**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 21**

**Episodes 2487–2658**

**Episode 2487**

Kissing Greyson was pretty much the best thing ever.

He pressed me into the mattress, one hand braced next to my head, the other firm on my waist as he deepened the kiss. His palm was hot against my bare skin, and I felt his calluses brushing against me as his grip tightened. His body was practically thrumming with need—a feeling I knew all too well.

He was taking his time, his hands lingering along my neck, the top of my chest. He didn’t make a move to push further, and it was driving me crazy. It was like he had all the time in the world. Like, after the days we’d been repulsed by each other, all he wanted was to make up for every missed kiss.

It. Was. *Incredible*.

And what was even more incredible? We really did have all the time in the world. Especially tonight, here in Greyson’s apartment. Neither one of us was being pulled away by other people, other responsibilities. It was just Greyson and me, and I kind of wished this could last forever.

I’d missed him so much. Missed kissing him. Touching him. Being kissed and touched by him. Aysel’s curse had dragged on for so long that I’d been starting to think we’d never be free of it. That I’d never be able to touch or kiss Greyson again. And now that we were free, now that he was here, his body warm and firm and smelling so good it made my mouth water, I felt such deep and overwhelming relief that I could’ve cried. I could barely wrap my head around how my body could hold so much wanting, so much love, and so much joy all at once.

His mouth left a hot trail down my jaw, then my neck, like he couldn’t stop himself from savoring the taste of my skin.

“Greyson,” I gasped. I needed so much more of him. And now that I could enjoy him, I was going to have him. All of him.

I clenched his shirt in my fists and tried to tear it off like he’d done to mine. All I did was weirdly stretch out his neckline.

He broke away from my mouth with a deep chuckle. His voice was so low, so threaded through with need, that it made my toes curl.

“What are you doing, love?”

“Trying to rip your shirt off like you ripped mine.”

His brows rose.

“It’s only fair,” I added.

He sat back so he was kneeling, and in one smooth motion he ripped his shirt off, right down the middle, then tossed the scraps to the floor. “So… something like that?”

My mouth went dry at the sight of his bare chest. At his easy strength. God, my mate was beyond sexy. How had I ever survived so long without touching him?

He dropped down again, his hands braced on either side of my head. “Now we’re even.”

I didn’t even get a chance to reply before he caught my mouth with his and we picked up right where we’d left off. I pressed myself against him, desperate for more. Kissing was great—I was all for kissing. But I wasn’t even close to being satisfied.

Greyson, on the other hand, was taking his sweet time.

My hands slid over the warm, sculpted planes of his chest, then around to his back. I squeezed his ass through his jeans, grinding against the hard, thick length of him.

“Someone’s feeling handsy,” he murmured as he dropped a line of kisses down my neck.

“Horny,” I corrected. “Maybe you can take care of that?”

“I’ll see what I can do.” His lips attached themselves to my collarbone, and his hands didn’t stray from their places on either side of my head. My core pulsed with need. My skin felt practically electrified, like I was a live wire just looking for something to ground me.

“Greyson,” I whined. Actually whined. It was maybe the least sexy sound I’d ever made, but his pupils dilated.

“What do you want, love?” His mouth moved lower, down my sternum, until his tongue traced the edge of my bra.

“You,” I breathed. “All of you. Please.”

My words seemed to snap whatever masterful control he’d had over the situation. His mouth dove down and caught my nipple, and I let out a deep moan, clutching his head to my breast, my hips canting up against this hardness again.

He groaned, my nipple still in his mouth, and the vibrations sent a flutter of pleasure through me. It wasn’t even remotely enough, but it felt so damn good I almost didn’t mind. *Finally*, he was touching me the way I wanted him to.

I reached for his belt, managing to clumsily unbuckle it.

“Get. These. *Off*,” I groaned as his mouth moved to my other breast, still teasing me through the material of my bra.

He laughed darkly and moved off me just long enough to strip off his clothes. Then, hunger heating his gaze, he pounced on me and tugged off my bra and panties. Finally, we were bared to each other, skin to skin.

“You are so goddamn beautiful,” he breathed. “I’ve missed you so much, and I’ll never let anyone or anything try to come between us again.”

The intensity in his eyes took my breath away, made my heart pound as he settled himself between my legs. He kissed a hot trail down my stomach, then glanced up at me with a wink.

My vision whited out when his mouth made contact with my clit.

“Greyson!” My fingers sank into his hair, but he didn’t let up one bit. The pleasure was beyond anything I could remember ever having felt before. I needed something to ground me, something to keep me from flying away, from getting lost in the sensation of his tongue lapping at my core.

I came twice—two toe-curling, back-bending, world-shattering orgasms—before he finally released me, wiping at his mouth.

“Oh my god,” I breathed. “I think you broke me.”

“I hope not.” He grinned, settling himself between my thighs. “Because there’s more where that came from.”

I let out a gasp as Greyson sank inside me, finally skin to skin, as close as two people could possibly be. It was amazing. Better than amazing. I wrapped my thighs around his hips as he began to rock against me, desperate to make this last as long as possible. To never have to let him go.

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Later, when we were breathless and sweat-slicked, coming back down to earth, he pulled me into his arms. “I love you so much.”

“Love you too.”

“Are you hungry?” he asked, his lips teasing the back of my neck. “We have all night. What would you like to do? I know a few great restaurants.”

I hummed, then rolled onto my back so I could see his face. Dinner sounded nice, but I didn’t want to leave the apartment. It would be hard enough to leave his bed. Everything had been so perfect—why spoil it by going out?

“How about we order pizza?” I suggested.

“Sounds good to me.” He dropped a kiss on my lips before getting out of bed. I watched him walk across the room to dig his phone out of his pants. God, his ass was just unreal. How on earth had I ended up with such a gorgeous man?

“Should I order half with pineapple?” He smiled.

I stuck out my tongue. Apparently, I was never going to live that down. “Order whatever you want.”

While he placed our order, I sat up and looked around. It was strange being in Greyson’s apartment, in the best way possible. But I’d gotten so used to being in the pack house all the time that I didn’t quite know what to do with such a private, quiet place. Here, we didn’t have to worry about people seeing us together—like a real couple.

This couldn’t last, of course. We had to return to the pack, and Xavier, first thing tomorrow. But I didn’t want to think about that right now. I wanted to enjoy this special experience with him while I could.

Then I remembered Kira.

“Have you heard any updates on Kira?” I asked as Greyson climbed back into bed with me.

He shook his head. “I texted Rishika, but she hasn’t gotten back to me. I made it very clear that she needs to let me know Kira’s status.” He kissed my forehead. “And as soon as the ward is in place, we’ll go back to the house and check on her.”

I frowned. “I hope she’s okay.”

Greyson began kissing his way down my neck. “I love how much you care.” He nipped at my shoulder, and I gasped. Even though we’d just had sex, I suddenly realized I could go again. I leaned back, and Greyson pulled down the covers to expose more of my body. He seemed ready for another round, too.

“But wait!” I said. “The pizza’s coming.”

Greyson’s smile was practically feral. “That won’t be the only thing coming.”

He pressed me into the mattress again, his mouth devouring mine as he settled himself between my thighs. I shoved all my thoughts—of pizza, of Kira, of all the things waiting for us back at the pack house—aside.

We only had tonight, and I wanted to make it count.

**Episode 2488**

“I’m gonna throw up.”

I rolled my eyes. “You are not.”

Greyson lifted the slice of pineapple pizza to his mouth with a grimace. “This is literally the worst thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Come on. You promised you’d try it!” I’d had to beg him to give it a shot, since he’d refused to even take a bite last time.

Greyson sniffed the pizza. “It smells like the beach.”

“It won’t taste like the beach.”

His brows raised. “I’m not so sure about that.”

“Seriously?” I laughed. “The big, strong Redwood Alpha’s afraid of a little pineapple on his pizza?”

It was a low blow, but it did the trick. His eyes narrowed, and he took a bite. I could see him chewing it with a small grimace. I rolled my own eyes at him at his dramatically slow bite. Even through the theatrics, his expression was maddeningly impassive.

*You’d think with all the whining he did about just trying the pizza, he’d have more to say about it!*

He set down the slice of pizza, grabbed his can of beer, and took a swig.

“Well?” I asked.

He shrugged. “It wasn’t awful.”

“Wow. What a glowing review,” I deadpanned.

“Hey, I’m only being honest.”

“You’re just like your brother,” I huffed, then froze. I probably shouldn’t have brought Xavier up. We’d just had an amazing time together—just the two of us. No pack. No Xavier. No need to bring the reality of our situation into things.

*Foot, meet mouth.*

But if my words bothered Greyson, he didn’t show it. He just slowly pushed the plate with the slice of pineapple pizza aside.

*Right. Focus on the present.*

“Why can’t you admit how good it is?” I asked, taking a bite of my own slice. It was sweet and salty and greasy—all the best flavors crashing together.

“Because it’s not good.” His lips quirked up in a smirk. “It’s just not quite as bad as I imagined. Though, it was better than the beach. I’ll give you that. There’s no sand in my teeth.”

“Again, a truly ringing endorsement.” I rolled my eyes, but there was no hiding the smile that tugged at my lips. “You should take another bite. Maybe you’d like it better if I fed it to you?” I grabbed the slice off his plate and held it up.

He leaned in, took the slice from my hand, then kissed my knuckles. “I’ll do it for you. And only you.”

He took a bite, then offered the slice for me to take a bite from too. Our eyes locked. Heat rushed into my cheeks.

And then Greyson sat back with a grimace and dropped the slice back on his plate.

“I think I’ve found my limit. I don’t think I can do this,” he said around the mouthful of pizza.

I pulled back, blinking. The pizza turned to dust in my mouth, and I swallowed. *What does “this” mean? Did I actually make a huge mistake mentioning Xavier?*

Greyson spat the pizza into a napkin. “I really did my best, but I’d still rather leave my pineapple in a piña colada.”

“Oh.” I let out a sigh of relief. Though a part of me still couldn’t believe he was rejecting pineapple pizza. I’d had such high hopes for him.

*Maybe it’s an Evers thing. I wonder if Colton likes it?*

He leaned in. “Hey, just because I don’t like your style of pizza, doesn’t mean I don’t like you. You have to have some flaws, you know. Keeps you interesting.”

He kissed me, and I savored it for a moment—along with the pineapple-y flavor of his mouth—before breaking away with a laugh. “I’m still gonna hold out hope. Tastes change, you know?”

He grinned. “Don’t hold your breath.” He caught my hand and gave it another kiss. “Would you like to go out and get some real food?”

My gaze locked onto his bare chest. “I’m not sure I want to go anywhere.” I bit my lip. “Maybe we should have some dessert instead?”

His pupils dilated, and his voice dropped to that low rumble that never failed to make my heart race. “That sounds… very tempting.”

He leaned forward and kissed me, his hand coming up to tangle in my hair. To hold me in place as he plundered my mouth. Apparently, the taste of pineapple pizza wasn’t too much for him to bear after all.

My mental snark was short-lived. Greyson nipped my full lower lip, deepening the kiss when I gasped, and then all of my thoughts floated away. All I could do was grab onto him, food forgotten, and try to keep up.

Greyson pushed the pizza box aside with one hand and pressed me into the mattress with the other. His hands slid down my sides, anchoring on my hips as he held himself above me.

Then a gurgling sound echoed through the room.

We stopped, and he slowly broke away from my lips.

“Was that your stomach?” I laughed. Then I realized he really hadn’t eaten all that much. “Are you still hungry? We can go out and get something to eat.”

He shook his head. “The only thing I’m hungry for is right in front of me.”

He captured my mouth again, picking up where we’d left off.

His stomach growled again. Louder this time.

I gently pushed him back. “You *are* hungry.”

He chuckled. “I guess I burned off more calories than I thought. Whose fault is that, huh?”

My cheeks went red-hot. “You’re just as much to blame.”

“It’s not my fault you’re so irresistible.”

“Stop.” I laughed. “If you’re really hungry, then we should go get something to eat.”

He sat up. “So it’s a date, then?”

I paused, suddenly struck by this. “A date… A *real* date, just the two of us? Have we ever been able to do that?”

“There’s a first time for everything. And I wouldn’t mind showing you off in Portland.”

“I’ll be the envy of the town with you as my arm candy.”

We separated, reluctantly, to go clean up. As I stepped out of the bathroom, I noticed my shredded shirt on the floor. I looked up at Greyson, who was slipping on a fresh pair of pants. “Um… What am I supposed to wear?”

He followed my gaze to the torn scraps of fabric. “Don’t worry about it. I have lots of stuff in my closet.”

My brows rose. “Like what?”

I imagined half of the closet stuffed with women’s clothes—mostly Maren’s cast-offs. And countless other pieces from people I didn’t even want to know about.

*I’d rather order delivery and keep this date in his apartment than go out dressed like another woman.*

His gaze softened, like he had some idea of where my mind had gone. “Okay, well to be honest it’s not *a lot* of stuff.” He looked me up and down. “But I do have a few shirts I think will work nicely.”

He led me to his huge walk-in closet. I was kind of shocked by all the men’s clothes that hung on the rod. He didn’t even live here anymore—why did he keep so many clothes here?

“For the record,” he added, “it wouldn’t matter to me if you were dressed in a burlap sack. You’ll look amazing, no matter what.”

I blushed. “Nice save.”

“I’m not exaggerating.” He flipped through a few options, then passed me a blue button-down shirt on a hanger.

I eyed the shirt. “Don’t I have a say?”

“Nope.” He slipped the shirt off the hanger, hung the hanger back up, and slipped behind me. Cool, smooth material slipped over my shoulders, followed by Greyson’s hands. He kissed my neck slowly, sensually, as he reached around to button up the shirt.

My heart was racing, that tension was coiling tight in my belly, and suddenly I didn’t want to go out anymore. Why leave when everything I needed was standing right in front of me? When I could spend the entire evening savoring Greyson instead?

He slowly turned me to face the full-length mirror hanging on the back of his closet door. My shoulders slumped. I didn’t look like one of those sexy models who were ostensibly wearing a man’s shirt, the essentials covered but the fabric still hugging all the right places.

No, I looked like a little kid playing dress-up in my dad’s shirt. Which was pretty much the opposite of a turn-on.

“I’m drowning in this shirt.”

Greyson pressed a finger against my lips and slipped a belt around my waist, using it to pull me closer. While he tightened the belt around my natural waist, he kissed me deeply. “You look so fucking sexy in my clothes. It drives me crazy.”

*I’m glad the look is working for someone.*

He stepped away, revealing my reflection in the mirror. *Not bad at all.* Now the material did hug the right places—at least a few of them. It actually could pass for a dress.

Greyson unbuttoned the top button, then another, revealing more of my chest. “You’d better stop me before I unbutton them all,” he said.

I took his hand and kissed it. Then I stepped up to the mirror, adjusting the belt on my waist, rolling up the sleeves, and, yes, undoing one more button until I was satisfied with my makeshift outfit.

“You look gorgeous,” Greyson said as he pulled on a shirt of his own. “Ready?”

“You’re making it sound like we’re going into battle. It’s just a date.”

“Hey, a first date is a lot like going into battle,” he retorted with a grin.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t turn into an *actual* one,” I fired back. “I’m excited about the idea of one normal night on the town with you.”

We left the apartment, and as we waited in the hallway for the elevator, I saw our reflection in the mirror. We looked like a real couple going out on a real date. I couldn’t believe it.

This was just one more reminder of what my life could be like with Greyson. Well, my *normal* life. If I’d ever had one.

I noticed Greyson checking out our reflection, too. *Is he thinking the same thing? How wonderful it would be—*

I stopped short when I felt a familiar tug in my belly. Guilt.

*What about Xavier?* I’d been constructing this whole fantasy in my head about Greyson and me, but what did that mean for the *due destini*? Could my fantasy choices impact the real one I still had to make?

**Episode 2489**

XAVIER

I frowned, then looked over at Kira, who was watching me with a pinched expression. Confusion? Hurt?

*Fuck.* I was not even remotely equipped to deal with this.

I looked back at Big Mac and lowered my voice. “What do you mean, we could lose her forever?” And why the hell did we always have to go from one extreme to another—if we weren’t about to lose someone to some weird-ass malady, then we had to fight a curse to fix some other magical problem.

And Big Mac, she knew her stuff. But was it possible she was being a tiny bit dramatic here? I mean, sure, it could be a little *jarring* for Kira to find out I wasn’t actually her dead husband. But could we really “lose her forever” if I didn’t play along?

The witch’s mouth settled into a thin line. It was a look she’d given me probably a hundred times over the course of our acquaintance, and it was then that I remembered Big Mac wasn’t exactly one to exaggerate.

If anything, her past approaches had been the opposite: matter-of-fact and realistic, to the point of being outright blunt. She didn’t really *do* dramatic, now that I thought about it. And that made this whole situation a hell of a lot more unsettling.

“Geoff?”

I turned to look at Kira again. Her brows knitted together as she looked at me. Yeah, she was confused, maybe even a little afraid. I hated seeing her like this—so weak and pale, lost in her own mind. She’d done so much for the Redwood pack—for me—and to lose her because she’d taken a blast that was meant for me, all because she had a crush on me… This whole thing was like a nightmare. Never in a million years would I have wanted her to come to any harm, but especially not on my account.

I forced myself to smile, to soften my voice. “You need to rest.”

“Why don’t you rest with me?” She scooted back to make room for me in her bed. “We haven’t seen each other in so long.”

*Right. Because I’m not your husband. Because your husband’s been dead.*

Kira patted the mattress beside her. “Come join me.”

I gave Big Mac a pointed glance. Fine, I’d play along because I cared about Kira. But that didn’t mean I was gonna spoon her while she was out of her mind. How the hell was I supposed to get out of this? I didn’t want to “lose” Kira, whatever that meant, but there had to be limits here.

Big Mac approached the bed and patted Kira’s hand. “Geoff will join you later, okay? But first, I need his help with something.”

She nodded toward the door and started to lead me out. I glanced back at Kira, who was smiling weakly.

“I understand,” she said softly. “Don’t take too long, okay? I always sleep better when you’re with me.” She squeezed my hand, seemingly reluctant to let go.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” I told her, then turned to leave.

“It’s great to have you back,” Kira blurted out. “How long are you staying?”

I paused and slowly turned back to face her. “I, um… I don’t know yet.”

She frowned. “It’s Iñigo, isn’t it? I wish you didn’t have to work for him.” Her chest heaved with emotion. “It’s not safe for you.”

“Hey, hey, hey.” I hurried back to her bedside. I didn’t know the rules of this magical delusion thing, but I couldn’t imagine it would be to Kira’s benefit if she got upset. “Don’t worry. This will be my last job with him.”

This only seemed to make her more agitated. She pushed herself into a sitting position. “No! You can’t do that. It’s too soon—he won’t let you leave.”

*Well, fuck.* Apparently I’d just opened a whole new can of worms. “Kira, it’s okay—”

“You can’t let him know you’re planning to leave! He’ll kill you! You know he doesn’t let anyone leave until *he* decides it’s time to end the partnership.” Her lower lip trembled, and a few fat tears rolled down her cheeks. “This is all my fault. I’m so sorry!”

Her tiny, hitching sobs absolutely gutted me. I squeezed her hand. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

For a moment, I considered telling her the truth about Iñigo—that the bastard bloodsucker was dead. As far as I was concerned, it was the one good thing Ava had ever done. But would that just make things worse? Clearly, she wasn’t connecting with reality right now.

Big Mac leaned down and whispered in my ear. “Tell her you won’t do anything without talking to her first.”

Ugh. How the hell had I ended up tangled in this mess? Getting fake relationship advice from Big Mac, of all people? Still, I turned back to Kira. Because there really was no ignoring her tears.

“I’ll explain it all later, okay? But right now, you need to rest.”

She sniffled, then nodded. “Okay. But you have to come back and lie with me when you’re done.”

“I will,” I lied.

Kira settled back down against the pillows, and I stood, releasing her hands.

Torin stepped forward. “I’ll stay with her.”

I started to follow Big Mac out of the room. I was so damn close to freedom.

Then Kira’s voice carried over to me. “I love you.”

I stopped but didn’t turn around. Big Mac raised her brows at me, her meaning crystal clear. I glanced over my shoulder at Kira. “I love you too.”

It felt weird—wrong, really—to say those words to anyone other than Cali. But I knew she’d understand. Right now, they were just words. They didn’t mean anything.

Kira closed her eyes, a smile tugging at her lips.

When I finally stepped out into the hallway, I was exhausted—like I’d just spent the whole day running the perimeter. I let out a long breath and sank back against the wall. There was something very wrong about pretending to be Kira’s dead husband, even if it was to help her. We were supposed to be friends, and I was impersonating someone who meant the world to her. I hoped that, whenever she came out of this funk, she wouldn’t remember any of this.

Plus, Cali would be back soon, and I didn’t want this to interfere with my mate and me spending time together. After her sleepover with Greyson in Portland, it felt like we had some lost time to make up for.

“Come on,” Big Mac said. “We’ll talk in my room.”

When I set foot in her bedroom, my gaze was immediately riveted to her closet. *Is that fucking mirror still in there?*

Being in here again reminded me of Cali. Though, now that I thought about it, there wasn’t much that didn’t have that effect on me.

Big Mac closed the door behind me. “Thank you for doing that. I understand that it’s probably a little awkward for you, but if you care for Kira at all, you’re going to have to keep it up for a while longer.”

“Well that’s conveniently vague.” I crossed my arms and leaned back against the closed door. “How do you know about any of this? You haven’t explained anything, including why you seem to think Kira could be ‘lost.’”

She sighed. “I’m going to tell you something, but it’s not to be shared with anyone. Is that clear?”

I nodded. “Yeah, whatever.”

Eyes blazing, Big Mac grabbed the front of my shirt and pushed me against the door with a surprising amount of strength. “*Nobody. Is. To. Know.* Do you understand?”

“Yes!” I held up my hands. “I won’t tell anyone!”

*She really is such a pain in the ass sometimes.*

She released me and stepped back. “I know what’s happening to Kira because I’ve seen it happen before, when someone close to me was hurt by magic.” Her eyes took on a faraway look.

“Who are you talking about?”

“My father.”

My eyes widened. I knew Big Mac’s mom was a witch too, but I didn’t know anything about her dad. For some reason, I’d never really thought she had one. I could only imagine what her parents were like. Were they responsible for her winning personality?

“When I was young,” she explained, “my father was struck by a witch’s magic.” She said it with no emotion, like it didn’t matter to her, but there was no missing the hurt flashing in her eyes. “That injury ultimately led to his death.”

I sensed there was a hell of a lot more to this story, but I knew better than to go digging where this witch didn’t want me to be. “I understand what you’re saying, and I’m not questioning your experience with this, but I don’t think continuing to play into this delusion is a good idea.”

“Well, too bad. You have to do it—just until I can figure out how to really heal Kira. It could take some time. Hopefully, I’ll be able to figure out a magical solution sooner rather than later.

My eyes narrowed. “Wait, how long do you expect me to do this?”

**Episode 2490**

GREYSON

I held Cali’s hand as we walked down the street together. The sidewalk glistened with the remnants of the rain that had fallen earlier, and the air carried that slightly damp scent of trees and the city.

I couldn’t for the life of me remember the last time I’d felt so goddamn happy.

There was a crisp chill in the air, not uncommon for Portland in December, and I let go of Cali’s hand, slipping my arm around her to place a hand on the small of her back instead. I hoped I could help keep her warm. My shirt looked absolutely to die for on her small frame, but it couldn’t have been offering much protection against the elements.

I really could have stayed upstairs in my apartment with Cali for the rest of the afternoon and evening, but I also liked the idea of getting to take her back home after our date.

Our first real date. No pack members. No Torin and his weird-ass dating games. And especially no Xavier.

Tonight, Cali was all mine. *Only* mine. And I intended to enjoy this rare gift to the fullest.

She glanced up at me and smiled. I tightened my arm around her. It was crazy just how natural it felt to be out here with her like this. Enjoying the city I used to call home.

*Why the hell didn’t we do this sooner? Portland’s not far from the pack house. We could’ve gotten away for the night pretty much any time.*

I vowed to do better in the future. It shouldn’t require the fine print on a warding spell for us to get some alone time. Even if I was the Redwood Alpha and she was a *due destini* mate. There was no reason we couldn’t make time for each other—for our relationship—like every other couple out there.

“Where are we going?” Cali asked. “Is there someplace specific you have in mind? Somewhere without pineapple pizza?” She grinned up at me and laughed.

Longing slammed into me so hard I almost stumbled. *How the hell can she look so good in one of my shirts?*

I stopped suddenly and pulled her close, kissing her deeply. She froze for a moment, then melted against me, kissing me back with enough passion that I seriously considered scooping her up in my arms and carrying her back to my apartment.

*It’d take five minutes to get back. A few more on the elevator.* Then I could take her back to my bedroom, peel my shirt off her… Or hell, maybe I’d leave it on. She was beyond sexy either way.

*I’d love to watch her ride my cock while she’s wearing nothing but my shirt—*

“Get a room, you two!”

We froze, and I glanced over my shoulder. Across the street, an older man laughed as he disappeared into a shop.

Another great thing about my place? *Privacy.*

I kissed Cali’s forehead. “I love you. So much.”

With my arms still locked around her, I could feel her heart begin to race. A smile tugged at my lips. I slid an arm around her, and we continued our way down the sidewalk.

“To answer your question, I do have a place in mind,” I finally said. “It’s the best place for a double feature.”

“A double feature? Like the movies?”

I laughed. “It’s when you basically have two dinners. Go from one restaurant to another.”

She smiled. “I’d have a double feature with you any day.”

About ten minutes later, we ended up at an intimate Italian restaurant, tucked away in an alley. I watched her eyes widen as we approached the understated front entrance.

“Not everyone knows about this place,” I explained as I opened the door for her to step inside. “I’ve always hoped I’d be able to share it with you.”

“Welcome,” the maître d’ said as he approached us. His polite smile grew into a full-on grin when he recognized me. “Mr. Evers! It’s been a while. Usual table?”

Cali eyed me. “You take all your girlfriends here?”

I laughed, though I suddenly felt a little hot around the collar. “Only the ones who like Italian food.”

She frowned and playfully smacked my arm. “Who doesn’t like Italian food?”

“See? It’s a good litmus test.”

She rolled her eyes and glanced around. Then her eyes widened when she saw the old school jukebox in the corner. “Oh wow. I haven’t seen one of those in so long. Not since I was a kid.”

I fished a quarter out of my pocket and pressed it into her hand. “Go pick out a song.”

She grinned and hurried over to the jukebox, and I turned back to the maître d’. “I’m ready for that table, if it’s available.”

He nodded and led me to my usual place in the restaurant, away from both the front entrance and the din of the kitchen. He pulled out a chair for me. “I’ve seen you here with a fair amount of women, but this one…” He gave me a warm, knowing smile. “You make a truly beautiful couple.”

“Thank you.” When the maître d’ stepped away, I looked over at Cali, who seemed to be poring over the song list. I hoped she hadn’t heard what he’d said.

*I want this all the time*, I realized suddenly. This easy connection with Cali. All the complications and responsibilities pushed aside.

*You have tonight. Make it count.*

Suddenly, an old Justin Bieber song came on, shattering the ambiance of the restaurant and drawing everyone’s attention. I had no idea why that song was even on the list, because it clearly went with this place like oil and water.

I set my napkin down and headed over to the jukebox.

“Seriously?” I teased. “I had no idea you were a fan.”

Cali’s face was the same shade of red as the marinara sauce on a nearby plate of spaghetti. “It was an accident! There are just so many songs to choose from, and I wanted to pick something perfect, and I hit the wrong button by mistake.”

“Don’t worry.” I leaned over her, reaching behind the jukebox to find the power switch. I flicked it off, and the song stopped.

A few people clapped, and Cali ducked her head.

I turned the jukebox back on, dropped another quarter in, and selected an old favorite: “At Last” by Etta James.

Cali’s eyes lit up as I took her hand and twirled her around once, then pulled her against me and kissed her.

This moment was just too perfect. It was doing funny things to my heart. Seeing her in my shirt, holding her in my arms—like she belonged to me. Like I belonged to her. I smiled a little as I recalled exactly why she was wearing my shirt. How amazing it was to drop everything and just focus on my mate for the first time ever. No pack business. No bullshit.

Just me and Cali. Exactly how things were meant to be.

I knew this couldn’t last forever. It couldn’t even last through tomorrow. In the morning, we’d get up and have to return to the pack house and all its responsibilities and complications. But at least we had tonight—both a perfect gift and a bittersweet reminder of all the things that stood between Cali and me.

I couldn’t help thinking of the dreams and visions the three witches had given me. Those beautiful glimpses of a future with Cali. What if that future could happen right now? The two of us sharing dinner together, without a worry in the world.

Cali stared up at me with complete adoration. She was smiling, relaxed, happy, and so goddamn beautiful my heart hurt. I was really wishing now that we’d never left my apartment.

The song came to an end, and I led her to the table. When she was seated, I gestured to the maître d’. When he stopped by our table, I ordered a bottle of my favorite wine on the menu. I couldn’t wait to share it with Cali.

Her brows lifted. “An entire bottle just for us?”

“You can drink as much as or as little as you want. I want you to have everything you want.”

Her cheeks heated, and it took every ounce of self-control I possessed not to say, “I want you to want me. To choose me. Once and for all.”

I knew better than to bring up the *due destini* and the specter of her making a choice. And the *due destini* was just another stressor we were leaving out of these perfect hours together.

Of course, she would choose me eventually. But up until recently, she hadn’t even been able to—thanks to the curse. Even though the three witches had told me the curse had been broken, I knew Cali was haunted by the fear of making a choice and accidentally killing one of us.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked. “You look so lost in thought.”

I cleared my throat. “Do you think now that Charon’s revulsion curse is gone, Big Mac can figure out if the killing curse is gone too?”

**Episode 2491**

I’d been swallowing a sip of wine as Greyson spoke, and I almost choked on it when his question registered. I swallowed my mouthful and then coughed, my eyes watering.

Greyson winced. “Sorry, love.”

I dabbed my mouth with my napkin, cleared my throat, and smiled. “It’s okay.”

Privately, I’d been wondering the exact same thing, but I’d ultimately decided not to bring it up. If such a thing were possible, there was no reason why we couldn’t wait until we returned to the pack house to find out for sure.

For now, though, I’d assumed that bringing the subject up would just cast a shadow over our time together. The question would come up sooner or later, but I didn’t want to spend this precious time with Greyson fixated on the future, and all the what ifs that came with it. Not when the present was so perfect. So fleeting.

“I, um… I don’t know,” I admitted. “Since Big Mac tried the first time, I’ve received another Seluna handprint. Aysel’s curse… It’s not the only other magic at play right now, unfortunately.”

Greyson’s gaze softened. “You’re right. I’m sorry for bringing it up. Maybe we can talk to Big Mac about it when we get back.”

I nodded and took another sip of wine. A longer, deeper one. If I was being honest, the thought of Greyson pursuing this line of questioning, of bringing it to Big Mac and finding out definitively if I could actually make a choice… It made me uneasy. Made some of the joy of our night together slip away.

“Of course,” I finally said, forcing a smile. “We’ll talk to Big Mac and get to the bottom of this.”

A crease appeared between Greyson’s brows, and I looked down at my plate, then took another sip from my wine glass. I knew Greyson was curious about it, and it was only right that he felt that way. This affected his future, after all. And I was sure that, in his eyes, removing the killing curse would make things easier. Would make it easier for me to choose *him*.

I knew it would be a good thing if the killing curse had been removed. I *wanted* it gone. Wanted that threat to my mates to disappear forever. But in some ways, the killing curse had made things easier for me, because as long as it was in place, I *couldn’t* choose. It had been my out, even though I’d always known this choice was looming over me.

But what would happen when I didn’t have an out anymore?

I didn’t realize I was nervously tapping my fingertip against my wineglass until Greyson reached out and gently took my hand.

“I’m sorry I brought it up,” he said again. His earnest expression told me he meant every word. “Let’s not talk about any of that for now, okay? I just want to enjoy this night with you.”

I smiled, and this time it felt real. “Okay.”

He raised his class. “A toast. To tonight. To us.”

I raised my glass and clinked it against his, and together, we took a drink.

I couldn’t help the nagging feeling that I was doing something wrong. That I shouldn’t be enjoying myself here with Greyson, that this time we were spending together was indulgent and selfish—especially when so much was still happening back at the pack house.

But I pushed that thought away.

*Why shouldn’t Greyson and I take this time together? After yet another curse, after Aysel trying to steal Greyson, and everything we went through to break Charon’s spell—why can’t we have a break?*

The waiter brought over a pair of menus, but Greyson waved them away. He flashed me a wink before turning back to the waiter. “We won’t need those. Love, do you trust me to order for the both of us?” he asked. “I think I know what you like.”

I blushed furiously. It was difficult not to hear that as an innuendo. “Sure,” I said with a nod.

He smiled at the waiter and said, “We’re ready actually.”

Then Greyson started speaking *Italian.* I blinked, shocked. How had I not known that he spoke Italian? Or some amount of Italian?

I wondered belatedly what exactly he was ordering for us, but I waved that thought away. I could trust Greyson to order for me. He knew what I liked. And he must be excited about some dish that he wanted to show me.

After placing our order with the kitchen, the water returned to our table with bread and dipping oil. Then he lit the candle in the middle of the table.

*This is so romantic!* I looked around the gorgeous, quiet restaurant and then back at Greyson. He gave my hand a gentle squeeze.

When I’d first met him, I never in a million years would have thought I’d be sitting with him in a place like this in the future, sharing such a beautiful moment together. He was supposed to be a notorious, dangerous Rogue.

And sure, he could be intimidating when he wanted to be, but he’d captured my heart long ago. And after that, it hadn’t taken long for me to see past the facade. To see who Greyson truly was.

He released my hand to offer the bottle of oil. “You have to try the dipping oil. I’ve never tasted better.”

I reached out to take it from him, to pour some into the small plate the waiter had put in front of me. But my fingers slipped on the bottle, and it fell over with a *thunk*, spilling onto Greyson’s sleeve.

“Oh my god. I’m so sorry!” I gasped.

“It’s okay.” He dabbed at his sleeve with his napkin. “I’ll take care of it.”

He got up and headed to the bathroom, and I died a little inside. *Why do I have to be so clumsy sometimes and ruin the moment?*

Suddenly, my phone rang, and in the tiny restaurant the sound seemed to echo. I quickly fished it out of my purse, my face heating. I should’ve put it on silent before—

The call was from Xavier.

I hesitated, my finger hovering over the screen. Not only was this a small restaurant where anyone could overhear our conversation, but this was supposed to be Greyson’s and my bubble date. Nothing from outside the bubble should be allowed.

But… it was Xavier. I missed him. And I was still worried about Kira. Maybe he was calling to give an update.

I glanced toward the bathroom. Maybe I could answer really quick.

“Hello?” I said in a hushed voice.

Xavier’s voice slid through the phone. “I’m just checking in… Is that Sinatra playing? Where are you?”

I swallowed roughly. “Um, I’m at a restaurant.”

A long silence slipped in between us, and that gnawing guilt monster came back full force.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourselves,” Xavier finally said. He didn’t sound glad at all.

“How’s Kira?” I asked, desperate for a subject change.

There was another pause before Xavier answered, “She was in a coma, but she’s awake now.”

I gasped. “A *coma*? I had no idea it was that bad! Why didn’t you call or text me?”

“Well, if you’d come back with me instead of staying in Portland—” Xavier cut himself off and let out a sigh. “Sorry. Enjoy your dinner. I’ll see you when you get back.”

He ended the call before I could respond. His timing was good, since Greyson returned to the table moments later, but I still felt like I’d been sucker punched.

Greyson took his seat, patting his sleeve with a paper towel. “Believe it or not, I managed to get it all…” He faltered when he saw my face. “Is everything okay?”

I didn’t know what to say, mostly because it didn’t *feel* like everything was okay. I knew it wasn’t a big deal that Xavier had called. Of course he would call to check in.

I cleared my throat and held up my phone. “Xavier called. Kira was in a coma, but she’s out of it now, I guess.”

“My mom just texted me while I was in the bathroom too that Kira was better,” he said, sitting down. He looked at me and reached for my hand. “Don’t worry about Xavier, love.”

I didn’t even tell him about his brother’s displeasure over my being here, because he already knew.

“Besides, by tomorrow the ward will be in place and we can go back to the pack house.” He smiled, but it didn’t reach anywhere near his eyes. “I want tonight to be just for us. Being the Alpha, I don’t always get a lot of moments like this with you. Moments where we can be alone, just the two of us, with nobody barging in. For one night, I just want to pretend that I’m not the Alpha. That I can shed the weight of… everything. I just want to enjoy this.”

“I’m sorry. I want that too.” I reached out to take his free hand so both our hands were linked across the table. “I know being Alpha is hard on you sometimes, but you’re right. You don’t have to worry about that tonight—Xavier’s looking after things at the pack house.”

I thought my words would be a comfort to him. An assurance that he truly did have the night off, that he didn’t need to worry about anything back home. Instead, Greyson’s expression tightened. “Can you do something for me?”

I nodded. “What do you need?”

He squeezed my hands. “Can you forget about Xavier for just one night?”

**Episode 2492**

VIOLET

The look on Marta’s face broke my heart. I hadn’t seen her look this worried, this sad, this small, since Charlie and I had first freed her from Bert. And at least then, she’d been excited to be outside the mansion for the first time in fifty years.

Trust my brother to say something stupid to upset her. Whatever he’d done, whatever he’d said, I was going to make it my personal mission to get that look off Marta’s face. I couldn’t just stand by and *not* help if there was something I could do to make things better.

“You can tell me,” I said gently. “It wouldn’t surprise me in the least if Lilac said something stupid that hurt your feelings. He’s *always* talking without thinking. It’s like half the words he says somehow bypass his brain on the way to his mouth.”

I laughed, but Marta still didn’t say anything, so I tried another tactic.

“Are you two fighting? What did he say?”

That seemed to snap her out of her funk. She shook her head, waving her hands dismissively. “No, no, no. That’s not what’s happening. Everything’s okay. It—it’s nothing.”

I frowned. “Marta, you don’t have to protect him on my account. I’m Lilac’s sister, but you’re my friend. If I need to give him a talking to, especially if it’ll help you, I’ll do it.”

“Why do you care so much? This isn’t your problem.” Marta sighed. “And anyway, you couldn’t fix it even if it were.”

“You’re the best person in the world for Lilac to have met. I mean, not only did you two fall for each other, but you’ve helped each other so much along the way. You, of course, saved my brother and brought him back to life, and Lilac… Well, maybe, it’s a bit uneven there.” I tapped my fingers against my chin. “He helped you discover your magic? Either way, you two seem like such a good match. Practically mates, you know?”

Marta’s eyes tightened at my words. *Oh no. Did I make things worse?*

I forced a smile. “What I’m saying is that whatever it is, you shouldn’t worry about it. Lilac probably knows he did something stupid, and he’ll come apologize to you once he pulls his head out of his butt.”

Marta gave me a thin smile but didn’t divulge a single detail about what was going on between her and my brother.

A knock sounded at the door, and Charlie came in. “Are you two ready to go?”

“I am.” I turned and looked at Marta. “Are you—”

Marta shook her head. “Actually, I changed my mind. You should go without me.”

I frowned. What the heck? Marta had wanted to go on the run with us right up until I’d asked whether or not something had happened between her and Lilac. So clearly *something* was up. Maybe she wanted to suffer silently and pretend that everything was fine, but I wasn’t gonna let that happen. She deserved better than that. Plus, Lilac and Plum had just been reunited! There was so much to celebrate! This was a time for reconciliation—not more fighting.

Charlie must have picked up on the strange vibes in the room, because he stepped forward, his face creasing in concern. “Marta, are you okay?”

“I… Um…” She gave him a smile that looked forced. “I just feel a little woozy. Maybe I have low blood sugar or something. It’s probably best if I stay here.”

“Marta, wait—”

“We hope you feel better soon!” Charlie linked arms with me and started pulling me out of the room. He didn’t stop until we were out of Marta’s room and in the hallway.

“Wait.” I tried to tug my arm out of his grip. “We should see if she’s okay. There’s something going on—”

“Marta’s an adult,” he said simply. “She can fight her own battles. Plus, I was getting the feeling that she just wanted to be alone. We should give her some space.”

“But what about—”

He pressed a finger to my lips. “Let’s just go on that run and have a good time, okay?”

I sighed. “Fine.”

As we headed back downstairs, I couldn’t help trying to figure out exactly what had gone down between Marta and my brother. I had to assume Lilac had said something tactless. He had that down to an art, really. The real question was whether he was self-aware enough to know he’d done something to make Marta upset.

It just struck me as odd that Marta wouldn’t tell me what had happened. She knew Lilac well, though maybe not as well as I did, but she seemed more the type to let a tactless comment roll off her shoulders than to wallow in how it had made her feel.

*Or maybe it doesn’t have anything to do with Lilac at all. Maybe it has something to do with Marta’s new mentor.*

Okorie didn’t exactly seem like the warm and fuzzy type. I could see how Marta might struggle if things weren’t going well in her training.

*Maybe Lilac will know what’s going on with her—either way.*

“Hey.” Charlie squeezed my hand. “I can see those little wheels in your head spinning. Just leave it alone for a while so we can go for that run, okay?”

I smiled. He knew me so well. Sometimes a little too well. “Okay.”

We headed outside, where Lilac was waiting for us. He frowned as we approached. “Where’s Marta? I was just thinking about the best way to get her on my back. I think I’ve figured it out!”

I rolled my eyes. “She’s not coming, and it’s your fault.”

“My fault? Why?”

“Why do you think? You must have done something stupid.”

Charlie sighed. “Violet, you don’t know that. Not for sure.”

I shrugged. “Let’s look at it logically: Marta wanted to come with us, and then when I asked her about Lilac, she suddenly didn’t want to come anymore. Coincidence? I think not.”

Confusion etched itself into the lines of Lilac’s face. “I… I’m not sure. Did I say something?”

“If you don’t know, then you probably did,” I said. “Whatever it is, just fix it when we get back. Marta’s a good person. She deserves the best.”

“Yeah…” My brother looked troubled. He shifted into his wolf form and bounded off into the forest without another word.

Charlie sighed again. Loudly. Pointedly.

“What?” I asked.

He shook his head. “You should have left it alone. Whatever happened, it’s between the two of them. It’s not your responsibility.”

It was my turn to sigh. “I know that, but I care so much about both of them. How can I just stand by and let them suffer? Marta’s such a catch. Lilac will never find anyone else who’s that perfect for him—they should be together. Happily, you know? And I know it’s not my place to get involved, but I know my brother. Chances are, whatever happened, it’s Lilac’s fault—he’s so new to relationships. I just don’t want them to lose each other over some stupid thing.”

