his eyes. He looked tired. “She had some idea about the Fae promise. Some kind of reversal. She said she wanted to flip the deal.”

I stared at him. “Is that possible? With a Fae promise?”

He shrugged. “We don’t know. Even Orla isn’t sure.”

I felt fear flood my chest. “Well if we don’t know for sure, then we can’t do it. Not if it’s going to put Cali—”

Xavier held up a hand to stop me. “Yeah, obviously. We aren’t putting Cali at risk.”

I met his gaze, and a silent understanding passed between us. We both loved Cali and were committed to protecting her, above all else.

I nodded. “Okay,” I said, then turned and headed upstairs.

In the dark hallway, I tried to recapture the excitement I’d been feeling about finding the card. I tried to shake off Xavier’s reminder that there were still difficult steps to be taken before the curse was broken, and to forget about the unsettled feeling Lakini’s sudden appearance had given me.

I had sprinted back to the house because I wanted to give Cali—and me—some hope that this curse was going to be broken, that this revulsion nightmare was going to be over. Soon.

I made a quick stop in my room and pulled on a pair of grey sweats, then headed toward Cali’s room.

When I knocked on the door, there was no immediate answer. Xavier had said she was asleep. I knocked again and heard a drowsy voice.

“Come in.”

I pushed the door open, and Cali squinted at me sleepily. Then, in a moment, she was on her feet and throwing herself into my arms.

I bent my head to her hair and breathed in her scent. Having just had Aysel in my arms, it was a completely different world to hold Cali tight to me. I loved Cali so much, and I held her like she was a lifesaver. Aysel’s weight had felt like nothing more than a bag of potatoes in my arms.

But I knew I had to be careful. I didn’t want to ruin the moment by making both of us sick, so I gently pulled Cali away.

“How did it go?” she asked breathlessly, looking up at me.

Her hair was mussed, and her lips were puffy from sleep. For a moment, I didn’t answer—I just lost myself in the darkness of her eyes. More than anything in the world, I wanted to kiss those lips. I wanted to lift her into my arms and take her to bed. I wanted to kiss every part of her and make love to her all night.

But I pulled myself together and took the card from my pocket. “I got it.”

Cali’s tired eyes went wide with shock.

“Oh my god,” she breathed, snatching it from me. She studied it closely, like it held all the secrets of the universe. “I can’t believe it.” She looked up at me. “You did it.”

I felt my whole body warming beneath the admiration in her eyes. I took the card back and put it down on the table next to her bed, then wrapped my arms around her.

But Cali stopped me. She put her palms on my chest and pushed, glaring. “We need to talk.”

My stomach dropped. “About what?” I asked, baffled.

She folded her arms. “You didn’t tell me that you saw Lakini when you and Xavier were in Portland.”

*Dammit.*

It sounded like Lakini’s visit had been more explosive than I’d thought.

“Listen,” I started, “I know it doesn’t sound great, but it wasn’t all that exciting. I wanted to stop by to get a sense of what we were dealing with. We just talked—”

Cali’s eyes were narrow slits, but they suddenly widened. “Greyson! *Look!*”

I turned and saw what she was pointing out. The tarot card was levitating, three inches off the surface of the bedside table.

We stared at it, thunderstruck, and before either of us could move, it zipped through the room and toward Cali’s open door.

**Episode 2462**

“Oh my god! Greyson! *Catch it!*”

I was terrified the card was going to disappear—and after everything Greyson had gone through to retrieve it. It was our best hope to have the curse lifted, and I’d be devastated if we lost it. What would we even do if we did? There was no way to break this damn curse without it.

Greyson lunged for the airborne tarot card.

“There’s no way in hell I’m going back to that place to get this thing again,” he snarled, snatching for the card as it whizzed through the air.

He was doing his best, but it felt like the card was deliberately trying to avoid being caught, and it seemed to swoop away whenever he got close to catching it. He chased it around the room, swearing and batting at it, but it evaded his grasp.

Then, as we stared at it, it swept out the open door.

For a split second Greyson and I stared at each other in shock, then raced after it. The card was zigzagging down the dark hallway, and we sprinted in its wake. Greyson got close to it, but it was always just out of his reach.

I stared at the thing, my mind racing. I thought of how Greyson’s half of the card kept ending up with him, no matter what he did to get rid of it. This card had to be doing the same thing, trying to make it back to Aysel.

We couldn’t let that happen. We had to catch it before it made it out of the house.

We chased the thing down the hallway, then watched as it slipped under the door leading toward the east wing. The space was small, and it slowed the card down. Greyson pounced—trying to catch it before it disappeared—but he wasn’t quite fast enough.

He wrenched the door open, and we barreled down a new hallway.

We were keeping the card in our sights, but beyond that, I had no idea what we could do. How the *hell* did you stop a flying piece of paper?

Next to me, Greyson pulled to a stop, his face flushed with effort. “I’ve got an idea.”

“What?” I gasped, fighting for breath.

He pulled his torn half of the tarot card from the pocket of his sweatpants and held it in front of him. We both watched as Aysel’s card suddenly stopped in midair. It hung there for a moment, almost like it was thinking, then zoomed back toward us.

Greyson’s card wiggled, freeing itself from his grasp, and flew up into the air. We stood and watched as the cards circled each other, almost like they were dancing.

Carefully, Greyson reached out and grabbed both cards, holding them securely. He looked at them, then at me. “I have no idea what the hell that was. They must have some magic in them that calls out to the other half.”

I stared at the cards in utter disbelief. “That was *wild*. Do you think they’ll try to fly away again?”

“Probably,” Greyson said. “I can feel them vibrating in my hand.”

“What should we do?”

“Make damn sure they can’t escape.”

He led the way back to his bedroom and pulled open a drawer in his desk. He took out a small mints tin and dumped the mints onto the desktop. Then he put the cards neatly inside and snapped the top securely shut. Then he put the tin into the desk drawer and shut it tight. “There. That ought to hold them.”

I frowned at all the precautions and, seeing this, Greyson gave my shoulder a gentle squeeze.

“Try not to worry about it,” he said softly. “We’ve got the card. It’s not going anywhere.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, still feeing uncertain.

“Sorry for the waking you. And all the… excitement. You should get back to sleep,” he said.

I hadn’t noticed until he spoke, but I was exhausted. I nodded.

“Goodnight,” I said, wrapping my arms around him. It was so wonderful to hug him, but I was tired, and I didn’t want to push our luck with the curse, so I turned and headed back to my room.

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The next morning, I woke up feeling like a new person. Lulled to sleep by the relief I felt that Greyson had made it back to the pack house—with the tarot card in hand—I had slept like the dead.

But as I lay warm in my bed, my thoughts went back to the chase the card had led us on, and I felt anxiety creeping in again. Greyson had secured it last night, but was that enough? Had it somehow flown away in the night? If we lost it in the house, how the hell could we bring it to Portland?

Flinging the blankets away, I stepped out of bed and hurried to the bathroom for a quick shower. Dressed and twisting my wet hair up into a bun, I headed right for Greyson’s room—but he wasn’t there.

I headed downstairs and found him waiting for me.

“Is it?” I asked breathlessly.

Greyson grinned. “It’s safe and sound, love.” He pulled the small metal box from the pocket of his jeans and held it up. “We’re all ready to go.”

I looked at the tin. “And the card piece is in there?”

He nodded. “I can still feel it pulsating. I think it’s still trying to get away, but as long as I keep it with me, we should be able to break this curse. And I am looking forward to it.”

He smiled knowingly at me, and I felt my knees go weak.

“So should we go?” I asked, trying to sound normal and not like a flustered pre-teen.

He nodded. “I have a couple of things to finish up, and then I’ll be ready.”

He scanned my face—probably taking in my blush—and winked at me as he brushed past me and headed up the stairs.

My face still burning, I headed into the kitchen for coffee.

“Cali?” Torin appeared at my elbow, his face grave. “Can I speak to you about a private matter? In private? It’s important.”

“Of course,” I said, immediately concerned. “What’s going on?”

“In here, please,” Torin said, leading me into the den.

I was flummoxed. What could be wrong? Torin had seemed so happy lately, with all the Christmas activities he’d been planning.

In the quiet den, Torin turned to me. He pulled two scraps of paper from his pocket and held them out for me to take.

One read *Greyson*, and the other *Xavier*.

“It’s official,” Torin said seriously. “Secret Santa has now begun.”

I felt like I was going to throw up. He’d stressed me out for *this*?

“I hope you’ve been thinking of a good present for both of them,” he said.

I rubbed my eyes. “I haven’t, actually. I’ve been so caught up with everything else going on that I haven’t really had time to think about it yet.” I looked up into Torin’s anxious face and smiled. “But I will. This is going to be great!”

“Good,” Torin said, looking relieved.

“Thanks for this,” I said, pocketing the notes. I was heading back to the kitchen when I thought of something and turned back to Torin. “Wait—if you’ve been assigning everyone Secret Santa, you’re going to know who gets you.”

“I know, but—”

“That’s no fun!” I said. “Do you want me to help so your Secret Santa can be a secret?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t include myself. And it’s fine,” he said quickly, seeing my frown. “I’ve already passed out everyone’s assignments. You were the last, and you have two people to worry about. Anyway, I don’t need any presents myself. I just like to see everyone so happy.”

He left me with a parting grin, and I looked after him. After everything he’d done to make the pack house festive and merry, he deserved to have the most fun out of all of us. I was going to have to think of something nice we could do for him.

I was back in the kitchen pouring coffee when Xavier walked in.

“Hey,” he said, walking over to me. “Will you come out to the porch?”

Wrapping my hands around my coffee, I nodded, but my heart sank at the look on his face. What was wrong now?

When I stepped outside, Greyson was already there, leaning against the porch railing. He looked unsurprised to see me, and he and Xavier both looked at me like they’d been waiting for me.

“What is it?” I asked, looking between them. “Is everything okay? Did something happen?”

“No, love, nothing happened,” Greyson said gently.

“Nothing new, anyway,” Xavier amended. “I wanted you to come out here because the three of us have to talk, and I’d rather we do it without half the pack eavesdropping.”

“About what?” I asked, my heart beating fast.

“We need to make a decision about Lakini. It may come down to her life, or breaking your Fae promise.”

**Episode 2463**

XAVIER

I watched Cali carefully, waiting to hear what she thought.

“You’re not seriously entertaining the idea of—” she cut herself off, as if unable to even bring herself to say what we were all thinking.”

“There’s no harm in hearing her out,” I reminded her. “There could be some wiggle room with the promise if we do.”

I wanted to hear what Cali thought, but I also just wanted to find the quickest, simplest solution to this. I wanted to get this shit with Charon and the Fae promise resolved. And—as worried as I was about the risk to Cali—I couldn’t stop feeling this bitter twinge every time I remembered that we were in this whole mess because of Greyson and Cali.

If I was being honest with myself, the bitterness had really ramped up when I’d heard Cali whisper Greyson’s name when I’d stopped in to say goodnight to her. That had hurt. I knew she’d been asleep—maybe even dreaming—so it wasn’t like I could hold it against her, but I still hated thinking about it.

Whatever. Whoever this affected, the Fae promise attached to this curse put Cali at risk, and it needed to be wrapped up as soon as possible. For Cali’s sake.

“We really only have two options,” Greyson spoke up. “Either we kill Lakini like we promised Charon, or we find a workaround.”

“We are *not* killing her,” Cali said firmly. “We’re not. We don’t kill people. Do you hear me?” She looked between us, making intense eye contact. “Do you?”

“I hear you,” Greyson said.

She glared at me.

“Okay, okay,” I said.

“We’re just going to have to find a workaround,” she said determinedly.

There was a long pause as we all thought about this, wondering what to do. I glanced around. Cali’s expression was anxious, and Greyson ran a hand along his jaw, clearly thinking hard.

*This* was the problem. None of us had any idea how to do this. We needed to find a way to fulfill Cali’s promise to Charon but make sure we kept her safe.

Cali passed a hand over her eyes. “I’m so sorry about all of this,” she said, sounding near tears. “If I hadn’t made that Fae promise, this wouldn’t be so complicated.”

She sounded so sad and defeated, it broke my heart.

“Don’t say that,” Greyson said quickly. “This is on Charon, not you.”

“This isn’t your fault,” I insisted.

She shook her head, looking miserable. “What are we going to do?”

“I thought about it all night, and I think we need to talk to Lakini,” I said.

Greyson looked up, clearly surprised. “Really?”

I nodded. “We need more information. When she stopped by last night, she seemed really confident that the loophole she found wouldn’t harm the promiser. We should find out why she’s so sure.”

Cali nodded. “That makes sense.”

“And if she knows anything more about Fae promises in general, we need to know that, too,” I added.

“Yeah, it’d probably be good to hear her out,” Greyson agreed.

“If we’re going to talk to Lakini about this, maybe we should bring my mom,” Cali said.

“I don’t know,” I started. “She—”

“She’s Fae,” Cali pointed out. “She hasn’t seemed to know much about Fae promises whenever I’ve asked about them, but she could still be useful. She still probably knows more than the rest of us. She might know whether Lakini’s plan would be dangerous for me.”

I thought about this for a moment. “I still don’t think it’s a great idea. There are a lot of moving parts to this thing, and we don’t need to add another element. Maybe don’t involve your mom.”

“Yeah, okay,” she said with a sigh. She looked down at her coffee. “I forgot to put milk in this. I’m going inside.”

When she shut the door behind her, I pulled out my phone and dialed the number Lakini had left with me the night before. I put it on speaker, so Greyson and I could both hear, and we listened to it ring.

“Hello, Xavier,” Lakini said, picking up after the second ring. “I thought you’d be in touch this morning.” She sounded smug.

“I’m not agreeing to anything,” I growled. “But we do want to come in and talk to you. Hear what you have to say.”

“Sure,” she said easily. “Come whenever you want. My schedule’s wide open for you.”

I glanced up at Greyson. “We can be in Portland today. Early afternoon.”