“You need to stay out of it. Whatever happens, it’s Marta and your brother’s choice. Even if they break up and it *is* over some stupid thing, it’s still their call, and they’re going to need your support. Besides, you wouldn’t want anyone meddling in our relationship if we were arguing, would you?”

*Well, when he puts it that way…*

I harrumphed and shifted, following after my brother. Moments later, Charlie did the same. I pushed ahead of him a little bit as I raced to catch up with Lilac. Charlie was right, but I didn’t want him to be.

This run was supposed to be fun, a way to celebrate Lilac and Plum being back together, and now I was just annoyed.

We caught up to Lilac, and fortunately with the three of us running together as wolves, it didn’t take long to fall back into that easy, competitive headspace. We had a few races between the three of us, and Lilac and I even play-fought. We hadn’t had a chance to do that in far too long.

It was so good to have him back. This was what things used to be like. This was how things were supposed to be. I knew one thing for sure: I would never take going on a run with him in our wolf forms for granted ever again.

As we slowed to a lope, catching our breaths, I mind linked to Lilac. *Seriously, is everything okay with Marta? You’re both acting strange.*

*I thought everything was fine*, he said. *But apparently not…*

I could tell he was confused about what happened

*Because you started a fight?* I asked. *Didn’t you?*

On my other side, I felt Charlie give an eye roll. He was part of the conversation too, and I was sure he still wanted me to stay out of it.

*No. I don’t know. It’ll be fine*, Lilac said. *I’ll fix things.*

Well I hoped so. Hopefully Marta would be able to take some comfort in that, too.

We’d started to head back to the pack house when I heard a strange whirring sound overhead. I looked up and spotted a drone passing over the treetops.

I blinked, and just like that, it was gone. Was I seeing things?

*Did either of you see that?*

*See what?* Charlie asked.

*I didn’t see anything*, Lilac added.

I wasn’t so sure. A chill ran down my spine.

Were there hunters still watching us?

**Episode 2493**

XAVIER

I set my phone down with a sigh. *Christ, I wish I’d never made that call to Cali.*

There was no denying—not even to myself—that my “check-in” call had been to verify one thing and one thing only: that Cali wasn’t fooling around with Greyson.

Which was obviously a pretty damn stupid thing to even question. Greyson was her mate, and they were having a goddamn sleepover at his bachelor pad in Portland, away from everyone else. What the hell was I expecting they’d be doing? A jigsaw puzzle? Of course she was at a restaurant with ward boy.

At least if they were at a restaurant, they were probably keeping their hands to themselves. Somehow, though, knowing that she and Greyson were out on a date didn’t make me feel any better. A date was *meaningful*. Plus, by the time everything was said and done, going out to dinner would definitely be the least troubling thing they did.

And hell, knowing Greyson, whatever restaurant they’d ended up at had to be something out of a romantic guide to Portland or some shit—“Top Ten Most Intimate Places to Take Your Mate.”

“This is the worst,” I muttered, pacing back and forth in my bedroom.

*Talk about a fucking nightmare…*

And the worst part was, it was still early. How the hell was I going to make through the rest of the night if I was constantly losing my shit over Cali being away with Greyson? At this rate, it was going to be the longest night of my life.

I wanted to call Cali again. To demand she ditch Greyson and get her ass home, where she belonged. Fuck their date. Fuck Greyson and his ward bullshit.

But of course, I couldn’t actually do that, no matter how tempting the idea. I couldn’t care less how Greyson felt, but I didn’t want to hurt Cali. She was probably having fun, and when was the last time she had been able to do something without some sort of supernatural threat hanging over her?

I let out a shaky breath and tossed my phone down onto my bed. Maybe it would be better if I stayed away from it until I got all these feelings under control. I didn’t want to talk to anyone, see anyone, or do anything other than sit in my bedroom and brood, honestly, but I didn’t trust myself not to fly off the handle.

Plus, Big Mac had asked me to check in on Kira. I’d been putting it off since my encounter with the witch earlier, when Big Mac had told me I needed to play along with Kira’s delusions or we might lose her forever.

*Fuck. This day can eat it.*

I didn’t want to be anyone’s husband except Cali’s, even if I was just pretending. Even if it was a literal life-and-death situation. I didn’t want any part of it. I believed Big Mac when she said that it could be worse for Kira if we tried to snap her out of it before her mind fully healed, but I couldn’t help but think that it all felt kind of… cruel, to keep pretending. It felt like leading her on, only a million times worse because Geoff was *dead*. No matter what happened, Kira was never getting him back. And she was my friend. Despite my discomfort, I wasn’t pleased with the idea of emotionally torturing someone who had recently saved my life. She’d probably hate me once she found out about this ruse.

I headed to her room to check in on her. God, I hoped she was asleep. I didn’t know if I had it in me to play the loving husband any more today. And just how far was I supposed to take this thing, anyway? I didn’t mind holding her hand or hugging her—she seemed to take enough comfort in it that my own discomfort paled in comparison. But I wasn’t about to kiss her again, and I sure as shit wasn’t going to spend the night with her.

Kira needed to recover. She wasn’t in her right mind, and as far as I was concerned, she couldn’t consent to anything like that—even if I actually wanted to give it to her. Which I definitely did not. She was my friend. I cared about her and wanted her to get better, but there was a limit to how far I was willing to take this. This wasn’t a Greyson-Aysel fake dating thing. My boundaries were like a Great Wall between Kira and me.

It was for the best. For everyone’s sake.

I pushed open her bedroom door and peeked in, careful to not make a sound.

She was still asleep. *Thank Christ. Maybe when she wakes up, she’ll be normal again.*

I could only hope.

Laughter echoed up from downstairs, and I went to seek it out. I sure needed some of that right about now.

I hit the downstairs landing at the same time Lola and Jay walked into the house. Immediately, an overwhelming stench of stale French fries slammed into me. I wrinkled my nose.

“What the hell have you two been up to?” I demanded. Jay was the stable sort, but you honestly never knew what you were getting with Lola.

“Wait, first tell us how things went in Portland!” Lola said. Then she glanced around with a frown. “Where’s Cali?”

I sighed. Portland was the last fucking thing I wanted to talk about. “Everything is fine. Cali’s in Portland until tomorrow. Now why do you smell like you fell into a vat of oil?” I asked her, desperate to talk about literally anything other than Portland. Or Cali. Or my stupid warded asshat of a brother.

Lola hesitated, but Jay nudged her shoulder. “Go on. Tell him.”

“I’ve been trying to help you,” she finally said.

Jay poked her again.

“By spying on Ava,” she finished.

I frowned. “Wait, I thought you were going to *tail* Ava.”

Jay laughed. “You should know by now that when Lola decides to do something, it’s never halfway.”

“You’re looking at the new waitress at what has to be the sketchiest diner in the world,” Lola explained.

“And it’s the strangest job in the world,” Jay added, “because it cost me a hundred bucks.”

Not a single part of this story was making sense. “Walk me through this.”

“We followed Ava to the diner, and I had to pretend to be a waitress so that I didn’t get caught. I was barely able to get out of there, but luckily the *real* waitress turned up, and that’s when I skedaddled away.”

*She’s taking this job way too far.* “Did you learn anything useful?”

She nodded. “Ava met up with Aysel there. They talked about being friends.”

Ava had told me that Aysel wanted to team up with her. *Did she actually take Aysel up on her offer without telling me?*

I huffed out a breath. “Thanks. You should go take a shower. A really long one.” I flicked a glance at Jay. “Honestly, how can you stand that smell?”

He shrugged. “I like fries.”

He and Lola headed upstairs while I mulled over this new information.

*Great. Dealing with Ava is bad enough, but now I have to worry about whatever the hell Aysel’s up to?*

I knew Aysel wanted to sink her claws into Greyson, just like Ava wanted to do to me. What could the two of them be scheming about? Were they teaming up to get their men? Did their plan involve Cali, somehow? Or were they just commiserating? Were they actually friends?

*Hell no.* I shook that thought away immediately. If Ava and Aysel had one thing in common, besides their complete inability to take no for an answer, it was that they were both so pathological, they couldn’t sustain a friendship.

Whatever was going on, they were allies. Not friends. And that was a pretty fucking gruesome thought.

*Will Ava tell me about meeting with Aysel like she did before, or will she try to keep it a secret this time?*

I wouldn’t even know about it if Lola hadn’t been following her. If Ava didn’t come clean when I asked her, that couldn’t be a good sign.

More laughter sounded from the kitchen. I was about to check on it when the front door opened and Ava walked in.

I wanted to blurt out my question right away, but I held back. I couldn’t show my hand just yet, or implicate Lola. Caution was always the best policy when dealing with Ava. I could always pour on the charm, but I wasn’t in the mood to be seductive, and sure as hell not with her.

*Maybe I can split the difference.*

I walked up to her and wrinkled my nose. “You smell like a diner.”

I watched her face carefully for her reaction, but she just shrugged. “I can’t help it. I went to Iñigo’s old diner. I heard it was under new management, and I wanted to collect my last paycheck.”

My eyes narrowed. “I have to hand it to you—asking to be paid after killing the guy? That’s ballsy, even for you.”

I couldn’t help but notice she hadn’t mentioned Aysel at all.

She brushed past me, but I moved to block her way again.

“Is there anything else you want to tell me?” I asked.

*Is Ava finally going to tell me the truth, or has she already sided with the Vanguard pack?*

**Episode 2494**

Greyson’s words hung in the air between us.

*Can you forget about Xavier for just one night?*

I didn’t blame him one bit for asking that of me. I completely understood where he was coming from. This time we had together in Portland, this one night together, free from all of our other responsibilities and connections, in this little love bubble we’d been fortunate enough to find… it was special. Fleeting. And who knew when we’d have time together like this again?

I wanted to give him the comfort of being present tonight, totally focused on him. Even if I *had* thought of Xavier during my time with Greyson, it was impossible for me to stop. I loved him—of course I’d be thinking about him—but I understood why it would be better for Greyson if I didn’t. Or, at minimum, if I didn’t bring up his brother.

The best gift I could give Greyson was my time. My attention. I *wanted* to be present for him.

Greyson grimaced and let go of my hands. “I’m sorry. That was an incredibly selfish thing to ask of you. Forget I said—”

“I’ll do it,” I said softly.

He paused for a moment, his eyes widening, and then he shook his head. “You don’t have to do something you don’t want to do, just to make me happy.”

“Greyson.” I caught one of his hands in my own, meeting his gaze. “I want to be here with you tonight. Just you.”

His face lit up, and his smile took my breath away. When was the last time I’d seen him this happy?

He pulled my hand up to his lips and kissed my knuckles. “Who knows when we’ll get this opportunity again? I want this to be about us. Think we can get back to enjoying our evening alone?”

I smiled. “That sounds perfect.”

Our entrees came out shortly thereafter, and between the food and the wine and the conversation, it wasn’t hard at all not to think of Xavier. At least, not actively. It was intoxicating, being with Greyson, eating a meal with him, being on a normal date together. He told me more about his life here in Portland, his favorite restaurants and clubs and coffee shops. The park he liked to jog through that was one gigantic, outdoor tree museum. How even though his time in Portland as a Rogue had been a tumultuous point in his life, there was something about the city that settled him. Made him feel like he’d found a home. Maybe for the first time ever.

Considering he’d been raised by Silas, I could see how Greyson felt that way.

“And what about your home now?” I asked as I set down my fork on my empty plate. “The Redwood pack house. How does it measure up against Portland?”

He shrugged. “My home is wherever you are, love. The rest is just geography.”

My heart caught in my throat, and I blushed.

This night was shaping up to be perfect—except for one tiny little thing. Xavier. I was far too absorbed in my conversation with Greyson to pay Xavier much attention, but I could still feel his presence in the back of my mind. He was there. Smirking at me and making sarcastic remarks.

*I’m sorry*, I said to my mental image of him. *I love you, but I love Greyson too.*

The waiter came by to collect our plates. “Would you like to see a dessert menu?”

“Oh no,” I groaned, my hand pressed against my stomach. I couldn’t even think of eating something else. I still couldn’t believe I’d eaten all that pasta after having pizza. Plus, we’d almost had that ice cream earlier, before Greyson and I had needed to… take care of things.

I blushed at the memory.

“We’ll just take the check,” Greyson said.

The waiter left to dispose of the plates and get our check.

Greyson turned his attention back to me. “I’ve got another surprise coming later.”

“How many more surprises are you gonna throw at me?” I teased.

“Ooh, that sounds like a challenge.”

The waiter returned with the check, and Greyson swooped it up without letting me see it. “Just leave it to me.”

When we stepped out of the restaurant a few minutes later, I felt like a princess. Like Cinderella during her magical night with Prince Charming—if Cinderella had eaten about a pound of pasta.

But thinking about princesses made me think of Aysel, and that kind of ruined my head canon. But Greyson had been so doting and sweet all night. Tonight was really turning into something more special than I’d ever thought it could be.

This was what dating Greyson would be like if things were different—if he wasn’t the Redwood Alpha, or even a werewolf. If I wasn’t Fae, and through fate we’d both ended up here in the city together.

Greyson took my hand, twining our fingers together as he led me down the street.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“It’s a secret.” He winked. He was playing all coy, and it was both hilarious and adorable, but I really did want to know more about this surprise he had in store.

“If I guess what it is, will you tell me?” I asked.

He laughed. “Alright, but you won’t be able to.”

“Is it ice skating?”

“Nope.”

“Stargazing?”

“Now you’re just being silly.”

“Going back to your apartment and screwing each other until we can’t walk?”

His steps stuttered, and he spun to look at me. His pupils dilated. “Is that what you want to do?”

I gave him an innocent look. “It was just a guess. Am I right?”

After a beat, he shook his head. “Why don’t we call that plan B?”

A few minutes later, we arrived outside a burger joint, and Greyson pulled me toward the entrance.

“Don’t tell me we’re going to eat for a third time,” I groaned. I couldn’t take any more food. And seriously, if this was his special surprise, did I have to worry? What else did he have in store that required a three thousand calorie dinner?

He laughed. “Just follow me.”

We stepped into the burger place and headed toward the back. A tall, well-dressed man was standing next to a nondescript door. What was going on here?

Greyson nodded at him. “Two.”

The guy nodded back, and I belatedly realized he was a bouncer.

The bouncer opened the door, and the sounds of music playing and glasses tinkling slipped out from deeper inside.

“Come on.” Greyson pulled me into the speakeasy.

We headed up a flight of stairs, the sounds growing louder, and when we stepped into the speakeasy I gasped. It was like something out of a fairytale, or a hipster handbook—a solarium with an amazing view of the city and the sky. Plants hung everywhere, along with fairy lights, and tea lights set inside mason jars adorned the tables.

It was beautiful, intimate, and just a little bit magical.

I scanned the crowd. Everyone here definitely seemed to fit in. They were all model-beautiful.

Greyson watched me with a smile. “Do you like it?”

“I love it. Just how many more surprises do you have up your sleeve?”

He squeezed my hand. “I plan on surprising you every day for the rest of my life.” He gestured to the bar. “What would you like to drink?”

I looked around at what the other patrons were drinking. Someone was sipping a blue drink shrouded in dry ice vapors. Across the solarium, I thought I saw a woman drinking out of a conch shell.

“Um, keep surprising me,” I said, turning back to him. “What do you think I should drink?”

“I think I’m up to that challenge.” He released my hands and circled me, touching my arms, my shoulders, my waist. It was like he couldn’t physically stand *not* to touch me. He paused to think. “You know, you look like a rum kind of girl.”

“A rum kind of girl.” My brows rose. “What does that mean? Wait, are you saying that every girl is a certain kind of drink?”

“Hey, every *person* is a certain kind of drink. That’s basic facts.” He shrugged. “Regardless, I only care about you, and you’re definitely rum. A little sweet, a little spicy, with a nice, deep, slow burn.”

I blushed. “Are we talking about rum, or about me?”

He pulled me into his arms and kissed my forehead. “You, of course.” He flashed me a smile that could make any woman swoon.

As he turned to order at the bar, suddenly I heard a harmony of, “*Greyson Evers?*”

I turned to see two unbelievably beautiful women approaching us. Well, approaching Greyson. I wasn’t sure they’d even noticed me yet. They stopped, one on either side of him, then planted their hands on his shoulders and kissed his cheeks.

“Um…” Greyson looked uncharacteristically flustered, all the bravado and smooth control gone as the two women fawned over him.

“Where have you been?” one of them asked, rubbing up and down his arm in a way that made me want to rip her hand off. “We all had such a great time. You should have let us know you were back!”

*Am I invisible? Who the heck are these women, and what “great time” are they talking about?*

I really hoped they weren’t talking about sex.

The other woman leaned in, giving Greyson a prime opportunity to look at the cleavage threatening to spill out of her top. “We haven’t had such a fun third since you moved.”

*Third? What does that mean?*

Greyson quickly stepped away from them and pulled me close. “Nikki, Cami, this my girlfriend, Cali.”

They both laughed, and Cami smirked. “Well, this is awkward.”

I turned to Greyson. “Whatever do you mean?” I asked with a sickly sweet smile. “Why would this be awkward, Greyson?”

**Episode 2495**

XAVIER

I stood there like an asshole, waiting for Ava to answer me. Was she finally—perhaps for the first time ever—going to come clean to me? Or was she even now thinking up some pretty lie to spin?

She lifted her chin, her eyes scanning over me. No doubt taking in my stance and trying to feel out how likely I was to push back against whatever response she was conjuring up.

Finally, Ava rolled her eyes. “If you really must know, I ordered coffee and toast. They were both pretty awful, but then again that diner’s not exactly gourmet fare.” She cocked her head, batting her eyelashes at me. “Or is that not what you’re digging for?”

I shrugged. If she was smart enough to know I was digging for an answer, then she was smart enough to have some idea of what I wanted to learn. Hell, Ava was a lot of things, but she wasn’t stupid. Knowing her, she’d already figured me out and was just playing with me.

She could play all she wanted. I wasn’t going to be the one to ask her directly what had happened in that diner today. That wasn’t what this test was about. I already knew almost everything I needed to, thanks to Lola’s work. What I still didn’t know for sure was whether Ava was going to say something about Aysel of her own accord, or if I’d have to get those details out of her another way.

“If there’s nothing else you want to weirdly question me about…” She pushed past me, heading for the staircase. “I’m going to take a shower. I smell like a vat of goddamn French fries.”

I stood there for a moment, the sound of her footsteps echoing dimly in my mind as Ava climbed the stairs. She hadn’t actually lied to me, I realized. Unless she’d eaten something other than coffee and toast, but that didn’t really matter. And anyway, if I really wanted, I could check in with Lola to see what Ava had eaten.

Not that I gave a flying fuck about that.

No, the bigger issue I had was that even though she hadn’t lied, per se, she still hadn’t been open with me about what had happened at the diner. Even though I’d given her ample opportunity to do so.

I needed to pin her down. Find out what really happened. What she knew about that crazy bitch Aysel. She wasn’t getting away that easily.

I followed her up the stairs, down the hall, and into her bedroom.

“Xavier, Jesus!” She spun on her heel as I stormed into her bedroom without knocking. She’d had her shirt halfway over her head, and she dropped the hem with a huff. “What the hell are you doing in here?”

“How much was it?” I blurted out.

She blinked. “What, you worried about my spending habits now? It was toast, Xavier, not caviar.”

“You said you went to get your last paycheck. How much was it for?”

“What does it matter?” she demanded. “And why the hell do you suddenly care so much about my pay?”

“I don’t have to explain why it matters. Where’s your paycheck?”

“Uh, nowhere you can get it. Because it’s none of your business.” She stormed into her bathroom, and I followed her to the doorway.

She spun to face me. “If it’s really that important to you, I never got paid. The new manager wouldn’t honor it. I wish, for once in your life, you would just trust me.”

She grabbed the doorknob, clearly ready to slam the bathroom door in my face, but I shoved my foot in the way so it wouldn’t shut.

“I wish you wouldn’t give me reason to question you,” I said simply.

In reply, she kicked my foot out of the way and slammed the door.

The fury was immediate, and my fingers curled into tight fists. She always had that effect on me. No matter the situation, no matter how calm and collected I intended to be, Ava never failed to get under my skin.

How had this fallen apart so quickly? I knew I had to question her, to see how she would answer and maybe even catch her in a lie if push came to shove, and instead I was here, standing outside the closed bathroom door. And the only thing I actually knew for sure was that she hadn’t said a damn thing about Aysel.

*Maybe I should just ask her point blank.*

I blew out a breath, ready to call it a wash and head back downstairs, but then I heard the water come on inside the bathroom.

A ripple of awareness slipped down my spine. Ava was there, on the other side of the door. In the shower.

My wolf stirred, suddenly hungry—but not for food.

The sound of the running water and Ava being nearby unearthed an old memory, dating back to when we were mates. When we were madly in love and unaware of anything else. Before Silas and the pack wars that had torn us all apart.

It felt like a hundred years ago, but suddenly I could recall everything about that moment with Ava with perfect clarity.

We’d gone on a picnic—not my idea. I’d always preferred sitting at a table, but Ava had insisted that the spot she’d found was well worth sitting on the ground. She’d brought us to a waterfall, tucked far away in the woods where nobody would stumble onto us.

We’d ended up skinny dipping, and then she’d pulled me into a shallow cave behind the waterfall. I still remembered the sound of her moans echoing off the slick rock as I fucked her against the rough cave wall, the mist and water spraying around us.

Then, when we were spent, we’d come out to find two bears running off with what was left of our lunch. I hadn’t been angry that day. I’d laughed. I’d thought it was the kind of story I’d tell our children someday—minus the waterfall encounter, of course.

It was so strange, remembering a time when five minutes with Ava hadn’t ended with me wanting to wrap my hands around her throat and squeeze the life out of her.

The memory had my wolf pacing restlessly inside me, chuffing and growling. That pull that drew me to Ava had turned into an outright driving force, pushing me forward, guiding my hand down to the doorknob, taunting me to open the door.

Ava would want me to come in. She’d never been shy about that. Hell, she’d probably be happy to see me, even with our recent encounter.

It’d be so easy… All I had to do was open the door.

I could picture her, naked in the shower, the water cascading over her curves, slipping off the tips of her breasts and the ends of her hair.

My hand closed around the doorknob, and my wolf kept urging me on. I could hear him growling, frustrated, in the back of my mind.

*Cali’s with Greyson right now—you saw how they kissed when the revulsion spell was broken. You know they stayed in Portland tonight so they could be together. Who knows how many times they’ve had sex—and the night is still young.*

I tried to shove my wolf away, to take control of my senses, my body—but then I felt steam wrap around my skin.

It was then that I realized I’d opened the door and stepped into the bathroom.

Ava was in the shower, her back to me. Her gorgeous body was obscured only slightly by the steamed-up glass on the shower door. Only a few steps, and I could—

I jolted back. What the hell was I doing?

I started back out of the room when she suddenly turned around to face me, naked and wet. She wiped the steam away to see through the door, then pushed her wet hair away from her face. Our eyes met—those dark, gorgeous eyes I used to stare into for hours.

I’d never thought I’d tire of looking at them.

I held her gaze. If I turned back now, I’d only look weak.

And if I was being honest, I didn’t want to look away.

Her lips hinted at a smile before she slowly turned back and put her head under the shower head. Water cascaded down her back, and suddenly I was thrown right back into that maddening memory.

I stepped closer, until I could feel the heat of the shower mixing with my own. That hair I used to love to grab when we fucked was longer than it had been when we were younger. I wondered how many times I could wrap it around my fist.

And those shoulders peeking out from either side of her mane… I used to hold them in my hands. I remembered all of it. All of Ava. I’d seen, touched, and tasted every inch of her body. And there she was—right there, mine for the taking.

I peeled my shirt off and stepped closer, opening the shower door. My view was obscured by a blast of steam, and when I could see her again, she’d turned to face me.

Ava’s brows lifted. “Are you joining me, Xavier?”

**Episode 2496**

GREYSON

This was, quite possibly, the worst coincidence in the history of the world. And as Cali gave me a pointed look, it was a little impossible *not* to feel awkward now that she’d said something.

Maybe it was stupid, but I had never thought I’d run into Cami and Nikki here. Hell, I hadn’t thought I’d see either of them ever again. And to run into them *here*, on my special night with Cali…

Well, I must have done something really goddamn awful in a previous life to deserve this kind of karma.

Heat rushed into my face as I remembered exactly what had happened the last time I’d seen Nikki and Cami. Specifically, all the different ways our bodies had contorted that night in Nikki’s queen size bed*.*

My past coming back to smack me in the face when I was in the middle of my romantic evening with Cali was the very last thing I wanted. Especially when I’d specifically asked her to leave Xavier at the door. What kind of hypocrite was I for asking her to forget her other mate tonight, only for these two specters from my past to come a-haunting?

Sure, it was out of my control, but it didn’t change the fact that my mate had just been forced to watch two women throw themselves at me like they had every right to do so. Like I wasn’t already spoken for—mind, body, and soul.

And how the hell was I supposed to explain to Cali that I’d had a threesome with these two women?

Just like that, the memory came rushing back in vivid detail, which was surprising considering just how drunk I’d been. I’d been passing through town and had gone out to get shitfaced or laid—or both. I’d ended up meeting Cami and Nikki at some dive bar. They were roommates, and they were exactly what I was looking for. A couple of beautiful women interested in a night of fun with no strings attached.

After a few rounds at the bar, I’d gone back to their place, where we’d had a few more drinks, and one thing had led to another. It had been a fun night, all things considered. Not anything I ever would have expected, but clearly not something I’d been opposed to either.

Still, hooking up with the two of them wasn’t something I’d thought about in a long time.

“Greyson?”

My eyes snapped back to Cali, who was wide-eyed, like a surprised deer. It was then that I realized I still hadn’t answered her question.

*Shit. How am I supposed to explain any of this to her?*

All of this had happened in my past, and even though Cali had said she didn’t judge me for that past, meeting Nikki and Cami in person was something else entirely. It was like rubbing all of that sordid history she’d rather not think about in her face.

I wasn’t supposed to tell Cali about it while Nikki and Cami were still standing there, was I?

Speaking of, both women laughed nervously.

“We’ll let you sort this out,” Nikki said.

“But if you’re ever looking for a repeat,” Cami added, “our numbers are the same.”

They both looked at Cali and smiled.

“There’s always room for one more, too,” Cami said.

“Good to see you again,” I said a little too quickly to urge the girls to head their own way.

“It was nice to see you!” Nikki gushed. “Maybe we can catch up some other time.”

I turned away from them, toward the bar, and the ghosts from my past disappeared into the crowd.

I still hadn’t said a damn thing to Cali.

“What’s your pleasure?” the bartender interrupted, and I winced at his suggestive tone. Could everyone just stop being so horny for the next eight minutes? Just long enough for me to get my head on straight and explain things to my mate?

Cali stepped up to the bar. “I’ll have a martini—and make it a double.”

The bartender nodded, then glanced at me. “You want to make it a triple?”

I just barely caught myself before I gasped and spat out, “No triples!” Instead, I cleared my throat. “I’ll have a draft. Anything that’s cold.”

He nodded and left to go prepare our drinks.

Cali drummed her fingers on the bar, staring up at me with arched brows. “So… Cami and Nikki. They seem… nice.”

I groaned. “Well, it was all a long time ago, and… god, I don’t even know where to start.”

“We have all night.” She shrugged. “You can take as long as you want. But for the record, I’m mostly interested in how you found yourself in their dual company. And can you explain the math? A third?”

I hesitated, trying to figure out what to tell her. The whole truth seemed too atrocious to share. But I had a feeling that if I doled out the details piecemeal, her questions would just lead to me sharing the whole story anyway.

I knew she wouldn’t be angry with me. Or, at least, I assumed she wouldn’t be. And that was a small comfort. After all, we hadn’t even known each other back then. But what I couldn’t quite figure out was whether this particular story was even a part of my life that she needed to know about. It was one thing to share anecdotes from my time here in Portland—to show her my apartment, bachelor pad though it was; to tell her just how much this city had meant to me in my time as a Rogue. But this? A threesome with a couple of horny coeds? Why on earth did she need to know about this?

Then again, I’d promised Cali I would be honest with her, and so far I’d been able to keep that promise. Why break it now? And over something so stupid?

I cleared my throat again. “So… I was twenty-three, single, and still a Rogue. After everything with Maren went to shit, I wasn’t interested in anything even remotely resembling a relationship. I met Cami and Nikki at a bar, and they took me home.”

Her eyes widened a bit. “You were the third. You… were in a threesome?”

“It was a one-night thing. Just random happenstance. And it happened way before I met you—”

“Stop. I’ve heard enough.”

I didn’t realize how much I was rambling until Cali had held up her hand.

Her face was creased with worry. Had I ruined our night? We’d been having such a great time together. I didn’t want all the joy and love she’d been feeling all night to be washed away by this one awkward encounter.

I took her hand, and relief rushed through me when she let me. “Let me be clear, because I don’t want you assuming that I brought you here hoping to bump into those two, and that I’m expecting a threesome with you.”

“You’re doing the math wrong.” Her brows arched. “Wouldn’t it be a foursome?”

*Don’t think about how that would look, Greyson. Don’t think about it, don’t think about it…*

“Well, mathematically, yes. But the point is, I know that’s not something you’re interested in, so please don’t worry about it.”

She slipped her hand out of my grip. “That’s a pretty bold assumption. How do you know I’m not interested in that?”

That did not help the heat that just shot through me.

I knew I was one wrong string of words away from ending up in the doghouse, but I couldn’t help but laugh. “Cali, I know you. You’re not interested in having a threesome, and that’s totally fine. It’s just something that happened in my past. It’s not something I’m expecting. I love you. You’re my mate.”

She huffed, her chest rising with the movement. She looked annoyed, and so damn cute in my shirt.

“I could be interested in something like that if I knew you wanted it,” she insisted. “I know I’m not the most experienced person in the whole world, but I don’t want you to be missing out on anything—”

My smile disappeared. None of this was remotely funny anymore, not if she truly believed that I felt like I was missing out while being with her.

“Missing out? Don’t be silly.” I took her by the shoulders. “Cali, being with you is a privilege. And it’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me. Or ever *will* happen to me. If you wanted to add someone to our private life every once in a while, I’d be open to that. But only if we’re on the same page about it. And if you don’t want it, that’s more than fine. Look, I’m more than satisfied. Were you or were you not in my bed with me earlier?”

Even through the dim lights, I could still make out her reddening cheeks. *This is not where I thought our evening was heading.*

The bartender returned and set down our drinks. Cali immediately took a long sip of hers.

“Slow down there, love,” I warned her.

She set down her drink and turned back to me with a fire in her eyes. “Well, I could be into the idea.”

Suddenly, I remembered the dream I’d had of a threesome with Cali and Maren. How utterly intoxicating it had been…

*If that’s something Cali would be into… Sharing something like that with her would be a whole other level of intimate.*

“Don’t you believe me?” she asked.

I paused. I didn’t believe her, not really. But she was being so feisty about it… Maybe I’d underestimated her. Maybe she’d thought about this before. Or maybe she was just bluffing.

“Who would this threesome be with?” I asked.

**Episode 2497**

My mouth went dry, and my mind blanked. I didn’t think I could have named a single person on earth at that moment.

The thing was, I was totally bluffing. I hadn’t expected Greyson to ask me to actually name someone.

I mean, I’d joked with Lola about it once before, long before I’d met Xavier. We’d talked about what it would be like to be with more than one person at the same time, but it had always been kind of tongue-in-cheek. Along the lines of that game “Kiss, Marry, Kill.” We’d picked our partners from the celebrity pool, tried to match them all up.

It had just been a game.

But right now, staring into Greyson’s eyes… This didn’t feel like a game. It felt all too real. And despite how surprised I’d been when I’d found out Greyson had had a threesome with Nikki and Cami, there was something kind of sexy about the idea. Of being the focus of two hot people.

My face was already hot enough to warm the entire solarium, but I swear to god it got even redder.

“You’re joking, right?” I asked.

He shrugged. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.” There was a smirk tugging at his lips, and something like an “I told you so” in his tone.

No way was I going to duck out of this. At least, not until I’d made my point clear. Greyson might’ve had loads more experience than I did in the bedroom, but that didn’t mean I was a prude. I didn’t like that he’d made that assumption about my interest in a threesome—even if he’d sort of been right.

At least ask a girl first before you uncheck the threesome box!

I rattled off the names of the hottest celebrity men I could think of. “Chris Evans. Michael B. Jordan. Richard Madden. Paul Rudd.”

Greyson did a double take. “Wait, *Paul Rudd*? The dude who plays Ant-Man? You know he’s like, fifty, right?”

I slapped his arm. “He doesn’t *look* fifty. Plus, he has a nice smile. He seems like he’d be a gentle lover.” I waggled my eyebrows at Greyson, and he rolled his eyes.

He put a hand on my arm. “Okay, everyone in the world can fantasize about people they don’t know or probably won’t meet—but have you ever thought about a threesome with someone you’ve actually met?”

I mentally ran through a list of people at the pack house.

*Lola? God, no. We’re like sisters, though Jay is cute.*

*Ava? The hardest of hard passes.*

*Ravi? No, he slept with Ava, so he’s disgusting by association.*

Greyson sipped his beer as I went through my mental Rolodex.

Finally, I sighed and shook my head. “Actually, I think I’d rather it be someone I don’t know. That way it wouldn’t be so awkward.”

He seemed to consider this for a moment. “Show me.”

I blinked. “I… Show you what?”

He set his drink down and gestured around the bar. “Do you know anyone here besides me?”

“No.”

“So pick someone.”

My eyes widened, and my stomach tightened. “Right now?”

Suddenly, a strange mix of pressure and fear mixed together in the most embarrassing way. Just talking about the possibility of recruiting a third was giving me stage fright.

Except… Was Greyson even being serious? Or was he bluffing too?

If that was the case, I wasn’t about to back down.

I pulled in a deep, calming breath, then gestured at the bartender. “How about him?”

He looked over at the bartender. “Okay. What is it about that guy that you find attractive?”

I almost spat out my drink. “I didn’t say he was attractive.”

He frowned. “Why would you pick someone to sleep with if you’re not attracted to them?”

I shrugged. “He has cute eyes.”

He gave me a confused look but nodded. Then he looked around the bar, thoughtful for a moment. “Maybe we should ask him?”

Horror froze me in place, and my brain short circuited.

He wasn’t really being serious, was he?

Greyson started to gesture for the bartender to come over, and I leapt up and pulled his arm down.

“Don’t do that!” I was almost dizzy with the excitement and embarrassment and slow-simmering desire mixing together inside me. It was a heady feeling, and not altogether bad.

Greyson laughed, the bastard. “I was just going to order another beer.”

I smacked his arm again. “Fine. Cards on the table, I don’t want to be with anyone here. Just you.”

He slipped an arm around my waist. “That sounds perfect to me… But what about her?”

I followed his gaze to another gorgeous woman at the end of the bar. She was clearly flirting with the bartender, who didn’t seem to mind, seeing as how he was flirting back.

“Maybe we can invite them both?” he suggested.

I knew he was just teasing me, but I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of jealousy. *Greyson must find her attractive. Why else would he have pointed her out?*

I was still surprised that Greyson had seemed genuinely unfazed when I’d suggested the bartender. Would he really want to have a threesome with me and another man? Or would he expect it to be with another woman? Wasn’t that every male fantasy? Two beautiful women going to town on the guy in the threesome?

I’d never really thought about kissing a woman before, but would I do it to make him happy? Maybe.

But that would mean I’d have to share him with another woman, and there was nobody here at the bar who I could tolerate sharing my mate with.

I had to admit the truth—maybe I wasn’t totally opposed to the idea of a threesome with Greyson, but it would be nearly impossible to pull it off, because it would make me too jealous to see him with anyone else.

Then Greyson started to laugh.

“Hey!” I gasped. “Were you joking about finding someone here?”

He nodded, still laughing too hard to speak.

“I can’t believe you led me on like that!”

“Of course I didn’t mean it. I just wanted to see how far you’d take this. You’re so cute.”

I rolled my eyes. “And now you’re being condescending.”

He looped his arms around me and pulled me in close. “Not if I mean it. And you *are* cute. So beautiful. So adorable. So feisty.” He kissed my forehead. “How could I ever even think of being with another person when you’re everything I’ve ever wanted?”

See? This was why I could never stay mad at Greyson for long. Even when he was being an ass.

I appreciated everything he’d said, and I believed him. I believed that loved me. That he wanted me and that I was enough for him. But still, I couldn’t help but wonder if he was truly uninterested in inviting someone else into our private life… After all, there had been a time when he was clearly open to having two women at once.

I forced myself to ask, “Is a threesome something you want? Truly?”

His smile disappeared, and his brows knit together.

*Oh no. He’s going to say something I don’t want to hear. Why did I have to ask him that question?*

“Honestly?” Greyson shrugged. “I’d be perfectly fine if I never had one ever again. Because as fun as this is to talk about, the fact is that I don’t want to share you with anyone.”

That was exactly how I felt about him, and the relief at hearing him say it nearly knocked me over. Made me feel special and cherished in that way he was so good at. But then I remembered Xavier, and how Greyson had to share me with him.

I was about to bring it up, but I stopped myself just in time. *Greyson asked me not to think of Xavier tonight. But when he talks about not wanting to share me, is he talking about a threesome or the* due destini*?*

He didn’t give any indication, either way. “However,” he continued, “the bottom line is: if we were on the same page about it and both wanted to do it, I would be happy to explore that with you. I’ll explore anything with you. Anything that would make you happy, I’m open to.”

I blushed at the thought—not only of how much I meant to him, but of all the different things he and I could explore.

“Actually,” he added, “there’s something I have in mind that I would like to do with you.”

My body heated up even more. “Do you mean something sexual?”

He took a sip of his beer, never looking away from me. He set it down, and the intensity in his gaze made my thighs clench. “Would you like to know what it is?”

**Episode 2498**

XAVIER

I paused, now acutely aware of what I was doing. I was about to reach the point of no return and enter the shower where Ava was waiting—naked, tempting, and soaking wet.

Ava continued to wash herself, gliding her hands over her slick skin while she looked me up and down with a sultry smile on her lips. She lifted her hair and squeezed it, letting the water run down over her face and body, her gaze riveted to mine.

“Do you always shower in your pants?” She flashed a sly grin, then turned away and started rubbing her hands down over her ass, smoothing the soap over her skin before turning back to me just as she moved her hands up over her breasts, squeezing them together and then letting them fall and bounce while she smiled knowingly at me.

I watched her, unable to look away, no matter how much I wanted to. My wolf urged me on, demanding that I take the leap. I was trying my best to resist, knowing that my lingering mate bond with Ava was trying to seize control, and right now, I wasn’t feeling strong enough to resist it.

Ava moved toward me and placed a wet hand on my chest. Immediately, I flashed back to being in that waterfall with her, water running down our bodies as we embraced and explored each other with our hands.

My wolf stirred, hungry. *It’s what you want, and she wants you. Do it.*

I knew that I didn’t want Ava—the only woman in the world I wanted was Cali—but my wolf persisted, and its desires were growing stronger by the second.

*She’s still our mate. Don’t deny us the pleasure.*

I was struggling. Yes, Ava was still my mate—despite all my attempts to break the bond and reject her—but she also murdered my mother. And she’d *just* lied to me about where she was and what she was doing. If only my wolf cared about that.

*That’s in the past now, and she’s here. And where is our other mate?*

I gritted my teeth.

*She’s with Greyson. She chose to be with Greyson.*

Images of Cali and Greyson together in his apartment in Portland flashed through my mind, and a wave of anger crashed over me before my attention was once again drawn back to the forbidden sight in front of me.

Ava stepped forward and pressed against me, her hands moving around to my back and lightly caressing my skin. Her breasts were pressed flat against my chest, and she was sliding up and down, ever so slightly, urging me, teasing me, driving me to the edge.

“Stop it, Ava,” I said, but my words were lost in the sound of the shower. Deep down, I knew that I hadn’t spoken loud enough, anyway. It was almost as if my wolf had seized me and made it so that I couldn’t protest loud enough or take any real action that would get me out of this and far away from her before I made the biggest mistake of my life.

I was usually so in control of my actions, but lately, when it came to Ava, all of that went out of the window. I could tell by the look in Ava’s eye that she knew my resolve was hanging by a thread.

She slid her hands slowly back around to my chest and edged them lower and lower, down to the waistband of my pants. She started to unfasten my pants, tugging at the button like she was trying to rip them right off me.

Quickly, I grabbed her hands, stopping her.

“What are you doing?” My voice was a hoarse whisper that I barely recognized.

Heat rolled in the pit of my stomach, and my knees felt like they were seconds from giving out. I wanted so badly to run and get away from her, but I was powerless, and she knew it.

Ava paused, then slowly dropped down to her knees, her eyes on mine. She continued to tug at my fly until the button popped free, then she pulled the zipper down and slowly tugged my pants down my legs.

“Ava…” My heart was pounding like a jackhammer, and I was frozen in place, unable to stop what I knew I should. There was no way that *she* was going to stop, and so it was all up to me. Too bad I was coming up short. How had I gotten here? Why couldn’t I conjure up enough self-control to get the hell away from her?

Ava roped her other hand around my back and pulled me closer, then touched her lips lightly against my stomach, her hot breath tickling my skin and sending chills racing through me from head to toe. I stepped back ever so slightly, but my wolf was still resisting. Ava quickly closed the small distance I’d created and looked up at me, her eyes heavy, lidded with desire, glistening water running down her breasts and over her smooth, creamy skin.

My eyes had a mind of their own, and they raked up and down her body, drinking her in.

*I have to stop this. I can’t do this! What the fuck am I doing?* My wolf was gaining the upper hand, and the pull was gaining momentum. *How much longer am I going to be able to resist this? What will happen if I just give in?*

My wolf growled deep inside me. *Cali gave you permission to do this. To have Ava. Ava wants you—wants us. Give in. Give in, Xavier. It’ll feel so good to just give in.*

Ava was brushing her lips along the feverish flesh of my stomach again as I struggled to suppress my response to her. Cali might have given me permission to be with Ava, but I’d told her I wasn’t interested. But was my body proving me a liar?It had before—and always when I was with Ava. If I did give in, would it be over? Would Ava finally lose this intense power she held over me? Would my wolf be satisfied? I didn’t know, but with how horrible this all felt, I was starting to wonder if it would be worth exploring, just to find out.

I took a deep breath and stepped back again, pushing Ava’s hands away from me, finally breaking the contact that was driving my wolf into a frenzy.

Ava hesitated before leaning back under the shower so that the water streamed over her naked body, drawing my attention to all the wrong places. She stood up and slicked her long, wet hair back, then ran her hands down the length of her body. She looked into my eyes.

“Do you want to join? Or just watch?”

Slowly, she trailed her slender fingers down between her legs and, with her gaze still on mine, she began to pleasure herself.

*Shit.* I tried to look away, but I couldn’t. My wolf wouldn’t let me. I felt trapped, and at the same time, so very turned on.