“That works,” she said. “See you then.”

“You know we need to be careful around that witch,” Greyson said as I ended the call. “She sounded nice enough on that call, but a witch is a witch, and we can’t trust her. She’s got her own agenda here, clearly. And if Charon figures out that we’re trying to do a deal with her, there’s going to be hell to pay.”

“I know that,” I bit out.

“Lakini doesn’t give a shit about Cali, so we need to watch her closely. If anything sounds like it might be a lie, it probably is.”

I nodded. “Cali’s safety comes first. And we need to really listen to this proposition of Lakini’s. If we left it up to Cali… She’s so damn good-hearted, she’d trust everything Lakini said. She always wants to see the best in everyone, no matter who they are.”

“I know.” Greyson sighed.

“But I have no intention of being manipulated by any witch,” I assured him.

Cali opened the front door and looked out at us. “My mom was in the kitchen. She asked what I was up to, so I just told her we were heading out. I kept it vague so she wouldn’t worry. You know how moms can be.”

“Fine,” I said. “We’re leaving in a half an hour.”

Cali nodded. “Okay. I’ll be ready.”

I slipped my phone back into my pocket, and Greyson and I followed Cali into the house.

“Rishika,” Greyson said as she came down the stairs. “I want to talk to you about today.”

“What’s up?” she asked, walking toward us.

“Xavier and I will be leaving for the afternoon. We’ll be back today, but late. I’m going to need you to keep an eye on the pack for me while we’re gone.”

Rishika nodded, but I didn’t hear the rest of the conversation because Lola appeared at my side.

“Could I talk to you?” she whispered. She tipped her head toward the small office next to the front door.

Jay was waiting for us when I walked in.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“We wanted to give you an update on Operation Evict Ava,” Lola said.

“Shh!” I hissed, looking around the small room. It was just us in the office, but I still glared at them. “Keep your voices down. I don’t want Ava to hear any of this.”

“Well, there’s really not much to hear,” Lola said. “We’re still working on finding an Alpha for the Samara pack. For a minute there I thought we had a contender, but it looks like we’re back at square one.”

“Uh-huh,” I said distractedly. I was really only half listening to her. I just kept thinking about going into Portland and talking to Lakini, and my mind was spinning with all the things I’d need to do to keep Cali safe.

“Anyway, we thought we’d just try trailing Ava on her runs for a few days. Since she met up with Perrie, we’ve been wondering what else she gets up to when no one else is around. I mean, no one keeps track of where she is, and sometimes she just disappears for hours at a time.”

“Yep, sounds like a plan,” I said, having barely heard what Lola was talking about. “Just be careful she doesn’t spot you. She’s got a keen eye.”

“Gotcha,” Lola said, nodding. “We’ll keep an eye out.”

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Half an hour later, I walked outside with Cali. Greyson was already out there.

“Ready?” he asked.

I nodded, but before I could answer, the front door opened and shut again, and Orla came down the steps to the drive.

“I know you boys have thought about this, but what you’re doing is really very dangerous. Trying to trick Fae magic is never a good idea,” she said, tutting as she came toward us. Her eyes went to her daughter. “I know you have a plan, but I’m just so worried about you, sweetheart.”

“We should get going,” I said, cutting Orla off.

We hadn’t even reached the car before Greyson’s phone pinged with a text. He slipped it out of his pocket and looked down at it.

“Shit,” he muttered.

I glanced over. “What is it?”

He looked up, his face grave. “Aysel knows I took the card.”

**Episode 2464**

I stared at Greyson, alarm bells ringing. “How do you know Aysel knows? What did she say?”

Greyson handed me his phone, and I read the text.

*You took something of mine. I want it back.*

My heart dropped to my feet. If Aysel knew, what would the Vanguard pack do in response? Was Greyson stealing the tarot card going to start a Vanguard-Redwood war?

“Who could have seen you take it?” Xavier asked. “Was it her, or someone else? Andrei keeps a close eye on her. Were you alone with her when you took it?”

Greyson took his phone back from me and shot a quelling look at Xavier. “I’ll deal with this later,” he muttered. “First we need to focus on what we’re going to do once we get to Portland.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Greyson ran a hand through his hair as the winter wind blew around us. “Given that Lakini has said she’s open to working with us, I want to make sure we’re all on the same page going in. There’s no room for mistakes here.”

He slipped his phone back into his pocket, apparently committed to ignoring the Aysel situation.

I knew he was concerned about Lakini—we all were—but watching him ignore that message from Aysel made me wonder if he was purposefully avoiding the subject. I also wondered *how* he’d managed to get the card from her. I hadn’t thought to ask last night when he’d gotten home—I’d been too overjoyed with his safe return and the news about the card—but now, I wondered. How *had* he gotten the card? And what had happened after I’d left the palace with the others?

He’d obviously found Aysel, and…

I knew they had kissed before. Greyson and Aysel. I didn’t like to think about it, but the memory resurfaced. I hated that it had happened, but I’d accepted it. It had been in pursuit of a larger goal. But had it happened again? How many more kisses had there been? And what else had happened? How much of this was I expected to tolerate?

I knew I could trust Greyson, but why hadn’t he told me what had happened when he’d gotten home last night? Had he expected me to ask? Or was he hoping I wouldn’t?

I had a thousand questions, but I forced myself to bite them back. I suspected ulterior motives in Greyson’s subject change, but he was right—we had a serious situation waiting for us in Portland. There was not one, but two witches waiting for us, and I was at the heart of this conflict, thanks to my Fae promise.

And once we took care of this awful revulsion curse, Greyson wouldn’t have to deal with Aysel ever again. She’d be nothing but a distant, annoying memory.

“We should go,” Greyson said in a business-like tone.

He turned to walk toward his car, and Xavier turned toward his. I stood still, watching them walk off in opposite directions.

“Which car are we taking?” I asked.

“Mine,” they both said at once.

Then they looked at each other, frowning.

“I’m driving,” Greyson declared.

“No, I’m driving. This whole thing was my idea,” Xavier pointed out. “I set it up. I drive.”

“No way. We’re not taking your car,” Greyson said, shaking his head. “Your cars have met too many bad ends. They’re jinxed. Mine is safer.”

“I can’t believe you’re arguing about this,” I said in disbelief. “We’re about to go meet up with a dangerous witch who none of us trust, and you two are arguing about a car. You need to stop this—”

“Cali,” my mom said suddenly, stepping in front of me. “I really wish you’d reconsider this whole thing.”

“Mom—” I started, but she cut me off.

“I know you all think you’ve thought this through, but you don’t have any idea of what this woman’s motives are. What does she even mean, ‘flip the deal’?” my mom asked, looking exasperated. “It’s just too risky to do anything that could break the Fae promise you made to this Charon person.”

“I know that, Mom. And I already told you I’d be careful.” I sighed, feeling tired again. “If I hadn’t made this stupid Fae promise in the first place, none of this would matter. We could have just handled things in Portland any way we wanted.”