Ava leaned back against the wall and arched her back as her movements intensified, her hands jerking up and down against her mound as soft moans escaped her parted lips, percolating through the steady rush of the shower.

*I have to stop this. Cali is the only one I want.*

My wolf’s response was blunt. *Then why are you still here? If you don’t want her, leave. No one is forcing you to stay here.*

“Are you enjoying this?” Ava asked, her voice a husky rasp. “It looks like you are.”

Her eyes traveled down my body and stopped to take in the one thing that betrayed me like nothing else could.

*I can’t believe this.* I was hard—really hard—and I couldn’t hide it from her. It was obvious, so there was no use arguing with her. Not only was I aroused, but it was also getting harder and harder to resist her. *Pretty soon, you won’t be able to.*

Ava smiled and brought her gaze up to meet mine. I hated the look of pure satisfaction on her face. She held eye contact with me, but it was clear from the movements of her hands, her body, the way her tongue was moving around inside the dark cavern of her mouth, that she was building up to orgasm.

“Xavier,” she gasped, closing her eyes and throwing her head back as she came.

Just like that, I snapped back to the reality of the situation. I yanked up my pants, clenched my fists, and rushed out of the bathroom. I tore through the house until I got outside, and then I shifted as soon as I was off the porch. I took off into the woods and ran as fast as I could. I tried to keep my mind blank, but I couldn’t stop replaying the last few moments over and over again in my head.

*That was far too close. How could I let my wolf take over like that?*

Then a shocking thought occurred to me. Was my wolf overtaking my human side?

**Episode 2499**

My heart fluttered and then started beating fast. The look in Greyson’s eye was beyond intense, and unlike anything I’d ever seen before. He was smiling, but I sensed that he wasn’t joking. I was almost afraid to ask, but somehow the words came out. “What do you mean?”

He paused for a moment, as if mulling over whether he wanted to say what was lingering on the tip of his tongue.

“Would you like to know what I had in mind?” Greyson held out his hand. “Come with me and find out.”

I took his hand and followed him, my head buzzing with curiosity that was tempered by a bit of uneasiness. The night had just taken on a surreal feeling, and Greyson was definitely in rare form. All of our talk about threesomes had ignited something in the both of us, but surely Greyson had no real plans to explore that. Our situation was already complicated enough without “adding a third,” as Greyson’s past flings had put it.

Greyson didn’t say a word as he led me through the bar, which was filling up fast. Nikki and Cami raised their glasses and smiled at us as we passed by. I gave them an awkward smile, my cheeks burning. It was interesting to think about Greyson as he used to be—a single man who’d had his pick of beautiful women, many of whom clearly still wanted him to this day. It was obvious now that Greyson’s edge was still there, and that he was excited to show it to me. I had no idea what he was up to, but given the evening’s conversation, I imagined it was going to be pretty intimate.

“Here we are,” Greyson said once we’d reached a quieter part of the bar. “You ready?”

“I’m ready.” I had no idea what to expect, and I took a deep breath.

Greyson opened a door, revealing a narrow staircase. “Up we go.”

*Where are we going? What exactly does he have in mind?*

I was getting more and more nervous as he led me up the winding stairs to a door that opened up onto the roof. There was a small, secluded sitting area with an amazing view of the sparkling sky above. It literally took my breath away. After the racy night we’d had, I’d had no clue what we might’ve been walking into, but I was pleased with what I saw, and my heart swelled.

“Wow, Greyson. This is amazing!” I shot him a quick glance. He was smirking at me, looking quite satisfied with himself. He still had that mischievous glint in his eye, but I felt a little less nervous about it, now. “Is this what you wanted to show me, Greyson? It’s so romantic.”

“Yup, this is it,” he said, escorting me over to the sitting area. The chairs and table were a little damp from rain earlier in the day, and Greyson pulled out a handkerchief and quickly dried off the seats.

“You’re always so prepared,” I said as we sat down. I snuggled into him and closed my eyes. He was the perfect space heater against the chill of the evening.

“Are you too cold? Should we go back inside?” He ran a hand briskly up and down my arm, and pulled me in even closer.

I shook my head. “No, I’m fine. As long as I’m close to you like this, I’m plenty warm.”

“Good.” Greyson sighed as he looped a warm, heavy arm around my shoulders and kissed me on the temple. “I’m so happy to get to spend this quality time with you, Cali. I wanted to show you the city and get away from everyone else downstairs. Just the two of us. There’s truly nowhere else I’d rather be.”

I smiled up at him and pressed a kiss to his cool lips. A cold breeze kicked up, and I yelped, shivering a bit and snuggling in even closer to him.

“There’s a way we could warm up… If you want.”

“Really? How?”

I took a quick look around, thinking that there was a heat lamp or something that I’d missed when we first got up here. When I didn’t see anything like that, I turned and stared up at him, just as a smoldering, stormy look passed across his face.

*Oh. I get what he means, now.*

“Wait, *here*?”I looked past him at the other buildings, which had plenty of windows looking straight down on where we were. “Everyone can see us!”

Greyson shrugged, seeming almost reticent. “If you’re uncomfortable, we can just snuggle. As long as I’m with you, I’m happy. No matter what we’re doing.”

The uneasiness crept back into my stomach. I was definitely a little nervous about going all the way for the enjoyment of the neighbors and anyone else who might happen upon us up here… But there was also something thrilling and dangerous about it. And I didn’t want to disappoint Greyson. It was his idea, and I wanted to be adventurous… Plus I wanted to make one of our few nights all alone together a memorable one. Above all, I wanted to make him happy, and I knew that there wasn’t anything to worry about, since there was no doubt in my mind that he would keep me safe.

Feeling a bit better about it all, and even a little excited, I leaned in and kissed him. The touch of his lips was exhilarating, especially now, looking up at the windows where anyone might be watching. *Watching me kiss my mate—my beautiful, powerful, sexy mate.*

“You taste so good, Cali,” Greyson said as our kiss began to heat up.

He pulled me tightly against him and wrapped me up in his strong, warm arms. For a split second, I felt like we were the only two people in the world. I returned the intensity of his kiss, realizing that Greyson was clearly trying to butter me up for what was coming next.

I wanted to be bold.

“You taste good, too,” I said, running my hands through his hair.

I wanted to try something new and exciting with him, something we’d never done before. Talking about sex at the bar with him before, even learning that he’d had a threesome with those two other women in the past… It had turned me on, though I couldn’t quite explain why. I knew that I liked that they’d seen us together, and that Greyson had introduced me as his girlfriend. He was mine, now. Not theirs. It felt so intoxicating to know that I had what they wanted, all to myself. Greyson’s entire being was already enough to drive me wild on its own, but adding a new, exciting element only increased the electricity between us.

I slid onto Greyson’s lap, shoving my tongue into his mouth and pushing him back against the seat. I’d waited so long to be able to kiss him like this, to touch him, hold him, to feel his warmth radiating against me. I reached down between us and moaned when I felt how hard he was. He wanted me, and I wanted him, and there was no one who could stand between us anymore. We were finally together in the way we were meant to be, and I couldn’t wait to take things even further—though I still wasn’t sure if I wanted to do it right here, right now.

Greyson wrapped his arms tightly around me and leaned forward, capturing my lips with his and taking the lead. He snaked a large hand through my hair and wrapped it around his fist, tugging gently before he leaned back in his seat to let me take the lead once again. Unable to help myself, I ground my hips against him, loving how his hardness felt pressing up against the warmth of my center.

“Cali, yes,” Greyson whispered against my lips.

His lips drifted down to my neck, and I looked up, catching a glimpse of the apartments across the alley. They were so close to us—all anyone had to do was open their blinds, and they’d see everything we were doing, clear as day. If someone happened to be walking by down on the street, they’d be able to hear us if we were too loud. I wasn’t sure if I cared. I was with Greyson, and he was touching me all over, making it easy to focus on him and only him.

“You’re tense,” Greyson said as he kissed up my jaw. “You can loosen up. I’ve got you, but if at any time you want to stop…”

He pressed his lips hard against mine again, and I melted into him even more.

Right then, the last thing I wanted to do was stop. It was so nice being here with him like this, and I tried to relax like he’d suggested, attempting to enjoy the moment for what it was without being too much in my head, and without worrying about who might be watching it all unfold. I’d just started to relax a bit more when I heard a few giggles. Greyson tensed and broke the kiss.

“What are you doing here?” he said.

“Who—” I turned to see Nikki and Cami standing in the doorway of the rooftop.

**Episode 2500**

LOLA

I fell back on the bed just as my heartbeat started to slow, though my breathing remained a bit ragged and labored. The sheets were cold and damp against me as Jay fell down beside me and immediately nuzzled my neck as I threw a leg over his torso. He was sticky with drying sweat, and while I wasn’t as sweaty as he was, our little romp had given me quite the workout.

“I’m so glad you don’t smell like fries anymore,” Jay said, placing a kiss just behind my ear.

“I am, too,” I breathed. “I used extra soap and shampoo in the shower to make sure.”

“Well, you must have pulled out all the stops in there, because it worked. You smell like my Lola again.” Jay sighed and propped his head up on his elbow. “So, have you thought about what your next step will be with Ava and Aysel?”

I paused, thinking it over. Our little diner excursion hadn’t quite turned out the way I’d expected, in more ways than one. “I was a little disappointed, I have to admit. After all I went through—not to mention you losing a hundred bucks—the only information I came away with was that Ava and Aysel are either becoming fast friends or partners in crime. Or both.”

I thought back to how cozy they’d looked, talking at the diner. It was no surprise that two women like them—who didn’t know how to keep their hands to themselves—would bond.

“Well, don’t get too deep into it,” Jay warned. “This isn’t really your problem.”

“What? How can you say that? Cali is my BFF, and I want to help her. Her problems are my problems.”

Cali had more than enough on her plate without having to worry about someone stealing her mates, and I was more than happy to run point for her while she and the boys took care of business in Portland.

“Hey, I get it,” Jay said quickly. “Xavier’s my best friend, but that doesn’t mean that there isn’t a limit to how much I’m willing to risk—and I certainly don’t want you getting drawn into conflict with either Aysel or Ava. Aysel is an unknown entity with Vanguard backing and a dark side, from what I can tell. And as for Ava, well, we know that she’s capable of anything—and that’s dangerous in and of itself. She also doesn’t have much if anything to lose, and you don’t want to go up against someone like that—especially when you *do* have stuff to lose.”

“I know all that, believe me. It just burns me up that I was so close to finding out what Ava was up to. Ava wants Xavier, we all know that, but what we don’t really know is how far she’ll go to claim him. And Aysel, well, she clearly has her sights set on Greyson. Cali doesn’t want either of those women to take her mates—hell, she would rather they didn’t even *exist* at this point—so I can’t just stand by and do nothing about it, especially when I’m so close to figuring out how to get rid of them for good.”

“Lola, you’re misunderstanding me. I’m not telling you to do nothing. Far from it. I just want you to be careful, that’s all. After all, you’re my mate. It’s my job to look out for you.”

“Aw, thanks hon!” I kissed him. “I promise I’ll be careful.”

“You’d better, or you’ll be in big trouble.” Jay gave me a playful swat on the ass, then got up to get dressed.

*Such a shame he’s covering up those amazing abs. He’d make a fantastic underwear model.*

I was all but salivating over him, so much so that I jumped in surprise when he tossed my clothes at me.

“Get up, get dressed,” he said. “I’m hungry.”

I got up and started to put my clothes on, tempted to pull Jay back into bed for another round. It was at moments like this that I felt so lucky to have one mate all to myself. That was why I felt so inclined to help Cali. I wanted her to have what I had—with both of her mates—without worrying about a couple of evil women trying to steal them away at every turn.

“So, are you planning on giving up on the diner?” Jay asked.

“Oh, I’m not sure… I was just *so close* to learning something.”

“Okay, I hate to sound like a worry wart, but Ava isn’t stupid. If you go back there, it’s only a matter of time before Ava recognizes you, and then what?”

“Come on, Jay. There’s nothing suspicious about me getting a job in the diner, is there? After all, it’s run by a vampire, and *I’m* a vampire.”

“Who is also a werewolf who lives with a pack of werewolves,” Jay finished. “I don’t know if you missed the memo, but vampires and werewolves? Not always a good combination.”

I glared at him. “So what does that mean? You’re having doubts about us?”

Jay grinned and yanked me close for a kiss. “Never. But not all werewolves feel the same way I do about my little vampire, and not all vampires feel the same way about werewolves as you do me. Remember Tottenville? How I was attacked? Oh, and let’s not forget those bozos Tracer and Echo. They tried to kidnap you to sell your hybrid blood! Who knows what Rosaura would do if she found out who—or what—you really are? After all, the diner used to be run by Iñigo, and we all know what kind of person he was—and what he would’ve done with someone like you.”

“I know, I know.” He was right, but that didn’t mean I wanted to hear it. I wanted to help Cali, and he was busy telling me all the reasons why that would be impossible.

“You say that you know, but I don’t think you really realize, Lola. The world’s a dangerous place for a special girl like you.” He stepped close and kissed me again.

“I know, I hear you loud and clear,” I said. “Okay, you hang here, and I’ll be right back with a snack for us so we can replenish our energy.”

I dashed downstairs to the kitchen, wondering if there were any fries left that weren’t stale. Despite the greasy smell that had clung to me ever since I’d left the diner, I’d been craving fries.

*Maybe Torin knows how to make them from scratch? If he can’t, I’m sure Cali’s dad can.*

“Hey, how’s it going?” Jacqueline asked as soon as I walked into the kitchen.

Before I could answer, Ava came hurrying in. I couldn’t help but notice that she seemed a little harried and out of sorts. Her hair was soaking wet, and she looked like she’d just thrown on her clothes without even bothering to dry off. I thought about Jay’s warning, and an idea sprang into my mind.

“Hang on a sec,” I said to Jacqueline. “Hey Ava, you worked at that diner that’s a few miles from here, right? Rockwood or Rockaway or something?”

Ava gave me a frazzled look. “What? Yeah.”

“Oh, thought so. That place is cool. Good food, cool people—a little edgy, but I like that. Plus, it’s one of those places that always seems to be open right when you have a taste for greasy food. I was thinking of getting a part time job. It would be nice to have a little extra money for things. You know, nail polish, clothes, hair appointments… All the stuff a girl needs to stay on point and fabulous.”

Ava gave me a blank stare.

“So, anyway… Did you like working there? Because if they’re hiring, I was thinking—”

“Um, I have to go,” Ava said suddenly, clearly not having heard a word.

I opened my mouth to say something, anything, to stall, but before I could even say a word, Ava was out the door.

“Ugh,” Jacqueline said. “Why do you want to work at a diner? Sounds like a nightmare. And you’re trying to work with Ava? Don’t you and your BFF Cali, like, hate her?”

“It’s a whole thing,” I huffed, wondering where the hell Ava had rushed off to so fast. “I’m trying to figure out if Ava’s lying about something, so I’m basically undercover right now. Thing is, I already have a gig at the diner.”

“What? You mean you *already* work there? You do know that you’re not undercover if you go as yourself, right?”

“Yeah, well I gave the diner manager your name—it was the first one that popped into my mind. She caught me off-guard, and I was under the gun, so to speak, so I just blurted it out.”

Jacqueline scowled. “What? You gave her *my* name? You have no idea what you’ve done.”

I stared at Jacqueline, confused. “What? What do you mean?”

Jacqueline gritted her teeth and looked me dead in the eye. “Now, because of you, he’s going to find me!”

**Episode 2501**

GREYSON

I moved Cali off my lap and stood, angling myself so that I was shielding her body with my own. It wasn’t like she was naked or anything, but I could feel her embarrassment, and I wanted her to know that I had her back and would protect her in any way that I could—even if it was from the stares of the two women standing in front of us.

Nikki and Cami were still giggling as they walked toward us. Nikki was fluffing her hair and licking her lips and Cami was looking me right in the eye, not bothering to hide her desire.

“What do you two think you’re doing?” I asked, unable to keep the annoyance out of my voice.

Nikki and Cami gave me a puzzled look. “What? You invited us!”

“Like hell I did!” I thought back to our quick conversation in the bar. We’d made quick eye contact when we’d passed them on the way to the roof, but…

Nikki pouted. “Then why did you smile at us?”

Cali grimaced.

*Oh, so that’s it. Cali was being nice, and they took it to mean something else.*

“So, what?” I asked. “Do you two think every smile means ‘let’s have sex on the roof’?”

Cami shrugged. “Usually.”

“Yeah, of course!” Nikki said with a snort.

“Well not this time, it doesn’t,” I said, standing firm. With women like Nikki and Cami, there was no room for being vague. They were used to getting what they wanted, when they wanted, and I needed to make sure they knew that this wasn’t going to go their way tonight.

“I never intended for it to be an invitation for a four way,” Cali chimed in. “I was just being polite.”

I groaned internally. My perfect, sexy moment with Cali was rapidly turning sour. *I wish that I’d never run into these two!*

“So I guess you two want to keep it a twosome? Ugh, so vanilla,” Nikki said with an eye roll. She and Cami raised their glasses in a haphazard salute. “Whatever.” Then both women turned and left.

As soon as they were gone, I turned to Cali. “I’m so, so sorry. I never thought in a million years that they would think it was cool to come up here. I meant what I said before—I would never instigate anything like that without you being one hundred and fifty percent on board.”

I watched Cali closely, noting that her unease seemed to be easing up just a little.

“I’m not blaming you,” she finally said. She sighed and wrapped her arms around herself, a thoughtful look on her face.

*Thank god she’s not pissed at me.* I’d just wanted to experience something new and exciting with her, something I was pretty sure that she’d never experienced before.

“That moment was supposed to be for just the two of us,” I said. “*Not* with other customers. Trust me, I would never do that without your consent. Ever.”

Cali reached up and pulled me close. “I meant what I said, Greyson. I don’t blame you in the least.”

She gave me a kiss, just as she shivered against me.

I stood up—though my current state made it a little difficult—and offered her my hand. “Let’s get out of here and get you warmed up.”

Cali nodded and stood up. I took her hand, and we gave the view from the rooftop one final look before I led Cali back downstairs to the bar. I glared at Cami and Nikki as we passed them on our way to the exit, and they glared back.

“You’ve changed!” one of them yelled as we walked out the door.

I tried to let their words roll right off my back, but hearing them say that hit me somewhere deep as I led Cali down the stairs and away from the bar. *Have I changed?* Now that I really thought about it, I supposed it was true. I used to be the type that didn’t even blink at a one-night stand or a threesome with some roommates, but now things were different. I had Cali. My mate. That had changed things for me in a major way, and I wasn’t ashamed to admit that to myself—no matter how much their little jab had gotten to me.

As Cali and I made our way downstairs to the burger place, I thought about how the changes that I’d undergone were definitely for the best. I was glad that I had Cali, and I was at a point in my life, and my life with her, where I didn’t really know what I’d do without her. When I’d been a Rogue, I’d had no direction, and I hadn’t wanted one. I’d lived on the edge, without any thought of settling down or following a plan. Now, with Cali at my side, everything just seemed so clear. So easy. Protect her, provide for her, and lead the pack with her. It was simple as that, and it was so fulfilling that I hadn’t even thought about my old life in ages, and I for damn sure didn’t want that life back.

Back out on the street, I considered whether we should walk back to my place so we could let off some steam, or if we should call a car. I had my arm around Cali, and I felt her start to shake. I looked down at her. *She’s crying!*

“No, love, what’s wrong? I’m so sorry about what happened back there—it was never, ever my intention for that to happen.”

I felt horrible, and I cupped her face in my hands, trying to wipe away the tears on her face. It was then that I realized she wasn’t crying—she was laughing. After a moment of shock, I joined in. It was a huge relief to be laughing about all of it. The last thing I wanted was for my past to upset Cali at all.

Cali wiped away the rest of her tears. “That was hands down the most embarrassing moment I’ve ever experienced in my entire life.”

“I’m so sorry, Cali, really,” I said, laughing harder.

“Did you see their faces? They *really* thought we were just going to invite them to join us.”

“I’m so sorry.” I slapped my hands over my face, feeling embarrassment for them, for me, for Cali—for the entire situation.

Cali shook her head. “No, no, it’s okay. Promise. You know, I was having a really good time until they showed up. At least neither of them was my mother or father. That’s the only way it could have been *more* mortifying.”

“I don’t disagree,” I said, horror flooding my body as I imagined Tom or Orla coming up to the roof and catching us in such a compromising position.

I couldn’t help but wonder if we’d ever be able to recapture the magic of the moment we’d experienced together. She’d been cautious and guarded at first, but she’d also seemed into it. I wasn’t sure when the opportunity might present itself again. Certainly not back at the pack house. It was too hectic there—not to mention the presence of Cali’s other mate, which kind of threw a wrench into risqué, spur-of-the-moment rendezvous.

I was starting to wonder what other things from my past might catch up to me. I certainly had a few more things I didn’t want to be reminded of—though Nikki and Cami were pretty high up on the list.

“Would you like to go somewhere else, maybe? I know a cool bar that overlooks the river.”

Cali looked up at me, a small smile playing on her beautiful, soft lips. “I’ll go wherever you want.”

She was doing her best to hang in there, but I knew that she was just saying that to please me. I cupped her chin and smiled. “Would you rather go home?”

I could tell she was about to protest for my sake, but then she finally nodded. “Yeah, let’s go home.”

I kissed her and took her hand, and we walked slowly back to my apartment, enjoying each other’s company and speaking little, though the silence between us couldn’t have been more comfortable.

The elevator ride up to my apartment reminded me of how the day had taken such a wild turn. Just that morning, we hadn’t even been able to touch each other without getting sick, and now, we couldn’t even keep our hands off each other—and had almost had sex on a rooftop. All in all, it hadn’t been a bad day.

We entered my apartment, and I closed and locked the door behind us. It still felt kind of strange to be back. Cali drifted inside, walking around and reacquainting herself with the space. She hadn’t said much on the walk home, and she was quiet now, too. I went around clicking on a few lights and tidying up a little—and then I turned to see Cali slyly unbuttoning her shirt.

*My shirt.*

She smiled when she caught me looking at her. “So, want to show me your balcony?”

**Episode 2502**

XAVIER

I raced through the woods as fast as my four legs would take me, the wind rushing through my fur, my ears tuned into the rustling trees, the chatter of the animals around me, and the sound of twigs snapping under my weight. Instead of dodging and weaving through the trees as I went, I let the branches hit me, wanting to punish myself for letting my wolf gain control over me like it had.

Now *I* was in control. I was taking my wolf on a wild run through the woods, where I could use the sting of the branches against my face as an opportunity to remove Ava from the picture and to remind both myself and my wolf that we were not separate beings. We were one. We needed to stay on the same page, and we couldn’t continue to have moments where I was pulling in one direction while my wolf pushed me down a path I had no interest in following. But it wasn’t easy. No matter how much I tried to shove the thoughts away, I kept seeing the image of Ava’s naked body, glistening in the shower. It taunted me, reminding me of what we used to have and the connection we used to share.

*But there’s no connection there anymore. Cali is the only one I want. If only my wolf would fucking listen to me!*

The worst part was that I could completely understand why my wolf was so tempted. If it weren’t for Cali and my loyalty and devotion to her, who knew where things might have gone? But there was no use thinking that way. Cali wasn’t going away, and even if she did—and there was no way in the world I’d ever let that happen—Ava would never be able to take Cali’s place. I was sure about that, even if my wolf had other ideas.

I turned at the sound of someone approaching from behind. My first instinct was to speed up.

*Is it possible that I accidentally stumbled into Vanguard territory? Is that asshole Andrei and the rest of the Vanguard pack hunting me?*

I was sure that I could handle Andrei, but there were only so many werewolves that I could take on at once. Part of me was craving a fight—it would definitely help take the edge off the aggression I was feeling—but I didn’t want to be outnumbered. Then the wind shifted, and I knew immediately who it was. Ava. She was following me. I should’ve known. It had been clear when I’d run out on her in the shower that she’d wanted me to stay. She was never one to let things drop, and I could only imagine where her head was after what had happened. That was the furthest I’d ever let things get, after all.

Like a flash of lightning, my anger was harsh and immediate. How much more of this could I possibly take?I slowed to a stop and turned to face her, and she slammed right into me, knocking me to the ground. I was back on my feet in an instant and, without even thinking, I sprang at her, angry and more than happy to take my aggression out on her; a worthy and well-matched adversary.

We circled each other and growled low in our throats. We both leapt forward at the same time and nipped at each other a few times before kicking things up a notch and taking angry bites out of each other’s necks, sides, legs, and muzzles. We were doing just enough to hurt each other, while barely breaking skin. The fight was pretty even; she would get the upper hand and have me pinned to the ground, trapped between her teeth, and then with a swift movement I would be on top, holding her down with one of my heavy paws while I dug my teeth into her side, daring her to move an inch.

The fight wore on and grew more savage until we were both a little bloody, and my body stung all over from her scratches and bites. There was no question in my mind that I wanted to hurt her, to make her suffer the same agony she was putting me through. At the same time, though, I meant what I’d told Jay. I didn’t want to kill her. I couldn’t just go around killing everyone who pissed me off—no matter how much I wanted to.

Not to mention that if I did hurt her, there was no guarantee that my wolf wouldn’t just run off again like it had last time. I’d felt so lost and incomplete without my wolf, and seeing Lilac in the same state that I’d been in had only made that painful memory stronger. But how was I supposed to resolve this?If I’d had evidence that she was plotting and scheming to ruin my mate bond with Cali, I might’ve thought differently. The only thing I felt right now was tired and frustrated.

I wanted this thing to be over so that I could feel normal again, so that I wasn’t constantly wracked with guilt over how I was acting.

Ava slid out of my hold, circled around behind me, and tore into my hind leg. I howled and rounded on her, snapping and clawing at her as she kept my left hind leg clenched between her teeth and avoided my attacks with ease. I twisted back and forth in her hold, taking care not to move too fast, which would cause me to break skin or bone—I’d heal quickly enough, but it would still put me at a disadvantage. I growled at her and gave one dangerously hard tug. Finally, I tore out of her hold. Without missing a beat, I lunged forward to headbutt her, then I dove on top of her and pinned her to the ground.

*Why are you doing this to me?* I mind linked. *Leave me the fuck alone!*

Ava shifted back to human. Once again, I was acutely aware of her naked body, and this time it was underneath me.

“I only came to talk to you, Xavier. Can’t we just do that? Talk?”

I knew that I could end things right there. Her neck was exposed and inches away from my teeth. But there was a softness, an earnestness to her voice that made me hesitate.

*Do you really want to talk?* I asked. *Or is this just another attempt to trick me and throw me off balance so that I’ll slip up and land right in your arms?*

“Can we please just talk, Xavier?”

I finally released her and snarled one last time before giving in and shifting back.

We stared at each other, our breath visible in the cold air, neither of us wanting to break the silence. My heart was pounding. My wolf was on edge, and the mate pull was still there.

“You wanted to talk, so talk,” I said.

“I didn’t come here to fight,” Ava began. “I just want to explain what happened back at the pack house.”

I snorted. “It was pretty obvious, don’t you think?”

“Listen, I get it. You’re angry with me. But have you ever tried to stop and understand why this keeps happening? If I could move onto someone else, Xavier, don’t you think I would’ve done that a long time ago? I can’t! Our fucking mate bond is still there between us, and I’m struggling just as much as you are. My wolf is strong, and she won’t back down. I try my hardest to control it, but sometimes—like back at the house—I can’t. Don’t you understand how that is? To lose control of your wolf?”

I understood all too well, but that didn’t mean that I was about to admit that to her.

Ava approached me with caution. “You might not want to admit it, but I can see that you know exactly what I’m talking about. I didn’t fully understand it before—maybe I was too sentimental and trying not to use my feelings toward you as an excuse—but the truth runs much deeper, and it’s an almost savage force that I now realize I can’t ignore.”

I knew what she meant. I was wary and on edge and not at all interested in fighting with my wolf again.

“What are you feeling?” Ava asked. “Is your wolf trying to do to you what my wolf is doing to me?” Her voice grew more emotional. “I’m frightened.”

I was surprised to hear that. I wasn’t used to seeing her be so vulnerable. She’d exposed a raw truth, and I could feel my wolf responding to it in a strong way. I’d never felt like that before.

I took a deep breath, letting my guard down just a little, mainly because I knew I’d have to if I wanted to get to the bottom of things so that I wouldn’t hurt Cali.

I took a deep breath, finally feeling a bit calmer about the whole situation. “So, Ava. What do you suggest we do about it?”

**Episode 2503**

I was anxious, and my fingers trembled as I undid the next button on my shirt and pulled it open. I felt super self-conscious. Would Greyson even want to take me out on the balcony? Or had that moment—that dangerous, thrilling, electric moment—passed us by?

Greyson moved past me to the balcony and opened the door. He turned to look at me. “Are you sure about this?”

I knew I’d be lying if I said that I was, but I was also feeling so tempted and turned on.

Greyson came close and brushed my cheeks with his fingertips, sending little currents rippling through my body. I yelped as he scooped me up in his arms, surprising me. I wrapped my arms tightly around his neck as he carried me out onto the balcony.

“You can see the river from here too,” Greyson said, turning and gesturing with his hand while still holding me.

I looked and could just make out the dark glimmering surface in the distance—and not far away, several other apartment buildings surrounding us on almost all sides. My stomach clenched. We weren’t quite as exposed as before, but it was still enough to give me chills.

Greyson kissed me on the neck. “Are you sure about this?” His warm breath tickled my skin as he spoke.

I took a moment to think. *Those apartments aren’t that far away. Will someone see us? Watch us?*

*Were those questions the whole point?*

My nerves were on fire as I kissed him deeply. “I’m sure.”

I just couldn’t get enough of him. It didn’t matter that we’d already had sex earlier, I still wanted more. The deprivation from the revulsion curse still tugged at me, and I just couldn’t be sated.

I kissed him again, harder this time. Greyson laid me down on one of the plush patio chairs and got down on his knees between my legs. He leaned forward and kissed me, running his hands up my thighs until he reached the fluttering warmth between my legs.

“You’re so wet,” Greyson breathed against my lips. “Every time for me.” He pulled my panties to the side and ran a finger slowly across my clit, causing me to gasp and rear back on the seat.

Unable to help myself, I moaned as Greyson played a finger across my opening, pressing against it in a slow rhythm, but not pushing inside just yet.

I paused at the sound of someone coming out on the balcony above us. “Did you hear that, Susan? What was that? An animal?”

We couldn’t see them, but if they happened to look down and to the diagonal, there was no doubt that they would see us. I tensed up, worried that they were going to call the cops—or worse, yell at us and shame us for doing what we were doing… But Greyson was unfazed, and clearly had no plans to stop. I gasped again as he slid his finger inside me, slowly. I laid back in my seat, the neighbors forgotten as Greyson picked up his speed and pressed his lips to my neck as he pumped his finger in and out of me.

“Does that feel good?” he whispered, looking up at me.

“Yes, it feels so good.” My voice was barely above a whisper, but not because I was afraid of who might hear. Rather, it was because I was overcome by passion. Greyson had his finger hooked upward so that he hit the right spot with every stroke, and I opened my legs wider to afford him as much access as he needed.

Greyson sat back and slid my panties down my legs, then leaned forward and pressed his lips against my slick folds, kissing and licking and suckling before dipping his tongue deep inside me. He lifted my legs so that they hung on the arms of the chair, and I opened my shirt and cradled my breasts in my hands, kneading my nipples between my fingers as Greyson lapped at the wetness between my thighs.

I’d closed my eyes when Greyson had first started going down on me, but I suddenly opened them, wanting to see the stars and the river, and even the buildings looming around us. It gave me a thrill unlike anything I’d ever felt before, being out in the open and exposed to anyone who might happen to look out their window or off their balcony.

Another moan escaped my lips, and I was no longer able to control the volume of my voice as Greyson continued to lap at my clit. He slid his finger inside me again and thrust it in and out, my body jerking with his movements. If he kept doing that, I was going to be gone.

“You taste so sweet, love. I could do this all night, you know that? All night,” he groaned.

“No, not all night,” I said huskily. “I want you inside me. Now.”

Without another word, Greyson lifted me to my feet, holding onto me tightly since my knees were so weak. He guided me across the balcony, and I leaned forward against the tall frosted glass barrier. I looked at the streets far below and the river shimmering in the distance, and then up at the sky as I heard Greyson unzipping his pants. A second later, my hands were gripping the glass railing as he slid inside me, easing me open. The sensation of it nearly made my knees buckle.

“Hold on tight,” he growled in my ear. He started off slow but then picked up speed. It was such a rush, being out in the open with Greyson heaving against me, his cock plunging deep before pulling out just as fast, my body vibrating with the power of his thrusts. My heart pounded as I imagined all the people looking out their windows and seeing my mate taking me from behind.

Greyson reached around and massaged my breasts before sliding his hands back around and down to slap my ass. “How does that feel? Did you miss this? Is it even better than you remembered?”

“So much better,” I moaned, not caring that my voice was probably carrying in all directions. I was in heaven, and I couldn’t believe I’d been so nervous to do this kind of thing before. My orgasm caught me by surprise, and I gripped the glass railing and threw my head back, my eyes on the stars as my climax pulsed through my body.

Greyson growled, moving me against the side of the building instead of the balcony as he came, his warmth pulsing inside me. He pulled me close so that my back was against his chest as his hips jerked in time with the last waves of his climax.

When we were done, Greyson scooped me into his arms again, which was great, since I felt like walking was out of the question at the moment.

“You’re seconds away from turning into a popsicle,” he said as he carried me back inside.

He sat me on the couch and snuggled beside me as my body buzzed with the thrill of what we’d just done. I blushed even thinking about it. I’d been so cautious at first, but soon that had gone away, and my desire had taken over and sent me reeling with wild abandon. Only now that we were back inside in the warmth of Greyson’s apartment did the embarrassment begin to creep in.

Had anyone seen what had happened on Greyson’s balcony on this beautiful, cold, December night?

“You’re warming up a little, I hope?” Greyson said, pulling me even closer as he threw a blanket over us.

“Yes, little by little.” I was still shivering as warmth finally began to overtake the chill of my body. Being here with him like this was yet another reminder of the life we could have.

“Do you need anything? Want anything?”

“No,” I answered, overcome with contentment. “Just to be with you.” All I wanted was to enjoy this quiet moment with him, even knowing that tomorrow we would have to go back to our life at the pack house.

“Want to watch some TV?”

“Yes, but put on something romantic,” I said.

As Greyson flipped through the channels, offering various choices, I thought about how glad I was to have him in my life. *To think that Aysel had tried to ruin this. Nice try, bitch.*

“Ooh, this looks good,” I said, when I saw the opening credits to one of my favorite romcoms.

“Your wish is my command,” Greyson said. He set the remote down and snuggled against me as we watched.

I could feel the excitement of the day taking its toll, and I was getting drowsy. I could think of no better end to this magical night than falling asleep in Greyson’s arms. But as my eyes fluttered closed, I was suddenly gripped by a feeling that pulled at my heart. My body felt like it was on fire, and fear overtook me.

“What’s wrong?” Greyson asked, jumping up and looking at me. “Are the handprints bothering you again?”

“No,” I said, sitting up slightly. “I don’t think so.”

I didn’t want to worry Greyson, but I was starting to panic. I felt it in my gut, the instinctive knowledge that something was very wrong. One specific thing kept echoing in my mind, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t shake the feeling that something very bad was happening to my mate bond.

**Episode 2504**

AVA

Xavier’s question washed over me, and all I could think was that I knew exactly what *I* wanted to do about it. I’d known it from the moment he’d surprised me by stepping into the bathroom while I was showering. I’d been surprised to see him there, but somehow not surprised at the same time.

Hell, I’d even seen the shock and the evidence of his internal struggle written all over his face. His eyes had all but screamed, “should I stay, or should I go?” But in the end, he’d stayed, and I hadn’t been able to stop myself from taking advantage of it. Having him there, so close to me and so ruled by his desire for me, had been like a fantasy come to life.

I stared at him now, realizing that I wanted to say everything that was on my mind, to tell him that I wanted him and that I knew he wanted me, too. There was no denying it, but I knew that it was better to hide what I really wanted to say, since there was no doubt in my mind that he would consider it to be another futile, frustrating attempt to get him back.

*I can’t admit that, can I? How I really feel? How I felt seeing him there, watching me touch myself?* If I did, he’d only accuse me of playing the same old games. *But how can I answer without lying?*

Xavier’s presence was distracting, even now, as I watched him standing there naked in front of me. After what could have happened in the shower, it was almost impossible to ignore the sight of every taut, hulking inch of him. Once again, I flashed back to the bathroom and pictured his erection as he watched me in the shower. Even before I’d started touching myself, he’d been hungry for me. He could try to deny how he felt all he wanted, and I knew that he was going to do just that, but his body hadn’t lied, and that was satisfying to say the least.

To protect myself, I’d been working overtime to suppress my attraction to him. Feeling the way I did about him would only bring me pain, since he was so hell-bent on ignoring me, on pretending that nothing remained between us. But it was too hard to ignore for me, and I couldn’t deny the attraction any longer.

*Like I told him. My wolf wants what it wants.*

Maybe if I told him the extent of how I felt, he wouldn’t believe me. I’d already turned him down once before when he’d suggested that we spend one night together to hopefully put an end to our attraction once and for all.

“So, what do you want to do?” Xavier asked, impatience coloring his voice.

I knew that if I hesitated much longer, he’d leave. We were being open with each other for once. There was no point holding back now.

“I want to spend the night with you. Whatever happens, happens.” My mouth was dry as I finished my words, and I hoped that he hadn’t noticed the tremor in my voice. I took a deep breath and held it, waiting for his response.

Xavier snorted, breaking the span of silence that stretched between us. “We both know what would happen.”

*So he’s turning me down, just like I did when he proposed the same thing to me.* I deflated, realizing how foolish I’d been to put myself out there like that. No matter how hard I tried, how much I tried to ingratiate myself to him, to make up for the times I’d been deceitful, things always ended up like this.

“Why now?” Xavier asked. “What changed your mind? A moment ago, you said that you were frightened. What, were you scared I’d turn you down?”

“Yes, of course,” I said, deciding to admit that much. “I’ve just come to expect that you will. You’ve rejected me more times that I can count.”

*Which is why Aysel’s proposal was so tempting*, I thought to myself. *If she could help me win Xavier back, never to be rejected again…*

“Do you have any idea what it feels like to be rejected by the one person who consumes you?” I asked.

Xavier looked away for a split second.

*Hmm. Is he thinking of me? Or is he thinking of her? Of Cali?*

I waited for him to speak, but when he stayed silent, I plowed ahead. “I was afraid of losing you. Of losing myself. It’s terrifying to be so… *lost*, like this. It’s what I experienced every minute of every day I spent in the spirit world—an infinite sense of helplessness and aimlessness.”

“So what, you think sleeping with me will give you purpose?” Xavier scoffed. “Give me a break.”

“Remember, *you* were the one who suggested that sleeping together would help. Have you changed your mind so quickly? Let’s not forget what just happened, only a few moments ago. It’s what motivated you to flee from the house, to let yourself become one with your wolf again. To tame him. Don’t you worry about what will happen? How far we might go? How far all of this might drive us?” I touched his arm tentatively, waiting for him to shrug it off. When he didn’t flinch, I continued. “You’re an Alpha, X. Why can’t you take charge of this?”

Xavier glanced down at my hand, and I knew it was coming—the moment when he would shove my hand away like it was a snake. But he didn’t do that.

“I don’t know if I should believe you or not,” he finally said. He sighed and looked away from me for a moment before turning back to meet my gaze head-on.

“Try, Xavier. Try to believe me. Just this once.” There was nothing I wanted more than for him to see me for who I truly was, for him to forget the bad things that had happened between us and trust me again.

Xavier sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He looked up toward the tops of the trees and then back at me. “I do understand what you’re saying. I get it. I’m tired of fighting my wolf. I’m always worried about the conflict within me. What happened in the bathroom, and what almost happened… It’s only going to get worse. I know that.”

“I know that, too,” I said. “And that brings us back to where this conversation started. What are we going to do about it?”

Xavier’s response was quick and cutting. “Nothing. We do nothing.”

I almost laughed in his face. “You’re fooling yourself again, I see. You just admitted that it’ll get worse. How much worse? Should we just let it go until we end up killing each other? Is that what you want?”

Xavier sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. I wondered if he’d finally reached the end of his patience. “The only reason I’m out here is because I’m able to control it. You’re out here because it’s all becoming too much for you. That’s not really my problem, is it?”

His words stung. I’d thought I was finally starting to get through to him, but once again, he’d rejected me. Still, I stepped closer to him, not ready to let the subject drop.

“How long, Xavier? How long do you think you’ll be able to control it? There’s only so much you can take—even someone as strong and confident as you has their breaking point. Tell me, Xavier, what will happen when it becomes unbearable?”

*Because you and I both know you’re dangerously close to reaching that point*, I thought to myself. I couldn’t stop picturing the way he’d looked at me in the bathroom. His eyes had been hazy, hungry, out of control.

If he turned me down again, what would I do? Would my wolf finally take over? Would I have no choice but to forge an alliance with Aysel? If I took the risk and joined up with her and Xavier found out, it would destroy any hope I had of reclaiming my mate, and I wasn’t ready to risk that yet.

I stepped forward once again, until I was mere inches away from him. All I could think about was how badly I wanted to kiss him, to feel his hands all over my naked body. I could see that look in his eyes again, the one he’d had while I touched myself in the shower. I wondered if me being this close would push him just enough to let his wolf take over. I didn’t doubt that his wolf was seconds from taking control again, but the thing was, I didn’t want his wolf to make that choice—I wanted Xavier to decide all on his own. I didn’t want him to have any excuse, any scapegoat for the decision he would make to be with me.

I looked him right in the eye. “You want a solution, Xavier? You want a way to end all the questioning? All the uncertainty? Then do it. Spend the night with me.”

**Episode 2505**

GREYSON

From the looks of it, Cali was in some kind of pain, and I was alarmed. I pulled away from her so that I could look her up and down. She looked okay, but she certainly wasn’t acting like herself. I’d felt her tense against me, and she was shaking just like she had outside, but I knew now that she wasn’t cold.

“Cali, what’s wrong? Tell me.” She’d assured me that she was fine, but I had to ask again.

Cali gasped in obvious discomfort. “I-I don’t know—something’s wrong with my mate bond.” She wrapped her arms around herself and glanced down at her feet. I could tell that she was doing her best to keep calm, but it didn’t seem to be working, and she was getting more agitated by the minute.

“Something’s wrong with your mate bond? What does that mean? If something’s affecting your bond, shouldn’t I feel it, too?” Then I realized. She had to be talking about her mate bond with Xavier. Damn.

Cali looked at me, clearly frightened. “Did I say something? Did I accidentally make a choice? If I did—even by mistake—maybe that’s why I’m feeling this way.”

Inside, I had a flash of how much I wanted her to choose me—but not like this. Not if it killed Xavier in the process. We’d done so well up until now, minding the bounds of *due destini*, but I knew just as well as Xavier and Cali that one wrong move could send the entire thing crashing down around us.

I replayed all the events leading up to this moment in my mind, but I couldn’t remember anything that had happened that would’ve amounted to Cali choosing me as her mate. She’d chosen to stay in Portland for the night, but that was a far cry from determining who her mate was.

I took her hand. “Don’t worry, Cali. Breathe.”

“I’m sorry, Greyson, but would you be upset if I called Xavier?” She was already up off the couch and digging through her purse to find her phone.

*Of course Xavier would find a way to ruin my one night alone with Cali.* “No, no, go ahead and call him—especially if you think it’ll make you feel better. Do whatever you need to, love.”

“Thank you,” she said distractedly as she returned to sit beside me on the couch. She dialed Xavier with shaky hands, still clearly in the grip of whatever was causing her so much distress.

The jealous part of me wanted to hang around and hear her conversation, but a bigger part of me didn’t want her to feel like she had to be careful or guarded when she talked to him. Besides, I was the one most in danger of being hurt by whatever I happened to hear her say to him. I got up and excused myself, then stepped out onto the balcony. I closed the door behind me, knowing that it would be too easy and too tempting to listen if I didn’t—even if it might hurt me in the end.

I stared out at the dark water in the distance and then down at the lights of the city below. It was hard to believe that Cali and I had been out here only a short time ago, enjoying each other’s bodies and having fun, not worrying about the pack house or Xavier or whether anyone could see what we were doing. Now that all seemed a million miles away, and we were back to worrying about our responsibilities back home.

*What has her so shaken up? Could it really be a problem with her mate bond?*

I couldn’t really imagine that she’d done anything to upset it, but could this be the result of the revulsion spell being broken? Some sort of after-effect? Witches were always the first to admit that their spells didn’t always work the way they were supposed to, and that sometimes there were other, unexpected consequences that could come about after the fact. If that were the case, I didn’t know what our options were—especially when we couldn’t be sure that was the reason why Cali felt off and afraid.

Then another thought hit me. *Aysel.* Could she have somehow found out that we’d broken the spell? Had she paid for another curse? This time, one directed only at Cali, out of spite? Or could it have something to do with the ward? Lakini had told me that the spell would take time to solidify—maybe Cali’s feeling was due to the unstable state of the ward.

I shook my head and tried to calm down, realizing that I was getting as worked up as Cali. There was no use worrying myself when I didn’t even know all the facts yet. I needed to approach this just like I did everything else—figure it out with a clear head without giving in to speculation. Right now, all I needed to focus on was keeping Cali calm and safe.

The door opened, and Cali, still distraught, stepped out onto the balcony, her phone in hand. “He didn’t answer,” she said. She looked like she was on the verge of tears.

I pulled her into a hug and stroked her hair. “Are you in any pain?”

Cali shook her head. “No, but I still feel like something’s wrong.”

I was relieved to know that she wasn’t in pain, at least. I hated when she was hurting, though I guessed that whatever emotional or mental distress she was feeling was pain just the same.

“It’s going to be okay, Cali. We’ll figure it out. I know this probably won’t help, but I’m sure he’s okay. My brother is a strong, capable guy.” *And a stubborn asshole—but this isn’t the time to mention that, I guess.*

“Why won’t he answer, Greyson?”

“I don’t know, Cali. Maybe he’s asleep, or just not around his phone.” I sighed, feeling helpless about how to make her feel better. “What do you want to do, Cali? Tell me, and we’ll do it.”

“I don’t know. I just have this bad feeling that I can’t shake. I know we agreed not to discuss Xavier…”

“What? What is it, Cali?” I took her hand.

“I’m really sorry, Greyson, but I need to go back to the pack house tonight.”

I wasn’t surprised, but I *was* beyond disappointed. Of course she would want to go back—not to the pack house, as she so tactfully put it, but back to Xavier. Everything always came back to Xavier. Even when we were hundreds of miles away.

“Are you sure that’s necessary?” I asked. “Maybe I can get in touch with Rishika and see what she knows. Would that be okay?”

“Yeah, I think that would be okay,” Cali said.

“Let’s do that then.” I took her hand and led her back inside. I grabbed my phone and called Rishika. Unsurprisingly, she picked up on the first ring.

“Hey, Greyson, I didn’t think you’d call so late. Is something wrong?”

“No… But is my brother around?”

“No, haven’t seen him. Why?”

“I don’t really want to get into it—if I’m being honest.” I was trying my best to keep a lid on it without being rude. “Would you mind asking around to see if anyone else might have seen him recently?”

“Sure thing. Hold on just a sec.”

I heard her talking to a few others before she returned to the phone. “Jacqueline saw him go outside a bit ago—not on patrol, it didn’t seem like. She said maybe he was just going for a run?”

“Thanks, Rishika. Could you give me a call when he gets back?”

“You got it, Alpha,” Rishika said.

I hung up the phone and looked up to see Cali plying me with a searching look.

“So, he went out?” Her voice was barely above a whisper, and she was wringing her hands.

I nodded. “Nothing out of the ordinary about that. Xavier has always liked night runs. It would explain why he isn’t answering his phone, too.”

I was trying to ease her worries, but I could already tell that her mind was hard at work. I knew what was coming even before she said it.

“I still want to go back,” she said.

“Well then it’s settled. I’ll take you back.”

“Thanks, Greyson,” she said. “I know it’s not what you want to hear…”

I hated that she looked so ashamed. I hugged her. “The only thing I want is to make you happy. Make sure you’re okay. If you’re worried about him, that’s how it is, and I’ll help make sure nothing’s happened. He is my brother.”

If it weren’t for her sense of foreboding, I would’ve put up more of an argument. Xavier was more than capable of taking care of himself, after all.As much as I hated the thought of rushing back on Xavier’s account, the last thing I wanted was to risk upsetting Cali.

I’d just started to gather up my things when Cali put a hand on my arm, stopping me.

“You can’t go,” she said.

“What? Of course I’m going. I’m not going to let you travel back to the pack house all by yourself.”

A flash of deep worry passed across Cali’s face. “I know, but won’t you coming back with me mess up the ward?”

**Episode 2506**

XAVIER

The first thought I had at Ava’s question was Cali. I pictured her face, her eyes, her lips, and then I pictured her in the shower with water rolling down her beautiful body as she looked right at me. For the first time since it had happened, Ava in the shower was the furthest thing from my mind. I didn’t even care to fantasize about what a night with Ava would be like. The only thing I could think about was Cali. I could feel our mate bond tugging at me in the same way that my wolf pulled at me when it came to Ava.

Only this time, it was just about Cali.

I knew that Ava was being honest for once—at least she appeared to be. But that wasn’t enough, and in the grand scheme of things, it really didn’t matter.

“Ava, I appreciate your honesty, but I’m not about to ignore my mate bond with Cali—I couldn’t, even if I wanted to. What you forget is that as much as my wolf yearns for you, he also wants to be with Cali. She’s my mate. Nothing you say or do will ever change that. I’m sorry to put it so bluntly, but despite what your wolf wants, and what my wolf might feel, it was Cali who brought my wolf back in the first place. If it weren’t for her, I’d be lost. I don’t want to be with you, Ava. Not tonight, not tomorrow, not ever.”

I’d let this go on for too long, and I needed to make sure Ava knew how serious I was. There was no way I was going to risk what I had with Cali for Ava. It didn’t matter that Cali had given me permission—I didn’t even want to take the chance. It wasn’t worth it.

Clearly stung by my words, Ava turned away. “It’s only going to happen again and again, Xavier. You might think you can stop it, you might hope that you can hold it off indefinitely, but you’d just be lying to yourself.” Her voice was low now, barely above a whisper, and it almost sounded like she was on the verge of tears.

“No, you’re wrong. You might not be able to handle the push and pull, but I can. You said it yourself—I’m an Alpha. I’m built to take it, to resist desires and urges that don’t serve me. You, this conversation—none of it serves me, so we’re done talking about this. I’m going back to the pack house.”

I took one last look at her, watching her wipe the angry tears from her face. I’d known that it wouldn’t be easy or pleasant to lay it all out to her like that, but I’d said what needed to be said, no matter how badly it hurt her.

I shifted and started back toward the house without looking back. Despite what I’d told Ava, and how confidently I’d come across when I said it, I was worried. I hadn’t admitted to her how close I’d come to losing the battle against my wolf tonight. The entire night was a concerning blur in my head. I couldn’t even remember stepping into the bathroom in the first place, let alone taking my shirt off.

But what I had been more than aware of was how much my wolf wanted to join her in that shower, and in that moment, the consequences hadn’t mattered to me. It scared me how easily I could’ve let it happen. I knew the hard truth now, and there was no ignoring it, or avoiding it. I was going to have to be vigilant if I didn’t want things to spiral out of control like they had tonight.

Next time, I might not be lucky enough to snap myself out of it.

My wolf was strong and persistent, and maybe it was feeling so strongly toward Ava right now because Cali was in Portland with Greyson.

*Is my wolf jealous? Is that it? Or did it just feel like it had a longer leash with Cali gone?*

One thing was for sure—I missed Cali terribly. Even though she wasn’t with me, I would sleep easy tonight knowing that for all Ava’s efforts, and for all my wolf’s desire, I’d made the right choice and remained loyal to Cali. My wolf might’ve been confused about who it really wanted, but I wasn’t.

Not one bit.

My wolf had never seemed to understand what Ava had done to make me kill her. Even when I reflected on how she’d killed my mother and set off an entire string of awful events, my wolf still didn’t seem to care. My wolf had a one-track mind and was only focused on losing its mate, not on the hurt that Ava had caused. My wolf also didn’t seem to remember that the only reason it had come back to me was because of Cali.

I wondered when my wolf would realize the truth and stop this troubling infatuation with Ava. I didn’t care what it took—I was going to get my wolf back on track and get Ava out of my head, once and for all. I just didn’t have the foggiest idea of how to go about it. I was fucked.

I returned to the pack house, and Rishika caught me as soon as I came through the door.

“Yo, Xavier. Greyson called looking for you,” she said. “You should call him back ASAP. It seemed important.”

“Thanks,” I said, wondering why he’d called. Was he having more problems with Charon and Lakini? If so, I didn’t want any part of it. I was over the whole Portland shitshow, and honestly, I’d already done more than was required. Greyson was lucky that I didn’t want any witches holding anything over Cali’s head, or I would’ve been all too happy to have let the revulsion spell fester.

On the other hand, what if he’d called because something had happened to Cali? I recalled how strongly my mate bond had pulled at me when Ava had mentioned us spending the night together. I’d thought that was the reason, but maybe it had happened because something was wrong? Had something happened to Cali? Was Greyson calling because he needed my help?

I hurried to my room and grabbed my phone. I was alarmed to see how many times Cali had called. Shit, maybe something was wrong after all.I immediately called her back, my anxiety starting to build.

“Xavier?” she answered after the first ring.

I let out a sigh of relief when she answered. I could hear the relief and yearning in her voice—and even the sound of her voice made everything feel right. I couldn’t stop the love I had for her, or how much I missed her—how much I wished that she was with me right now. Our connection—down to the way every fiber of my being responded to the sound of her voice—was something that Ava would never be able to understand. There was no comparison. Ava didn’t stand a chance, and she never would, no matter how out of control my wolf got whenever I was around her.

“Xavier, are you there? Are you okay?”

“Yes, yes, I’m fine, baby,” I said. “Are you okay? What’s going on? Is something wrong?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I just had a feeling that you were… I don’t even know what I felt. It was so weird, Xavier. It felt like our mate bond was being interrupted or something—I can’t really describe it. But now that I hear your voice, I feel like it was probably nothing and that everything is okay.”

I was immediately reminded of the shower and Ava, of what could have happened, what I’d had to force myself to avoid doing, and how vulnerable Ava had been. I couldn’t shake the feeling that what Cali had been feeling was the disturbance that was happening between me, Ava, and my wolf. I was so happy that it was over now, and hearing Cali’s concern solidified my resolve to get my wolf in line, once and for all.

“I’m fine, Cali, I promise,” I said. “Nothing’s wrong. I was just out for a night run and didn’t have my phone.”

“Okay, well I’m glad that you’re all right. You don’t know how worried I was, but it’s okay now—now that I know you’re fine.”

It pained me to hear the slight tremor in her voice. It felt like something she wasn’t saying to me. As I had been since the first time I’d laid eyes on her, I was so affected by what happened to her, by the thought of her feeling any pain or distress. There was nothing I wanted more than to protect her, to be by her side to comfort her whenever she needed me.

I just needed to see her, and I knew that if I did, that would make this whole night right again, would make everything feel worthwhile—plus, it would be yet another way to show my wolf who was boss and who really, truly had my heart, Ava be damned.

“Cali, do you want me to come and get you?”

**Episode 2507**

There was nothing I wanted more than for Xavier to come join me in Portland. I missed him more than I could explain, especially since I’d felt our mate bond pulling at us, as if something had gone wrong between us. It had been an unfamiliar, scary feeling, but it had also been a reminder of the strength of the bond we shared—and also of how fraught that bond could be in the face of *due destini*, or whatever other forces were at play. Still, I knew I couldn’t say yes, even if I wanted him right there in my arms so that I could see he was okay with my own two eyes.

I took a deep breath, hoping that he wouldn’t take what I was going to say next the wrong way.

“No, I don’t think that’s a good idea, Xavier.” I’d promised Greyson that I wouldn’t think about Xavier or bring him up tonight, but I’d epically failed at that, and the guilt was already starting to seep in.

I was out on the balcony again, having stepped out to take Xavier’s call. Greyson was being so patient with me, and I knew he was in there, waiting, probably worried about how I was feeling and not judging me at all for how strongly I’d reacted when I’d thought something was wrong between me and Xavier. I turned and could see his silhouette out of the corner of my eye. He was waiting for me on the sofa, and I knew that I needed to get back to him soon if I wanted even the slightest hope of salvaging our evening.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come, Cali? I can shift and be there in about an hour. It would be no problem for me to do it—in fact, I’d like to.”

“No, no, that’s not necessary. Of course I appreciate your offer, Xavier, but I know it’s late, and I don’t want you out running in the woods at this hour—and I’m with Greyson. I was going to drive back tonight, but Greyson wouldn’t let me.”

There was a slight pause before Xavier finally spoke again. “I agree—he’d better not have let you drive back all by yourself.”

“I’m a perfectly safe driver,” I huffed. Xavier laughed, and it lifted my spirits to hear it. I hesitated for a moment. “We’re okay, right?”

There was a long pause before he finally answered. “Of course we’re okay. I promise you’ll see that for yourself the moment you get back tomorrow. And let me just say that I cannot wait to see you.”

“Me neither. I really, really miss you.” I shivered as a stiff wind picked up, probably blowing in off the river. It was getting colder, and Greyson was waiting for me. I hated to end the call, but at least now I knew that Xavier was okay, and that was what mattered most. “I’d better go. I love you, Xavier.”

“Love you, too, Cali. See you tomorrow, tiger.”

“See you.”

My heart fluttered as I ended the call. I lingered outside for a few more moments, collecting my thoughts and trying to shift gears before I went back inside. I wanted to be clear and unencumbered for the rest of the night. Greyson deserved at least that much after my little freak-out.

Greyson came up to me as soon as I came back in. “Is everything okay?” He reached out and took my hands, warming them up. “You’re so cold, love.”

I smiled at him. “Everything’s fine. Thank you, Greyson, for being so understanding… I’m sorry about all of this. I didn’t mean to ruin our entire evening.”

I leaned in close, taking in his heat.

Greyson shook his head. “No, stop. You didn’t ruin anything. Believe me, I know the position you’re in, and I would never want you to feel like I’m making it any worse for you. And despite what he-who-shall-not-be-named thinks, I was worried about him, too. I’m glad to hear that he’s okay.”

He led me back to stand in front of the couch and turned to face me. I could tell that he was waiting for me to take the lead, thoughtful and considerate as ever.

I rose onto my tiptoes and kissed him, knowing that he was doing everything in his power to comfort me. I wanted him to know that I was with him now, and that there would be no more distractions.

“So, how are you feeling?” he asked. “Better, I hope? You had me worried before.”

“I’m fine. It just all came on so suddenly. It’s like I said before—it felt like something was tugging at Xavier’s and my mate bond. I can’t remember ever feeling that way. I don’t even know how else to describe it so that it makes sense…”

“I think I kind of get it, even if I don’t know exactly how you were feeling. While you were calling Xavier, I got to thinking about how there’s still so much that we don’t know about *due destini*. Whatever it was you were feeling, I didn’t feel it, so I assumed that whatever discomfort you felt at that moment certainly had something to do with my brother.”

I nodded. “That sounds reasonable enough. I wonder if Xavier felt something, too.” I winced and looked up at Greyson. “I’m sorry, I was trying so hard not to mention him again tonight.”

“It’s fine,” Greyson said with a smirk. “You’re allowed three violations before you’re punished.”

“Oh, is that right?” I said, relaxing when I spotted the gleam in his eye. Clearly if he was able to make light of it, he wasn’t too upset.

*Just don’t think about it anymore. I can talk to Xavier about what happened when we get back to the pack house in the morning.*

Greyson pulled me close and stroked my hair. “So, you want to watch a little more TV?”

“Sure, whatever. All I want is to be here with you, in your arms, preferably listening to your heartbeat.”

I followed Greyson back to the couch, and we sat back down. I snuggled into the crook of his arm, and he turned the television back on. I felt my body relax and took comfort in knowing that at least for the moment, both of my mates were safe.

“I have to admit that I wasn’t all that into what we were watching before,” Greyson said as he absentmindedly flipped through the channels. Suddenly, he stiffened against me. “What is this?”

I looked at the screen. “It’s *Twilight: New Moon*,I think.”

Greyson frowned and pointed. “What is *that* supposed to be?”

I chuckled. “It’s a werewolf, of course.”

Greyson scoffed. “Wow. I thought old werewolf movies were a joke, but this? This takes the cake.”

“Have you seriously never seen *Twilight*?”

Greyson shrugged. “No, not really my thing. And you should know by now that werewolves don’t look like that,” he said.

I laughed. “Okay, well maybe they don’t. But that’s not the point. It’s a love story.”

Greyson laughed. “We can watch it if you want. I’ll just be over here trying to suspend my disbelief and all that.”

We settled in and started to relax. I was feeling good again, happy that my worries about Xavier and our mate bond were already becoming a distant memory. I jumped when Greyson suddenly reacted during the scene where Jacob, in werewolf form, got into a fight with another werewolf.

Greyson leaned forward in his seat, his gaze riveted to the screen. “This is how people see us?”

I smiled at him, tickled that he was getting into it. “See? It’s fun, right?”

Greyson gave me a look that said he wasn’t about to admit anything of the sort, but he didn’t change the channel, either. He relaxed again once the fight scene was over, and I leaned against him, determined to enjoy the rest of our time together without any more major interruptions. I liked watching Greyson as he watched the movie, noting all of his reactions, small and large, and laughing when he rolled his eyes at a scene that he didn’t quite agree with.

Before long, my mind couldn’t help but drift back to my conversation with Xavier. He’d said that he hadn’t felt anything, and that he felt fine. He’d sounded well enough, but I’d felt that disruption—or whatever it was—so strongly that it was almost hard to believe that he hadn’t felt the same thing. Greyson hadn’t felt anything either, but I was certain—no, positive—that I’d felt something… Hadn’t I?

What had happened, exactly, to cause such a strong reaction in me? It had been unlike anything I’d ever felt before, and it had seemed so real and urgent. But maybe I was wrong.

Had something real happened that had caused me to react that way, or was it all just in my head?

**Episode 2508**

MARTA

I kept my eyes closed tight as I focused on getting my magic to exactly what I wanted it to do instead of letting it have its way with me so that it could kill yet another flower.

As always, it was so hard to keep my hands from being agents of death and destruction. Why was it harder to bring life to things than it was to bring death? It was kind of depressing, if I really thought about it. I just wanted to make the flower bloom like I had the other day. To my chagrin, I hadn’t been able to recreate the effect since that first time, but I was staying positive about it, since I knew I had the ability to do it somewhere within me.

That was a start, at least.

When I’d first learned that I could see ghosts, I never would have dreamed that that power would grow into something that would allow me to have an impact on life and death. I still had no idea how far the kind of magic I had at my disposal would extend, but for once, it was nice to focus on it—even if it was under Okorie’s direction. It was the perfect thing to help keep my mind off of everything that was happening with Lilac—and at this point that was the last thing I wanted to think about, since I’d spent the entire day thinking about nothing else.

*Here I am again, thinking about it.* I sighed.

“At this point, I think you’re going to bore the poor thing to death instead,” Okorie said.

I opened my eyes and glared at him. “I didn’t ask you.”

I closed my eyes again and amped up my concentration, but all that seemed to do was give me the beginnings of a headache. I opened my eyes again and glared at him.

“You didn’t have to ask. My advice is free flowing and court sanctioned.” He winked.

“I’m not making great progress as it is,” I huffed. “Today, I just feel like my magic is stuck.”

*Maybe like I’m stuck. Stuck wondering if my relationship was doomed to crash and burn, no matter what.* There was no way I wanted to admit that to him, though. He didn’t need to know any more about my problems than he already did.

“Some days are like that,” Okorie said thoughtfully. “Lucky for us, tomorrow is a new day.” He smiled sweetly at me.

I looked at him and couldn’t hold back a laugh. “Um, did someone replace you with another Okorie? Ever since you opened up to me and Dani, you’ve been acting so much… *nicer*. It’s weird.”

I definitely didn’t miss the old snarky, snappy, sour Okorie, but the way he was acting now was just throwing me off. I just needed everything to be normal today so that I could keep my shit together.

He shrugged. “Maybe I was always like this, and you just didn’t take the time to notice. Wouldn’t be the first time someone misread me.”

I laughed again. “Right.” I stood up, dusted myself off, and put the flower down. “I think I’m going to call it quits for the day.”

I stretched and worked overtime to keep my mind blank, not wanting to go back down the well-travelled Lilac road.

Okorie arched his eyebrows in surprise. “Really?”

“Yeah. Even Dani’s inside already.”

“Hmm, maybe that’s because Dani doesn’t have a supernatural werewolf boyfriend who just got back from the spirit world with his wolf reattached.”

I was surprised to hear all that from him, and I wondered how much he’d heard, exactly. Clearly, he’d learned more than I’d intended him too. That wasn’t hard—it wasn’t like we were the best at keeping secrets in the pack house. The entire place was a tinderbox of drama, gossip, lover’s quarrels, and all-around chaos. Most of the time I loved it, but not when my drama was the subject of everyone’s attention—especially when even someone like Okorie had gotten wind of it.

“It’s not like that,” I said. “I’m just trying to focus on my magic right now. Isn’t that what I’m supposed to be doing, anyway? Court sanctioned and all?”

Okorie nodded, taking in my words. “Oh, so you’re *not* just trying to avoid someone? My mistake. And here I thought you were starting to enjoy our time together.”

I glared at him again. “Fine. So what if I was just trying to have some alone time, even if you have to be present for it? Is that a crime? Do you need to alert the witch council?” I snapped.

Okorie raised his hands in mock surrender. “Whoa, take it easy. I’m certainly not going to be the one to tell you that having a werewolf boyfriend is a bad idea.”

I scoffed. “A bad idea? This, coming from a warlock? Forgive me if I take your advice with a grain of salt.”

“Hey, I’m just saying. I’ve not seen a lot of witches and werewolves dating before, is all. It’s kind of funny, I guess.”

I didn’t like being the butt of his joke. “That’s not what you’re seeing in my case. I’m not a witch—I’m a medium, or a bridge, or whatever. Besides, Mrs. Smith and Big Mac are together, and they’re in a perfectly successful, healthy relationship.”

“Sure, but neither of them died and came back to life, did they? That tends to complicate things, but I’m sure you already know that.”

I sucked my teeth in frustration. “I’m done with this conversation.”

I moved past him and started toward the house. As I got closer, I could see through the window that a group had gathered in the kitchen. Torin was right in the middle, talking animatedly as he used a batter-covered ladle to drive home his points. It looked like there was some sort of cooking demonstration going on. I sighed. I wasn’t feeling up to whatever was going on in there right now. I just needed some time alone with my thoughts.

My conversations with Lilac had been so difficult today, and a little soul-crushing, if I had to admit it. I was weary after talking about mates, relationships, love, breaking up, making up, and everything in between. It was all a lot, and the prospect of going in there with all those people—probably all in cheery moods that would be like oil to my miserable water… I just preferred not to deal with it.

I stopped and turned around, coming face-to-face with Okorie.

“I see you don’t want to join the cooking jamboree going on in there,” Okorie said. “I’ve never seen so many cheerful group activities. This place is like living in a spirit squad’s torture chamber.”

“Tell me about it,” I muttered, mad that I actually agreed with him for once.

“Well, you could always stay out here and practice for a little longer, if you want.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Just cut the act, okay? You’re starting to sound like *you’re* the leader of the spirit squad, and I’m not in the mood.”

Okorie gave me a confused look. “What act?”

“This whole nice act you’ve got going on. I’m not buying it. It was nice of you to open up to us and everything, but I know that the only reason why you’re being so agreeable all of a sudden is so that you can reach your mentoring goal and get the hell out of here as soon as possible. You can’t fool me.”

Okorie frowned at me. “Nice analysis, medium bridge, but you’ve got it all wrong. Sure, this isn’t my dream gig, but I genuinely want to be here for you and Dani. I’m sorry if you don’t see it that way. I’ll be sure to try to change your mind.”

I felt my cheeks flush, and I crossed my arms. “If you want to be here for us, then why don’t you actually *teach* us something about magic, not just all this meditating or whatever?”

Okorie nodded slowly and grinned. “Okay, I’ll bite. Like what?”

“Like…”

I wracked my brain, trying to think of what would be the most useful thing for me to know right now—you know, other than how *not* to kill things that I didn’t want to kill. There was still so much that I didn’t know about magic, and so there were way too many questions that I could ask him. It was a little overwhelming, to tell the truth.

We both looked back toward the house, just as a roar of laughter rang out. It was Lilac, and he’d laughed so loudly that we’d heard it clearly out here. I could see him through the window, and he looked like he was having such a good time.

I had an idea.

I looked back at Okorie. “Is there some kind of magic spell, charm, any of the above, that can tell whether or not I’m Lilac’s mate?”

**Episode 2509**

GREYSON

The movie wasn’t half bad, if I set aside all my issues with the way werewolves were portrayed. We were totally *not* hotheads. Apart from Xavier. And Colton. And Mace. And—

The point was that this *Twilight* stuff wasn’t totally accurate. Currently, Bella was racing through the fountain while Edward removed his shirt to expose himself as a vampire.

And Lola thought *I* was dramatic.

Just as Bella reached Edward, effectively stopping him from showing his vampire sparkle to all the humans, I heard a snoring noise. I turned to see that Cali had fallen asleep and was snoring lightly, like a kitten. I hadn’t realized how late it was. Glancing over at the movie, I turned it off. I felt pretty certain she knew how it ended anyway.

Once that was done, I faced my mate and stroked her cheek. She looked peaceful and adorable. I was so glad she’d agreed to stay with me. Even when the revulsion spell had still been in effect, even if it had felt like torture, I’d always preferred to be by her side.

When I kissed the corner of her mouth, she stirred.

“Ready to go to bed?” I whispered.

She harumphed, and I smirked, gently scooping her up in my arms. Her eyes opened, and she wrapped her arms around my neck, kissing me there, then up my jawline as I walked toward the bedroom. She was so sweet that I wanted to freeze this moment.

Nevertheless, I knew we had to go back to the pack house in the morning, to face Xavier again. I wondered if she’d agree to spend another day here. But even if she did, I knew she was worried about Xavier—hell, even *I* was worried about Xavier. Asking to stall our return would only make Cali’s concern build, and I would hate to end our time in Portland like that.

I wanted her to be happy.

I wanted her to cling to me just like this, reach for me the moment I set her on the mattress. Smiling, I joined her in bed. She snuggled in next to me, putting her head on my shoulder and pressing herself against me. She was so affectionate and cuddly, and I knew many Alphas probably wouldn’t admit to liking that kind of stuff, but I’d have fought a fucking army to keep her with me just like this.

“Did you like the movie?” she asked sleepily, tracing circles on my stomach.

“It was… interesting,” I said.

She snickered.

I kissed her forehead, tilting her chin up to make her face me. “Thank you for staying with me.”

“I wasn’t going to leave you, not after everything that happened,” she murmured, glancing down at my mouth. “And to be honest, I stayed for my own benefit, too.” She smirked, brushing her lips over mine. “I’d probably find it impossible to stay away from you.”

“My ego appreciates you saying that,” I said.

She laughed. I kissed her a little, just for the comfort of it. I didn’t go any further—I had werewolf stamina, but she was tired out after the excitement of the day. I loved sitting with her like this, anyway.

I couldn’t help but imagine a future where we’d never be apart. The yearning that had built between us during the revulsion spell had been too much to bear, but during these past few hours, there had been endless opportunities to quench it.

The idea of staying another day popped into my head again—nagging at me as I thought how great it would be to have Cali all to myself. Wine and dine her, kiss her, touch her, fuck her, make love to her. Being with her was so exhilarating after such a long, literally cursed, withdrawal that I couldn’t get enough.

I needed to remind myself, though, that putting her in the position of having to choose between staying or going, between me or Xavier, would only put a damper on her joy of being with me today. This was, objectively, all I could have, because the drama at the pack house never ended. I was the Alpha. I had to get back, had to watch my mate re-enter that same *due destini* loop, being torn in two different directions, between two different men.

Once we got back to the pack house, the magic would be gone.

And I had so much bullshit to consider—the Seluna handprints, Lucian, the Vanguard pack, Aysel always causing new problems, Ava doing whatever the fuck she wanted while Xavier struggled to deal with her… All the things that I’d been able to put aside while in Portland, I would have to face once we were back.

“You’re not happy about leaving Portland tomorrow,” Cali said. “Are you?”

I looked down at her—her gaze was soft as she watched me.

“It’s like you can read my mind,” I said.

She yawned, nuzzling at my chest. “I like the sound of that.”

I snorted, glancing at her body. “Believe me, you don’t want to hear my every little thought.”

“Oh, *please*,” she muttered, closing her eyes. “I know you, Greyson. Right now, I bet you’re wishing we could stay like this forever.”

“You got two out of two—*when* did I become so easy to read?” I asked in pretend-outrage.

She giggled, then yawned again, sighing. “I feel the same way.”

I hugged her tight, kissing the top of her head. “I just love being with you. I missed it so much, and I… When we get back, I will do everything to make that possible. To keep you safe and happy, just like this. I’ll kiss you goodnight and good morning and…”

*And* she’d fallen asleep.

She must’ve been exhausted.

I smiled to myself, kissing her forehead. And with her in my arms, I was lulled to sleep as well.

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The sun rudely woke me up a few hours later.

After my mate had rested, we’d had sex again and again in the middle of the night—I just couldn’t goddamn get enough. How the hell was it morning already? I sighed deeply, trying to preserve this feeling—Cali was in my arms, her back to my front, her body soft and warm and smelling like fucking heaven.

I couldn’t help but kiss her exposed shoulder, ignoring Seluna’s handprint. She moaned softly and pushed back against me.

“Good morning,” I murmured, brushing my lips up her neck as my hand traced up her thigh. She shivered, her ass wiggling back, the friction making my hard-on fucking jump.

“Good morning to you too,” she said with a breathless little laugh.

When she faced me, she grinned wide. She looked so happy, it took my breath away.

Stroking my cheek, she whispered, “You’re so gorgeous in the morning.”

I snorted. “That’s my line.”

She smirked, all cheeky, and I leaned in and kissed her. It started with one little kiss, then a couple more, then Cali opened up her mouth for me, and I slipped my tongue inside. I kissed her long and deep and hard, hitching her leg over my hip just to feel and hear her whimper into my mouth. She shivered when I trailed my hand down her inner thigh, staring into her eyes.

“You want me to make you feel good?”

She bit her lip, nodding eagerly. Before she could say another word, I slid under the sheet. I hiked up her T-shirt—*my* T-shirt, the one she’d worn after we’d showered together—and kissed down her flushed chest, her soft, trembling stomach. Her hands flew to my hair, and she moaned, arching up to me. I spread her legs, my fingers hooking into the sides of her underwear to slide it down, my teeth grazing her inner thigh—

*CLASH!*

I jumped up, ready to fight an imaginary intruder, but then I realized it was just Cali.

She flailed, pointing at the floor. “The glass! On the nightstand! You did the thing, with your teeth, and I—”

I pressed my lips together, looking at the shattered pieces. “To think, I hadn’t even gotten to the main event.”

She blushed. “It’s not funny, Greyson!”

“Of course it’s not funny,” I deadpanned. “My morning is ruined now.”

She glanced at my crotch. “You still seem, uh, *happy*, though.”

I smirked. “I’m always happy when you’re around.”

Her whole face turning red, she rolled her eyes but laughed at the same time. She shook her head at me before she made a move to stand up. “I’ll just—”

“Oh, no,” I said, “I’ll deal with it. I don’t want you to cut your feet.”

“Just because you’re an Alpha werewolf, it doesn’t mean your feet won’t bleed,” she said pointedly.

“Yes, but mine will heal more quickly,” I said. “I promise I’ll be careful.”

I was ready to get out of bed when she put a hand on my back.

“Can’t we just stay in bed a little longer?” she asked hopefully.

The morning light made Cali look like some sort of hot sun goddess, straight out of one of my many fantasies. But, regretfully, I said, “I promise I will arrange to have many more mornings like this—minus the broken glass.”

Cali groaned and plopped back on the bed. “I hope I don’t have to wait too long.”

She kept grumbling about cockblocking glasses, and I had to laugh at her genuine outrage. I quickly picked up the biggest pieces of glass and tossed them away, and then I grabbed the broom.

As I finished up sweeping, she asked, “How are we supposed to know when it’s safe to go back, though?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“If we leave too soon, the ward might not take effect,” she said. “How are you feeling?”

I threw the glass away and returned to bed, to her. Leaning down, I cupped her face in my hands and kissed her softly. “I feel like I could do this all day.”

Cali swallowed roughly. “But what if we get back and find out the ward isn’t working?”

“I didn’t think about that. I just assumed we’ve been in Portland long enough.”

My mate seemed worried, though. “I don’t want to take any risks. Can’t we check with the witches before we go?”

**Episode 2510**

AVA

Xavier moaned softly into my mouth as our lips locked. He lay over me, pressing me down, the heat of him scorching, incredible. My mate. All I’d ever wanted.

All I had ever aspired to conquer.

“Xavier,” I breathed his name, wrapping my arms around him tight, only to realize…

My arms were empty. Xavier had slipped away, just out of my grasp. Always out of my grasp. I reached for him, choking on despair, but then my eyes flew open.

Xavier was gone.

I was in a strange, luxurious room. I’d opened my mouth to call for him when it hit me—it had been a dream. Nothing more. Even after I’d bared my damn soul to him, he’d humiliated me. He’d turned his back on me, seen me wiping tears, left me alone to cry, with nowhere to go.

I couldn’t go back to the pack house, not after what he’d said to me.

And even though Xavier had crushed me time and time again, somehow this last time had felt the worst. It had cut the deepest, and I felt trapped.

My wolf had trapped me, because I knew that even if I went back to the house, I would need to fight, tooth and nail, to stop myself from going to see him. My wolf would never let up—it didn’t understand humiliation. It didn’t see how pathetic this was, how crushed I felt, how with Xavier’s every rejection, my sense of self was being chipped away.

I had no idea who I was when I wasn’t begging for Xavier.

I made myself sick.

I’d been feeling that way since the night before—when I’d wandered away from the pack house, feeling as lost as I’d been when I was in the spirit world. And before I’d known it, I’d made my way to the Vanguard pack. The palace that I’d once helped Xavier, Cali, and Greyson escape from didn’t feel like a prison right now.

Aysel hadn’t asked me any questions the night before. She’d just accepted me and put me up in this amazing room. It had a four-poster bed, a silver tapestry on the walls, and marble floors. It was far more tasteful than I remembered. But as nice as it all looked, I didn’t feel comfortable.

Aysel had given me a few hours of solitude, but she’d want to talk soon.

She would ask again about us joining forces. She wanted me to help her win Greyson as if he were a prize, and with the promise that doing so would bring Xavier to me, it was tempting. It was horrible and degrading as a notion—that I’d have to stoop so low—but it was tempting.

After the night before, I was ready to try almost anything. *Almost*.

I just couldn’t shake the feeling of distrust I felt toward Aysel. My instincts said that she’d double-cross me in a heartbeat, but I’d do the exact same thing, so why should I expect anything more from her? Perhaps it would be worth it.

Perhaps selling what was left of my soul to the Vanguard princess was the way to go.

I couldn’t live through another brutal rejection—not like the one Xavier had thrown at me a few hours before. It had devastated me, made me angry—not with Xavier, but with myself. I hated myself as much as I loved him. I was breaking myself because of this mate bond.

My wolf was in complete control, and I was at its mercy—no longer a person, just a need.

I had become my need, only.

I was nothing else.

How could I have fallen this far?

Who had I been before I’d returned from the dead? Before Xavier had become the only thing that mattered to me? Had I been someone who even deserved his love to begin with?

A knock on the door startled me out of my thoughts.

“Come in,” I said, after clearing my throat.

A well-dressed male servant entered. “Good morning, Miss Reed. The prince and princess have requested your presence for breakfast.”

I was ready to say no and just leave the palace. But where would I go? Spending the night away from the pack house hadn’t resolved anything.

“Sure,” I said. “Let me get dressed.”

The stoic-looking servant remained by the door as I stood up. I realized I had no clothes—I had shifted when I’d left the pack house to catch up to Xavier. Even though werewolves wouldn’t blink an eye, I didn’t want to turn up naked to breakfast at a strange place, so I checked the closet.

Of course, Lucian had filled it with clothes.

The Vanguard pack probably had many werewolf visitors who needed clothing from time to time, for various reasons—shifting, or simply fucking. I grabbed some black leggings and a sports bra and headed to the bathroom to freshen up. I’d showered the night before, so now I just used a brand new toothbrush (I hoped) and combed through my hair with one of the brushes on the vanity.

I checked myself in the mirror.

For someone who had her soul crushed just a few hours earlier, I didn’t look it.

A few moments later, the servant escorted me to the dining room. I had no idea what to expect, but I could only wait and see.

Aysel and Lucian were seated at opposite ends of the table, with various pack members sitting along each side. I recognized Andrei, but not the others.

“Ahem.” The servant cleared his throat. “Your Royal Highness, your guest has arrived.”

Aysel looked up from the gorgeous breakfast spread. Even though the rest of the pack fell silent, she squealed when she saw me and gestured excitedly for me to approach. “There you are! Come sit with me!”

The servant led me toward the vacant seat beside Aysel. I was acutely aware of all the eyes following me. It didn’t faze me—I’d always attracted a certain amount of interest. At least Xavier hadn’t robbed me of that.

“How did your night go?” Aysel asked the second I took a seat next to her.

I ignored the thought of the dream I’d had with Xavier in it. “I slept very well,” I lied.

Aysel smiled, clearly pleased. The rest of the pack was still staring at me and whispering among themselves, and then Lucian spoke up.

“Hello, Aysel’s friend,” he said. “We met at one of our parties, isn’t that correct? Amy, right?”

I couldn’t even begin to imagine what was going on in Lucian’s head. He obviously didn’t remember the fact that I’d helped the *due destini* trio escape this very palace. I’d have been offended—except his not remembering me had just made my life easier.

“Ava,” I corrected him. Because even if he didn’t remember me, he could at least have the right name.

“Ah, yes,” Lucian said. “You’re the last of the Samara pack, its princess of sorts. Or at least, what’s left of it.” He gave me a performative, sad look. “Pity, really—sorry to hear about your brother.”

I had to stop the flinch at the memory of Nolan. He’d been ruthless, someone some might call a monster. But he’d been my family. I’d loved him regardless.

Perhaps abuse and rejection were simply a part of love, for me.

“Lucian!” Aysel scolded. “Don’t bring up such things first thing in the morning. Ava didn’t come here to dwell on the past.”

Lucian hummed, pointing at me with his fork. It felt like he’d remembered all there was to know about me, now. The escape thing included. Because he said, “I find it interesting that you spend so much time with the Redwood pack, Ava. Curious indeed.”

Before I could open my mouth to speak, Aysel said, “One reason: Xavier Evers.”

She said my mate’s name as if it were the answer to everything about me.

The entire pack was staring, and I hated to have my business discussed like this, in the open.

“Wait,” Lucian said, frowning. “Isn’t Xavier mated to Caliana?”

I pressed my lips together. “Xavier’s my mate, too.”

Lucian’s bi-colored eyes went wide. He leaned forward, suddenly full of interest. “Is Xavier a *due destini* mate as well?”

I felt the back of my neck heat up. This was such a fucking mess. “I—I was mated to Xavier before… It’s complicated.”

Lucian glanced around at his equally intrigued pack. And then he persisted. “Before what?”

Aysel mercifully put a stop to the interrogation. “Stop being so nosey, Lucian. It’s none of your business, only my own. Besides, don’t you have some brooding to do in the library?”

Lucian glared at her. “No. But I do have a massage scheduled.” He stood up from his chair. “You’ll have to excuse me, actually.”

As everybody said goodbye, he approached me and leaned down.

“Ava, dear, I would like to hear more about your complications,” he said, interest still evident in his gaze. “I’ve always been fascinated by mates who share.”

I didn’t reply, but that didn’t seem to put him off. He left without another word.

“Excuse my brother,” Aysel told me. “He’s been preoccupied lately.”

“With what, exactly?” I asked.

She waved me off. “Let’s ignore his nonsense and focus on you, sweetheart. How long do you plan on staying?” She placed her hand over mine on the table, fluttering her eyelashes. “You’re welcome to stay as long as you want.”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “But thank you.”

“Of course.” She smiled. “I didn’t ask last night, but I must admit that I’m curious. *Are* you here because of Xavier?”

I pulled my hand away, a lump forming in my throat. I didn’t want to talk about this, not in detail. I hoped a half-truth would satisfy Aysel. “Let’s just say that things didn’t go as I had hoped.”

Aysel put a hand on my arm. “I’m so sorry. Seems like we both know what it’s like to want someone who doesn’t yet feel the same.”

I didn’t tell Aysel that she was just a spoiled psychopathic brat, whereas I was someone who was being *forced* by goddamn nature to crave her mate.

Instead, I stared at her and said, “You said that there’s something I could do about that. Tell me exactly what you have in mind.”