“But that’s *not* what happened,” my mom pointed out. “And we have to deal with reality. Cali. Think, sweetheart. I’d be devastated if anything happened to you. I’d just feel better if you stayed here. Stay home.”

I was starting to feel really frustrated with my mom, but I took a deep breath and tried to stay calm. “I get that you’re worried, Mom, but I’m not a child anymore. And I’m not even just some defenseless human. Yes, I made the Fae promise that caused this, but I also have my Fae magic, which I’m getting better and better at using. I can take care of myself. And I can take care of them, too,” I said, nodding at Xavier and Greyson.

They weren’t listening to me, though. They were still arguing about whose car to take to Portland. *Ugh. Alphas.*

“I have heated seats!” Greyson said.

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Me too. And satellite radio. Come on, man, it just makes sense to take my car.”

Ignoring them for the moment, I looked back at my mom. “They need me just as much as I need them. Just look at them!” I gestured toward my still-bickering mates.

My mom took this in, and when she smiled, her eyes were bright. “I understand how you feel, Cali. I know you want to protect your mates. And I’m so proud of you. I’ve seen the progress you’ve made in controlling your magic. You’ve worked hard, and it’s paid off.”

“Cali, let’s go,” Xavier called, waving me toward his car. Apparently, he’d won the argument. Greyson followed after him, looking annoyed.

My mom’s expression grew even more anxious, and she spoke quickly. “But even with your Fae magic—even with two Alpha werewolves—you need to understand that you’re setting off to fight a witch without a witch.”

“You may have a point,” I admitted, “but you’re also overthinking this. We’re not going to Portland to do battle. We’re just going to talk to Lakini. Nobody’s planning on getting into any kind of witchcraft battle.”

My mom shook her head, looking grave. “Nobody ever plans it, Cali, but you can’t count on plans when it comes to witches. They’re an entirely unknown variable.”

I threw my arms around my mom. “I promise to be super careful,” I said, squeezing her tight. “If something so much as feels weird, I’ll get out of there. I promise.” I pulled back to look at her. “But the boys are waiting. I have to go.”

My mom looked like she was about to cry, but she pulled me back into a hug and clung tight. “Be safe,” she whispered, then let me go and hurried back inside.

I hated to see her so upset—and I didn’t want to make her cry—but I couldn’t send my mates into this mess without me.

But making my mother cry didn’t feel like an auspicious send-off, and I slid into Xavier’s car feeling pretty bad.

Greyson turned to look back at me as we headed off down the driveway. “I guess Orla’s not too thrilled with you coming along for this little errand?”

“Not exactly,” I admitted.

“I guess I can understand that,” Greyson said. “Just so we’re clear—when we get to Portland and see Lakini, I don’t want you to do or say anything, okay?”

I scowled at him. “What the hell, Greyson? What’s the point of me coming if I’m not *allowed* to do anything? I’m allowed to speak, aren’t I?”

Xavier peered at me through the rearview mirror. “Yeah, sure. Just not in front of Lakini.”

“And why not?” I demanded.

Xavier shot a look at Greyson. “We’re just a little worried that you might make another Fae promise without realizing it.”

“Oh my god,” I moaned, tipping my head back and glaring up at the car’s roof. “You’ve got to be kidding me. That was a one-time thing. I’m not likely to make that mistake again, am I?”

I looked between them, but neither Greyson nor Xavier spoke. They were both looking forward, and Xavier was determinedly avoiding my gaze in the rearview mirror.

I crossed my arms across my chest with a huff. “When will everyone around here stop treating me like I’m a baby?”

Before anyone could comment on that, the air in the car gave a strange vibration, and then, with a gusty explosion of air and a loud pop, Big Mac appeared next to me in the back seat.

I screamed, Greyson swore, and Xavier swerved the car off the road.

**Episode 2465**

GREYSON

The car was heading straight for a tree, so I turned back to grab at Cali, to make sure that she stayed put. Xavier got the car under control a second later, though. My brother had many faults, but thankfully his reflexes worked perfectly.

“You okay?” I asked Cali. She nodded, wide-eyed and panting, before looking at Big Mac, who was casually sitting next to her. After popping into the car out of thin air.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Xavier snapped at Big Mac.

“I was about to ask the same thing,” I said gruffly. Fucking witches, man.

“This is what you get for not waiting for me,” Big Mac declared. “It would have taken you five seconds!”

“But why are you even here?” Cali asked.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Orla asked me to come with you.”

I eyed a scowling Cali. Why would her mom invite Big Mac?

“I get that none of you want me here,” Big Mac said wryly, “but I’m not the biggest fan of this situation either. I’ll leave if you don’t want my help.”

“But why did my mom—”

“Orla was concerned for everyone’s well-being,” Big Mac said, cutting Cali off. “So I offered to help, because contrary to popular belief, I’m not a monster.”

Big Mac wasn’t a monster, per se—my mother wouldn’t have been marrying her if she were—but it wasn’t like she was the easiest individual who’d ever walked this green fucking earth.

“Does my mom think we can’t fend for ourselves?” Cali said, looking both surprised and uneasy, and Big Mac rolled her eyes.

“There’s power in numbers, Cali. But if you don’t want me to come with you, I’m more than happy to—”

“Okay, stop,” I said, cutting her off.

In theory, I didn’t need anyone to help protect Cali, but we were dealing with a witch. My pride could take a hit if it meant that we’d be better prepared to deal with Lakini.

“You make a good point,” I told Big Mac. “There is power in numbers.” I turned to Cali. “What do you think, love?”

Cali gave Big Mac a look. “I mean, she is very mean sometimes, but also very powerful.”

Big Mac raised an eyebrow. “Thank you for the compliments.”

Xavier snorted, eyeing Big Mac. “Put your seat belt on. And when we get there, don’t shoot first unless you have to.”

Big Mac scoffed. “We both know that you’re the hothead between the two of us, kid. You’d better take your own advice.”

As Xavier grumbled something, I told the witch, “Thank you for coming along. We’re grateful that you want to help.”

Big Mac nodded, looking satisfied. Cali stared at the witch and seemed much more settled now, and I felt the same. I was pretty sure my brother agreed as well—nobody liked taking on witches, and having Big Mac on our side might give Lakini pause before she tried anything tricky.

This whole situation was tricky already, though. The unanswered text from Aysel was like a ghost in my phone. A huge reminder of last night. I knew I had to respond to her, but what the fuck was I supposed to say? Had she realized that I’d been lying to her the entire time?

Hell hath no fury like a princess scorned.

I glanced at Cali, who was enthusiastically trying to engage Big Mac in some small talk about the witch’s wedding to my mother. My chest constricted—my mate was so gorgeous, so sweet, and I…

I needed to explain to Cali how I’d acquired Aysel’s half of the tarot card in the first place. But pretending to make out with Aysel while I slipped it out of her next-to-nothing swimsuit was a bad story to share. I’d felt a sort of fucked-up lust toward Aysel—fucked up since this was literally my abductor and stalker we were talking about—but lust meant nothing. It could never be enough to make me cross the line or question my feelings toward Cali.