**Episode 2511**

Greyson and I were about to arrive at the Rusty Wrench. I was sitting in the passenger seat, pouting as I stared up ahead. I did *not* want to get out of the car just yet. Because getting out of the car would mean finishing up all our business here in Portland, and then going back, and I…

*I don’t want to go back! I just want to stay here with Greyson. Naked, preferably.*

I knew it was selfish to feel like this, but doing all of this normal stuff with Greyson had felt so good. You know, up until I’d had that mate bond freak-out and thought something had happened to Xavier… But in the end, it had turned out fine. No, for real.

I knew that Xavier was all right—he’d said he was, and he’d sounded like he was, and it was a new day and all that. So far nothing had been ailing me—apart from some cockblocking shards of glass, but that was nothing in comparison to what could’ve been.

I turned to face Greyson. He was driving, wearing his sunglasses, and the light was hitting him just so… He looked amazing. Like some sort of luxury fashion brand model, or a god of the Grecian variety, like freaking Achilles or something.

He was so beautiful, I wasn’t sure how he was real.

I hadn’t been able to be affectionate with him for so long because of Aysel’s stupid spell, and now I couldn’t get enough. Was it so wrong that I wanted to linger in this feeling just for a little bit? I almost wished that his car would break down, or that it would start snowing heavily—some sort of delay that meant we would have to spend a little more time together, just the two of us. Alone.

*That’s not very fair to Xavier…*

Well, it hadn’t been fair to Greyson and me that we’d been cursed, so everything was a mess, wasn’t it?

“Hey,” Greyson said after parking the car. “What’s going on in your head right now? Everything okay?”

I shrugged. “I’m just looking at you.”

Greyson laughed and semi-blinded me with his beauty. It was ridiculous but true. “Looking at me?”

“Am I not allowed?” I feigned outrage. “I’ll have you know that you are way too good-looking *not* to be looked at, especially by your mate, and that is me. Forever and ever.”

Greyson chuckled and turned off the ignition. He shot a smirk my way, holding my hand as he leaned over to give me a peck on the lips. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

I gasped, semi-offended for real now. “*Not so bad?*”

He laughed again, and I loved that I could do that to him so easily. He kissed me again, this time stroking my cheeks, and I felt like I was floating. “You’re the most beautiful, funny, and caring woman I’ve ever met. I’d die without you.”

I melted. “Okay, but you’re *really* good at this whole sweet talk thing. We should kiss.”

He laughed again, because he clearly wanted me to accost him. “Let’s take care of the whole Lakini and Charon situation first,” he said, and unbuckled his seat belt.

I’d have preferred to have sex in the back seat of the car in broad daylight—I was ready to embrace my wild side again, not gonna lie—but apparently we had to do the responsible thing.

We got out of the car and headed into the bar, hand in hand. Greyson had called Charon and asked him to meet us at the Rusty Wench, and the warlock had agreed. Greyson had given Lakini a heads-up too, so everything should be okay.

*Hopefully those two haven’t killed each other…*

I was surprised that the bar was open so early—perhaps it was just for us? Either way, the bartender was here, and he didn’t look happy. He’d just come out from the back, lifting a case of beer.

“Good morning,” I chirped, waving at him with a smile.

He glared at me. Without a word, he dropped the case loudly on the counter.

“Rude,” I grumbled, looking up at Greyson.

He grinned. “You’re so cute.”

I smiled, happy again, despite the fact that the bar gave me a seriously creepy feeling. I couldn’t imagine working here every day, unless I was a big grumpy bartender who didn’t like to be greeted in the mornings.

*Asshole*.

“Hello?” Greyson called, holding my hand as we walked toward Lakini’s office. “Charon? Lakini?”

The silence was interrupted when there was a bit of a scuffle from behind the door. Suddenly, Lakini came out, her hair disheveled. She cleared her throat, looking us up and down. “Oh, hi, good to see you two.”

She adjusted her clothes, and I raised an eyebrow—why did she look out of breath? Was she working out or something? I was about to ask her when Charon came out from behind the door too, tucking in his shirt and smoothing his ruffled hair.

*Ahh.*

“Great, you’re both here!” he said happily.

I shot Greyson a look. *They were just making out, weren’t they?*

*Yep*, he mind linked back.

*They must’ve settled their differences*, I noted, and Greyson snorted under his breath as Lakini ushered us into a booth. She and Charon followed, and then I saw her swat his hand away, like—oh my god, did he just pinch her? In public?

“… oh, hush,” Charon said in a louder voice in response to whatever Lakini had whispered before the two of them sat down. “There’s no reason for us to hide our reunion.”

“One night doesn’t solve everything,” Lakini said seriously, pointing at us. “And I’m sure Greyson and Cali didn’t come here to talk about you and me.”

Charon pouted.

Lakini turned to Greyson. “Did you have some questions about the ward?”

“We followed your instructions and stayed the night in Portland, but I wanted to make sure everything’s okay,” Greyson explained. I blushed, thinking about how we’d spent the night, as Greyson added, “We want to make sure the ward is working.”

“Is it safe to go back?” I asked both of them.

Some sick part of me wanted them to say no. I shook it off. I had to remember the pack. And most importantly: Xavier.

“I can always try to put a spell on you to see if you’re in the clear,” Charon offered. “What do you want me to do?”

“We can pick?” I asked.

Greyson’s voice was wry. “This ought to be interesting.”

I smacked his arm as Charon said, “I can do a shifter spell, the hair color spell… Or how about levitation?”

“I prefer to keep my feet on the ground,” Greyson deadpanned.

“I have an idea!” I said, clapping my hands. “Can you make him sparkle, like in *Twilight*?”

Both Lakini and Charon stared at me with raised eyebrows.

“What?” I asked defensively.

“Go ahead,” Greyson said to Charon, snorting. “Give it a shot.”

Charon shrugged and snapped his fingers, but Greyson wasn’t sparkling.

Lakini smirked at me. “Do you really want to see him sparkle?”

“Yes, please,” I said excitedly.

She grinned and snapped her fingers. When I looked at Greyson again, he was sparkling like a much more ruggedly handsome Edward Cullen.

*Be still my beating heart!*

“This really works for you, huh?” Greyson teased, nudging me. I was so embarrassed, but also I nodded, because I couldn’t lie to him.

“*Anyway*,” Lakini said, unfortunately taking the sparkling spell away, “there’s your proof that the ward to keep Charon from casting spells on Greyson is working, so you two have nothing to worry about. By waiting overnight, you made it stronger.”

I was both disappointed and relieved.

*But we’ll have to keep this going—at least for Aysel.*

I wasn’t quite an Oscar-winning actress, but if it meant keeping Greyson safe, I was going to do my absolute very best to keep Aysel from finding out. Since I couldn’t fight Aysel right now, and I had the Seluna marks, that would have to do. I didn’t want Aysel to get another witch or warlock and do something worse as revenge…

*I’d expect anything from a horrid villain like her, honestly!*

“Thank you both,” Greyson said, looking at Charon and Lakini. “But if it’s all the same, I hope never to have to see you again.”

This made the couple laugh, though I was pretty sure Greyson wasn’t joking.

“Likewise,” Lakini said. “Hopefully it’s not too soon, but if you’re ever in need of anything, you know where to find us.”

I definitely caught the “us” there, and the way the two of them looked at each other. They were definitely rekindling things, huh? My speech must have worked.

*Hopefully they don’t kill each other.*

Charon’s phone rang that same second, and he jumped in surprise.

Lakini frowned. “Who’s calling you this early?”

Charon glanced at his phone, and his expression turned alarmed. “It’s Aysel.” He looked up at Greyson and me. “What should I do?”

**Episode 2512**

I gulped, grabbing Greyson’s hand instinctively. He was big and strong and all that, but my urge to protect him couldn’t be controlled.

“Is there a way Aysel could have found out what happened?” I asked Charon. I knew that logically that couldn’t be the case, but fear didn’t listen to logic.

Unless she’d noticed the tarot card missing…

“I didn’t tell her,” Charon said earnestly, and Lakini nodded as if to highlight his admission.

Greyson squeezed my hand and gestured to Charon curtly, looking cool. “Answer it.”

Charon turned to Lakini, who said, “Do it.”

Charon took a deep breath before picking up and putting the call on speakerphone. My heart was pounding.

*Fucking Aysel! Can’t she just LEAVE US ALONE?*

“Charon! Good morning, darling!”

I blinked in shock at the sound of her voice. She sounded… *sweet*?

*Gag. No, I mean, GAG.*

“Aysel, hi,” Charon said, sounding friendly but visibly cringing. “How are you doing?”

“Just wanted to check in and make sure you received payment for the little spell I had you perform for me,” Aysel said, still sweetly.

“I got it, thanks so much,” Charon said.

“I apologize for the delay,” Aysel said, sighing loudly. “Things have been hectic at home. My brother is going through something.”

I squinted at the phone suspiciously. *Interesting*. What could Lucian be going through? Granted, the last time I’d seen him he was kind of a mess. He’d seemed really caught up in the Seluna stuff, and the idea of seeing her again. He was really obsessed with her, actually. Could things have gotten worse since the pool party?

*Seluna did seem pretty angry at him for contacting her before she contacted him…*

It had been like watching a weird lover’s spat.

“Sorry to hear that, Aysel,” Charon said, and he did sound worried. Damn, this guy could really have been an actor, huh? “Anything I can help with?”

Aysel sighed heavily, again. “No, I’ll deal with it in my own time. I just wanted to say thanks, and to apologize again. The spell has been great, though—it’s done *exactly* what I needed it to.”

If I could’ve reached through the phone and strangled Aysel, I totally would have.

*But the spell didn’t keep us apart for very long*, Greyson mind linked. He brought my hand up to his lips and kissed it, his eyes burning. My rage was slightly appeased. *Slightly*.

“That’s great,” Charon said, and Aysel laughed.

“It really, truly is,” she said, her voice full of glee.

*I’m gonna set you on fire, you horrible swamp monster!* I screamed inside my head. *No, that’s offensive to swamp monsters! Aysel is worse!*

“Well, if that’s all—you know where to find me,” Charon said, clearing his throat. “Let me know if you need anything.”

After a few more pleasantries, they hung up.

“Didn’t seem like she knew anything had changed, right?” I asked.

Charon shook his head.

“That’s good,” Greyson said. “You were really good with her.”

“A great liar,” Lakini said, raising an eyebrow.

“Thank you for keeping our secret,” I told Charon.

He shook his head. “Thank you for knocking some sense into me. The path I was on was a messy one, not where I wanted to be.” He turned to Lakini, staring. “Definitely not where I needed to be.”

“That’s good to hear,” Greyson said.

“I’ll keep the secret as long as I can. I won’t be the one to offer anything up to Aysel,” he said, and Lakini nodded.

“You two have my word as well,” she said.

The four of us shook hands, and it felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

*Is this real life? IS IT?* I wondered dreamily as we stepped out onto the sidewalk. The sun was shining down on us, I was with my mate, and we were free.

“We’re free!” I squealed, and threw my arms around Greyson.

He chuckled, hugging me back before smoothing out my hair. “You good?”

I nodded against him, feeling a little emotional. “I just can’t believe we actually DID IT. We got rid of the Aysel spell, we dealt with the Fae promise… It’s just incredible that we got through everything without causing any more problems.”

Greyson grinned at me. “Don’t you know by now that the two of us can do anything together?”

I turned into goo as he kissed the top of my head and led me back to the car. My stomach was full of all these happy fluttery feelings—the past few hours had been so amazing that the next question I had to ask him almost made me wince.

“I was wondering…” I paused. “How are we going back to the pack house?”

“You have two choices,” Greyson said. He thankfully seemed unfazed. “We can take the quick route, or the scenic route. It’s up to you.”

I realized that the quick way would be him shifting and me riding on his back. That was tempting—I loved the feel of holding him tight when he was in wolf form. But also, I knew that the scenic route would mean a long, leisurely drive with Greyson, a real way of holding onto the magic we’d shared.

The longer we took, though, the more anxious Xavier would get.

I decided on what I knew we had to do. “If you don’t mind, maybe we could take the fast route?”

Greyson took a step closer as I leaned against the car. He lowered his head to face me, brushing his mouth to the corner of my lips before he muttered, “I get it. I wish we could stay longer, but I get it.”

My stomach clenched. “I want to stay too, but—”

“I know,” he said, smiling a little. “It’s all good.” He raised an eyebrow. “We can still have breakfast before we head home, right? You shouldn’t travel on an empty stomach.”

I didn’t see how an hour was going to matter too much either way, so I said, “Very true, and also I’m starving.”

He grinned. “Me too. We probably burned off too many calories last night.”

“Of *course* you’d tease me about that.” I snorted, more than a little flustered. The memory made me feel like the cat that got the cream.

Greyson smirked as if he could read my thoughts. “I know this great place that I used to go to a lot, actually. It’s not fancy, but the food is Instagrammable. Does that sound good?”

I looked up at him, smiling. “It sounds perfect.”

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Greyson drove us to the restaurant. He was right—the food looked amazing, and tasted just as good. I got the pancakes, Greyson got the French toast and waffles because he literally ate like a wolf, and we got fruit bowls as well, plus coffee and orange juice.

I took a bunch of pictures of the food and him with it, and he smiled so widely and looked so sweet that I kind of wanted to cry just looking at him. I asked a bunch of questions about how he’d found this place, and he asked me how *Twilight: New Moon* ended, and the conversation flowed wonderfully…

Until it didn’t.

As the breakfast wound down and the waitress took our empty plates, both of us went quiet. I stared at him as he sipped the last of his coffee, and my heart ached.

“Are you sad we have to go back?” I asked softly.

He shrugged. “I am. But at least we can hug and kiss each other when we do get back without worrying about making each other sick.”

I smiled, reaching out to hold his back. “You’re right. That’s finally over.”

He kissed the top of my hand and called for the check.

“You wanna go for a walk around the block before we leave? It’s a picturesque neighborhood,” Greyson said after we got outside.

I knew he was just trying to stretch out the time we had together, and I couldn’t blame him. I felt the exact same way. The silence stretched, though, and my heart pounded while we rounded the block toward his car.

*This has to end… But I don’t want it to.*

The thought made me feel bad for Xavier, but I knew I loved him too. I just… I just hadn’t been so happy in a while. So carefree.

“So we’re gonna do it like this,” Greyson said, then, interrupting my thoughts. “I’ll drive us back to my apartment so we can leave the car there, and then we’ll take the woods home.”

“How long will the run take?” I asked.

“About an hour, once we start.”

*That’s so soon*, I thought, my stomach clenching uncomfortably.

As Greyson led me to the car, I watched his profile. I could tell he was trying to look nonchalant, but I could see a pout forming on his mouth. I couldn’t stop myself from saying, “Okay, look—I know we both wish we could stay, and we can’t.”

His eyes crinkled. He didn’t see mad. Just… resigned. “I understand. It is what it is, love.”

My heart ached for him. For *us*.

“I need you to know that I will never forget this moment with you.” I stretched up onto my tiptoes to kiss him—

And was hit by a wave of nausea.

**Episode 2513**

LOLA

For someone who was, in theory, Alpha material, Ravi sure was intense about his pancake art.

“No! You’re doing it all wrong!” he told Torin, gesturing wildly at a stack of pancakes.

Torin, bless his heart, was equally offended. “Let’s make this a face-off, then, sir. Holiday-themed pancake art—a race, just the two of us!”

I looked between them, and if I was being honest here—which I always tried to be, despite any and all disastrous consequences—it was way too damn early for this. Nursing my second cup of coffee, I sat at the dining table and watched as the spectacle unfolded before me.

And then Ravi accidentally spilled some of the batter on the hot griddle, and it practically ruined all his artwork.

Artemis and Rishika gasped in unison, bellowing, “Oh, NO!”

I squinted at them and their mesmerized expressions. Were they for real?

“This is ridiculous. We all know that, right?” I asked.

“Yes, but it’s fun. Don’t you know that too?” Jay teased. When I looked up, he leaned down and kissed my cheek.

“At least the coffee’s good,” I grumbled, taking another sip. It was probably good because I hadn’t made it. I eyed Jay’s beautiful, muscular back as he made a plate for himself, chattering with Torin, and then I looked around the dining area.

Everyone was down here—Artemis and Rishika were making eyes at each other, Sage and Zainab were consoling Ravi over his disastrous pancake decoration attempt, and Tom was showing Orla the pancake portrait he’d made of her, which actually did look like her. I was amazed, honestly.

As I looked around at the pack engaging in various social rituals, I realized that Jacs hadn’t come downstairs yet. Was she still mad at me for using her name at the diner? She’d never explained her reaction—why would she be so alarmed about some guy finding her?

Who was that guy?

She’d refused to tell me what was going on, so I’d just tried to make things better by telling her that there were probably hundreds of Jacqueline Markovs running around in the world. Jacs had just thrust out her chin and told me to leave her alone, which was just bizarre.

I knew that Jacs was a drama queen—she made me look tame—but even this seemed off the charts. What was the big deal? And if my using her name was a big deal, why wouldn’t she help me realize what was up?

I did feel a little guilty about the whole thing, though. I knew that Jacs had been having a hard time fitting in at the pack house. I hadn’t meant to do anything to upset her, but how could I have known that she’d go off like this?

“Lola.” Xavier’s usual curt tone broke me out of my thoughts. Without any other greeting, he sat on the bench next to me, munching on a reindeer-shaped pancake that I was pretty sure he hadn’t made. “You don’t have to worry about the Ava stuff anymore.”

I blinked in surprise. “What? Why?”

He shrugged. “I took care of it,” he said, biting the reindeer’s head off.

I gasped at the sight of such a thoughtless decapitation and blurted out, “Wait, you *killed* her?”

Xavier arched an eyebrow at me, pausing mid-bite. “As tempting as that sounds, no. I just made it clear that she’s not welcome here anymore.”

“But what about your wolf? Didn’t he—”

“My wolf is here, with me. It’s fine,” Xavier barked, then walked off to look at Ravi’s disastrous pancake art.

I was about to follow him and ask more questions—because what the fuck was happening right now?—but Jay was back. He placed a hand on my shoulder, keeping me seated. “Lola, leave him be.”

I scowled. “Why?”

“Do you really think he’s gonna tell you anything more if he doesn’t want to?” Jay asked, squinting at me.

I huffed. “Okay, that’s a good point.”

“Xavier said he dealt with it, so leave it be,” Jay said. “You don’t have to snoop around the diner anymore, and you won’t have to scheme to reunite the Samara pack.”

I stood up, leveling Jay with a stare. “But how can Xavier expect Ava to just stay away?”

Jay sighed just as Xavier walked past us. I grabbed him by the arm and asked, “What about what I told you? About Ava meeting with Aysel?”

Xavier stared at me in that serious, broody way of his that Cali found attractive for some reason. “What about it?”

I couldn’t let this slide. “Didn’t you confront Ava about it? Why did she do it? Did she say why?” I asked anxiously.

“Didn’t ask her. I’d been waiting to see if she’d offer the information up herself, and she didn’t,” he said. “She’s a liar, but what else is new?”

“But—”

“She’s demonstrated more about herself by not admitting it than if she had, Lola,” Xavier declared. “Let it go.”

“But that’s not enough!” I exclaimed. “If Ava lied, there must be a reason. She really could be working with Aysel, and who knows what they’re up to! Shouldn’t we nip this in the bud? It doesn’t only put the Redwoods at risk, but probably Cali too.”

Xavier’s eyes darkened. He stared at me as if I were a reindeer pancake he wanted to decapitate. “Drop it, Lola. As far as I’m concerned, Ava is no longer part of my life. I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

He walked away, and when I made a move to follow him, Jay blocked my way. “Lola, no.”

I glared. “Lola, *yes*!” I pointed at Xavier’s retreating back. “Xavier is hiding something, I can tell!”

Jay rubbed his temples. “Lola, *please*. Let. It. Go.”

“How can I? This is so weird!” I hissed. “Do you really believe Xavier believes Ava is out of his life? What kind of denial is *that*?”

Jay stared at me. “If he wants to be in denial, then so be it.”

“Seriously? Do *you* believe Ava is going to leave Xavier alone?” I demanded.

“I doubt it,” Jay said seriously. “But for now, Xavier needs his space.” He looked over at the counter. “And I need another pancake, and a second cup of coffee.”

“But I only got involved in this to help Xavier! We all know we can’t trust Ava—it’s completely obvious—so why should I just let it go? I’ll wait until Cali is back—see what she thinks about it.”

Jay groaned. “Don’t you think Xavier should be the one to tell Cali? Why are you getting so involved?”

“Because Cali is my friend,” I declared. “My best friend.”

He pointed at his chest. “And you know Xavier is mine. Despite what he may say or do, this Ava thing has been a struggle for him. Don’t make it worse.”

I pouted, and Jay sighed, taking my hand.

“Lola,” he said. “I don’t want to argue with you about this. Can you please stop fixating on it?”

*Easier said than done*. Internally, I decided that I’d talk to Cali about it anyway—I’d just have to wait till she got home. I knew that was what my friend would want—Cali wasn’t a “let it go” kind of person, either. That was why our personalities matched up so perfectly—we were made of the same material, though I was naturally overwhelmingly confident for reasons that nobody exactly knew.

“Fine,” I told Jay, rolling my eyes.

“Thank you,” he said. Then he smiled, looking relieved and delicious. He was lucky he was so hot. It was the only reason why I tolerated his “let’s keep a cool head” nonsense.

“By the way…” I looked around and saw Rishika talking to Violet, and Artemis discussing something with her mom and Tom. “Have you talked to Jacs this morning? Has she come down yet?”

“No,” Jay said.

I scowled. “She’s probably waiting until I’m done having breakfast. I should probably go to her room and apologize again.”

“You do that,” Jay said, and pointed at the counter. “And I’ll go try out Ravi’s pancakes. He’ll probably get offended if I only eat Torin’s.”

Jay proceeded in his quest for breakfast food, and I headed upstairs, going over the information I already had. How could I apologize to Jacs more than I already had? What more did she want from me? Crying? Begging? A massage? I probably wasn’t good at those.

Even more irritated than I had been before, I knocked on Jacs’s door. No response. I huffed. Did I have to grovel? Was that what she wanted? If that was the case, then I’d grovel, dammit!

“Jacs, come on.” I knocked again, more loudly. “I just want to talk. Be nice, for once in your life.”

I knocked again, hard enough that this time the door slid open. It hadn’t been locked.

The room was empty, and all of Jacs’s stuff was gone.

*She* was gone.

**Episode 2514**

I steadied myself against the car, and Greyson held me tight. His brow furrowed, he stared down at me. “What is it? Are you okay?”

I swallowed roughly. “I don’t feel so well.”

He immediately put an arm around me. “Do you want to lie down?”

I placed a hand on my stomach. “I just—I feel nauseous…” Dread filled me. “Could it be the revulsion spell?” I looked up at him. “Have Lakini and Charon tricked us?”

“No,” Greyson said, right away. “It can’t be the revulsion spell. I don’t feel sick at all.”

I looked down at myself, panicking. “Shit, did the ward go wrong? Is this some sort of side effect?”

My questions didn’t stop there, but for Greyson’s sake, I screamed them inside my head instead.

*Oh my god. Will this happen every time I kiss anyone? Will I feel sick to my stomach? I can’t face going through what happened with Greyson again and have it happen to Xavier, too!*

“You’re going to be fine,” Greyson said soothingly. “I’ll go get some ginger ale to help settle your stomach, okay?”

“No, there’s no concrete studies that even helps! And don’t go! I’m sure it’ll pass…” I breathed sharply as the feeling got worse and another thought entered my mind.

*Shit… What if it’s not the spell? Could I be pregnant?*

Greyson and I *had* just had some serious marathon sex.

*Oh my god, Cali, you’re on the pill!* I reminded myself. *And it’s not like someone who’s pregnant gets sick the day after they conceive!*

But what if Greyson being Alpha meant he had supercharged sperm or something?

A nightmare scenario started unravelling inside my head. What would I tell my mom and dad? What would I say to Xavier? Would that be like making a choice? If I were pregnant, would Xavier, like, *DIE*? Because of the *due destini* curse or just out of heartache?

*Oh my god.*

“Cali, look at me,” Greyson said, his calm voice pulling me out of the spiral. I stared, panting as he asked, “Is it possible you have food poisoning?”

I paused. I hadn’t even considered that. It would be so normal!

“Do you think I do?” I asked hopefully.

He squinted. “Why do you seem happy to have food poisoning?”

I chuckled awkwardly. “Um, it makes more sense—I’d rather have food poisoning than take on another curse.”

He raised his eyebrows, unlocking the car. “I’d rather you had neither.” He reached inside and offered me a water bottle from the driver’s side compartment.

“Thank you,” I muttered.

“Do you want to sit down?” he asked. “There’s a park around the corner. Or I could take you back to the restaurant; I can carry you in case you—”

I raised a hand. “Let’s just go back to the apartment.”

“We can wait there until you feel better. No need to make the long trip home immediately,” Greyson said. He was full of worry and attentiveness, while I was a weak, mostly-human nightmare who was ruining our amazing trip together.

“I’m so sorry this happened.”

“What are you talking about?” He pushed my hair back, looking into my eyes. “This isn’t your fault. I just need to make sure you’re feeling better.”

“But I really am sorry. I’m just a mess, and you—”

A horrifying burping sound escaped my mouth, and my hand flew up to cover it.

*What kind of demon just escaped my insides?*

I could not *believe* I’d just done that in front of Greyson. Would the humiliation NEVER END?

Greyson, for his part, just grinned cheekily. “That is the most insanely cute burp I’ve ever heard in my life.”

“This is the most embarrassing moment of my entire life, and that’s saying a lot, considering who I am,” I said.

Greyson laughed, and I realized that I actually felt better. Could that have been it? That I’d needed to burp like a baby?

*Good god.*

“How’s your stomach now?” he asked, smirking.

“I still want to die, but I’m feeling much better,” I admitted begrudgingly.

He kept on grinning like some sort of mischievous prince, while I was a burping monster. “The important thing is you feel better. No curse, no worries.”

I couldn’t believe I’d done that in front of Greyson. But he was being so cool about it. That had to be true love, right? Not that I ever doubted it, but if I ever did, this memory would prove my worries were misplaced.

“Can we go back to your apartment now?” I asked.

He smiled, holding my hand. “Yes.”

Greyson checked in with me every few minutes during the ride to his place, and I felt very awkward but also very cared for. He was such a catch. I’d been panicked about having morning sickness, but that wasn’t because I didn’t want to *ever* have his kid—just not right now.

I was only twenty years old, and in no hurry to raise a child. And what about Xavier? We’d talked about that before. It wasn’t the time for it. But if the *due destini* continued on its course and one day I did want a child, would I have to have a baby with both of them to please the curse? Would everything need to continue to be evenly matched? But when we would know for sure if the curse was gone? I didn’t want a baby right now—I was still a baby myself!

*Cali, calm down*, I told my brain. *It was just a burp.*

By the time we arrived at Greyson’s apartment, I was still embarrassed, but there was no longer any hint of nausea.

“You sure you’re okay?” Greyson asked for the millionth time.

“Stop fussing over me,” I huffed. “I’m fine.”

He raised an eyebrow.

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, I like it when you fuss over me. But seriously, I don’t feel sick anymore.”

“And you don’t want to go upstairs for a few minutes before we head back?” he asked, eyebrows still raised.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Are you suggesting something? Would we just go up to relax, or do you have something else in mind?”

Now that the nausea was gone, I was totally game for more sex. I’d obviously developed a problem—a Greyson addiction, almost, and the first step was admitting it.

But he laughed. “Cali, my thoughts are pure, I promise.”

I couldn’t relate.

“I just want to make sure you’re okay before the ride back. If you want to lie down or anything,” he explained.

I paused for a moment, tempted by various thoughts, but then I shook my head and told myself to get a grip. “I feel well enough to start back now, if that’s okay with you.”

“Anything you want,” he said, leaning over to kiss my cheek. I was definitely looking forward to getting on his wolf’s back and feeling his powerful body beneath me.

*I’m a heathen, aren’t I? This is what has become of me!*

After Greyson locked the car up, he led me to the woods behind the building. He took a step back, looking around to make sure we were alone, and then his hands reached for his belt.

“Okay then,” I mumbled awkwardly. “You’re getting naked now.”

“It’s nothing you haven’t seen before,” he said with a playful smile.

*Or licked before*, my brain added helpfully.

I was out of control.

Greyson wasn’t helping any. His gaze remained on me as he handed me each and every item of his clothing so I could put it in my backpack. I kept stealing glances at his increasingly naked body, mainly because I had very little shame left.

“All done, then?” I asked morosely in a high-pitched voice after the last item was secured in my bag.

Instead of answering my entirely unnecessary question, Greyson gripped my wrist and pulled me in for deep kiss that made my knees weak. I wrapped my arms around his neck and deepened the kiss instantly, enjoying the feeling of his massive hard *everything* against me.

*You’re supposed to be going back home now!*

I forced myself to let him go, panting a little as he stepped back. With a mischievous look on his face, he said, “Don’t worry, love. I’ll be sure to make this a smooth ride.”

And then he shifted into his wolf, still looking glorious.

Five minutes later, I was holding tight onto his back as we raced through the woods. Every other moment, he kept mind linking me, asking the same thing.

*Are you okay? Feeling good?*

And every time, I said, *I’m okay! Don’t worry.*

I was truly okay, actually—more than okay, because I loved how attentive Greyson was being. Though I still wished I could take that damned burp back. I would’ve preferred to have suffered through several hours of nausea, which was probably a problematic thing to think, but whatever.

When we finally got to the pack house, Greyson lowered himself down, and I jumped off his back. Once he shifted back to human, he turned to me right away.

Before he could speak, I said, “I’m good!” I gestured at myself. “See? All in one piece.”

He grinned. “Just checking.” He nodded at my backpack. “Can I have my clothes now, please?”

I raised an eyebrow, glancing down at him. “I don’t know. I might want to enjoy the view.”

He smirked, walking up to me. “And here I thought you were too shy to admit it.”

“Not after last night,” I said. My cheeks heated up, but I loved flirting with him.

He laughed, crossing his arms over his chest. His voice lowered as he said, “You could take a picture; it would last—”

“Guys, so glad you’re back!” Sage ran up to us, waving wildly, and reality came crushing back into place.

We were definitely not in Portland anymore.

“Something’s come up,” she said. “You’d better get inside.”

**Episode 2515**

“Is something wrong?” I asked Sage, alarmed.

Greyson took the backpack from me, reached inside, and pulled his clothes out, quickly getting dressed while Sage replied, “I’m not sure, but Rishika asked me to make you sure I told her the minute you got back, and here you are.”

“But you look so nervous,” I said, actually feeling a little annoyed. Was she trying to give me a heart attack here?

“Better not keep Rishika waiting,” Greyson said, leading the way back in.

“She was pretty adamant,” Sage agreed, keeping pace.

I knew better than to test Rishika’s patience myself, so I didn’t inquire further as we made our way up the porch steps. Sage rubbed a hand along the back of her neck as we hustled.

Sage paused by the porch. “Sorry,” she said sheepishly. “Rishika was talking to Violet right before, and they both looked super troubled and wouldn’t tell me what was up, and I just—”

“Hey,” Greyson said, resting his hand on Sage’s shoulder. “It’s fine. I’m here. I’ll take care of everything.”

Sage looked up at him with wide eyes and nodded. It was incredible how these big bad fighter werewolves could get all fidgety like bunny rabbits, and all it took to settle them down was the Alpha.

“Go inside,” Greyson told Sage. “Tell Rishika I’ll be right in.”

Sage vanished inside, and all I could think was that I was so lucky to have had these amazing fleeting moments with Greyson in Portland. We’d never be able to be so intimate and carefree at the pack house. There was always something going on, something dangerous or at least worrisome, and Greyson had to be on constant alert. Though what was so important right now, I couldn’t even imagine.

*It’s just always something!*

“We’d better get inside too,” I told him. “Rishika must be—”

He didn’t let me finish my sentence. He pulled me in for a kiss, a soft one that deepened. I clutched him, wrapping my arms around his neck, and when we broke apart, I looked up at him, dazed.

“What was that for?” I asked breathlessly.

He kissed my cheek, then my nose. “I just want to remind you what we’re capable of.”

*Damn*, I thought. *He really is very good at this boyfriend thing, huh?*

I hugged him tight, nuzzling his chest. “I wish we could have stayed in our little bubble forever.”

“We’ll have other, better times, I promise,” he said, kissing me one last time before opening the door for me to enter first.

“Here goes nothing,” I said, and he snorted, following me inside.

It was good to be here, though, despite everything that was waiting for us. The pack house smelled like my memories of home—when my mom or dad had cooked something amazing. I had a feeling that my dad probably taught Torin one of his old recipes and that was why the house smelled so good right now. We were all part of one big, funny, messy family, and even if it gave me trouble from time to time, I loved it.

This was my home now.

“Good to see you’re back, guys,” a voice said. I turned to see Rishika walking up to us. We all entered the living room as she added, “Greyson, we need to talk.”

Violet followed right behind. She gave me a half-hearted wave, and all my fuzzy feelings took a back seat.

“What’s going on?” Greyson asked, cutting right to the chase. At least he had no issue stepping right into his Alpha position, as if he’d never left.

“We maybe have a situation,” Rishika said.

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “*Maybe?* What does that even mean?”

“I think…” Violet started, swallowing audibly as she glanced upward. “I think I saw a drone.”

My stomach dropped.

*Shit! Didn’t the hunters use drones? Are they coming after Violet again?*

I squeezed her shoulder, trying to comfort her. “That must’ve been really scary—I’m so sorry.”

“Please tell me what happened. Don’t spare any details,” Greyson told Violet.

“We were on a run, and….”

As Violet explained, I spotted Charlie hovering behind her in the hallway. He approached, his expression both somber and worried.

“Charlie,” Greyson said after Violet was done. “Do you have anything to add?”

“I didn’t see the drone, and neither did Lilac,” Charlie said, taking Violet’s hand.

She cringed. “I’m not one hundred percent sure I saw it, either—it happened so fast. Lilac thought I imagined it.”

“We’re exploring every possibility right now,” Greyson told Violet. “You did good, letting us know what happened—even if you’re not sure.”

Greyson’s certainty and ease seemed to calm Violet down. It was awesome how he didn’t accuse Violet of letting her imagination get the better of her. Even if he didn’t believe her, he was willing to listen and respect her feeling of unease. I felt like this was what made him a great leader, and it had to be why Rishika had picked him as her choice for Alpha.

“What’s going on?” said a familiar gruff voice, interrupting my thoughts.

I looked at the living room doorway. Xavier. His blue eyes were fixed on me, his soft, dark hair smoothed back after a shower, and when I saw him, my heart swelled. An electrifying feeling coursed through me, and without thinking, I ran into his arms.

He wrapped me up in a hug, and we held each other for a moment, neither of us speaking. I knew Greyson was watching, but my mate bond with Xavier tugged me forward, settled me close to him, eager to be fed and nourished after last night’s scare.

*How could I ever live without him?* I thought.

Which was what I’d thought about Greyson, too.

I felt a dull pang in my heart. Sometimes this *due destini* madness hurt in ways that made it feel impossible to deal with. Feeling completely torn between the two of them while wanting a normal life for us both really hammered that home.

“Hey,” Xavier said, pulling back to face me. His lips were pursed, but I could see the contentment in his gaze. The mate bond thrived between us, and the instinctive feeling I got was *ease*.

“Hi,” I whispered, stroking his cheek.

“Good to see you, Xavier,” Greyson said from behind me.

He’d walked up to us, and I broke my embrace with Xavier. Xavier’s dark eyes drifted to Greyson, and he nodded brusquely. The feeling of standing between them was so familiar. I was back at it again, stuck in the middle, and I’d only been back at the pack house for a second.

“I…” I had no idea what the hell I was supposed to say.

But of course, Greyson did.

“Everything’s good, love,” he said. “I need to catch up with Violet’s report, and any other Alpha business. Why don’t you relax, settle back in, see your mom? We’ll talk later.”

I nodded, and he kissed my cheek, returning to Violet and Rishika and Charlie after shooting me a warm look. It was pretty obvious that he’d given me an out—an opportunity to spend some time with Xavier. And he’d done it in the most socially savvy, casual way possible, which… Well, I couldn’t relate.

*I have no idea if I could ever be the bigger person in a situation like this*, I mused.

“I’ll bring this up to your room,” Xavier said.

I turned to look at him. He’d picked up my backpack and was holding out his hand for me. We climbed the stairs, his skin warm against mine, his grip firm like he’d never let go.

The moment we got into my room, he tossed the bag on the bed and wrapped his arms around my waist, planting his hand at the back of my neck before he kissed me. Hard. I melted into it—the intensity with which I’d missed him rose the surface, the need to keep him and feel him so strong after the way I’d felt the night before.

I’d been a little worried about how he might react when I walked in with Greyson, knowing we’d been alone in Portland for the night. But if Xavier was upset, he wasn’t showing it. He just kissed me and made me dizzy with it before breaking it off and staring deep into my eyes.

“Are you okay?” he breathed against my lips.

“Yes. You?” I asked.

“Even after you told me not to come last night, I was still thinking about it,” he muttered. “In the end, I decided I trusted you. But if you’d wanted me there, I would’ve run to you in a heartbeat.”

“I know,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m sorry—I know I left you a million messages after I got that weird feeling, but I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I’m just glad you called and that everything’s okay. You are okay, right?” He lifted my chin, making me face him. “You can always be honest with me.”

I let out an awkward little laugh, shaking my head. “I wish we could mind link long distance. That way I could’ve just told you right away.”

He smirked. “I guess we’ll have to settle with texting and phone calls.”

“It’s just…” I swallowed, fiddling with the buttons of his shirt. “It was a little scary, honestly.”

“What was?” he asked.

“The feeling. The reason why I called you so many times,” I whispered. “It was this unsettling sensation that something was happening to our mate bond…”

He stayed dead silent. Had it all been in my head?

“Are you sure you didn’t notice anything unusual?” I asked him.

His brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

Swallowing thickly, I asked, “Did anything happen while you were out running last night, Xavier?”

**Episode 2516**

XAVIER

My jaw tightened. How could I explain to Cali what had happened with Ava? I was still trying to make sense of it myself. I couldn’t lie to Cali, but did I have to reveal everything?

There were some things that I knew would only make her upset, and justifying my wolf-crazed brain right now would not help my mood either. I thought I could at least spare her some of the madness.

In a flash, I remembered the shower scene that had led me to running—the temptation I had felt, jarring and instinctual. How my senses had gone haywire seeing Ava naked and wet, touching herself. Ultimately, though, I had taken control of my wolf and walked away.

That had to count for something.

That had to count for everything.

I felt like shit, but what was done was done. And the bottom line remained the same.

“I confronted Ava last night,” I said.

Cali’s eyes widened. “Why? What happened?”

A twinge of guilt hit me, making my stomach clench. “I got tired of her constantly trying to get me back, always hanging around the pack house. I finally decided I’d had enough, and I told her to forget it.”

There. That was the truth. Basically. Mostly.

It was enough. *Right?*

Cali squinted at me. “But you’ve told her that before. Like, a million times.”

“I know,” I said. “But I was even harsher than usual.”

“In what way?” Cali asked quietly. I could feel her anxiety, and a hint of excitement—as if she couldn’t believe this was finally happening. I couldn’t, either.

My wolf hadn’t sought out Ava yet, and I prayed that that would continue to be the case. He was fucking purring at the moment, thrilled to be reunited with Cali. It was a relief.

“I painted the picture for Ava,” I said. “Perhaps I was cruel, but I had to talk to her about the reality that I’ll never leave you for her—or anyone.”

I leaned down for another kiss, but Cali rested her hand against my chest, looking up at me with huge yes. “Where’d she go?”

“I have no idea,” I said. “And I don’t give a fuck.”

Hopefully my wolf wouldn’t change his mind anytime soon, because I couldn’t deal with that bastard right now.

“So you threw her out?” Cali asked, her eyebrows arched in surprise. “Like, for real?”

I shrugged. “Not in so many words, but basically.”

She swallowed, looking down at my mouth. She drew in a shaky breath. “Do you think that’s why I felt our mate bond shiver?”

“What do you mean?” I asked cautiously.

“When I was still in Portland, I felt like our mate bond was under pressure,” Cali said. Her face was so vulnerable. “Like something was seriously wrong.”

“I see…” I trailed off.

On the inside, though, all I could think about was what had happened in that fucking shower. Was that what Cali had felt? Had those fleeting moments of my being unable to resist my wolf affected my mate bond with Cali?

I recalled feeling something too—something unpleasant, something fierce. But I’d been so wrapped up in dealing with Ava, in fighting my own wolf over her, that I hadn’t thought much of it. Was there a chance that what had happened with Ava was more consequential than I’d originally thought?

I couldn’t dwell on it. It wouldn’t do any good.

“I’m not going to keep on thinking about Ava,” I said to Cali. “And I don’t want you to keep thinking about her, either.”

That was a lie, somewhat, and Cali pinpointed it right away. “I can’t just ignore what happened last night, though. How did she react when you spoke to her? You have to tell me, Xavier.”

I cringed. “Well. She was hurt and pissed when I left her in the woods.”

Cali huffed. “Oh, great. Angry Ava is never a good thing.”

“And what’s the alternative? Just letting her roam around the house and wag her fucking tail at me?” I asked.

Cali pressed her lips together. “You’re right. I’ve always wanted you to tell her to leave. To *make her* leave, finally.”

I took a deep breath, resting my hands on her shoulders. “Exactly. And now that you’re back, I can protect you from anything Ava might try.”

Cali puffed up. “I can protect myself—I have my powers. I’ll blast her, so help me god!”

As Cali started flailing and threatening in that way of hers that made me want to laugh but also kind of take her seriously, I recalled how Lola had seen Ava dealing with Aysel. Was there a chance that Ava would try to put a spell on me, like Aysel had to Greyson? Or would she put one on Cali? Or on fucking *both* of us?

I had to admit, that wasn’t out of the realm of possibility—you just never knew with Ava, and in some fucked-up way, I understood her. Her wolf could make her do some extreme, reprehensible things. I knew that from personal experience, but still—I wouldn’t just lie there and take it.

Giving a pissed-off Ava an ally like Aysel could spell more trouble, and if that happened, I would be prepared. I would deal with it, and there was no need to worry Cali about it right now. It might not even happen—Ava might’ve gotten the memo. She might finally manage to control her wolf, like I’d been controlling mine.

Either way, Cali shouldn’t be thinking about Aysel and Ava forming weird alliances to steal away Greyson and me. I knew Cali—she’d take the idea and run with it. There was no way in hell that that was what she needed right now. Not after last night, with the way she’d sounded—so worried and devastated at the idea that our mate bond was in trouble.

That would never happen.

I could tell that she was still upset about it, from the way she spoke about feeling the bond being threatened, from the way she was so fucking mad at Ava.

“And she *dared*! Ava dared—”

“Hey, hey,” I said, holding her tight, cutting off her rant. “You’re not supposed to be the angry one—that’s me.”

She snorted, all the fight draining out of her. “Don’t make me laugh.”

“But it’s true. You’re supposed to be the nice one who tells me to chill, and I’m the hothead,” I said, stroking her cheek. “I just hate seeing you upset. The mate bond is here, it’s good. I promise. Ava is gone.”

Cali swallowed, resting her hand over mine on her cheek. “I won’t mention her again.”

I was relieved. “I won’t bring her up again either. She’s caused enough problems, enough pain—we don’t need her messing things up. Right?”

“Right,” Cali said quietly.

I pulled her into a tight hug, kissing the top of her head. I felt so damn uncomfortable talking to Cali about Ava, even more so after what had happened in the shower, but I couldn’t just ignore stuff when Cali needed to be reassured.

I didn’t want her to worry.

She should never worry about my love for her.

No matter how my wolf felt, she had my undying devotion. And if he needed to be reminded that Cali was the reason why he was actually alive and with me, I would do everything in my power to make him come to his senses.

“I know what this is all about,” I whispered in Cali’s ear.

She faced me, sniffling a little. “What?”

“You missed me,” I said, brushing my nose against hers. Even when she was out of town with Greyson, she missed me enough to call a million times. It felt good to know that he didn’t own her—that she needed me in her life as well.

“I’m not complaining,” I said, smirking.

She let out a little scoff, shoving me. “Of course I missed you. I always miss you.”

I grinned. “I am hard to live without, right?”

She smirked. “You’re even harder to live with.”

I frowned. “What are you even talking about?”

“You barely ever do laundry, Xavier,” she said in a teasing tone. At least she was joking. I hoped.

I was also a little offended. “Excuse me? Not only do I do my laundry, but I also own more clothes than anyone else in the house.”

“That’s because they shred off this amazing body,” Cali said wryly.

I squinted at her. “So you think my body is amazing?”

Cali offered a long-suffering sigh. “I’m sure you do, too.”

I smirked again, lowering my face so it was level with hers. I loved these moments of us teasing each other. Flirting, not worrying about curses and drones. “But that’s not what you said, is it?”

Cali snorted as I started to unbutton my shirt. “What are you even doing?” she asked.

“You obviously don’t want me to shred my clothes, so I’m being careful,” I said seriously.

“So you decided to get undressed?” Cali asked, fighting a smile.

“I thought you wanted to see my amazing body?”

Cali waved me off. I loved how flustered she got. “Stop teasing!”

I moved closer, my gaze locking with hers. My voice dropped as I told her, “I’m not teasing, Cali. In fact, I’m going to prove to you how strong our mate bond is.”

Before she could say another word, I pulled her in for a passionate kiss.

**Episode 2517**

GREYSON

I was running in the forest with Violet and Rishika, all of us in wolf form.

*Right or left here?* I asked Violet.

*Left*, she replied, and led us further into the grounds, to the place where she’d seen—or thought she’d seen—the drone. As we ran, Violet told me, *I was worried you wouldn’t believe me.*

There was a nervousness to her tone that made me want to tell her that everything would be okay. Poor kid—she meant well.

*Why did you think that?* I asked.

*I’m not sure. I didn’t want to cause problems, not when there’s already been so many*, she replied. *But I’m glad you do believe me.*

Rishika’s wolf shot me a look that seemed to say, “See? I told you you’d be a good Alpha. I know literally everything.”

She probably did.

*How’s Charlie?* I asked Violet as we kept racing forward. *Have you guys heard anything from his mom?*

*No, not really*, Violet replied.

I had to process whether that was good or bad. Good—it meant that there was no crisis. Bad—there was a crisis, and it was too late for us to help. Or Iris had double-crossed us. The possibilities were endless.

I was grateful that Iris had helped us deal with Shanna Paiyn, but I wouldn’t be breaking into song over the fact that one of my pack members was the son of a hunter as formidable and influential as Iris Kim. I had no idea how the pack had even reached this point.

Werewolves, vampires, Fae, witches, a medium, a hunter… Where would it end? Could it even end? Were we completely out of control? Did I just gather up whatever stray knocked at my door because I was too much of a softie? Was I, as an Alpha, failing for not embracing the traditional unwritten rules of werewolf packs?

Then again, I never did like rules, written or otherwise.

First of all, I didn’t fail. It just wasn’t my thing. Second, it felt like having that magical mashup was Redwood’s secret strength. Anyone with half a brain cell would be able to tell how valuable Torin or Marta could be to any pack. They were amazing people, too—a big part of me felt *grateful* to have them around. They had chosen us, and we had chosen them, and there was something magical about that bond. Literally.

How many other packs had that to work with?

It was what made us stronger every day.

But hey, I still wasn’t thrilled about Iris the hunter and her link to Charlie.

*Over there!* Violet said, interrupting my thoughts. We’d arrived at a spot in the woods, and her wolf looked upward. *This is where I saw it. It hovered right above where we’re standing now. And then it just disappeared.*

I nodded and looked around the area. How the hell could a drone have come this far? We were miles away from anything.

Violet’s wolf fidgeted. *You’re not saying anything—why aren’t you saying anything?*

I shot her a look. *Just trying to process.*

*Is it possible the hunters are back?* she asked.

*I suppose it’s possible, but there’s no proof*, I said.

Rishika’s wolf eyed us both. *It could be the Vanguard pack. Don’t forget that. Things between our packs are still unresolved.*

I thought about Aysel. Somehow, I couldn’t imagine her at the controls of an actual drone. She seemed to be more of a hands-on manipulator. And her meddling had been more in the realm of curses and magic than high tech. But she was old school too, princess and all.

*Search the area*, I told Rishika and Violet. *But don’t go too far. Let me know if you notice anything unusual.*

*What about you?* Rishika asked.

*I’ll head north*, I said. *Meet back here in ten minutes.*

Both of them nodded, and we split up. I couldn’t believe that just hours ago I’d had Cali in my arms, touching her, kissing her, laughing with her. Now I was back with the pack, searching for a fucking drone that may or may not have been real.

It was surreal, by all accounts.

I’d much rather have been in Portland, alone with my mate. I’d hated to leave her back at the pack house with Xavier. But that couldn’t be helped, and as annoying as my little brother was, I couldn’t blame either one of them for wanting to see each other.

I just wished it wasn’t happening so soon after Cali and I had returned.

I’d hoped that we could bask in the glow for a little longer—no crisis to deal with, just her and me enjoying a nice lunch with the pack while Xavier kept his hands to himself. But apparently, that had been too much of a request.

Someday, one day, being with Cali wouldn’t be fleeting and interrupted. She and I had defeated Aysel’s bullshit, and we’d fought in the Fae world, and there was nothing that could stop us. There was no question. I knew it deep in my gut. It was the only way I could see my future, and I was going to manifest it, come hell or high water.

Feeling puffed up and happy with myself—as I should—I circled back around and met up with the other two. Violet and Rishika stood by a big rock, Rishika looking as calm as ever, while Violet’s wolf looked like it was vibrating.

*We found nothing*, Rishika said.

*I’m so sorry!* Violet said. She sounded so anxious. *I swear I saw something, I didn’t mean to waste your time, it’s just—*

*Hey, it’s fine*, I said. *Don’t feel bad.*

*And it’s not like we’re doubting you*, Rishika added. *The problem is drones don’t leave footprints, and they move fast.*

*It must’ve been spying on us*, I theorized. *Or there’s a chance that you and Lilac and Charlie surprised it. Could it have been here for some other purpose?*

*I don’t know*, Violet said quietly.

I felt like it could’ve also been a bird or something, and she’d gotten confused, but I didn’t tell her that. I didn’t want to give her reason to doubt herself even further.

*Either way, you’re good*, I told her. *It’s better for you to be more aware, more suspicious, than to ignore what could be a real threat.*

She nodded, looking hopeful. *Right. Thank you for saying that.*

Violet may be the purest out of everyone in the pack. Good thing we had her, I thought. It was nice having a kid around to keep us level.

*We’ll just have to keep an eye out for it*, I said. *Why don’t we take one last look around before we head back?*

Violet nodded and burst into action while Rishika and I hung back a little.

*What do you really think of Violet’s story?* Rishika asked me.

*I have no reason to doubt her*, I said. *And even if she’s wrong, it would be an honest mistake.*

*True*, Rishika agreed. *I am a little skeptical, especially since nobody else who was with her saw or heard it. But I also want to give Violet the benefit of the doubt—we’d have more to lose if we ignored her.*

I smirked internally. *Sounds like you don’t like taking unnecessary chances. Just like your Alpha.*

Rishika’s wolf snorted. *Don’t get a big head.*

I snapped my tail at her, and her wolf yipped, both of us laughing internally. It was good to have this kind of pack dynamic for both wolves and humans—play was a positive thing for bonding.

But then something shifted in the breeze, and my good mood vanished.

I stopped and sniffed the air.

Rishika did the same.

*Something’s wrong*, she said. *The scent. Werewolves? Could it be the Vanguard pack?*

I concentrated, ready to listen. To use not only my eyes, but all my senses. I smelled wolf, no doubt about that. But not *were*-wolves.

*Follow me*, I told Rishika.

The two of us approached a line of trees. The scent was growing stronger. I wished Violet were with us—I hated the idea of her wandering around when there were strangers on the pack property.

When I paused, I heard a low growl as a pack of real wolves stared us down.

Great.

Rishika growled at them, but I said, *No! Hold off.*

There was the sound of footsteps approaching from behind, and for a moment I wondered if there were more fucking threats about to burst forward. Thankfully, it was just Violet.

*Stop moving*, I told Violet. *Let me handle it.*

Her wolf froze. She didn’t make a sound. At least she was here, a few steps behind me and safe. I turned back to the wolves. The last thing I needed was a wolf-werewolf fight. It rarely happened, but when it did, it wasn’t fun. I didn’t like hurting these magnificent creatures, though if they got too close, I wouldn’t have a choice.

This was a matter of territory, and our friends over here knew that all too well.

I spotted the Alpha, a large male with spotted fur, and mind linked with him directly.

*Welcome to Redwood pack territory.*

The wolves stopped growling. Their Alpha didn’t move. He looked me straight in the eye and said, *Be careful. The humans are watching.*

**Episode 2518**

Kissing Xavier was so different from kissing Greyson. Greyson was something new, exciting, but being with Xavier was like coming home again. I felt welcome, and I was so overwhelmed after what he’d told me about Ava.

He’d finally chased her away.

*Finally*, it was just the two of us right now, and it felt almost too amazing to be true. I cupped his face between my hands, opening my mouth up for him to kiss me deeper, hold me tighter. I allowed myself to feel every single little thing with this kiss.

Xavier’s devotion, his choice, his love.

He loved me, and he’d forced Ava away, even though it could piss off his wolf.

He’d done that for me. For us.

Ava’s absence was definitely a thing to celebrate—hopefully we were done with her looming in the pack house, always waiting in some corner, ready to pounce on Xavier. I almost felt sorry for her, for how pathetic she was being, for how her wolf had reduced her to…

*To whatever it is that she is right now.*

I knew who I was, though. I was Xavier’s chosen mate, and he kissed me like he couldn’t resist, like he couldn’t get enough, like the world would end without me close to him.

I yelped in surprise when he lifted me up, and I just couldn’t resist playfully scolding him. “Xavier!”

He smirked, looking up at me, his eyes glistening with what had to be joy.

This was joy, and I was so lucky to have and keep him. To feel our mate bond through and through, a living thing that flourished.

“I’m so glad you’re back,” he whispered against my neck as I wrapped my legs and arms around him. “I missed you way too damn much.” His words, all the raw emotion in there, made me feel all fluttery.

“I missed you too,” I murmured. And then, I said the absolute honest truth. “I was so scared about our mate bond last night, Xavier.”

“Nothing happened. Nothing’s ever gonna go wrong. I’m right here, baby,” he said, pushing me up against the wall, his gaze gliding between my eyes and my mouth. “I’m never letting you go.”

He kissed me again, harder, faster, and I moaned into it, pushing my fingers through his hair. It was soft and wet from his shower, and the sensation of every inch of him against me was incredible. He rubbed up against my legs, and I shivered, the mate bond throbbing between us, the connection as real as our shaking bodies, holding onto each other.

I wanted him so badly—I had to feel him, skin to skin, just to make sure that he was real.

That nothing would come between us.

“I need you,” I choked out, breaking the kiss.

His gaze darkened further, the lust in his eyes making me feel light-headed. He grabbed me and brought me over to the bed, dropping me onto it before kissing me again.

“I can’t stop thinking about you when you’re not with me,” he whispered against my neck, biting lightly, but hard enough to make me shiver. “I want you so badly all the fucking time.”

By now, I was panting, and he hadn’t even gotten naked. As if he could read my thoughts, he sat back on his knees while he hovered over me, taking his shirt off fully. “I’ll spare this one the destruction, just for you.”

I’d have laughed if I hadn’t been turned on out of my mind. Xavier’s body was, as always, stunning—a statue carved from marble. A thought popped into my head, then, about another body, just as fucking gorgeous.

*Cali! Maybe you should do the ethical thing and stop this before it gets too far? I mean, you WERE with Greyson yesterday! And he’s downstairs, dealing with Alpha stuff, while you and Xavier are just—*

Xavier unzipped my pants, licking at my belly button before he dragged them down, and every sane thought escaped my brain. My hips arched toward him instantly, and he groaned against my skin, tearing off my underwear as well.

*Take off your top*, he mind linked, looking up at me as he spread my legs, and I was helpless to resist. His intensity, his passion, had me reeling.

*Do you have any idea how much I missed this?* he said in my head, and I whimpered, grabbing onto the pillow. He licked at me, at the apex of my thighs, looking up and going slow as I felt the connection between us heightening. The mate bond felt stronger with every single passing moment, and Xavier’s words were electrifying.

*Your taste, your scent, your perfect body, how wet you get for me… It all drives me fucking nuts*, he said. His fingers and tongue were between my thighs as he worked me over, and I sobbed with how much I needed.

*I can’t stop thinking about this, just this: you, spread open for me, begging for me to take you*, he whispered in my mind, and my body convulsed. *Do you want to come, Cali?*

“Yes,” I said out loud.

Xavier kissed me right where I needed it, three fingers moving inside me until I started shaking, waves of pent-up energy releasing. He licked and sucked on me till I was nothing but a fluttery mess.

*How’s the mate bond now?* he asked, and I laughed.

I was so happy I could only laugh.

*I love you so much*, I said.

Grinning, he brushed his lips up my stomach, then pulled me into his arms. I kissed his neck, biting a little, like he liked it. I touched him all over—his shoulders, his chest, his abs, and then where he was hard for me. He hissed, almost jumping, and as I kept going, kept pampering him, he shivered into my touch. It was magnificent to see a tremendous body like his heave with pleasure, just because of me.

After he came, I didn’t stop. I kept stroking him, up and down and the way he liked—kissing his mouth at the same time, kissing his neck and chest. Within moments, he was hard again. He felt so good that I couldn’t wait any longer. I wanted closeness, with nothing between us.

“Xavier, please,” I moaned, and that was all he needed to flatten me back and climb on top. He spread my legs and looked between my thighs with an intense, burning lust that had me flushing all over.

*So fucking perfect*, he said. *Mine.*

And I knew that this gorgeous, powerful man loved me. He had chosen me again and again, and I adored him for it.

When he slid inside, he wasn’t gentle, but I didn’t want him to be. I was so wet, he slipped in smoothly, my body clamping down on him as I cried out.

*Don’t stop—please, please don’t stop*, I said, and he kept going, fucking me hard and fast, his mouth searing mine with the most amazing kiss.

*You feel so fucking good, fuck*, he panted, his voice echoing in my head, bringing us even closer.

“I want to see you like this,” Xavier growled out loud, flipping us over and pulling me on top.

I was sweaty, melting all over him. The sounds I made were keening as he gripped my hips to urge me on. I looked down at him, going faster and faster, rubbing against him just right. I felt his body tremble underneath me, my own tightening around him as if getting ready to snap.

*That’s it, I want to feel you*, he rasped through the mate bond, gripping the back of my neck for another kiss.

*I love you*, I said, clinging to him, sliding closer and closer to the edge while he seemed to follow right after, release so close for the both of us that I could taste it.

“Me too,” he moaned out loud. “I love you so fucking much—”

*BAM!*

The door burst open, banging against the wall.

*Oh my god, are we under attack?*

I screamed and flipped back onto the bed, diving for the blankets to cover myself—I wasn’t going to attend a whole-ass fight naked.

“Cali, stay back,” Xavier choked out, protecting me with his body.

This was truly madness—we’d been having a good time, enjoying each other, being vulnerable with each other, and now *this*?

Pushing my hair away from my face to see what the fuck was happening, I looked at the door.

Looking chaotic and enraged, Kira was standing by the entrance.

*What. The. HELL?*

Xavier gaped, staring at her as she stepped into the room, her face ominous, her hair twirling around her as if it had life of its own. Magic was sparking around her hands—purple, offensive magic—and her eyes were filled with one word.

And that word was “murder.”

“*You!*” she growled, pointing at me. “Get the *fuck* away from my husband!”

**Episode 2519**

I choked as I looked between Kira, who seemed furious, and Xavier, who seemed shocked. It felt like my head was about to explode—what in the world was going on this time? What had I missed?

Grabbing Xavier’s arm, I hissed, “What the hell is happening? Did she really just call you her *husband*?”

The thought of Kira and Xavier together made me queasy. There was something about how tall and good-looking and dark and brooding they would be together that took me aback. I’d never thought of them paired, but I also hadn’t expected Kira to burst in claiming Xavier was her husband, either! Was this why I’d felt the mate bond being pulled?

*What the flying fuck is happening right now?*

“Kira,” Xavier said gruffly, covering himself. He hadn’t even responded to my question! “Kira, you should be resting right now—*please* calm down.”

I blinked. *Calm down? CALM DOWN?*

Was this a dream? Was I dreaming? Or was this, like, some sort of weird nightmare that wouldn’t end?

Kira sure seemed to think so. “I’m not stupid, Geoff!” she snarled, before her furious expression turned mournful. “How could you do this to me?”

And then she burst out crying.

“Who the fuck is Geoff?” I whispered to Xavier.

*Geoff is Kira’s dead husband*, Xavier said, his whole face constricting.

I gasped. *What the actual hell is happening right now, Xavier? Why does Kira think that you,* my mate*, are her dead husband?*

*It’s complicated*, Xavier replied, cringing. *She was affected by Charon’s blast of magic…*

I realized he was talking about what had happened during the fight in Portland, when Kira had escorted everybody to help out. *Damn*. Poor Kira—I was worried about her. This wasn’t normal behavior, obviously. But I also wanted to be with Xavier without worrying that she’d literally tear me apart.

*NOW what am I supposed to do?*

“I can’t believe you did this, Geoff.” Kira kept on quietly sobbing, leaning against the wall in obvious devastation. This was actually horrible.

*I need to fix this, Cali*, Xavier told me. At least he looked regretful. I nodded, and he got up, a sheet wrapped around his waist. Clearing his throat, he said, “Kira, look—”

“No!” she snapped, the change in her mood instant. She marched up to me and pointed accusingly. I flinched back as she barked, “Who is she, Geoff? Where did you find her? Tinder?”

I gaped. Me? *Tinder?* I beg your fucking pardon! *No offense to Tinder, but we’re actual supernatural mates, bonded by magic and stuff!*

“Xavier,” I said through gritted teeth. “How much of this am I supposed to take?”

“You feel humiliated, don’t you?” Kira glared at me, full of fury. She was pretty terrifying. “Imagine how *I* am feeling right now!”

“Kira, please,” Xavier started again. “You shouldn’t even be up right now. You should be resting with—”

Kira scoffed. “You bastard! You think I’m going to rest while you… do *this*… with *her*…” She’d barely finished her sentence before she broke down crying again. “I thought you loved me, Geoff!”

Was it weird that I wanted to comfort her? I had to stop myself from running up to her and hugging her and telling her that everything would be okay, and OMG Geoff was such an asshole, am I right?

Bottom line: clearly, Kira wasn’t okay. There was something seriously wrong with her, and as much I wanted to help her, I was also extremely worried. What if I got too close and she got mad and blasted me with magic? She was a witch, a very powerful one at that, and one wrong move from either me or Xavier could set her off.

The last thing I needed was a brand new spell cast my way.

“I promise everything will be okay,” Xavier said, walking up to her. His delivery was pretty wooden—no Oscar noms for him anytime soon—but at least he was trying. “Let me just—”

He tried to put an arm around her, but Kira just bounced back to being super mad again. She swatted his hand away, hissing, “I know what I saw! Right before my eyes—you cheated on me, don’t try to deny it! I thought we’d be together forever, and you betrayed me in the worst way possible!”

*Oh, shit.*

I’d have grabbed some popcorn if this whole thing hadn’t been completely messed up. Xavier stood there, looking helpless, and Kira wasn’t done ranting. Of course not.

“Have you done this before, you bastard?” she spat. “I bet you have!” She turned to me and snarled, “How many times?”

“None, no times!” I spluttered, flailing about with the sheet around my chest. “It’s not like that at all, I—”

“Shut up!” she said, and I flinched back.

*OKAY THEN!*

She turned back to Xavier, glaring. “Was I not enough for you? You horrible liar, why would you do this to me? After all we’ve been through?”

Xavier literally just stood there, cosplaying as a statue. The man was simply not a good enough liar to deal with this kind of situation. And then he said the worst thing possible.

“It really isn’t what you think.”

I winced, feeling the urge to hide under the covers. It clearly *was* what Kira thought it was, but just not the *way* she thought it was. Was it just me, or had Xavier just dug us in even deeper?

*Maybe I should just go?* I asked Xavier awkwardly.

I felt kind of weird, though—after all, this *was* my room—but maybe it would be best if I left him with Kira. Maybe it would make Kira less volatile.

*Yeah, I’m gonna go*, I told him again, ready to grab my clothes, when Kira snarled.

“Don’t move!” Her cheeks still wet with tears, she wiped them and hissed, “I’m not letting anyone go until I find out the truth!”

I had no idea what the fuck to say or what the fuck to do. I had never, not in a million years, expected anything like this to happen to me. How did one deal with a situation of this sort? Greyson had said that I was good at diplomacy and had a lot of potential, but this was too extreme to handle, wasn’t it?

“Did you hear me?” Kira snapped at me.

I nodded quickly. “Yes, ma’am!”

*We have to get her to calm down*, Xavier said*. I promise I’ll explain everything, but until then, just play along. Okay?*

I swallowed roughly. If Kira really believed Xavier was Geoff, then how the hell did he think he was going to get us out of this? She was *furious* at Geoff right now!

“What is going on here?” A booming voice thundered through the room.

Big Mac was at the door.

*Our savior has arrived!*

But would *Big Mac* really save us?

She walked into the room, looking around at all three of us. Xavier, standing, covered with only a sheet. Me, pulling the covers over my exposed shoulders. Kira, glowering at both of us, tearful and enraged.

From Big Mac’s perspective, this had to be a very WTF moment.

*Hell, I’m part of it, and it’s still a WTF moment for me too!*

“Why are you here, MacKenzie?” Kira asked, wiping her eyes quickly.

“I heard a lot of shouting,” Big Mac said calmly.

Kira snorted bitterly and pointed at us. “I caught Geoff cheating on me with this… this *girl*.”

Big Mac shot me a look. Through gritted teeth, she said, “You always have to cause a scene, don’t you?”

I was both embarrassed, because she had a point, but also annoyed. This was not Big Mac’s business, and none of this was my fault. But I’d have to defend my honor later. Right now, I was facing off against a very angry witch.

“Big Mac!” Kira looked weirded out. “What are you saying right now? Who is she?” Kira peered at me, and Big Mac cleared her throat.

“Nothing,” she said. “I just have to agree with you—Geoff is a bastard for cheating on you. But…” Big Mac moved closer, reaching out to hold Kira’s shoulder. “You were also in an accident and need to recover. We have to take care of you. Okay?”

Big Mac’s voice was uncharacteristically soft. She gently put an arm around Kira, who began to cry quietly, yet again*.* Jesus, all her emotional changes were giving me a whiplash. I felt so sorry for her, though. This had to be horrible—her dead husband was long gone, and she’d clearly loved him very much.

As for Big Mac… Who would’ve thought that the gruff, tough Big Mac would manage to defuse the situation? I was so grateful.

When I glanced at Xavier, we both knew that the moment was ruined, but he gave me a small, incredulous, relieved smile.

*It’s okay. We’re safe now*, he said.

But as Big Mac led Kira to the door, the devastated witch froze.

“This isn’t over!” Kira declared.

Suddenly, Kira spun around, raised her arms, and fired a massive wave of magic at us.

**Episode 2520**

XAVIER

I leapt in front of Cali just as she was raising her hands in what I assumed was self-defense, and shielded her with my body. As I braced for the impact of Kira’s magic blast, my mind spun—I just hoped I wasn’t going to end up like her, with my mind and memories scrambled.

Cali grabbed for me, trying to tug me out of the way. “What’s wrong with you, Xavier?” she hissed.

An energy was building in the room—the air was nearly crackling with it. It surged, and I watched it arc toward me. My whole body tensed, readying for the impact, but then—at the last second—it veered off sharply and hit the window with a huge bang that shattered the glass into dust.

My ears rang in the stillness that followed.

“I did it!” Cali exclaimed.

I spun around to look at her in confusion. “What did you do? All you did was try to stop me from protecting you!”

Cali frowned. “I stopped the magic with my shield, Xavier. Did you feel it? I wasn’t sure it worked, but I think I’m getting better at it since—”

“No, *I* stopped it with *my* magic,” Big Mac cut in. She glared at Cali. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves here.”

Kira was staring down at her hands, looking baffled. “What happened?”

She wobbled on her feet, like she was about to stumble or fall over, and Big Mac rushed to her side, holding her tight.

“You need to rest,” the older witch said.

I started toward them—to help Kira—but Big Mac shook her head emphatically. Then, her arm around Kira’s shoulders, she led her from the room.

Seeing them disappear from my doorway, I felt the tension release from my shoulders. The danger was past, but I felt awful. Clearly, Kira wasn’t doing any better than before. And seeing “Geoff” with Cali hadn’t helped matters at all.

*Fuck.*

I turned back to Cali. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said.

I shook my head. “This was not how I had planned on reuniting with you.”

Cali looked frustrated and glanced down at her hands. “I thought I’d blocked that magic. I was sure I was getting better at making the shield.” She looked up and—seeing me looking back at her—lowered her hands to her sides. “But Kira… Will she be okay?”

I ran a hand through my hair. “I hope so. Listen, Cali, about that husband thing—I should have explained what was going on before now, but I just wanted to see you when you got back, and…” I shrugged. “I’m sorry. The last thing I expected was her to come in here while we were—”  
 “Don’t apologize,” Cali said quickly. “I knew Kira wasn’t doing well. I should have asked how she was. I guess I got a little carried away.”

Blood rushed into her cheeks, and I moved toward her, taking her hands in mine.

“I guess I can’t blame you for not being able to keep your hands off me,” I said, running my thumbs over her knuckles. I missed the feel of her. She’d looked fucking incredible on top of me. It’d been exactly what I needed. What I still needed, but now the mood had officially been killed.

Cali smiled and blushed a darker pink. “I feel awful about that,” she said, looking toward the doorway. “Kira looked so upset.”

“There’s nothing for you to feel bad about,” I insisted. “We were in your room, and the door was closed. It’s not like we were flaunting anything in front of her.”

It was Kira’s fault for barging in, of course, but it didn’t feel right to blame her for what had happened, either.

I glanced at the door. “I suppose I should have locked the door, but most people knock before they come in, even in a pack house. Well, except for Colton. I don’t think he’s ever knocked on a door in his life.”

Cali smiled, then glanced at the shattered window. “I guess you’d better call Phil.”

The window was the least of my worries, and I didn’t even look over at it. I pulled Cali into a hug and kissed her soft hair.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that, before you even had a chance to settle in,” I said softly.

Cali heaved a shaking sigh, like she was feeling the true danger of the moment for the first time. “It was scary, but I’m more worried about Kira.”

I’d figured as much. This was Cali, after all. She was always thinking about everyone else before herself.

She leaned back and looked up at me. “Why you?” she asked.

“What?” I asked, not understanding her question. “Why me what?”

Cali shook her head. “Why does she think that *you’re* her dead husband? Why you, of all people?”

I felt my heart give an off-tempo thump. Since Kira had confessed her feelings toward me, I hadn’t quite figured out the best way to tell Cali, and the thought made me uneasy.

That unease must have shown on my face, because Cali cocked her head and peered up at me. “What is it, Xavier? What is it that you’re not telling me?”

Well, this was it. This was the moment. If I didn’t tell her now, it would stop being an oversight and start being a lie.

I took a deep breath. Then I took Cali’s hands.

“There’s something you should probably know,” I started slowly.

Cali frowned. “What?”

I steeled myself. “She kind of, sort of… has a crush on me,” I finished in a rush.

Cali’s eyes went wide. “What? A crush on you? How in the world could you possibly know that?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t notice at first, but after she told me about it, it got clear real fast.”

“Oh,” Cali said, her eyes going even wider.

“I hope it goes without saying that I don’t have the same feelings toward her,” I said quickly. “I like her as a friend, but that’s all. You know that, don’t you?”  
 “Of course I do,” Cali said, rolling her eyes. Then she frowned again. “But that still doesn’t explain it.”

“Explain what?” I asked.

“How does her having a crush on you translate into her believing that you’re her dead husband?” Cali asked.

“Because I’m irresistible?” I offered. Cali did not laugh at this.

“What do you think it is?” she asked.

“I really don’t know. Neither does Big Mac. She says Kira’s recovering from taking the hit from whatever spell Charon shot at me, and I guess it’s messed her up more than anyone thought it had.”

Cali looked pale. “But will she be okay? Will she get better, and remember who you actually are and everything that’s happened?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I hope so. Though what happened just now probably isn’t going to help.”

“But what about us?” Cali asked.

I stared at her. “What are you talking about?”

“What just happened was really scary, but I feel worse for her. She was so confused and sad. I don’t want to do anything that might set her off again,” Cali said.

“I mean, I think it’ll be fine,” I said. “We just have to be more careful about locking doors and stuff.” I hoped Cali wasn’t going to be so afraid of Kira that she started stressing out about sleeping with me. “There’s got to be a way we can keep Kira from seeing us together again.”

I liked Kira as a friend—and I was worried about her well-being—but there was only so far I was willing to go for the woman.

I’d just told Ava off, so that was another worry off my mind, and spending time with my mate was all I wanted to do. The thought of giving up Cali—even for just a short time—just wasn’t a possibility. And now that Greyson had been freed from the revulsion spell, I wasn’t going to let him fill the void.

I put my finger beneath her chin and lifted her face so we were looking right at each other. “Don’t worry,” I said softly. “Well figure something out. I promise.”

Cali nodded. “Okay,” she whispered back.

“Well, she’s in bed,” said an annoyed voice.

I looked up quickly to see Big Mac standing in the doorway, glaring at us. She looked pissed, which was no surprise. Big Mac was pissed all the time.

“I already warned you to be careful,” she said bitterly.

“Careful?” I asked incredulously.

“Yeah, *careful*. It didn’t look like you were trying too hard,” Big Mac said.

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll be sure to lock the door next time.”

Big Mac narrowed her eyes even further. They were so narrow, it was hard to tell if they were open at all. “There won’t *be* a next time.”

“What does that mean—” I started, but I stopped as Big Mac waved her hand.

I felt a tingle pass over my body. It was faint, but definitely there. I looked up at Big Mac quickly. “What the hell did you just do?”

**Episode 2521**

GREYSON

I replayed the voice in my head as I stared at the shaggy brown wolf in front of me.

*Be careful. The humans are watching.*

Had I heard that right? I glanced warily into the trees. Were there humans nearby? Here? Now? Were we being watched by humans right now?

I didn’t know the answer to that, and not knowing made me feel uneasy.

*Listen to me*, I growled, looking over at Rishika and Violet. *Do not shift back to human. Not under any circumstances.*

Rishika frowned at me. *What’s going on, Greyson?*

*That’s what I’m trying to find out*, I muttered. I turned back to the Alpha wolf. *Do you know who is watching us? And why?*

His breath was white smoke in the cold air. *No. But I’ve noticed an increased human presence. It’s no longer safe here. I’ll be leading my pack to another area.*

And with that, the Alpha turned his back on me and started off into the trees. The rest of his pack followed him at once, disappearing as silently as ghosts.

*Greyson*, Rishika said, her voice breaking into my thoughts. *Are you going to tell us what the hell’s going on? Who were they? They weren’t werewolves, were they?*

*No, they were real wolves*, I said. *But their Alpha told me to be careful of the humans. That they were watching.*

I glanced up at the trees, which seemed quiet and might have felt serene, if I hadn’t been feeling so edgy.

*That doesn’t sound great*, Rishika said.

*Yeah, maybe we should head back to the pack house*, Violet suggested. *We should warn the others. You know how everyone goes for runs in these woods.*

*Hang on*, I said. *Let me think for a second*. I needed to work through this. I didn’t want to get back to the pack house and tell the others until I knew more. It would only fuel speculation, maybe even spark a panic. I wanted some solid answers first. I had no reason not to trust the Alpha, but there were just too many questions.

I glanced up into the sky. I had to figure that whoever was watching us was probably using a drone—the one Violet had seen.

But why? Did they suspect we were werewolves?

I somehow doubted that. Humans often needed a lot of convincing of our existence—even when confronted with the truth. Even in the face of physical evidence, they had a hard time accepting what they saw with their own eyes.

Which generally suited me just fine.

But if there were humans who’d started growing curious or even suspicious, that could mean a whole host of trouble for the Redwood pack—and all the surrounding packs, too. We all used the woods to shift and run as we wanted. But if we were being watched, or recorded, that would mean trouble.

*I don’t think we should go straight back to the pack house*, Rishika said. *If there are humans watching us, we don’t want to lead them home. Let’s expand our search a little wider. See if we can find some evidence.*

I nodded. *That’s a good idea*.

And if there were humans watching, they’d only see three wolves—three very large wolves—roaming the woods. Nothing too remarkable about that… I hoped.

*We should move fast. Stay close, both of you*, I said. *No wandering off. If you suspect anything—if you see something, smell something, hear something—let me know.*

Rishika and Violet both nodded their sleek heads and followed as I started deeper into the woods. As the trees grew thicker around me and the light dimmed, I had to admit I felt a little spooked. These woods belonged to the Redwood pack, but now that the idea had been introduced, it was hard to shake the feeling that I was being watched.

But that just strengthened my resolve. We *had* to figure out what this was, before it became an actual problem for us. We couldn’t risk ignoring it. Werewolves had managed to remain nothing more than myths to humans for centuries—and I wasn’t going to allow anything to threaten that. This was my role as Alpha of my pack. Our survival could depend on staying hidden.

My only reassuring thought as I moved through the forest was that Cali wasn’t a wolf. There were times when I wished she was, like when I imagined her as my Luna. And Cali had hinted more than once that she’d like to be turned, but I hadn’t acted on it. But if there was a real human threat out there, looming somewhere, then at least Cali would be safe. It seemed pretty unlikely anyone was going to discover she was Fae.

But if they did…

I shook my head. I couldn’t even let myself think about that. She was fine. She was safe. She was back at the pack house, perfectly protected from all of this. With Xavier, who I knew would ensure her safety—no matter what.

*I’ve got something*, Rishika said, stopping suddenly.

*What is it?* I asked.

She put her nose to the ground, then looked back up. *Humans.*

I breathed slowly.

*I’m getting it, too. That way*, I said, turning west. *Let’s follow the trail.*

As we walked through the still trees, I began to notice things. Small things, almost invisible—things most people wouldn’t have noticed in a thousand years. But they were signs of human passage through this area: broken twigs, bent branches on the bare undergrowth, a stray footprint in soft soil. And the scent was growing stronger.

I cast a glance over my shoulder at Rishika and Violet, who were still following. I wondered if I should send them back. One wolf could be stealthier than three, and I was used to roaming the woods on my own, always on the lookout for a Rogue or any other threats.

But I knew Rishika was a good, experienced fighter—if it came to that. I hoped it wouldn’t. Violet was good, and she was strong, but she was young. And a bit of a wild card. I’d feel terrible if something happened to her while she was out here, on patrol with me.

We all heard it at once—the unmistakable crackle of radio static. We froze and listened hard. Up ahead, there was a voice. It was deep—a man’s voice—but he was speaking too low for me to make out his words entirely. Snippets of what he was saying wasn’t going to help me.

I wondered if this guy was out here on his own. Judging by the tracks through the forest and the footprints I’d spotted in the mud, I thought he probably wasn’t.

*I’ll circle around*, Rishika offered. *See if I can get a better look*.

I hesitated for a moment. *I should be the one getting a better look. It might not be safe—*

*I’m smaller than you*, Rishika argued. *It’ll be easier for me to hide and find cover in the shadows*.

That was probably true, but I still wasn’t sure.

*I’m going*, Rishika said. She took an experimental step forward but kept her eyes on me, watching for my reaction.

*Fine*, I sighed. *But don’t take any chances, you hear me?*

*I hear you.*

*And keep in constant contact. I want to hear from you*, I said firmly.

Rishika nodded. *You got it, chief*.

She crouched down, lowering her furry body even closer to the ground, and started forward.

Still feeling tense, I watched her move slowly through the trees until she was swallowed up by the gloom of the forest, disappearing from my line of sight.

With a sigh, I threw my head back and looked up into the sky. My thoughts were on the drone. If there really had been one, how could it have found us? The forest was so thick—even with the leaves off the trees, the pines still obscured most of the sky. I just didn’t get it.

Frustrated, I looked down again, giving my head a shake.

*How’s it going, Rishika?* I asked.

*Fine*, came her answer. *Nothing so far. Wait, hang on. Okay, I’m getting closer. There are two—no, three people here.*

My pulse rate ticked up. *Are they armed?* I asked quickly.

My first thought was hunters. Human game hunters. Which were always a troublesome annoyance.

*I can’t quite see*, Rishika said.

Even though we were communicating through the mind link, she was still keeping her voice down. Rishika was a pro—always cautious.

*Hang on*, she went on. *I’m going to get closer for a better look*. There was a pause. *There’s a woman here, tallish, thin. Her hair’s under a hat, so I can’t quite see the color or—*

I waited for her to go on, but she stayed silent.

*Or what? Rishika? What’s going on? What do you see?*

No answer.

*Rishika?* My voice grew alarmed as my heart started to race*. Rishika? Answer me!*

But there was no answer. Rishika had stopped responding.

**Episode 2522**

The tingling sensation that had started when Big Mac waved her hand toward Xavier and me was still echoing through my body. What the hell had just happened? The air around us still felt electrified, and I looked at her, baffled. Had she just *cast a spell* on us?

“What did you just do?” Xavier demanded. He stepped toward Big Mac. “Answer me! What the hell did you just do to me?”

Big Mac gave him a cool look. “Good god, Xavier. Relax. It was nothing life-threatening.”

“Then what was it?” Xavier asked again.

“It was nothing. Just some insurance to protect Kira while she’s in this fragile state,” Big Mac said vaguely.

“What do you mean by insurance?” I asked, my heart pounding. I didn’t like the sound of that…

“I cast a polarization spell,” Big Mac said simply, looking over her shoulder toward Kira’s door. Everything looked quiet.

I’d never heard of a polarization spell, but I had a bad feeling about it. “What does it do?”

Big Mac looked at me. “It will prevent Xavier from kissing you.”

“Wait, *what*?” I gasped. My stomach dropped in an instant. Was Big Mac really doing this to me? After what I’d *just* gone through with Greyson? This felt like some kind of awful, recurring nightmare. “What does that mean? Am I going to puke every time I’m with Xavier now, too—”

“Don’t interrupt,” Big Mac snapped, glaring at me. “I was about to say that it will only affect you when you’re in close proximity to Kira.”

Xavier’s hands clenched into fists, and for a wild moment I worried that he was going to hit Big Mac. “Define *close*,” he snarled.

“You know, close.” The witch gestured vaguely. “Anywhere in the house.”

“What? Anywhere in the *house*? I thought you said in proximity to Kira,” I said.

Big Mac gave me her signature beady stare. “Kira’s in the house, isn’t she? Do you think what happened to Kira was fair? Would you rather be responsible for her having another episode? Maybe an even worse reaction than the one she just had?”

“No,” I said quickly. “Of course not.” I didn’t want to make anything worse for Kira, but I was scared, too. This felt like the worst kind of déjà vu. “How does this spell work? Is it going to make me sick?” I couldn’t go through any more nausea, like I had with Greyson. Or like I had when I’d freaked myself out this morning, thinking I was pregnant.

“No, no, nothing like that,” Big Mac said. “That’s so vulgar. Only wizards like Charon do work like that. No, the polarization spell is just force. Like magnets. You two cannot physically touch each other while inside the house.”

Big Mac said this like it was no big deal, but I didn’t like the sound of that at all.

“Why the hell did you do that?” Xavier growled. “You don’t get to just cast spells on people in this house. That’s not your call.”

Big Mac gave Xavier a cold look. “Maybe not, but I had to do something for Kira. You saw her—it’s clear to anyone with a set of eyes that she’s not in a good place. And you saw how upset she got when she saw the two of you together. We can’t do anything to risk her health, and the two of you kissing or”—she gestured between Xavier and me again—“has the clear potential to make her condition worse. Much worse. And as a fellow witch, I can’t risk that.”

I let Big Mac’s speech sink in. I understood where she was coming from—she was clearly worried about Kira, and I could see why. Kira was completely out of it. I didn’t know what spell Charon had hit her with, but it didn’t even feel like she was seeing what was in front of her face.

But still, I wished I’d had a little warning, or even just a heads-up that Xavier and I needed to cool it around Kira. Big Mac could have just told us to control ourselves around her, rather than putting a spell on us. This just felt very familiar, and not in a good way. I’d *just* gotten out from under Aysel’s spell.

But this wasn’t Aysel. This was Big Mac, and I knew that was different. She had cast the spell to protect Kira. There was a greater purpose here, not just deranged self-interest. And that helped. It made things a little easier to stomach.

Xavier didn’t seem to be thinking along those lines, though, and when he spoke again, his voice had an edge as hard as steel. “And when will Kira be okay again?”

Big Mac shrugged. “That’s still up in the air. Clearly. But what you two just did certainly didn’t help—”

“I didn’t do anything!” I protested. “I didn’t even know—”

“Cali didn’t know Kira was sick like this,” Xavier said, coming to my defense.

Big Mac squeezed the bridge of her nose, as though she felt a headache building. “I know this is an inconvenience for you, but it really won’t affect your life that much. Just keep your distance from each other for a little while. And you can just leave the house, go somewhere else, if you must take care of any…” She shuddered. “*Needs*.”

I felt a flush heat my cheeks at the word.

Big Mac turned away. “I’m going to go check on Kira—”

“Hang on,” Xavier said. “I want you to spell out exactly when you’re going to lift this fucking curse.”