I had been forced to kiss Aysel in order to get the card. To break the curse that was keeping me and Cali apart. My mate wouldn’t like the truth, but she’d understand. At least I hoped she would. She needed to.

Everything I did was for her. For us, together.

So I took a deep breath, pulled out my phone, and finally replied to Aysel’s text.

*What did I take?*

Better to play it casual.

She replied within seconds.

*You took a piece of my heart, Greyson.*

And then she followed that with a string of heart emojis

Seriously.

I internally groaned at how fucking ridiculous she was, but I was at least relieved that she hadn’t actually realized the card was gone. Thank god. Then again, maybe this was worse. Was my “seduction” working a little too well? This was what I got for being irresistible. It was a curse on its own, sometimes.

Shaking my head at myself, I held the tin box with the tarot card in the palm of my hand. If it hadn’t been for Cali’s Fae promise, I would’ve said to hell with Lakini and gone straight to Charon with the card. Let the two witch ex-lovers fight it out on their own, kill each other or go on a date—see if I cared. All I wanted was to end the revulsion curse. But all of it hinged on fulfilling that damned promise.

“Fucking hell,” Xavier grumbled and hit his horn, startling me out of my thoughts. “Hey!” he barked out the window. “Get out of the way, jackass!”

“Xavier doesn’t deal well with being stuck in traffic,” Cali informed Big Mac sheepishly.

“Most people don’t,” Big Mac replied.

I scoffed. “It’s fine—we still have plenty of time.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “This is bullshit. I’ve got other things to do today.”

Before anyone could even speak, Big Mac snapped her fingers, and there was a familiar humming sound.

In the blink of an eye, everything twisted around me, a blankness that made me feel queasy, but much less disoriented than the last time. When I opened my eyes again, the car had come to a stop on a Portland street.

Fucking witches, man.

“Cali?” I asked. “You good?”

She looked slightly green. “A little queasy.”

Big Mac gave Cali a leaf thing to chew on for the nausea while Xavier glared at her. “A little heads-up would’ve been appreciated.”

Big Mac fired back, “Would you rather spend half the day stuck in traffic?”

As the two of them bickered and Cali thanked me—I vowed to hug her when I was able to again—I looked around. We were just a few blocks from the Rusty Wrench. I recalled how Kira had admitted that Big Mac was more experienced at transporting than her. It showed, though I wasn’t about to compare the two witches out loud—that felt like a dick move, so I’d leave it to my brother.

“So what’s the plan?” Big Mac asked after Xavier parked near the bar.

“Best if Xavier and I talk to Lakini first,” I said, pocketing the tin box with the card. “We’ll call for you when or if we need you.”

Big Mac glared. “*If?* Are you saying that I came all this way to do nothing?”

Cali scowled. “What about me?”

“You wait in the car with Big Mac,” Xavier told her, and that was a real bad move.

I was glad he’d stepped on that grenade first.

“Are you fucking serious?” Cali huffed. “Like Big Mac, I didn’t come along for the ride!” She pointed at her chest. “This is my Fae promise you’re bargaining with, so I should be there!”

Xavier sighed and turned to me. “Any suggestions?”

I cleared my throat, turning to look at the two women. “Xavier and I go in. If a bomb goes off or something, we take the hit.”

“*A bomb?*” Cali squealed while Big Mac said, “There won’t be a bomb.”

“Just a figure of speech,” I said. I chose my next words carefully, just to make sure neither of them thought that I was bossing them around or underestimating them. “Xavier and I walk in, check things out, deal with the risk first. If things are okay, you two join and help us out. Sound good?”

Big Mac rolled her eyes, and Cali nodded. “That sounds fair.”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “How’s that any different from what I said?”

I smacked his shoulder and gestured for us to get out. Grumbling, he did it, and moments later, we were at the front of the bar.

*Be prepared for anything*, I mind linked. *This place isn’t just a dive bar—it’s a deep dive bar teeming with lowlifes.*

Xavier smirked. *Sounds like my kind of hangout.*

I wasn’t even fucking surprised.

When we got in, the bar was nearly empty. Lakini was talking to the asshole bartender and seemed unhappy to see us. I wasn’t jumping up and down with joy either, but I also wasn’t making a fuss about it.

“You’re early,” she said coldly.

I wasn’t going to let her get the upper hand. “Do you want to talk or not?”

Lakini eyed us both. “I assume you want to take me up on my offer?”

Xavier glanced at me. I shook my head, taking a few steps closer to her.

“Slow down,” I said. “Before we talk about any bargain, I need an answer.”

“About what?” Lakini asked, her tone cautious.

“When I first approached you, you practically threw me out,” I said. “What changed? Why are you willing to work with us now?”

**Episode 2466**

XAVIER

I was keeping one eye on the bartender. He was clearly pretending to be busy setting up, but his attention was wholly on us, and he was glancing up every few seconds. Greyson had told me that the guy was a hothead, which meant that he probably had a club or a shotgun under the bar. He was probably a warlock too, just to make things worse.

I fucking hated witches.

“I know you spoke to my brother yesterday,” Greyson said, staring at Lakini and nodding at me, “but I want to hear it from you directly. Why are you offering to work with us now?”

“What’s in it for you?” I asked.

“We know witches don’t work for free,” Greyson continued. “So what do you want in return? And we need a clear answer—no vague witchy bullshit.”

Lakini stared between us, her jaw set. She thrust her chin upward. “You probably won’t believe me, but I’m gonna tell you the truth anyway.”

Greyson looked at her up and down. “Which is?”

“I’m doing it because I want Charon to fail,” she said sharply.

I had to laugh. “For real? I’m gonna need a better explanation.”

Greyson shot me a look, like, “*Sounds good enough to me, we’re actually lucky she’s not being more cryptic about this*,” but he didn’t speak. He could probably tell that Lakini had more to say—and then she did.

“Charon was willing to do anything to have me killed, and I’m not the forgiving type,” she said. “I know his jealousy won’t ever let up—he knows that his reputation was built off mine. He’s so mediocre in what he does that it’s laughable.”

“Hard to imagine how you ever fell for him,” Greyson said with a slight lift of his brow.

She scoffed. “That’s in the past. He’s subpar in every way. And if it got around that his curses can be broken… his reputation would take a hit and never recover.” She looked between us. “He’s proud, and being labeled a failure is almost worse than death. It’s a gift I’d like to give him to thank him for trying to have me killed.”

*What do you think?* I asked Greyson.

*Pretty cruel*, he replied.

*I like her style.*

Lakini’s style matched mine, so I stared at her with a smile. “You know, killing either of you hasn’t been ruled out yet. Just an FYI.”

The bartender slid one hand under the counter, and I turned to him, pointing.

“It would be best if you kept your hands where everyone can see them,” I advised. “We’re not fucking around here.”

The bartender glowered at me, then glanced at Lakini. When she nodded, he put his hands on the bar.

“All this is fine and dandy,” Greyson said to Lakini, “and I appreciate you wanting to get rid of what sounds like a parasite of a man—”

“Parasite’s the right word—”

“But we’re not here to pick teams after a break-up,” Greyson cut her off. “We need results. You sure you can break the revulsion curse?”

Lakini rolled her eyes. “Obviously. I wouldn’t be wasting your time or mine if I couldn’t. I’m a busy woman, you know.”

Greyson looked around the empty bar pointedly.

She gave him a sneer. “Things are not as they appear. I know this new deal is pretty loaded, and you have to think about it, so I’ll be in my office when you’re ready.”

She strutted away, looking like some sort of prowling tigress. Definitely way out of Charon’s league, but we weren’t gonna talk about that right now. The bartender reached for a glass and then paused.

“Okay with you if I finish setting up?” he asked, his voice full of sarcasm.

I nodded, and Greyson gestured to one of the joint’s far away corners. We headed there and took a seat—our view of the bartender and the door to Lakini’s office was unobstructed. It was a good, strategic spot. We couldn’t take any chances.

“What do you think?” Greyson asked.

I shrugged. “Witches are never easy to deal with. There’s always a catch.”

“What do you think we should do?” Greyson asked.

“Would be nice to put Charon in his place,” I said. “The little shit tried to blast us. He’s got a lot of fucking nerve. I’m not going to let that go.”

“Me neither,” Greyson replied. “But I want to be cautious. We can’t let spite cloud our decision. This is really fucking important, Xavier.”

It was.

I knew it was important for Cali and Greyson too. Both of them. Together. If the curse was broken, they’d be able to be *together* again. I had no fucking idea how I felt about basically helping my brother to get back with my mate. I’d been enjoying being the only one to kiss her. To touch her. Now I’d have to fucking *share* again?

It was messed up. It was unfair, actually. All of it. I resented it.

It wasn’t like I really had a choice in the matter, though. Until the revulsion curse was broken, there would always be a shadow hanging over the three of us. Screw Greyson, but I didn’t want that for Cali. I didn’t want her to be miserable, especially because if she was miserable, I’d be miserable too. Also, if she knew that I could help and refused to, or she thought that I was sabotaging Greyson’s attempts to break the curse, she’d get mad.

I *definitely* didn’t want her to get mad at me.

Besides, I was pretty sure that if things were the other way around, Greyson would act all noble and go out of his way to help me. Which was gag-worthy—the holier-than-thou asshole thought he was so much better than me—but true.

He had this thoughtful look to his face right now, so I nudged him.

“So what do we do?” I asked.

“I think we need to make sure that whatever new spell Lakini casts won’t put Cali in harm’s way,” Greyson said. “I’m wondering if making a new deal with Lakini would affect her Fae promise.”

“Good point,” I said. “Also, we have to make sure that Lakini knows we’re calling the shots.”

Greyson nodded, standing up first. “Time to bargain with the witch.”

I followed, my eyes fixed on the bartender, who stared back at me daringly. The jackass had a lot of nerve to make that kind of eye contact with an Alpha. I almost wished he’d try something so I could punch that mocking look off his face.

“This way,” Greyson said, leading the way down a dark corridor.

With one last look at the asswipe bartender, I followed.

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Lakini’s office was pretty normal, for a witch. I suspected everything inside was an illusion or something, though. Like, it was too normal.

Had I mentioned that I fucking hated witches?

“Well?” Lakini asked, looking between us. “Do we have an understanding?”

“Not before we set some ground rules,” I said.

Lakini sat back in her chair. “Very well. Make your offer.”

Greyson stared at her. “It’s pretty simple. You break the spell that your former lover cast on me. If you don’t, we will kill you. Is that clear?”

And people called *me* a brute. Greyson seemed to have picked up some of my tricks.

He leaned forward over the desk, much like I would’ve, and said, “That, of course, means that nothing happens to Cali, regardless of any promises she’s made.”

“Exactly,” I said sharply.

Lakini looked between us, her eyebrows arched. “Interesting.” She squinted. “You’re both very protective of the Fae girl. She must be very special.”

I hated the way she said that. Why was she smiling? What the fuck?

“Leave Cali out of this,” I snapped. “No ambiguity, no cryptic maneuvering, no bullshit. Either Cali stays safe, or this deal ends right now. And I’ll make no promises about who ends up dead.”

Lakini nodded, huffing. “I get it, okay? No need to make such a fuss.”

I scowled. This felt pretty off. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it, but it was like Greyson’s and my threats hadn’t landed as hard as I’d hoped.

“I don’t like your tone,” I told her, growling.

She scoffed, raising her eyebrows. “I don’t like yours either. Do you see me getting my panties in a twist?”

I couldn’t believe she could be so nonchalant after the way I’d talked to her. It was pretty infuriating.

“I really fucking hope you’re taking this seriously, Lakini,” I said, cracking my knuckles. “Because I definitely am.”

“Both of us are,” Greyson said, his expression harsh.

Lakini took a deep breath, shaking her head. “Of course I’m taking it seriously. I even have some insurance.”

Greyson scowled. “Insurance?”

“The hell is that supposed to mean?” I demanded.

Lakini didn’t answer. She just looked at the door, a second before it opened.

The bartender came in, a hand on each of them as he pulled Cali and Big Mac in roughly. Cali’s eyes were wide, her mouth open in a silent cry for help.

Lakini crossed her arms, smirking. “Would you like to talk ground rules?”

**Episode 2467**

*A few moments earlier…*

Big Mac was sprawled in the back seat of the car, busy doing sudoku in a giant book. How could she be so chill while we were basically on a super dangerous mission? Where the hell had she found the ability to *think* right now? It looked like she didn’t have a care in the world.

I, on the other hand, had many cares. Like, I cared a lot. I cared so much that I was about to explode. I’d been watching the entrance of the Rusty Wrench ever since the boys had vanished inside a few minutes ago.

*What’s happening in there?*

The doors were this cool teal glass, but I couldn’t admire the aesthetic when I had no idea what was going on. I could only see their silhouettes, nothing else. *Damn it*. I felt helpless and a bit peeved that both of my mates had wanted me to come to Portland but then made me stay in the car.

*I’m not here for the road trip*, I thought. *I’m here for the ADVENTURE! And to break the curse, of course!*

Would moving to the front seat give me a better look? I started to move across the center console to look out the window, squeezing my way through, but then my knee bumped Big Mac’s. She looked up at me, wrinkling her nose.

“What in the world are you doing?” she asked.

Stuck halfway between the front and the back, I said, “I can’t see them!”

“Yeah,” Big Mac said wryly. “Because you’re not supposed to. You’re supposed to stay here in the car. Did you miss that part?”

I scowled, shoving myself back into the back seat. “How can you stay so calm? I don’t get it.”

Big Mac sniffed in derision. “Have you tried sudoku?”

“Ugh!” I plopped back down into the seat and sighed. “Doing puzzles isn’t going to help, Big Mac.”

“Puzzles always help,” she deadpanned, and I was pretty sure she was fucking with me.

“This isn’t a joke,” I said, huffing. “My mates are in there dealing with a witch who is most definitely up to something, I myself am under a stupid curse, and I’m supposed to just sit and wait?”

“You could play sudoku. It helps with cognitive—”

“Enough with your puzzles!” I declared. “I want to at least take a look inside.”