“It’s not a curse,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Don’t be so dramatic. It’s a spell, and I’ll lift it when it’s safe for Kira and not a minute sooner.”

And with that, she walked away and disappeared into Kira’s room.

Xavier’s shoulders were tense, and his jaw was set at such a sharp angle, it could have cut glass. “This is *not* how this was supposed to go,” he growled.

I hated seeing him so upset, and he was clearly pissed. “Is it possible that Big Mac was pretending about the curse? Just to freak us out and keep us apart?”

Xavier gave me an even stare. “When have you ever known Big Mac to joke about anything?”

“I just think that before you get too upset about this, we should give it a try. Kira’s not here, so she won’t see. Just kiss me.”

Xavier’s angry expression cracked a bit as he smirked at this. “I’m always ready to do that.”

He stepped forward and gathered me into his arms, but just as he leaned his head down toward mine, I felt a strange sensation—I was being pushed back by some invisible force. It was the feeling I used to get when I played with magnets as a kid.

Xavier was straining to get closer—to make contact—but the harder he tried, the more the unseen energy pushed us apart.

I struggled forward, trying to keep my head moving in his direction, but nothing I did worked. The force was just too great.

After a few seconds of this, Xavier exhaled sharply and took a step back. If possible, he was even angrier now, and I started to doubt that the test had been such a good idea.

“Let’s try it again,” he said sharply, but the result was the same the second time.

I was frustrated enough to cry. Xavier and I had been so *close* when Kira had burst in. We’d hurried to help, of course, but now even if we wanted to pick up where we’d left off, there was no way we could.

At least not while we were in the house, according to Big Mac’s spell.

Xavier took a deep, angry breath, and I watched his shoulder muscles move beneath his golden skin. He was still naked under the sheet he’d wrapped around himself, and I could feel my mouth start to water at the sight of him. He looked irresistible—even if he was still furious. But there was nothing I could do about it. Thanks to Big Mac, I couldn’t even peck him on the cheek.

*Ugh*. This was so frustrating. And now I wanted him more than ever. Was that because I couldn’t have him?

I reached for his hand, and his skin felt hot against mine. “I know this sucks—like big time sucks—but if it means that Kira will be able to recover, then I think we’re just going to have to suffer through this.”

Xavier’s jaw worked, and I could see a muscle pulse. He shook his head. “No.”

“What do you mean, no?” I asked.

“I refuse to put you through any more suffering,” he said.

“But what choice do we have—”

“Get dressed,” he said shortly.

This stopped me, and I looked at him in surprise. “Dressed? Why?”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Why do you think? We’re getting out of here.”

**Episode 2523**

GREYSON

*Greyson? What’s wrong?* Violet’s voice sounded small and worried in my head. *Has something happened?*

*Stay quiet*, I said. *I’ve lost contact with Rishika*.

I closed my eyes and tried to listen. Was it possible she’d just gone too far? But no, she hadn’t had time to get out of range of the mind link.

*Wait, what?* Violet sounded terrified. *Oh god, we have to go find her. Where is she? Something might have happened to her—*

*Take a breath*, I said, mildly distracted as I was sensing for Rishika*. We have to be careful. Especially now. I don’t want to rush blindly into anything. This could be a trap.*

Violet was terrified. I could hear it in her voice. She ought to go back. I didn’t want her out here if there was so much risk, but I didn’t feel right about sending her back alone either. Rishika had seen humans already. Who knew if there were other humans nearby? No, for the time being, we needed to stick together.

*Just stay behind me*, I hissed, *and do only what I say, when I say it. You got me?*

*I got you*, said Violet in a small voice.

I moved slowly forward, cautiously following the path of Rishika’s scent, but doing my best to stay hidden in the long shadows of the trees. Before she’d disappeared, Rishika had said she’d seen three humans, but what if there were more? Were there others she hadn’t seen? Could that be why she’d stopped responding?

I narrowed my eyes when I saw movement up ahead. Something rustled, low on the ground.

*Stay close*, I said, shooting a glance back at Violet. *I’m going to get a closer look.*

*Be careful, Greyson*, Violet said.

I nodded and moved forward. I advanced slowly and cautiously, one step at a time, pausing every now and then to listen to the low rumble of voices, making sure I hadn’t alerted anyone to my presence.

Then I saw them: three humans hunched over Rishika’s body, which was lying prone on the icy ground.

My gut instinct was to rush the humans. To take them by surprise and attack while their backs were turned. There were three of them, but I could probably dispatch then all before any one of them could even raise a gun.

Behind me, Violet sucked in a startled breath. *Are they game hunters?* she asked. *Could they be? I don’t see any weapons.*

I peered closely at the group. *There*, I growled. One of the women—the one wearing a baseball cap—was holding a rifle, but it looked odd. Not like any rifle I’d seen.

Who were these people? I could just barely make out that Rishika was breathing. Good. If she hadn’t been, I was pretty sure nothing could have stopped me from plowing through the brush and attacking the humans. Even so, she was so disturbingly still on the ground. But even if she had been shot, she would have been hurt, but still able to make it back to where Violet and I had been waiting. Unless they’d used silver bullets. My stomach twisted at the thought. But why would they use silver?

Unless they knew about werewolves.

*What does lips mean?* Violet asked. She was so close to my shoulder, I almost jumped.

*What?* I asked, irritated. I was trying to think.

Violet tipped her snout toward the three humans. *Look at their jackets. Lips.*

I looked. All three people were wearing identical navy blue parkas, and there was large printing on the back spelling out “LIPS”.

I stared at it. What the hell *did* LIPS mean? Certainly didn’t sound like a hunter crew I knew about.

Violet took a step closer—presumably to see better—and stepped on a twig, which cracked like the sound of a gun firing in the quiet woods.

The woman with the rifle spun around, holding the gun at waist level. She peered hard into the trees. “Did you guys hear something?”

She took a few steps forward, and closer now, I could see the front of her jacket. There was a circular logo on the front, and I could make out the words: “Lupine Investigation & Preservation Society”.

LIPS.

Holy shit.

*Greyson, we should attack*, Violet said. *Rishika’s been hurt. We have to get her out of there.*

*Hang on*, I said quickly. *These aren’t game hunters.*

*What? Are you sure? What are they then?* Violet asked.

*They’re wolf conservationists.*

*So what are they doing to Rishika?* Violet demanded.

*I don’t know*, I admitted. *But if they’re into conservation, I can’t imagine they’d hurt a wolf.*

“Sheila!” one of the other people called, looking toward the woman with the rifle. “Come on back here. We need you. We’re going to draw some blood.”

The third man rummaged in his backpack and pulled out a handful of supplies. Vials, tubing, and what looked like a capped needle.

“Is the tranquilizer in full effect?” he asked. He looked down at Rishika and shook his head. “I thought I’d seen some big ones, but this is the biggest fucking wolf I’ve ever seen.”

“I don’t think she’s from that northwestern pack we were following. She can’t be. She looks completely different.” The second man looked at his companions. “Could there be another pack in this area?”

I didn’t like any of this. They’d noticed Rishika’s size and didn’t know what to make of it. It was clear they had no idea they were dealing with a werewolf. And that tranquilizer… What if their dose wasn’t enough? Who knew how long a small dose might keep a strong werewolf like Rishika down? And if she came out of it—half-awake and threatened—that wasn’t going to be good for anyone. *Especially* the humans.

The third dude leaned in closer to Rishika and looked her over carefully. “That tranquilizer better be fucking working. I don’t want this one waking up on me.”

I could see the syringe in the man’s hand. He was looking for a good place to put it into Rishika.

*We have to do something*, Violet said, her voice growing increasingly panicked. *Let’s go, Greyson!*

*You have to stay still*, I snapped.

*But Greyson—*

*Listen to me. The only way I could stop these people would be to scare them off, or to try to attack them. No matter what I do, though, it could jeopardize Rishika. I can’t risk it.*

I looked over at the group gathered around Rishika’s still body. These LIPS people looked like they dealt with wolves, so it was highly possible they had weapons other than tranquilizer guns at their disposal, for self-defense. *That* was a risk, too. But letting them take Rishika’s blood could be a *huge* problem.

All they’d have to do would be to get that sample under a microscope, and they’d see she wasn’t a wolf species they’d ever encountered before. And that would draw more scrutiny to our area—and more humans.

*Greyson*, Violet asked, a sob in her voice*. What do we do?*

*Right now, we wait*, I growled. I was anxious as hell, and I knew I couldn’t sleep on the blood, but I was just going to have to deal with that later. I wasn’t sure how, but I would. But for right now, though, I needed to do just what I’d told Violet to do. Sit, be still, and be patient.

*They’re not going to hurt her*, I told Violet.

Violet and I watched in silence as the man drew a vial of blood. He held it up to the weak winter sunlight, capped the needle, and slipped it into his backpack.

Then he stood up straight and brushed off his jeans. “We should go check the other traps. This wolf won’t be out much longer, and I think we should give her some space. She’ll be a little disoriented when she wakes up, and the last thing she’ll need is a group of strange humans around to make her panic.”

“Yeah, fair point,” the first woman said, hooking the rifle over her shoulder. “Let’s get out of here.”

The second man reached down and removed something from Rishika’s leg, then all three packed up their backpacks and started off into the woods.

Violet started toward Rishika, but I stepped in front of her, holding her back.

*Patience*, I reminded her.

I’d learned through some explosive experiences not to rush into situations like this. There were too many variables. People sometimes forgot things and came back for them.

I was trying to stay calm, for all our sakes, but I could feel my heart hammering in my chest. It seemed to count out the seconds, pounding away the time.

Rishika still wasn’t moving. My pulse pounded in my throat. She’d always been one of my strongest supporters. She was a good fighter, and a good friend—I *had* to get her out of here.

We waited in silence for what felt like a fucking eternity. The woods were quiet. Even the noisy winter birds had gone still. When things were perfectly, *perfectly* silent, and I felt sure the group from LIPS wasn’t coming back, I rushed forward.

Rishika stirred as we approached—and then I saw it. A metal circle around her hind leg. The man had attached a tracker to her ankle.

**Episode 2524**

XAVIER

“Xavier, what are we doing?” Cali asked, looking perplexed.

“Listen,” I said, turning to face her, “Big Mac said that we couldn’t kiss inside the house, so obviously the solution is we go kiss outside.”

She didn’t protest further, so I grabbed my jeans. If I could only be close to Cali out of the house, then I needed to get out of this damn house. I was furious and frustrated as hell that we’d been interrupted in the first place. We’d both been *so close*, and my whole body felt like a banked fire.

Cali picked up her bra from the floor and dropped her sheet to pull it on, making me stop what I was doing to stare at her. My eyes swept over the perfect shape of her breasts just before she pulled on the scrap of lace she called a bra, covering herself. She looked amazing. I knew I’d missed her while she was in Portland, but looking at her now, I realized just how much.

“Why are you staring at me?” Cali asked, giving me a side-eye as she pulled on her T-shirt.

“I want to kiss you,” I said frankly, wanting to do a hell of a lot more than that. “You look just as sexy getting dressed as you looked getting undressed.”

Her cheeks blushed rose pink, and I took her hand to lead her out.

I nodded toward Kira’s closed door as we passed it, indicating that she needed to be really quiet and tread lightly. The last thing we needed was to have Kira hear us and cause another scene. The way I was feeling, I couldn’t promise myself that I wouldn’t get angry if she started up again. I knew that wasn’t fair to Kira, but—*damn*—did I want to kiss Cali.

And I was going to. I was going outside to kiss my girl. And nothing was going to stop me. Not this time.

But as we got to the bottom of the stairs, a high-pitched voice stopped us both in our tracks.

“*Cali!* You’re back!”

We turned to see Lola hurrying toward us.

“Can’t you two catch up later?” I snapped, glaring at Lola.

Even as I spoke, though, I knew that wasn’t in the cards. Cali and Lola were best friends, and they’d been separated on different missions. There was going to have to be some catching up.

Cali threw her arms around Lola, and as they hugged, I couldn’t help but notice that Lola looked a little frazzled. Her hair was messy, and her eyes looked wild. What the hell had happened to her? She’d seemed fine a while ago, when I’d seen her with Jay. Had she and Jay had a fight?  
 Lola pulled away from Cali and grabbed her shoulders, looking gravely into Cali’s eyes. “Have you seen Jacs?”

Cali frowned. “Jacs? Jacqueline? No. I just got back. Why?”

Lola heaved a gusty sigh. “Well, she’s vanished.”

“What?” Cali looked astonished. “*Vanished?*”

Lola nodded. “Apparently. Just packed up all her shit and poof, disappeared.”

I couldn’t stay I was sorry to hear this news. One less vampire around here wouldn’t be so bad.

“Someone must have seen her,” Cali said. “How could she disappear in a pack house full of werewolves?”

“I’ve already asked around. Nobody’s seen her,” Lola said. She ran a hand through her hair, and I figured out why she looked so crazy.

“Oh no, I’m not sure that’s a good thing,” Cali said, her face creased with concern.

I could see Cali getting worked up, and I didn’t want her getting sidetracked. I still had the picture of her on top of me seared into my brain. The moment just before Kira had burst in and started screaming. I wanted to go back to the good moment, *before* the yelling. And I did not want to deal with missing vampires.

Lola turned to look at me. “You have to do something, Xavier.”

“Do I?” I asked incredulously. “Jacqueline isn’t exactly my problem.”

“What are you talking about?” Lola asked.

“What are *you* talking about?” I countered. “Jacqueline is a guest. She’s a vampire living with werewolves. It’s not normal. Maybe she just left because she felt out of place. It would make sense, wouldn’t it? She’s not one of us.”  
 Lola glared at me. “*I’m* a vampire.”

“Also not normal,” I pointed out.

Lola glared harder. “And a wolf.”

“Again, not normal, but at least you’re still part of the pack. So,” I said, turning back to Cali, “how about that kiss?”

Cali rounded on me, her eyes flashing. “Lola is upset about her missing friend, and you want a kiss? Where are your priorities, Xavier?”

I groaned. *This* was what I’d been worried about. This was exactly why I hadn’t wanted to get involved. Why the hell was I supposed to be concerned about a vamp who’d gone on the run? And what the hell was I even supposed to do about it?

“I’ve been thinking about calling Tottenville,” Lola mused. “See if she ended up back there. This is just so weird. I just don’t know what else to do.”

“I think calling your vampire school is a great idea,” I said quickly. “They’ll know what to do. Now let’s go,” I said, tugging on Cali’s hand.

I was determined to test out the range of Big Mac’s stupid spell.

As we stepped onto the porch, a frigid breeze blew up, wrapping itself around us, and Cali shivered in her T-shirt.

“It’s freezing out here,” she said, looking around. “Maybe I should go back inside and grab my coat.”

She was just reaching for the doorknob when I grabbed her arm and pulled her against my body. “I’ll keep you warm,” I promised, my voice husky with want.

I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her even closer. I leaned down to kiss her and—once again—was pushed back by some unseen force.

Fury coursed through me, and I tried again. I strained against the power, but I knew it was useless. It was just as impossible as when we’d tried to kiss upstairs. We were so close, and yet so far. All thanks to that fucking witch.

She’d lied to us. We were out of the fucking house. Why was the curse—or spell, or whatever Big Mac wanted to call it—still keeping us apart? I hated to admit it, but I was starting to understand how my brother must have felt while the revulsion curse had been on him.

I must have looked as frustrated as I felt, because Cali squeezed my hand and looked back at the front door. “We are still in the house. Well” —she shrugged—“we’re on the porch, which I suppose might still count as being in the house.”

“Once a witch, always a witch,” I complained.

Towing Cali behind me, I headed down the stairs, impatience unfurling in my chest. I took ten full steps away from the house, just to be safe.

Cali stepped in front of me and looked up, her face anxious. “What if the spell is still working?” She glanced around the frozen yard. “Maybe we should go even further.”

But I couldn’t wait. As she turned away, I caught her around the waist and pulled her into a kiss. She was surprised, but just for a moment, and then her whole body relaxed, and I felt her bend herself backward over my arm.

Did this feel like the *hottest* kiss we’d ever had because we’d been denied this simple pleasure inside the house? Because it felt amazing to hold her and press her against me? To push my tongue past her lips and tangle it with hers?

Then my thoughts went to Greyson again, and how he must have felt when he’d been able to kiss Cali again, after their curse had been lifted.

*Fuck!*

Why did I keep thinking about my brother right now?

I pulled away for a moment, and Cali sucked in a breath. She was breathless and flustered, and when she looked up at me, her lips were swollen from my kisses.

“I guess Big Mac wasn’t lying about the spell,” she breathed.

I didn’t care about Big Mac. I didn’t care about the spell, or about Greyson. The only person I cared about was Cali, and I wanted more. I wanted to kiss her again, but even that wouldn’t be enough. I wanted to rip her clothes off and take her—in the house or out of it, I didn’t care. Under the open sky would be fine with me.

I was leaning in for another kiss when I heard a scuffling, then a shout coming from the woods. It was werewolves, no doubt, but I wasn’t in the mood to pay attention to anything but Cali. I tried to block it out and was leaning in to press my lips to Cali’s when I saw Greyson and Violet come bounding out of the woods.

But that wasn’t the weirdest part. Rishika was slung across Greyson’s back.

I looked at Greyson, meeting his gaze.

*I need your help*, he said. *Right now.*

**Episode 2525**

GREYSON

I shifted back to my human form as I approached the house, keeping Rishika securely over my shoulders. She was starting to move a little, but barely.

“Greyson! What happened? Are you okay?” Cali asked breathlessly, running toward me. Xavier was behind her, and he frowned as he came toward us.

Cali looked me over, like she was searching for injuries, then pointed at the metal band circling Rishika’s ankle. “What’s that?”

“It’s a tracker,” Violet said grimly.

“A *what*?” Cali breathed.

“And we have to get it off her,” I said. “Right now.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Xavier stepped in front of me, blocking my path. “A *tracker*? And you brought her straight back here with it still attached? Have you lost your fucking mind, Greyson?”

“Well, it was complicated—” Violet started.

“Why would you bring that tracker back here?” Xavier asked, outraged.

I hesitated for a moment. “I know there’s a risk, but what did you want me to do? Just leave Rishika out there in the woods? She was shot with a tranquilizer. She’s barely moving, man. We have no idea how that’s going to affect a werewolf. If you’re so damn worried about it, then help me get the fucking thing off her. Then we can get rid of it.”

Xavier looked irritated but moved his gaze to the tracker. “Who the hell put the thing on her? And why?”

“Some organization called LIPS,” I said. “The ‘Lupine Investigation & Preservation Society’.”

Xavier looked at me, baffled. “What the hell does that mean?”

“I think they’re some kind of wolf rescue or conservation group,” Violet offered.

“That doesn’t sound good for us,” Xavier said darkly.

“I’m not worried about them tracking us here,” I said.

“You should be,” he bit back.

“Think about it,” I said. “All we really need to do is get this thing off her. That way, even if they track it here, we can just convince them their equipment malfunctioned and we have no idea what they’re talking about. I mean, what are they going to do? Call us out? We’re just a group of people living in a house,” I said reasonably.

“Like a commune,” Cali offered helpfully.

Despite the situation, she made me smile. “I don’t care what we call ourselves, as long as we move fast on this.” I glanced at Rishika. “Everything depends on getting this tracker off her leg. It’s going to be a lot harder to explain if they track it here and it’s still on her. Let’s get her inside.”

“I don’t know about that,” Xavier said, shaking his head.

I suppressed an eyeroll. “Fine.”

It wasn’t fine, but I didn’t want to get into an Alpha pissing contest with my brother. Time was of the essence. So I laid Rishika carefully on the ground and looked critically at the tracker.

“How does it come off?” Cali asked, stepping next to me and crouching down.

“I have no clue,” I muttered, turning the thing around on her back leg. It looked like there was a space for a small key or a tool of some sort, something that might unlock the thing, but I didn’t want to waste any time trying to figure it out.

Rishika was still in her wolf form, and still pretty out of it, so I wasn’t sure if she was going to understand what I was saying to her.

*Rishika? You’ve got a tracker on your leg. I’m going to try to break it off. Do you understand what I’m saying?*

*Just do what you have to do*, Rishika replied, but the words were slurred and weak, and it made my worry increase.

*Let me know if I’m hurting you, okay?*

She nodded groggily, but I didn’t believe her. Rishika wouldn’t ever admit that she was in pain. It wasn’t exactly her style.

I took hold of the tracker in both hands and pulled. Hard.

“Be careful,” Cali said quietly. She had her hand on Rishika’s neck and was stroking her softly.

“I am,” I muttered, but I increased the pressure. This tracker needed to come off. Now.

I pulled harder and harder, and—finally—the thing gave with a snap that surprised a gasp out of Cali.

“Great, it’s off,” Xavier said quickly. “Now let’s destroy it.”

“Be my guest,” I said, tossing the thing to Xavier. I watched as he easily pulled the thing apart.

“That’s not going to be tracking anyone anytime soon,” Xavier muttered, then walked it over to the trash cans by the side of the house, dropping it in.

“Is Rishika going to be okay?” Cali asked, her face lined with worry.

Rishika’s eyes were open, but barely, and she wasn’t moving.

“I think the tranquilizer will wear off soon,” I said, but it was more of a hope than any kind of knowledge. In truth, I had no idea what was going to happen, or what effect tranqs had on werewolves. I wanted Rishika to shift back to human. At least that would show me she was with it enough to make the switch.

*It’s off*, I told her. *Are you feeling strong enough to stand?*

Rishika struggled to her feet. It took a while, and when she got there, she was wobbly and took only one hesitant step.

*Hang on*, I told her. *I’ve got you.*

It was clear the tranquilizer’s effects were still with her, and I wanted her stronger before she tried shifting back.

Behind us a door slammed, and I looked over my shoulder to see Artemis racing down the lawn toward us. Her face was pale, and as she got closer, I could see that her eyes were wide and terrified.

“What happened?” she demanded. “Who did this? What’s wrong with her?”

“It’s okay,” I said, trying to sound reassuring. “She’s been tranquilized, but I think she’s going to be fine.”

“*What?*” Artemis gasped.

“We were out looking for that drone I saw,” Violet started, “and we heard these voices…”

As Violet and Cali explained the circumstances, I stepped away, pulling Xavier after me.

“Listen,” I said, “we have a bigger problem.”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Dammit, man. What other shit have you brought back here?”

His attitude put my teeth on edge. I wasn’t in the mood for it, but I wasn’t in the mood to deal with it either, so I let it slide.

“This group we found, the one that put the tracker on her—LIPS—they took a sample of Rishika’s blood, too.”

Xavier thought about this for a moment. “That makes sense, if they’re some kind of animal research team.” He paused. “But when they analyze the blood—”

“Oh my god,” I snapped. “I shouldn’t have to explain this to you.”

“You don’t,” Xavier spat back, pissed. “I’m not a fucking idiot, Greyson. I can see what we have to do. We have to get the blood out of their hands before they have a chance to look at it. But the question I’m asking is why you let them collect it in the first place?”

“I had no choice,” I said hurriedly.

Xavier narrowed his eyes. “Bullshit. There’s always a choice—”

“Just drop it,” I bit out. “None of that matters. It’s done. The point is that the LIPS people have a sample of werewolf blood, and we need to get it back from them. Now I’m just hoping I can get you to agree with me long enough to help.”

Xavier gave me a long, cool look, and crossed his arms over his chest.

I gritted my teeth as frustration surged through me. “Come on, man. We’ve done it before—worked together. Can we keep it together enough to do it again?”

“Yeah, I’m going to help,” Xavier said. “It’s for the good of the pack—of course I’m going to help. What do you have in mind?”

I was relieved to hear him say that, but not surprised. “I want to do some research on this group, LIPS. Find out where they have a lab.”

Xavier pulled his phone out of the pocket of his jeans and started scrolling. “Their headquarters is about two hundred miles away from here,” he said after a moment.

I looked out into the woods, thinking. “They must have field camps all up and down the northwest, spread out. How else would they have come so close to us?”

Xavier navigated to another page. “They do,” he confirmed. “There are several, up and down the state. The closest one to us is…” He paused for a moment, reading. “About thirty miles from here.”

I nodded. When I looked over at Rishika, I saw that Artemis had gotten her to try to stand again. Rishika looked steadier this time, though she was still in her wolf form. Still, she looked a little stronger, and that was a good sign.

“So,” Xavier said, looking up from his phone. “What do we do?”

I could feel my pulse beating in my temple. “The only thing we can do. We go get that blood back.”

**Episode 2526**

Looking at the terror in her eyes, my heart broke for Artemis. I could see how shaken she was to find Rishika in such bad condition—and Artemis didn’t get shaken easily. It took a lot to throw her, but it was clear she was panicked.

“Rishika,” Violet said gently. “Do you think you feel strong enough to shift?”

I couldn’t hear Rishika’s answer, of course, but I really hoped it was yes. It was hard to tell how affected Rishika was by the tranquilizer while she was still in her wolf form. I glanced back toward the house, wondering if I should go get Torin. Maybe he’d be able to do something to help—but that would probably be easier if she was in her human form.

Artemis leaned close and whispered something in Rishika’s ear. I couldn’t hear what it was, but it must have been something encouraging, because Rishika nodded. Artemis and Violet both stepped back, giving the wolf her space.

And with a sound like snapping bones, Rishika shifted back to her human form. It seemed like it took a little longer than usual, but it was successful, and that was what mattered. Rishika stood before us in her human form, but she swayed on her feet.

“Water,” she rasped. “I need some water.”

“We’ll get you some,” Violet said quickly.

“You need a blanket, too,” Artemis said. “Let’s get you inside.”

She slipped her arm around Rishika’s waist and together, they walked toward the steps leading up to the door.

Rishika was weak—Artemis was half-carrying her—but at least she was walking and awake. Maybe the worst was over. Maybe we wouldn’t have to live in fear. It didn’t sound like this LIPS group they’d seen were hunters of any kind. They were trying to help wolves—not kill them.

But when I looked over at Greyson and Xavier, who were standing a little ways away and speaking in low tones, I noticed that neither of them seemed to share my relief. They both looked tense and angry.

I hoped they weren’t arguing, though it wouldn’t have surprised me if they were. But at least they probably weren’t arguing about me for once. Given what had just happened, whatever they were talking about had to involve Rishika.

I walked toward them to join the conversation and caught the end of Xavier’s sentence.

“—and one way or another, we’re going to have to get that damn blood.”

That stopped me in my tracks. “What blood? What’s wrong?” I asked, frowning. “Does Rishika need blood?”

Xavier glanced over at me and snorted. “Yeah, in a way.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“She needs her blood *back*,” he clarified, which didn’t really help.

“I don’t understand what we’re talking about,” I said, looking between my mates. I felt about two steps behind in the conversation.

“Let’s head inside,” Greyson said. Looking over my shoulder, he scanned the trees at the edge of the property. “We can talk in there.”

Greyson dropped into the laundry room and pulled on a clean pair of sweats, then headed into the living room. “Gather the pack, will you?” he asked Sage.

Sage looked a little taken aback at his abruptness, but she nodded. “Yeah, sure.”

“The whole pack?” Xavier asked. “You want to tell everyone about this?”

“If we’ve got a human problem, then it’s a pack problem,” Greyson said. “We’re all going to need to be careful out there.”

Sage must have done a good job conveying the tension of Greyson’s message, because it took a surprisingly short amount of time for the whole pack to gather in the living room. People perched on the arms of chairs and spread out on the floor, and everyone was looking up at Greyson.

“While we were out looking for the drone Violet saw, we ran into a group of humans—”

“*What?*” Zainab asked, clearly shocked.

Greyson didn’t pause. “They appear to be with some kind of wolf conservation organization. They’re the ones who tranquilized Rishika.”

“Bastards,” Zainab muttered.

“But it gets worse,” Greyson said grimly. They must also be conducting research of some kind, because they also took a sample of her blood, and we have to get it back before they get a chance to examine it. We do not need a group of humans searching for us.”

“You got that right,” Ravi said.

“So what do we do now?” I asked. “Are we going to try to find the field camp and steal the blood back?” I paused. “Though is it really stealing? They did steal the blood from Rishika in the first place. Assuming they didn’t have her sign a consent form.”

A few people chuckled at this, but Greyson looked grave.

“There’s no way to know if that’s where they’re keeping the blood. We don’t have any idea when the team we saw will be returning to their field camp.”

“What about the tracker?” Lola asked.

“Greyson took it off Rishika, and I destroyed it,” Xavier said.

“*What?*” Lola’s eyes got big. “You *destroyed* it? *No!* Why would you do that?”

I looked at Lola, baffled. Why the hell was she acting so weird? “I think it’s pretty obvious why we’d want to destroy a tracker that could lead these LIPS people right to our front door.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Don’t you understand?”

“Understand what?” I asked, still confused.

“We could have reversed the signal on the GPS device, and it would have led us right to the LIPS people who placed it,” she said, in a tone that implied everyone was idiots for not knowing this. “Where is it now?”

Xavier pointed out the window. “Outside in the trash. Where it belongs.”

Lola scrambled to her feet. “I’m going to look at it. I might be able to rebuild it,” she muttered.

As she hurried out of the room, she passed my dad coming in.

“What’s this I hear about LIPS?” Dad asked, looking around. “Is that the Lupine Investigation & Preservation Society?”

That was a mouthful. “Yeah, we were talking about them. Why?” I asked him, surprised.

“I just read an article about their work last week,” he explained.

“Really? Why?”

He shrugged. “Ever since I became a werewolf, I’ve started reading up on wolves. You never stop learning, you know.” He smiled and gave my shoulder a squeeze.

Lola rushed back in, holding the broken pieces of the tracker she’d retrieved from the trash. “Nice job, Hulk-hands,” she muttered, glaring at Xavier.

“Do you really think you can you fix it?” I asked, looking at the twisted remains of the tracker.

Lola assessed the damage. “No, I don’t. But I’m going to try.”

“I can help, if you want,” I offered, though I knew basically nothing about electronics.

Lola knew this too, and shot me a quizzical look. But she shrugged and gestured toward the door. “Okay. Come on.”

I followed her out of the living room and into the kitchen.

“Flip on all the lights, will you?” she asked.

“Okay,” I said slowly. “Why the kitchen, though?”

“I need an open workspace,” she said, and put the pieces of the tracker on the kitchen table.

“Hey, Lola,” Jay said, walking in. “Are you sure about this? It seems a little… intense.”

Lola glared up at him. “It’s all about attitude. And with an attitude like that, it’s a wonder you get anything done around here.”

Jay frowned. “But how do you even know what you’re doing?”

Lola was still looking at the broken pieces, almost like she was trying to put a puzzle together. “I know a little. I fixed Cali’s walkie-talkie when we were in the third grade. Didn’t I, Cali?”

“You did?” I asked, surprised.

Lola looked up from the tracker and started at me, stunned. “I can’t believe you don’t remember that. It was huge! We were at Central Playground, and we were spying on those cute boys riding their razor scooters down the slide.”

“I have no recollection of any of this,” I admitted. ‘But I believe you. And I have complete faith that you’ll be able to fix this.”

Though even as I said this, I could see that Lola was starting to look a little frantic. She’d pried away the outer metallic casing and was looking at the circuitry inside.

“Put your finger right there,” she ordered me.

I did—carefully—and watched as Lola touched a severed wire to a small circuit board. There was a spark as she touched the two together, and I jumped back.

“Holy shit, Lola. You’re not going to zap me, are you?” I demanded.

Lola glared at me. “Thanks for the complete faith in me, Cali. Just keep your finger there and quit jumping around.”

I cautiously put my finger back on the circuit board as Lola tried another wire.

There was a crackle—though no sparks this time—and after a moment a tiny red light began to blink.

“What is that?” I asked. “What did you do?”

Lola looked up grinning. “We’ve got a signal!”

**Episode 2527**

LOLA

“Go grab my laptop, will you?” I asked, looking up at Jay.

“Why?” he asked.

I rolled my eyes. “I need it to triangulate the position of the LIPS team with the signal. I have to make this work.”

As Jay left the kitchen, Cali dropped into the chair next to mine and put a hand on my arm.

“Lola, are you okay?” she asked, her expression concerned.

“*I’m fine!*” I snapped. “I’m completely fine. I’m just trying to help. We’ve gotten this far, haven’t we?”

But even I had to admit there was more to it than that. I felt like if I could do this—and help Greyson and Xavier find the blood the LIPS team had taken—maybe somehow, I’d be able to find Jacs, too. I knew it made no sense, and there was no connection between the two things, but… I just had to do *something*. Something concrete and meaningful. Maybe thinking about the blood had just reminded me of how Jacs had just disappeared.

It was really catching me off-guard, how worried I was about her. I mean, she’d gone missing, but it wasn’t as though Jacs and I were, like… *friends*.

I mean, had I been able to tolerate Jacs more since we’d left Tottenville? Yes, of course. That was obvious. Had I looked to her for guidance on being a vampire a handful of times? Sure. But did that make us friends?

Jay came back into the kitchen bearing my laptop. “Here you go,” he said, setting in front of me.

“What happens now?” Cali asked, watching me closely as I opened the computer.

“I’m going to use a program that will read the signal and—using the extrapolation algorithm—will give me the location coordinates,” I said, quickly navigating to the site I needed.

Cali gave me a blank stare. “You know I have no idea what you’re talking about, right?”

I heaved a sigh. “I’m going to put some code into the computer, and the computer will tell us where the LIPS people are. Got it?”

“Yeah, I got that,” Cali said. “But what I don’t get is how the hell you know how to do all this. When did you learn this?” She stopped herself. “Though I guess you were always good at science. You just paid more attention in school than I did.”

Her voice was starting to distract me. “Just trust me. I can do this. And get me a mocha!”

Cali nodded. “You got it.”

I entered the code, and an error code came back. I gritted my teeth and did it again. Then again. Then again.

I was working furiously, trying to get the thing to work, when Jay slid into the chair next to mine.

“So,” he started, clearing his throat nervously, “you know you’re being pretty intense right now, right?”

“Oh, you know me,” I muttered, not looking at him. “Anything for the pack.”

“Uh-huh,” he said slowly.

I shot him a glare. “Are you going to tell me what you want, or are you just going to sit there, being all up in my aura when I’m trying to concentrate on this?”

“I’m just saying, I don’t think this is actually about the pack,” Jay said, in his measured way. “Is it?”

I didn’t want to get into this, so I looked back at my computer. “Just stop bothering me.”

“Could this have anything at all to do with a certain missing vampire?” he asked.

My fingers stuttered over the keys. “Shit,” I muttered under my breath, quickly correcting my mistake.

“Lola, it’s okay,” he said, his voice soothing. “It’s okay to be worried. As soon as you’re done with this, I’ll help you look for her. I’m sure there’s got to be some logical explanation for what happened.” He paused. “The truth is, we don’t really know much about Jacqueline.”

He was right about that. We didn’t know much about her. *I* didn’t know much about her. I wished more than ever that I’d gotten to know her better.

“I tried calling Tottenville, but they didn’t know anything,” I said, my voice catching. I was staring at my computer screen but not seeing anything.

“Maybe she just left on her own. Maybe she needed some space for a while. Have you considered that?” Jay offered.

I shook my head. “I don’t think that’s it. The timing is too coincidental. Jacs was upset with me because I used her name at the diner. She thought someone was going to find her, but she never said who, or what she was so afraid of.” She’d been so scared, but she’d never explained it to me, and now she was missing. Or hiding.

A headache was starting to build, and I kneaded my eyes with the heels of my palms.

“Hey,” Jay said gently “I know Jacs looks like she’s ready to rush a sorority, but she’s eighty-six years old, Lola. She’s a vampire, and she’s been around for a while. Whatever’s going on with her, it’s only been a few hours. And I’m sure Jacs is more than equipped to take care of herself for the time being. It’s not like she’s without defenses.”

“I know,” I said quietly. It was nice to hear this from Jay. I knew he was only looking out for me and trying to make me feel better, but he was probably right.

Jay was always looking out for me. He believed in me, which made me feel even more determined to crack this case, and I turned back to my computer.

“How’s it going in here?” Xavier asked as he and Greyson walked into the kitchen.

“I’m still working on it,” I said shortly. “And maybe I’d be able to get further if people would just give me a little space.”

“We can’t wait much longer,” Greyson said. “If the NCIS episode you’ve got going on here doesn’t work out, here’s the plan: I’m going to organize the pack into a few groups, then we’ll search for the LIPS team by radiating out from the spot where Rishika was found and tagged.”

Xavier and Jay nodded, and I felt the pressure on me tick up. Greyson’s plan *sounded* like it made sense, but it was a total crapshoot. There were hundreds of square miles of forest out there. Finding the LIPS team in there would be like finding a needle in a haystack. I could do better than that—if only I had a little more time to work on it.

Jay must have seen the tension on my face, because he put a hand on the small of my back. “You can do this,” he said quietly.

I looked over at him and remembered a distant memory—the moment I’d realized I was in love with him. Cali and I had been sweating through a finals week at school when a package had arrived from Jay. There was a note—*To help you study. I know you’ll do well. Xoxo.*

The package had been filled with all my favorite treats—Double Stuf Oreos, licorice, jellybeans, and hot Cheetos. Jay and I spoke all the time, but he’d never even mentioned it. It had been a complete surprise and was just the thing to get me through that hellish week. I had felt seen and loved, and even though I hadn’t actually done all that well on those tests, I’d smiled through every one of them, thinking about Jay.

I leaned my head against his shoulder for a moment. His support was all I needed to get through this. With Jay, I knew I could do anything.

“Thank you, baby.”

Then I turned back to the computer. I was just waiting at this point. I had entered the code and was waiting for it to process. I would know in just a moment if it had worked.

The seconds ticked by. Then, in an instant, hundreds of thousands of numbers and code sequences flashed by on the screen. It was overwhelming, but just as my brain started to reel, the screen went completely blank, and I found myself staring into my own reflection on the black screen.

“What the fuck?” I muttered.

Cali looked over my shoulder. “Was that supposed to happen?”

I bit my lip, trying not to snap at her. “I don’t know.”

Cali tipped her head, thinking. “Maybe you’re supposed to do something here.”

“Like what?” I bit back.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Like this?”

She reached over my shoulder and tapped *Enter*.

“Cali, don’t do that—” I started, but stopped when the black screen gave way to a detailed color map. “What the actual fuck?”

I stared at the map for a moment. I recognized the highways. It was close to us. And there, just a few miles away, was a flashing red dot.

Cali squinted at it. “What’s that?”

“That must be the LIPS team!” I said, amazed. I looked up at Greyson and Xavier. “But we have to get going—they’re on the move!”

**Episode 2528**

XAVIER

*LIPS is on the move?* I leaned forward and looked closely at the map that had appeared on Lola’s computer.

“Hang on a second—I know that part of the woods.” I squinted at the landmarks. “It’s not that far. We can be there in no time.”

I’d said “we” on purpose, of course. I didn’t give a shit what Greyson thought—I was going to be part of this. I wasn’t about to let Greyson lead this mission and claim all the glory. And—from my perspective—this whole situation was Greyson’s fault.

Okay, if not the whole situation, then at least a good chunk of it.

“I’m going to lead a small unit of pack members,” Greyson started. “I’ll take Xavier, Zainab, and Ravi.” He turned to look at Jay. “Since Rishika’s still not a hundred percent, you’re going to be in charge while we’re gone.”

Jay nodded. “No problem.”

“I want everyone outside in five minutes,” Greyson said decisively.

“Wait,” Cali said quickly, looking up. “What about me? Can’t I come with you?”

“*No*.” Greyson and I spoke at the same time. We glanced at each other, annoyed.

But Cali looked even more frustrated. “Did it ever occur to either of you that you’re going to be dealing with humans? And after tracking them through the woods as werewolves, are you planning on shifting back and walking into their field camp completely nude? That’s going to make quite an impression.”

“We’re not planning on seeing any of those LIPS people face-to-face,” Greyson said shortly. “We go in, get the blood, and we’re gone.”

And with that, he turned and headed out of the kitchen.

Cali glared after him.

I stepped toward her. I knew I couldn’t kiss her, but she looked upset, and I wanted to make her feel better.

“Hey, I know you’re worried, but think about it like this,” I said. “This LIPS group doesn’t sound like a real dangerous outfit. I seriously doubt anyone is standing guard over their supply of wolf blood samples with a pistol loaded with silver bullets.”

Cali sighed. “I know that, but I’d still feel a lot better if I was with you. I could help.”

“How about this: I promise to take good care of Greyson,” I said with a smirk. “And I’ll make sure we get it done fast. I want to get back here to you. If you’ll recall, we still have some unfinished business,” I added, my voice a low growl.

I wanted to kiss her so badly my mouth watered, but I knew that wasn’t a possibility. Not in the house, anyway.

“The only lips I want to explore are yours,” I said softly.

Cali gave me a tiny smile as she shook her head and squeezed my hand. “All I want you to promise is to be careful. Okay?”

“As long as you promise to stay out of trouble while I’m gone,” I said. “Deal?”

She nodded. “Deal.”

I headed out of the kitchen, then out the front door. Zainab and Ravi followed me, and we met Greyson on the frozen mud of the lawn at the bottom of the steps.

“Okay,” I said, “let’s get this over with.”

I was about to shift when Greyson stepped in front of me, a pensive look on his face.

“You’re going to follow my lead, right?” he said in a low tone.

“Yeah, sure,” I said with a chuckle. “But isn’t following your lead the reason why Rishika got caught, bro?”

Greyson’s eyes narrowed. *Don’t pull that shit. You want to blame me, fine. But don’t do it in front of the others.*

Anger flared in my chest. I didn’t like getting directives from Greyson, but I just shrugged.

“Whatever,” I muttered, kicking my shoes off.

When I shifted, I was dying to pounce on Greyson, but I managed to restrain myself.

But as we headed toward the trees, I played back what I’d just said and realized that I’d been pretty disrespectful. I’d have beat the shit out of Greyson if he’d said something like that to me and I were the Alpha.

The bitterness of my response probably had something to do with the steady fever of frustration I’d been feeling because of what was going on with Cali. I hated being separated from her in any way. I supposed that wasn’t Greyson’s fault, exactly. Though, if I connected the dots leading to Big Mac’s curse, I guess it kind of *was* his fault.

Big Mac had cast that spell because Kira thought I was her dead husband. But Kira only thought I was her dead husband because she’d gotten in the way of a blast of Charon’s magic. And she’d gotten in the way of Charon’s magic because we’d been in Portland, trying to break the revulsion spell on Greyson. So at the end of the day, it actually *was* Greyson’s fault.

Prick.

The woods were a greenish-brown blur as we ran through them. We were moving fast, and I was glad. All I wanted was to get this over with, get back to the house, and pick up where I’d left off with Cali. I wasn’t too worried about the mission—I wasn’t sure what we were going to find when we got to the LIPS people, but I somehow doubted we were going to face much danger. Preservationists didn’t usually put up a fight.

After a few more miles, I started to smell them. Humans.