Big Mac glared at me, annoyed. With a begrudging grunt, she put down her puzzle, as if determined to let me know that I was one hundred percent destroying her afternoon. “Look, Caliana—I’m not having fun here either, so I’d appreciate you dialing down the temper tantrum.”

I gasped. “I am not having a—”

Big Mac cut me off. “Need I remind you that I’m here because Orla asked me to be? And with good reason—we all know the trouble you tend to stumble into when you’re left to your own devices.”

I scowled. “First of all, how dare you? Second, why does everyone keep throwing my mistakes in my face? Why do you guys always ignore all the good stuff I’ve ever done? I’m not useless, you know!”

Big Mac just raised an eyebrow, which made me EVEN MORE annoyed.

“Seriously?” I demanded. “Those are my mates in there. I have to know that they’re okay.”

“They are two Alpha werewolves,” Big Mac said wryly. “I’m sure they can fend for themselves—or let us know they’re in trouble by howling or something.”

I huffed. “It’s not that I think they can’t defend themselves. It’s that I want to make sure everything goes well for them. I want to see it with my own eyes.” I stared at her seriously. “What would you do if Mrs. Smith was in there?”

Big Mac’s eyes narrowed. “You will not manipulate me into letting you go, Cali. We stay in the car for now.”

And with that, Big Mac picked up her sudoku again.

*Oh my god! This is ridiculous!*

My anxiety kept climbing with every passing second. I stared at the doors the entire time. What if Greyson and Xavier didn’t have the time to howl for us to help them? What if the witch had taken their voices away or something? What if they were trapped in there?

I so wished I’d handled this whole thing differently. After all, I was the one who’d made the deal. *I* should be the one who handled Lakini. These kinds of technicalities mattered! And I had Big Mac by my side—what could possibly go wrong?

She didn’t seem all that useful right now, though.

“I know why Mom told you to come with us,” I told Big Mac, breaking the silence. “She said that it was dangerous to go to fight a witch without having a witch on your side—”

“A great observation—”

“—but how is that going to work if our witch is sitting in a car doing puzzles?”

Big Mac frowned. “I’m not YOUR witch. I’m not anyone’s witch—I’m only my own, and you’d better not forget that.” She wagged her finger at me, and I realized that I’d just struck a nerve.

*I wonder what that’s about…*

“Why are you getting mad at me right now?” I asked, indignant. “Shouldn’t you be channeling that toward Lakini? And if you’re your own witch, why are you letting a couple of werewolves boss you around?”

Big Mac glared at me. “Again, stop trying to manipulate me, Cali. It’s not going to work.”

“I’m not trying to do anything—just telling the truth,” I said. “Did you come all the way here just to stay in the car like some sort of pet?”

She sneered. “Now you’re just pissing me off.”

“But—”

“Need I remind you, Cali, that *I* brought you here?” she asked, raising both eyebrows. “Because I can take us all back to the pack house just as easily.”

“That’s not fair!”

Big Mac picked up her puzzle book. Coldly, she said, “Life isn’t fair.”

I groaned, slumping back in my seat.

“This is bullshit, you know,” I grumbled under my breath. She ignored me. “I *know* you wouldn’t let Mrs. Smith go in there by herself. But you expect me to just sit idly by.”

Big Mac kept ignoring me.

*I have had ENOUGH!*

Determined, I grabbed the handle, opened the door, and got out of the damn car.

“What the hell are you doing?” Big Mac demanded.

“What I should have done in the first place!” I slammed the door and stomped to the bar’s entrance.

Even if my mates didn’t need saving, I bet seeing me there would boost their morale. Right?

*Or piss them off. Anyway, we’ll see!*

It took my eyes a second to adjust to the dark interior of the bar. My mates were nowhere to be seen.

The large, grumpy bartender shot me a look and said, “We’re not open for business yet.”

“I’m actually looking for the two guys who came in a few minutes ago,” I said.

The bartender grunted. “Do you *see* anyone else here?”

“Listen here, you…” I stomped over to him, unsure what kind of insult would be best suited, here. When I couldn’t decide, I just said, “You *bartender*! Don’t play games with me, I’m—”

His gaze shifted past me. A second later, the bar was illuminated by the opened front door as Big Mac entered. At the same time, a light flashed near the register.

The bartender’s annoyed expression became a threatening one.

“What does the witch want?” he growled.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Take it easy. I’m here to take her”—she pointed at me like I was some sort of misbehaving pet—“back to the car.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I declared. “I’ve made it this far, and I’m not about to back out now.” I glared at the bartender. “Where the hell are my mates?”

He let out another grunt and pressed a button. The light stopped flashing, but Big Mac didn’t seem happy about that. She grabbed me by the arm, her gaze sharp as she said between her teeth, “Let’s get out of here before he asks us to—”

“You need to come with me,” the bartender said, coming around the bar.

Big Mac shot me a look that said, “I TOLD YOU SO!” and also, “THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT!”

“We’re not going anywhere without my mates,” I told the bartender, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Can you do us both a favor and be quiet for once?” Big Mac hissed at me.

Before I could reply, the bartender said, “Enough chitchat.”

And then he took us by the shoulders like he was a mother cat and we were a couple of kittens, and steered us to an office in the back.

“Where are you taking us? Where are Xavier and Greyson?” I demanded.

“You’ll find out soon,” he said roughly.

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At least we found my mates a few moments later.

*YAY!*

They were both alive, and as beautiful as ever. Not very happy, though.

“Let them go,” Greyson growled at the bartender, and Xavier stepped forward, ready to attack. Both their gazes flashed dangerously, and Big Mac tugged at the bartender’s grip.

He let her go first, and I was offended.

“You were asking about these two guys—here they are,” the bartender told me, letting me go as if I were a dirty rug. He then turned to Lakini, who was sitting behind the desk.

“I’m done babysitting,” he told her. “Gotta go get the bar ready.”

As he left, I looked between Greyson and Xavier. They were both clearly very, very displeased.

“I was worried, wanted to make sure you were both okay,” I said awkwardly.

Big Mac rolled her eyes so hard I thought they’d fall out of her head.

“This is perfect, actually,” Lakini said, before my mates could reply. She pointed at the door. “Everybody else leave—I want to talk to the Fae alone.”

**Episode 2468**

LOLA

*Everything* about Ava was unsettling.

I had so many questions about her and her behavior. Her pattern of staying at the house—or not—was so strange. Where did she even go when she left? Did she sleep outside? Come inside when it suited her?

I had no idea, but what I did have was a pair of binoculars, and I was now looking out my bedroom window at the back yard and the woods. Where was she, goddammit?

“What are you doing?” Jay asked, poking my shoulder.

“Investigating,” I said gravely.

“Why are you using binoculars, though?” he asked. “Your vampire sensibilities don’t interrupt your werewolf ones, do they?”

I huffed, facing him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Can’t you just find Ava’s scent?” Jay asked, looking mildly amused. He really was so beautiful.

*No, Lola! Don’t get distracted!*

I forced myself to focus. “Yeah, Xavier said I could track Ava as long as I was careful.” I pointed at my binoculars. “This is about as careful as I can be. Besides, isn’t this a bit more fun?”

Jay rolled his eyes. “Lola, this isn’t a caper. Xavier and Cali’s happiness and well-being are at stake.”

“But—”

“Also, an entire other pack’s ability to survive may hinge on whether we can get Ava to try to reunite the Samara pack,” Jay said. “This is serious business, Lola.”

I frowned, putting down my binoculars. “Well, when you put it like that it sounds ten times less fun.”

Jay smirked and kissed my cheek. “Good.”

He was such a sneak.

“We need to be serious about this, okay?” he said, tucking my hair behind my ear. “It could have real ramifications if we fail, here. And if we accidentally start a war with Ava, there’s no telling what kind of revenge she could take on Xavier, or even Cali. Do you want something to happen to your best friend?”

“Of course not.” Sighing, I glared into the distance. “If she dared hurt Cali, I’d kill her.”

Jay cleared his throat. “Anyway.” He patted my shoulder. “Let’s just go track her scent and keep an eye on her, shall we?”

I grumbled, “Fine. I guess we’ll do this the boring way.”

Jay snorted, pulling me in for a side hug, kissing the side of my head. I was about to give him a proper kiss when Jacqueline the kiss-blocker walked in.

“What are you two even doing?” she asked, frowning.

“Nice to see you too, Jacs,” I said dryly. “Do you want to go on a little adventure with us? We’re going to track down Ava.”

Jacqueline scoffed. “Hard pass.”

“Why?” Jay asked.

“It’s not healthy for you to stay cooped up in the house,” I said seriously. “We went to the blood club, and you haven’t been anywhere since—isn’t there something you want to do?”

“Well, I was going to see if you wanted to go on a blood run, but now I’m not in the mood anymore,” Jacs said stubbornly.

Jay shot me a look and mind linked, *I don’t think I need to be here for this conversation.*

I glared. *Don’t you dare leave me with her!*

“Jacs, I know that you don’t have any real friends here apart from me—”

Jacqueline wrinkled her nose. “Gross but true.”

“—but you could at least try to make more friends within the pack. Or at least go out for something other than blood, and meet new people on your own?” I asked hopefully.

Jacs hummed. “Another hard pass.”

I eyed my mate, who looked lost and a little bored. *Jay! Do something! She needs encouragement!*

Jay squinted at me. *What am I supposed to do? She’s not even listening to* you*, and you’re supposed to be her friend!*

“But what *do* you want to do, Jacs?” I asked, tapping my foot and crossing my arms over my chest. My god, I was acting like my dad, and I couldn’t even stop myself from doing it. “You can’t just stay home and mope all day. You didn’t even want to go to college.”

“That’s a good point,” Jay piped up.

“Thank you, babe,” I said, shooting him a grin.

Jacs glared between us. “The college thing is different.”

“How is it different?” I asked impatiently. “Jay and I don’t get it.”

“Is there a particular reason why you don’t want to do anything at all?” Jay asked gently.

“I don’t understand how you haven’t gotten bored out of your mind around here,” I huffed. “You’re basically hanging out at the pack house almost all the time—it’s like Tottenville at this point, but without the classes.”

Jacs got this stubborn look to her face. Uh-oh. “What I’m doing is none of your business. I don’t want to go on an adventure, I don’t want to go back to school—I just want to be left alone. Got it?”

Jacs’s haughty, aggressive tone had me fired up. Marching up to her, I said, “Listen here, you—”

“Lola, *hey*!” Jay blocked my way, resting his palm on my arm. “Take it easy, okay?” He glanced over his shoulder. “If Jacs wants to stay here and just hang out, that’s her choice. As her friend, you can give her a little time with her thoughts.”

I groaned, crossing my arms. Why was Jay indulging her? Then again, Jay indulged everyone most of the time.

“Fine,” I barked, then pointed at Jacs. “But at some point, you and I are going to do something—anything—to break you out of this moody slump!”

Jacs rolled her eyes at me and turned away, and I had just about had it with her.

Irritated, I followed Jay out of my room and down the stairs.

“Let Jacs relax for now,” Jay said as we walked outside. “Feels like she needs it.”

“But why?” I demanded.

Jay shrugged. “I don’t know. But you can let her do her thing and keep an eye on her, like a good friend. Okay?”

“I hate it when you don’t take my side on things,” I grumbled. “And I *super* hate being her friend.”

Jay smirked. “You two make quite the pair.”

I smirked back, twining my arm through his. “*We* are quite the pair.” I gave him a peck on the mouth. “Come on now, it’s time for our adventure!”

Even though Jay shook his head at me with a scoff, we both shifted and started running through the woods, ready to pick up Ava’s scent.

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It didn’t take long for Jay to track Ava down. He was a master at it. And despite all the things he’d said about this mission being “serious business,” I was getting major adventure vibes. It was nice to get out of the house and feel useful, and even though Jay had said not to make it a caper, how could I not? I loved capers! I also appreciated being responsible for dealing with Ava and the Samara pack, even though it remained a conundrum.

Jay was super helpful, though—even when Ava’s scent started to fade, he instantly picked up a fresh trail. His wolf’s nose lifted up, steering the two of us off in another direction. We bounded on for a little while longer until we hit a little clearing and the side of an old county road. On the other side of the street, there was a diner.

Ava’s scent was stronger than ever.

*That’s the Rockaway Diner*, Jay mind linked. *The last time we were here…*

*We thought Ravi was going to kill us all?* I said, completing his sentence.

Jay scoffed. *Good memories, right?*

I shrugged. *The sign up front says “Under new management”. And I don’t remember the food being bad.*

*Ava must like the food too*, Jay noted. *This place reeks of her scent—and fries.*

*We have to get closer and see what she’s up to*, I said.

Jay nodded seriously. *Follow me.*

With him in the front—I so loved it when he took charge—we sneaked off toward the diner. There were some tall trees and bushes on one side of the building, and the two of us waded into them to get a peek through the large windows.

I scrunched my nose—the place smelled like weed.

The scent led me to a waitress leaning against a dumpster, smoking. I wondered how good the waitress would be at keeping track of orders if she was stoned. Good for her, though—I bet customers could be huge assholes.

*Over there!* Jay said.

I turned to stare in the direction he indicated—Ava was inside the diner. We could clearly see the back of her head from this vantage point.

*I think that’s her*, Jay said.

*Of course it’s her*, I scoffed. *She’s been around the pack house so much that I’d recognize every part of her anywhere.*

*She’s not eating alone*, Jay noted.

I squinted, tilting slightly to the side, and then I saw…

*That’s Aysel!* Jay said.

He looked as shocked as I was to see the Vanguard girl who was obsessed with Greyson. I’d never forget how she’d barged into the pack house and insulted all our holiday decorations. What a bitch.

*Lola*, Jay said, his tone cautious. *Why are these two eating together?*

I froze, realizing the gravity of Jay’s question.

*Oh, no…*

Why *was* Ava meeting with Aysel?