*Everyone slow down*, Greyson said steadily. *We’re going to be cautious approaching. They’re armed with tranquilizers, at least. Everyone keep your eyes open.*

He led the group through to a thick section of the woods, and they opened up into a small dirt road. And there, parked up ahead, was a blue truck. One side was emblazoned with “Lupine Investigation & Preservation Society”.

*So, bro. What’s the plan?* I asked.

But before Greyson could answer, the doors of the truck opened, and two guys stepped out. They pulled on backpacks and, after a moment of situating themselves, headed into the woods.

*How many did you say there were?* Ravi asked.

*We saw three*, Greyson said. *I recognize those two. The guy in the hat is the one who took Rishika’s blood.*

I looked down the dirt road. *So where’s the third?*

*I don’t know*, Greyson said slowly. *There was this one woman in a hat. She’s either still in the truck or off somewhere else. She was the one with the tranquilizer gun.*

*Are we thinking the blood’s in the truck?* I asked.

*It’s worth finding out*, Greyson said.

I nodded. *I think we should cause a distraction. Draw them off. It’ll allow us enough time to get into the truck.*

*That sounds good*, Greyson said.

*I’ll do the distracting*, I offered. I’d had enough experience doing that kind of thing back when I was working with Gabriel.

Greyson—for once—had no objection to my plan, and nodded. *Fine. Zainab and Ravi, you two take up positions around the truck. East and west. I’m going to shift back and get into the truck. It doesn’t look like they locked it.*

*Can do, boss*, Ravi said.

*But if you see or hear anything, let me know. Right away*. Greyson looked at me, and we locked eyes.

An understanding passed between us, and I nodded. Then I headed toward the other side of the truck.

*I’m going to howl and lead the LIPS guys away*, I told Greyson.

On the other side of the truck, I could see the two guys. They’d barely gone a few feet into the woods. They were talking, and one of them was holding what looked like another tracker.

Giving them a wide birth, I moved deeper into the woods, shifted back to human, and yelled as loud as I could, “*HELP!*”

Then I shifted back to my wolf form and howled.

Even from a distance, I heard one of the guys give a terrified shriek.

“What the hell?” the other one gasped.

The two guys started moving toward me. At first, I could only hear them crashing through the underbrush, but when they got close enough, I was able to spy them through the trees. I held my position. I needed to let them get close enough to just get a glimpse of me before I sprinted deeper into the woods.

This was stupid easy. Just a classic distract-and-draw-away move. A baby could’ve done this.

I stopped for a moment and listened, making sure I hadn’t moved too fast and lost them, but then I heard the sound of a stick cracking. As I whipped my head around to see what it was, there was a soft *pfft* sound, and something sharp struck me in the neck, stinging like fire.

I stumbled a little from the impact, and something that felt somehow burning hot and freezing cold at the same time spread outward from my neck.

I looked up to see a woman in a hat standing twenty feet away. And as she lowered her tranquilizer gun, my world began to spin.

**Episode 2529**

I paced the kitchen relentlessly, drinking a white chocolate mocha that I did *not* need. My heart was already beating disturbingly fast without the added caffeine. I just wished I could have gone with Greyson and Xavier. I knew they were right—that the conservationists weren’t really anyone to be worried about, but… I was worried.

For as long as I’d been in the supernatural world, Greyson and Xavier had always emphasized the absolute importance of making sure that humans *never* found out about the existence of werewolves. If they knew werewolves were real, it would be really, *really* bad news.

I’d only found out because of my connection with Xavier. He hadn’t known at the time that I was Fae, and already part of the supernatural world—hell, *I* hadn’t known I was Fae at the time—but it was clear to both of us that I was going to be wrapped up in his world for the long haul.

But, unless one of those LIPS people turned out to be someone’s mate, I really doubted humans finding out about werewolves was something the Redwood pack wanted to happen.

“Stop pacing,” Lola growled, looking up from her laptop. “You’re giving me heartburn.”

I dropped into a kitchen chair with a gusty sigh. “Sorry. I’m just worried.”

“They’re going to be fine,” Jay said soothingly. “Everything’s going to go really smoothly. It’s like Greyson said—they’ll get the blood and get out. It’s even better that they went in with a small team. They’ll get in and out even faster.”

“I know,” I muttered. Jay was right, of course. And Xavier was an expert at this kind of stuff. This was the kind of thing he’d done before I’d met him.

But it was never easy for me to be away from my mates. I always felt anxious when I couldn’t be there to protect them. I’d almost had a chance to protect Xavier when Kira had lost her marbles and tried to fry us. And I would have, too, if only I’d been able to conjure my magic shield faster.

I drummed my fingers against my coffee cup and tried to think of what Grandpa Innes had taught me—to learn to manipulate the energy around me. To build a snowball of my own magic.

I sighed again. Clearly, I was going to have to practice more. I just wasn’t at a point where I could be certain it would work. Of course, I’d still try to use it to protect Xavier or Greyson, if I had to. I wouldn’t even hesitate. As their mate, wanting to protect them was just a part of me.

Lola glanced up at me, then back at her computer. Then, after a moment, back up at me. “Ugh, Cali. I can’t just sit here and watch you be this way. You need something to take your mind off this blood sample rescue mission.”

I took a sip of my mocha. “What am I supposed to think about instead, Lola? Christmas presents?”

Lola shrugged. “Sure, why not?”

I rolled my eyes. “How am I supposed to think about that kind of trivial stuff at a time like this?”

Lola turned back to her computer and started typing again. “Fine. Whatever.”

After a moment, I craned over to see the screen. “What are you doing now?”

“Trying to find Jacqueline,” Lola muttered.

This surprised me. “Really? Why?”

“Because she left,” Lola said shortly.

“Yeah, I know, but…”

“I know we’re not exactly best buddies,” Lola said. “But I’m still worried about her.”

“So what are you doing?” I asked.

“She’s got a phone. I’m trying to reverse the signal to find her, or figure out if there’s any way to track her with it.” She stared hard at the screen. “There’s got to be a way.”

“Oh, okay.” I was quiet for a moment. “Have you tried *calling* her?”

Lola shot me a deadly glare. “Of course I have. I’m not an idiot, Cali. I’ve sent dozens of texts, and she hasn’t gotten back to me. They haven’t even been read.”

I thought about this for a moment. “What if she’s just ghosting you? Can you think of any reason why she might do that?”

Lola looked angry for a moment, but then her shoulders slumped, and she sat back in her chair. “I upset her just before she left. I didn’t mean to,” she added quickly. “But then she took off before I could explain what happened.”

“Well,” I started slowly, “if she *is* trying to avoid you, maybe she’ll talk to me. Give me her number.”

Lola looked at me for a moment, then shrugged. “Sure, why not? I guess it’s worth a try.”

I fished it out of my pocket and handed it to Lola, who dialed the number and handed it back to me.

But as it started to ring, my thoughts began to jumble. What the hell was I supposed to say if she picked up?

“Hello? Who is this?” a hard voice demanded.

“It’s… Uh—I—it’s Cali,” I finally got out. “Hi Jacqueline, it’s Cali, from the pack house. What’s up?” I said, trying to sound bright and cheerful and not like I’d almost dropped the phone when she picked up.

Lola’s eyes bugged out, but I ignored her, turning away so I couldn’t see her face.

There was a long pause before Jacqueline spoke again. “Why are you calling me?”

“Don’t hang up,” I said quickly. “I’m calling because I’m worried about you. Can we meet somewhere—”

“No,” Jacqueline said shortly.

“Come on,” I said. “Everyone’s worried about you. Especially Lola.”

Jacqueline snorted contemptuously. “If you’re really worried about me, don’t call me again.”

“What about meeting up?” I asked, growing desperate.

“No,” she said. “No, he could follow you.”

I frowned. “Who could follow me?”

But the line had gone dead. The call had ended.

“So…” Lola said slowly. “Having only heard your side, I’m guessing that didn’t go so well?”

I frowned down at my phone. “She was acting really weird. She thinks she’s being followed or something.”

Lola scrubbed a hand over her eyes. “I just wish she would tell someone what this is all about. It’s one thing to leave—she was welcome to do that whenever she wanted—but this is so shrouded in mystery.”

She sighed and turned back to her computer.

I watched her for a moment. “Are you still looking for her?”

“Of course,” Lola said.

I hesitated, but I knew I had to say it. “Maybe you should stop. Jacqueline made it really clear that she doesn’t want anyone from the pack calling her. And I think trying to find her would likely fall into that same category.”

Lola huffed indigently. “I can’t just sit here and do nothing. *Ugh!* This is *so* like Jacs. Nothing is ever easy with that girl.” She looked at her screen for a moment. “Maybe I should just cut my losses. If she wants to be left alone, so be it.” She sighed. “At least I know she’s alive.”

I looked at Lola’s desolate face. I knew she didn’t really mean that she wanted to stop looking, but I wasn’t sure what else we could do at this point.

“I could try calling her again,” I offered weakly. “But, given her state of mind, I don’t think she’d pick up.”

Jay was standing at the counter, and he’d been watching this thoughtfully. “Maybe you should get some rest, Lola. You know Jacs isn’t hurt. It sounds like she’s just a little freaked out—”

“And that’s all my fault,” Lola interrupted, looking wretched.

I glanced over at Jay. I wasn’t even sure what she was talking about.

“Lola, stop,” Jay said firmly. “Whatever happened wasn’t your fault. You had no idea that what happened would upset Jacs like that. You need to stop feeling guilty. What’s done is done.”

I watched him as he walked out of the kitchen. I’d always appreciated Jay’s calm demeanor. He was always good in a crisis, which was important, as Lola was prone to crisis. Jay had always been a steady influence on her.

Lola’s phone rang, making us both jump, and when she looked down at the caller ID, she gasped.

“It’s her!”

“Answer it!” I hissed.

Lola took a moment to collect herself, then accepted the call. “Hello, Jacqueline.”

I leaned forward, hoping to catch a word, but Jacqueline was speaking too quietly.

“*Put it on speaker*,” I mouthed to Lola, but she only glared before angling away from me.

Finally, when I was about ready to pull the phone out of Lola’s hand, I caught a few words from Jacqueline.

Lola spoke into the phone, mumbling a few “uh-huhs” before I yanked the hand holding the phone away from her ear. She rolled her eyes and hit speakerphone. I gave her an appreciative nod.

“So will you meet up with me?” Lola asked.

There was silence on the other end. I almost thought Jacs had hung up when suddenly her voice came through the small speaker. “Okay, I’ll meet up. But I make the rules.”

**Episode 2530**

MARTA

Outside in the back yard, I watched the commotion in the kitchen through the window. I’d heard what had happened to Rishika, and I assumed there would be a search party sent out to gather more information. Humans being on the trail of werewolves sounded like a bad problem to have, so I hoped they’d figure it out. I had been spared from all the excitement of the day by… *mentoring*.

*Joy.*

It was funny, I thought, turning away from the window. There was always something happening at the pack house. It was kind of overwhelming sometimes, but whatever the drawbacks, no one could ever say that living with werewolves in their pack house was boring.

Which—weirdly—actually made the mentorship feel pretty good. It felt like a dependable constant, rather than the annoying nuisance I’d thought it was going to be. It had come to be something I could really rely on.

Okorie, though, was another story.

I glanced over at him, standing with Dani. He’d been present for only a little of the werewolf debacle, and now he was speaking to the younger witch, encouraging her to dim the flame he was holding in the palm of his hand.

“You can do it; just focus you mind,” he was saying. “Cut out the noise of your thoughts and see only the flame. Control it. When you control your mind, you can control the flame.”

The flamed burned bright for a moment, then shrank until it was almost gone.

Dani gasped. “I did it!” she cried, amazed with herself.

Okorie smiled at her, and I found myself grinning, too, watching the two of them.

But when Okorie glanced over at me, I looked away quickly, turning my attention back to my set of plants.

Okay, so while I did like the routine of the mentorship more, I was getting a little bored of the flower beds Okorie kept giving me. The only options with the flowers were to kill, or try not to kill.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Okorie step away from Dani and make his way toward me. I tried to look deeply interested in my flowers, despite a creeping feeling of self-consciousness.

“How’s the progress over here?” he asked. “Going well, or are you still thinking about werewolf mates?”

I gritted my teeth, thinking about how last night I’d had the audacity to ask Okorie whether there was a way to tell if I was Lilac’s mate. Instead of answering, he’d just brushed me off. He’d told me to just go inside, that it was late, and that I should stop thinking about magic and get some rest.

Now he stepped even closer to me, observing the plants, and I felt myself bristle.

I stood a little straighter and said, without looking at him, “I’m doing fine, but if you’d given me an actual answer to my question last night, I’d probably be doing even better. I’m finding it difficult to focus.”

I just skipped over the part where I hadn’t been working and had been watching him work with Dani instead.

“And,” I added, looking over at him, “now that I’m thinking about it again, I would like an actual answer to my question.”

Okorie looked at me for a moment, then at my flowers. He waved his hand, and my flowers grew again. “I’ll answer your question when you manage to keep at least ten of these alive. Ten. No killing them.”

I felt a hot flash of anger. “No,” I said as he went to step away, “I don’t think that’s going to work for me.”

“Excuse me?” he said icily.

“Just answer the question,” I said, just as coldly.

Okorie crossed his arms and gave me an even stare. “You’re going to have to remind me of your question. I seem to have forgotten it.”

I resisted the urge to grab him and let my powers suck the life out of him. “You remember it perfectly well, Okorie. I want to know if there’s any way for me to tell whether or not I’m Lilac’s mate.”

Okorie sighed and shook his head, like I’d deeply disappointed him. “You, Marta, are capable of incredible, life-altering things. You can bring living beings back to life, or give them death at your hands, but the most pressing question on your mind is whether or not your boyfriend is the one for you?”

The obvious contempt on his face surprised me, and I felt a blush heat my cheeks. It sounded so… petty and stupid when he phrased it like that.

Which I assumed was his point.

“Forget it. It’s nothing you would understand,” I muttered, turning back to my plants.

“Why wouldn’t I understand?” he asked sharply. “It’s just a relationship like any other, isn’t it? I can certainly understand that. How is a werewolf mate bond any different than falling in love with someone under any other circumstance? Which is painful as hell in and of itself, I might add.”

“Ugh.” I rolled my eyes. “You’re so cynical! Why are you like this?”

Okorie shrugged. “It’s not cynicism. It’s just the truth.”

“Whatever,” I said, regretting bringing this back up at all.

But Okorie wasn’t ready to let it drop. “Why does it matter whether you’re his mate or not, anyway? That mate stuff is just some werewolf shit. What does it have to do with you? You’re a witch.”

My pulse was pounding hard, and it felt like I could feel my heartbeat in the base of my throat, but I didn’t answer.

Okorie huffed a sigh. “Just don’t kill ten of those flowers, and I’ll answer you.”

“With less sarcasm?” I shot back.

Okorie smirked at this. “Maybe. But no promises.”

I turned back to my flowers, breathing hard. My mind was reeling, but I tried to focus on the purple pansy in front of me, and tried not to think about how I’d always *hated* pansies, and it was just like Okorie to grow these stupid flowers for me to work with.

*Focus. Focus.*

I tried to narrow my vision so all I saw was the dark purple petals shot through with yellow, but as I reached for it, it withered in my hand.

“Focus,” Okorie said firmly.

*Focus. Focus*.

But my mind wasn’t taking suggestions. It kept going over Okorie’s words. It *did* matter to me whether or not I was Lilac’s mate. I was in love with him. There. I’d said it. He was the first person I’d ever loved.

I’d been reading enough books lately to know that first loves were always a big deal, but there was something about what Lilac and I had that felt different. Bigger than the first-blush stereotype. When I thought about Lilac, I just *knew*. I knew he was going to be a part of my life forever.

I couldn’t explain it, exactly—it was just this gut feeling that I had.

Reaching for another flower, I felt the petals of that one dry and curl with decay.

*Dammit.*

I didn’t want to lose Lilac. The time he’d spent apart from his wolf and seeing how happy he was to be reconnected made it hard to not think about this. Because not knowing if I was his mate… That meant that he probably had another mate out there. Somewhere. And I knew Lilac. He was a romantic. He was every ounce as romantic as Violet was. And the second Lilac found his true mate, that would be it. Why would he keep room for me after that? Even as a friend.

There was a lump in my throat as big as an apple, and I killed five more flowers in quick succession.

My heart ached like it was being squeezed by an iron hand. Thinking about my life without Lilac was nearly unbearable, but the pain was mixed with fury. I was pissed, and I kicked the flowerbed over, sending the rotted flowers tumbling onto the frozen December ground.

“Whoa there,” Okorie said, holding up his hands. “Settle down, Marta. You just need to be patient. Try again.”

I opened my mouth to tell him where exactly he could stick his pansies, but then over his shoulder, I saw Lilac walking toward us.

Seeing the stormy look on my face, he raised his eyebrows questioningly. “Is now a bad time?”

I dashed a tear from my cheek with the heel of my palm. I hadn’t even realized I was crying. “Now. Now is fine.”

I tried to smile, but it just wasn’t happening. The anger and fear were too strong, but I fought them down.

That was something. It had been a while since I’d been able to control my emotions like that. Maybe mentoring was good for some things. Not that I’d tell Okorie that. I wouldn’t want to give him the satisfaction.

Lilac glanced at Okorie, then gave me a smile. “Hey, I need to talk to you right now. Can I?”

**Episode 2531**

XAVIER

I stumbled backward, my movements already sluggish as the tranquilizer coursed through my system. *Jesus Christ—what the hell is in this thing?*

It took a lot to make me falter, but this seemed to be doing the trick. I longed to shift back to human and tear the dart out of my neck, but of course doing that would be suicidally stupid.

The woman who’d shot me with the tranquilizer watched me stumble around, then slung her gun over her shoulder and cupped her hands around her mouth.

“I’ve got another large wolf over here!” she yelled, presumably to the other LIPS members nearby. “Come quick!”

I turned away and kept moving. Sprinting at full pace seemed beyond my abilities right now, but it wasn’t like I could just let her take my blood like she’d done to Rishika. Plus, I had no fucking clue how much the tranquilizer would incapacitate me. I could only hope I had enough strength to lure them away long enough to give Greyson a chance to steal Rishika’s blood sample—without getting caught myself.

“Hey, big guy,” the lady crooned as she slowly approached. I knew she was just waiting for the tranq dart to do its work before she jammed yet another needle into me.

Fuck. That.

I suddenly felt a bit bad for the regular wolves in the area.

I snarled at the woman as she drew nearer, which gave her pause.

*Damn right. Stay the fuck away from me!*

I turned and headed deeper into the woods, stumbling over rocks and tree roots. I had to move fast enough so as not to get caught, but slowly enough to keep the woman on my trail. This was a goddamn annoying task all on its own, but with the tranquilizer working its way through me and trying knock me on my ass, it was fucking maddening.

In the distance, I could make out two other LIPS guys approaching.

“I’m over here!” the woman called. “Follow my voice.”

If I’d been in human form, I would have rolled my eyes. Either she was confident that the tranq had knocked me on my ass so well that she didn’t have to even try to be stealthy, or they weren’t the most woodsy bunch of conservationists.

I honestly didn’t care which at this point. It was for the best that the group following after me was getting bigger. It meant that Greyson would have that much of a better opportunity to steal Rishika’s blood.

*If he fucks this up, I will never let him hear the end of it.*

I kept moving, pushing through the weariness trying to drag me down. It would be so, so easy for me to just lie down, take a break. Maybe have a nice midday siesta. God, I couldn’t remember the last time I had felt so high and out of it. Every cell in my body was begging for relief, for sleep.

But of course, I couldn’t do that. If stopped, if I gave in to the tranq, they’d find me and we’d be stuck in this shitty situation all over again.

I stumbled over a rock and growled under my breath. All I wanted was to go back to the pack house, to see Cali again and pick up right where we’d left off. I still couldn’t believe Big Mac had cast that stupid spell. It wasn’t my fault Kira had gotten her brain addled by some spellwork and was now convinced that I was her dead husband.

An annoying and vaguely sleepy voice in the back of my head reminded me that Kira had only been hit by that blast because she’d been protecting me. So, yeah. Technically, it *was* my fault. Guilt softened the raw edges of my anger.

*You know what? Fine. If the only way I can be with Cali is by staying outside the pack house, then I’ll just have to make that work.*

But I wouldn’t get a shot at that if I didn’t evade my pursuers first. It hit me with a jolt how easily I could hear them, smell them. They were gaining on me too fast. It was the fucking tranq.

My feet dragged as I put on a burst of speed, and I stumbled for a moment before my body remembered how to regain its footing. I summoned all my strength and pressed on ahead, zigzagging around so I could shake them off a little bit.

I just needed to confuse them long enough to overcome the drugs in my system and regain my strength. Then we could move ahead with this stupid plan.

I paused to catch my breath.

“Hey, why don’t you hit the big guy with another dose?” I heard one of the male LIPS members say. “That should do the trick. He’ll be out for a few hours, but we can have a small recon team watch him to make sure no bears or any other animals get too curious before he wakes up.”

Unfortunately, I was pretty sure the guy was right. I was Alpha strong, but I wouldn’t be a match for a second dose. One dose on its own was putting my endurance to the test—another would knock me flat on my back. Make me completely helpless, vulnerable to whatever the hell they wanted to do to me.

*Zip!*

A dart lodged into a tree, just shy of my head. I’d been so busy sluggishly worrying about getting hit by the dart that I’d forgotten to move out of the way.

I glanced over my shoulder.

About fifty feet back, the woman was holding up her gun. The two guys flanked her.

“How could you miss him?” one of the guys asked. “He’s freaking huge!”

*Rude.*

The woman was staring at me with something like awe. “He’s even bigger than the one I tagged earlier.”

“Maybe they’re from the same pack,” the third LIPS member suggested.

The woman quickly reloaded her gun. “I’ve never seen anything like them. What if we’ve discovered a new subspecies?”

*Yeah, it’s called the werewolf.*

I kind of hated how close they were to the truth, and that was going by sight alone. They hadn’t even had a chance to look at Rishika’s blood yet.

Their words were like cold water being thrown over me. This was exactly why I was here, putting on this charade for them at all—to keep them from finding out who Rishika and I truly were.

I gathered my strength and burst through the tree line. Surely, I could distance myself from them now? It felt like it had been ages since we’d initiated the plan. Greyson had to have had enough time to get Rishika’s blood from the LIPS vehicle by now.

As I kept moving, I felt my strength begin to return. My system was overtaking the tranquilizer. Rishika had had a harder time fighting it, but then again, she wasn’t an Alpha. Another dart struck the ground near my foot.

*Fuck!* I’d have to be more careful. I put on another burst of speed, glancing back over my shoulder to make sure the woman wasn’t about to nail me with another dart, when suddenly the ground beneath my paws gave way and I tumbled down a steep ravine. I felt each rock and twig and bush I hit on the way down—until my head smacked against a tree trunk at the bottom.

Then all I felt was the worst headache of my life.

Blood dripped into my eyes, and I shook my head, trying to shake off the pain and disorientation. The three LIPS members appeared at the top of the ridge, pointing down at me.

“We’re not trying to hurt you, big fella!” one of them called down to me. I could hear in his voice just how thrilled he was to have caught up to me. “We want to help you.”

Right. They wanted to help… because they thought I was just a big-ass wolf. I was sure they meant well, even though they were well on their way to just ruining my day, but I couldn’t help wondering how their demeanors would change if they knew what they were really dealing with.

Which, once again, was the reason why we desperately needed to get Rishika’s blood back. The reason I was out here in the first place.

The three LIPS members started slowly making their way down the ravine toward me, and I decided then and there that I’d had enough. If Greyson hadn’t managed to get a hold of the blood by now, then that was his problem. I’d done all I could.

I broke into a run, ignoring the aches and pains flaring up as I moved. I didn’t stop. Didn’t slow. If anything, I pushed myself to move faster, to leave the LIPS crew behind.

When I was certain that a random dart wasn’t going to hit me, I paused, listening for the LIPS members. Their voices were distant now. Good. I kept running until I couldn’t hear them at all.

I tried to mind link with Greyson. I had no clue if we were in range. I could only hope.

*It’s time to get back to the pack house.*

It was then that I realized the dart was still in my neck. I pawed at it, but I couldn’t quite reach it. That lady was a pretty damn good shot. I was lucky she’d only hit me the once.

I looked around. *Fuck it.* The coast was clear.

I shifted back to human and yanked the dart out of my neck. That was when a buzzing noise sounded overhead. Wary, I spun around, immediately on my guard.

A drone was hovering nearby.

I froze. “Shit.”

How long had that been there? Had it recorded me shifting?

**Episode 2532**

Lola and I waited in the living room for Jacs to share the location of the meeting site with us. Lola had put her computer away, and we’d both gotten ready so we could leave the moment Jacqueline told us where to find her.

I glanced out the window at Jay’s car, which we’d be taking to meet with Jacqueline. Lola had told him not to come with us because she and I were going on a girls’ day shopping trip. Jay being Jay, he’d still offered to come with us and “be our chauffeur,” but Lola had convinced him it wouldn’t be worth his while, and that it would be best if we had privacy. There might have been a veiled promise in there that Lola would come back with some new lingerie to model for him, but I wasn’t sure about that part, and I didn’t care to ask.

In the end, Jay had handed over his keys and told us to be careful. He hadn’t asked anything else, but I still felt guilty about tricking him. Lying to him, really. I would have much preferred that Jay came with us—or even better, that we waited until Greyson and Xavier got back and they came with us too—but Jacqueline had been insistent that we meet up with her sooner rather than later.

I bit my lip. *It’s okay to do this. To leave to meet with Jacs while Greyson and Xavier are out dealing with the LIPS people. Lola needs me, and I can’t help Greyson or Xavier here at home anyway. Besides, they’ll be fine. LIPS are just a bunch of researchers—the only dangerous thing about them is their curiosity.*

Lola sighed. “She sure is taking her sweet time.”

I stood. “I’m going to check on Artemis and Rishika before we leave.”

I’d been worried about Rishika since they’d brought her back drugged, but I was also concerned about any adverse effects those tranquilizers might have on werewolves in particular. You know, in case Xavier or Greyson ended up on the receiving end of one.

I went upstairs and ducked my head into Artemis and Rishika’s room. Any worries I had about the tranquilizer were put to rest when I saw how much better Rishika was looking.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

She was pulling on a pair of running shoes. “I’ve had worse hangovers—I’ll be fine.”

I glanced over at my sister for confirmation, and the way that she was watching Rishika made my heart ache. Clearly, Artemis was still shaken by the whole thing. I smiled at her. “Maybe when Lola and I get back from meeting Jacs, you and I can talk more about that New Orleans trip?”

Artemis’s face lit up. “That would be great. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it since we first discussed it. I can’t wait to put things into motion.” Her smile dimmed a bit. “Though, I am a little nervous. What if I come back empty-handed, or we actually find Adair but he doesn’t want anything to do with me?”

“Hey, let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves. No point in worrying about the things we can’t control. You’ll still have Mom and me no matter what, and we can still have a fun vacation. Think of it that way,” I said. “I’ve never been to New Orleans, so let’s only think about having fun for once.” My lips quirked. “And hey, if New Orleans doesn’t work out, there’s always Las Vegas.”

Rishika groaned. “Hard pass. There are too many wild partiers there for my taste. Let’s hope we can stick to New Orleans.”

Lola appeared in the hallway behind me. “I got the location. Are we going or what?”

I quickly hugged my sister. “We shouldn’t be long. Let me know when Xavier and Greyson get back.”

A few minutes later, Lola and I were in Jay’s car, heading to the meeting point. Lola was driving, which was… not ideal. She was what some might call a very *aggressive* driver. She pulled onto the main road leading away from the pack house.

“Jacs texted the address.” She passed over her phone. “Can you tell me how to get there?”

“Sure.”

I plugged the address into the navigation app and frowned. “She wants to meet us at a carnival?”

Lola did a double take. “A carnival, really?”

The car veered slightly into the oncoming lane.

“Keep your eyes on the road!”

She jerked the wheel to correct our path. “Okay, but seriously. Is that where the address leads to?”

I nodded, my heart still racing. “According to the navigation, yeah. She didn’t tell you?”

She shook her head, dutifully keeping her gaze locked on the road this time. “Nope. She just dropped a pin so that we’d know where to meet her. I guess a carnival could be a good lowkey meeting place though, right? There are lots of people, so it’d be easy to blend in?”

“I guess.” I grimaced. “Still, I wish she could’ve picked somewhere else. Don’t carnivals have clowns?”

“Circuses have clowns. This sounds like one of those traveling carnivals. The ones with a bunch of rides, games, and lots of delicious greasy food. My dads and I used to go to one every year, and it was so much fun! I’m actually really good at the ring toss, so even if things with Jacs don’t work out we can still have some fun at least.”

I smiled weakly. “I hope so.”

With everything that had been going on, it felt like my life had just been one fire to put out after another. My time in Portland with Greyson had been wonderful, but it would still be great to get a break from all the stuff happening at the pack house right now.

I still wished Big Mac had at least asked Xavier and me for some input before she’d cast that spell on us. Now I couldn’t even kiss him in our own home. It just wasn’t fair.

*First Greyson, now Xavier—are the* due destini *gods toying with me or something?*

“Oh, I hope they have funnel cake.” Lola sighed wistfully. “That was my favorite thing to get when I went to the carnival with my dads. We’d start with funnel cake, then walk through the house of mirrors, then we’d have hot dogs or burgers and then walk through the gaming gallery, and I almost always won at least a prize or two…” She continued on, recounting her cheery childhood carnival memories.

It was nice, in a way, and made our meeting spot seem just a little less creepy—until we pulled up to our destination.

It was a carnival, all right. But it was pretty much the exact opposite of the scene Lola had described. Instead of a bright, cheery amusement park, the carnival in front of us was *old*, with peeling paint, rusted steel, and tattered banners. It looked like something out of a Stephen King novel. Even the sky seemed darker here, as a thick cloud cover moved over the sun.

“Um… Is this it?” Lola asked.

I checked the GPS. “Yeah.” I glanced ahead again. “I can’t believe Jacs would want to meet us here. Like, come on! Malls exist. Is it a vampire thing?” I looked at Lola.

She shook her head. “This vampire’s getting the heebie-jeebies, so no. It must be a Jacs thing.” She pushed open the door. “It doesn’t matter. We’re here to find out why the hell Jacs ran away, not ride the roller coaster.”

We looked up as the single coaster groaned its way up a rickety, rotten wood track. “Good, because there’s no way in hell I’m getting on that thing.”

As we entered the carnival, Lola pulled out her phone. “I’ll text her and ask her where she wants to meet.” Her thumbs moved over her phone, and a moment later it chimed. “She wants us to meet her at the funhouse.”

“The funhouse. Wonderful.” Why *not* meet at one of the creepiest attractions a carnival had to offer?

We bought our tickets from a carnival worker who looked pale enough to be a vampire and headed toward the funhouse.

“Wow, this place is pretty dreary,” Lola said as she looked around.

“Understatement.” Still, I wouldn’t have minded being here with Xavier. It would’ve been great to spend time with him, even here. Plus, we could’ve kissed freely. I smiled softly as I pictured us snuggled together on one of those boat rides. “Do you think there’s a Tunnel of Love here?”

“Yeah, there.” She pointed at a gigantic, misshapen wooden shack. It looked like plywood was the only thing holding it together. “Hardly romantic, though.”

My fantasy disappeared right before my eyes. As we walked past the arcade, several of the workers tried to goad us into playing.

Lola took my arm and pulled me away, walking faster now. “Don’t bother. All the games are rigged.”

“I thought you said you were great at the ring toss?”

She shrugged. “Yeah, because I learned how to cheat.”

We paused in front of a monster house designed to look like an old castle. There were several cut-out monsters on display, including a faded vampire and a werewolf. We stared at them for a moment.

“Well, that’s just insulting,” Lola declared. “I look nothing like either of those things.”

I agreed—though, to be fair, this was kind of what I’d thought supernaturals looked like before I’d met any of them.

We continued on toward the funhouse, but then I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye.

I glanced over my shoulder. Someone was watching us from a distance.

“Keep moving,” I said.

A few minutes later, I saw the same person in the reflection of the house of mirrors. They were looking away from me, but what were the odds that they were heading in the same direction as us? There was something sinister in the person’s appearance—large sunglasses, long dark hair, ragged carnie clothes…

I pretended to look into the mirror and fix my hair as I whispered, “Lola, are we being followed?”

**Episode 2533**

GREYSON

“Hey! I’ve got another large wolf over here!” the LIPS woman called to the two guys.

They ran off after her and disappeared into the forest.

My stomach clenched. *Did Xavier really get himself caught? Or is this all part of the diversion?*

It was impossible to tell, but it didn’t take a genius to realize that Xavier getting caught, or getting his blood taken, would only make this already shitty situation even worse. There was no way that LIPS would think “this guy must own a dog” if they ran the blood that was supposed to be a *wolf’s* and it came back mixed. Wolf and human. There were errors in so many of these kinds of tests at a regular, open-to-the-public lab, but something told me LIPS would test again and again, and when they would come up with the same answer each time…

I paused, torn between continuing with the plan or pausing to divert the LIPS crew away from Xavier. Ultimately, if we didn’t make it out of here with Rishika’s blood, then all of this would be for nothing. We would have put ourselves, and Xavier, in danger for no reason. I had to continue with the plan.

I mind linked to Ravi. *Go check on Xavier. This may just be part of the plan, but I need to know if he’s actually been caught.*

If my brother had gotten himself caught, I’d have to deal with that later. For now, I was almost certain there was nobody in the LIPS vehicle. This might be my only chance to get Rishika’s blood, and I wasn’t going to let it pass me by.

I raced out from where I was hiding and paused to look around, listening for any approaching vehicles or LIPS members. I couldn’t hear anything but distant shouting, which was growing more and more distant. It sounded like Xavier was on the move, leading the LIPS crew on a chase just like we’d planned.

Maybe I wouldn’t have to worry about my brother after all.

I mind linked with Zainab. *I’m going in. Let me know if anyone approaches.*

I shifted back to human and opened the back of the vehicle, pausing to listen again before stepping inside and quietly closing the door behind me.

The interior of the vehicle was pretty much what I’d expected—a mobile lab/research office. There was a long desk along the wall with monitors and computer equipment, some built-in storage, and tons of paperwork, charts, and lab equipment.

Tucked beneath the counter was a small fridge with a thermometer attached to the front of it. I opened the fridge and, next to some plastic-wrapped sandwiches and a few cans of diet soda, was a tray of blood samples.

*How hygienic.*

I pulled out the tray.

*Should I destroy all the samples? Or just Rishika’s?*

If LIPS was really the kind of organization they claimed to be, then the research they were doing could help the wild wolves roaming the woods in this part of the state. Far be it from me to get in the way of that work.

I searched through the vials. Since these weren’t done on human subjects, there were no names on the handwritten labels. *Shit. Which one is Rishika’s? Is it even here?*

Then I noticed that each label had a date and a number scrawled on it. There was only one vial with today’s date, so that had to be Rishika’s. I set that vial aside and put the others back in the fridge where I’d found them.

*Well, that was easy.*

I was about to leave when I heard footsteps approaching from outside the vehicle.

*Shit. Spoke too soon.*

I didn’t have time to do anything—not that I could even try to hide in here. Whoever was approaching the vehicle was right outside. I glanced around the interior of the lab and then down at myself. This was going to be an interesting interaction. I’m sure the naked man holding a vial of wolf blood in one hand would play well with the other scientist. I had to get out of here stat.

*Preferably before someone could call the cops on the crazy naked dude with the blood.*

Would it be better to shift back and just surprise whoever was out there? Maybe if I moved fast and scared the shit out of whoever was coming, they wouldn’t have time to react, or think, and I could still get out of here without compromising anyone.

I turned toward the door, preparing myself to shift on the spot when I caught movement in the glow of the video monitor mounted on the wall. It was showing an aerial view of the woods.

*Violet said she saw a drone.* She’d been worried that the rogue hunters were back, but maybe the drone had belonged to LIPS all along and it was just part of their research.

Zainab mind linked, *Greyson? We have to get out of here.*

I peeked out the window. Zainab was gesturing for me to hurry up. She must have been the person I’d heard outside the lab.

I headed for the door when the image on the monitor shifted. The drone was in motion.

And it was recording my brother.

My chest hitched.

Xavier, in his naked-ass human form, was staring up at the drone.

*That’s great, here I am worried about getting caught when my brother may have already been captured shifting on camera.*

I hurried out, the vial tucked in my hand.

“I hear a car coming,” Zainab explained.

I listened. She was right, and the car was getting closer.

I followed her into the woods. When we made it past the tree line, I emptied the vial onto the dirt and smashed it, covering the broken fragments with a bed of pine needles. We looked up as the car pulled up to the mobile site.

The driver got out, stretched, and called out. “Rhonda? We’re here for the blood samples!”

I let out a breath. If we’d started this a single minute later, Rishika’s blood would’ve been on its way to the lab, and there would’ve been nothing we could do.

Another guy got out of the passenger seat. He held a large remote in his hand. “I’m going to bring the drone back,” he said to the driver. “I think there’s something wrong.”

My stomach twisted.

“What do you mean?” the driver asked.

“I just saw the craziest thing.” He tapped the small screen built into the remote. “Something must be up with the footage. I could have sworn I just saw a naked guy, but the image is too small to tell. I want to check the recording on a better monitor.”

He pulled a flash drive out of the remote and started toward the LIPS vehicle.

Adrenaline and cold certainty poured into my veins. I had to get that flash drive.

I mind linked with Zainab. *Circle around and cause a distraction.*

She shifted and hustled off with a growl, causing both men to pause.

“Did you hear that?” the driver asked.

Zainab was being as loud as possible as she barreled through the trees, pulling their attention away to the other side of the woods. I took my shot.

I shifted and burst out of the woods, startling both men, who let out yelps of surprise. Both the remote and flash drive fell to the ground as the men scrambled into the safety of the car and slammed the locks down.

*Fine with me.*

While they were cooped up in their car, probably pissing themselves, I scooped up the flash drive in my teeth and raced back into the cover of the woods. A beat later, Zainab fell into step beside me, and we crept back toward the site, watching as the two guys slowly got out of their car, both of them stunned and shaking.

“What the hell was that?” the drone operator gasped. “Did that wolf just eat the flash drive? What are we supposed to tell Rhonda?”

The driver took this opportunity to walk up to a tree, unzip his pants, and relieve himself.

Just then, Ravi rejoined the group. *What the fuck?*

The guy stopped, clearly having heard something in the woods. “Rhonda?”

I froze as he looked deeper into the trees.

*We need to get the hell out of here.* For one thing, the scent of urine was overpowering. For another, we’d done everything we could, and lingering here any longer would just put us at risk.

The guy finished up, tucked himself back in his pants, and turned away, gesturing the other guy over to the mobile lab.

Ravi, Zainab, and I moved farther into the woods, well out of earshot of the LIPS crew near the lab, and I shifted back to human. “Where’s Xavier?”

Xavier’s part of the plan had been the riskiest, and after seeing him on the monitor, I worried about what the hell had happened on his end. Had he outrun the hunters? Or had something else happened to put him in the path of that drone? I couldn’t go back to the pack house, to Cali, without my brother.

Before they could reply, movement echoed through the woods. It was the woman—Rhonda—returning with her coworkers.

“The big one got away,” she lamented.

So Xavier had escaped, then. Good. But where was he? Was he hurt?

Then Rhonda added, “The team is on it, don’t worry. We’ll get that wolf no matter what.”

**Episode 2534**

Lola gasped. “Someone’s following us?”

I shushed her. “Keep your voice down. And don’t look,” I added, when she craned her neck to look behind us.

“How the hell am I supposed to see who’s stalking us if I can’t look at them?”

“I don’t know. Just… don’t be obvious, okay?”

Lola thought for a moment, then contorted her body as if she were stretching and checked out her reflection in the mirror. “I don’t see anyone behind us.”

“What?” I stared straight into the mirror, using the reflection to see the person who had been following us. Only, Lola was right. There was nobody there.

Lola rolled her eyes. “I think maybe your imagination is running wild. Again.”

I shook my head. “Maybe.”

I could’ve sworn someone was following us. I mean, I saw them. I knew what they looked like. Sort of. Could it really be a coincidence that I’d seen them over by the arcade, then the monster house, and again just now in front of the house of mirrors?

*They did look like a carnival worker… Maybe they’re just doing their job, and that takes them all over the grounds?*

We kept walking when suddenly the person I thought had been behind us appeared directly in front of us, blocking our way.

I jumped back with a yelp. “What do you want?”

Lola frowned, then cocked her head. “Jacqueline?”

The person, who I now realized was a woman, lowered her oversized sunglasses enough to reveal her eyes. Realization hit me.

*It’s Jacqueline, all right. But why is she dressed like a murderous carnie doll?*

“Keep your voices down!” she hissed.

I glanced around, and it hit me then that Lola, myself, and now Jacqueline were the only non-carnival workers I’d seen since we’d arrived. “Why? There’s barely anyone here.”

*Which definitely isn’t sketchy at all, I’m sure.*

“Jacs, what’s going on?” Lola asked. “Why did you run out on us like that?”

Instead of giving us our long-awaited answer, Jacs ushered us toward the funhouse. “We’ll talk inside.”

We passed our tickets over to a hollow-eyed attendant and went inside. The funhouse smelled musty, like it hadn’t been cleaned in far too long. Wrinkling my nose, I glanced around. The floors were sloped, and the mirrors overhead seemed to either compress or elongate my body. I knew that the whole thing was probably just an optical illusion, that behind the mirrors and other effects we were probably just in a big room with plywood-thin walls that created a maze. Still, what part of this was supposed to be fun?

“Come with me.” Jacs must have already familiarized herself with the space, because she walked on ahead, leading us deeper into the funhouse.

Suddenly, Lola stopped. “Seriously, Jacqueline. What is going on here? Why so much secrecy? Why did you run from the pack house without saying anything? And who is the ‘he’ you said was going to find you?”

Jaqs removed her sunglasses with a sigh. “The truth is, I’m being stalked.”

I gasped. “That’s awful! Do you think they followed you here?”

That would’ve explained all the subterfuge, at least. But it didn’t give me any comfort to think we might have walked into the stalker’s sights. Could they be stalking all three of us right this second?

I looked around wildly, but all I saw were distorted, fractured reflections of myself on the funhouse mirrors.

*This place is an actual nightmare.*

“Well, who’s doing the stalking? And how long has this been going on?” Lola asked.

“He’s been after me for years. It’s the real reason why I’ve avoided ever using my name in public. Why I can’t register for school. Why I stayed at Tottenville for so long, even though I was *so* over it.” She sighed. “Anything I do will give my location away. So you using my name for that fake diner job opened me up to being found by him. That’s why I left. Why I’m still running.”

“Wait, Lola, when were you at the diner?” I asked.

“It doesn’t matter anymore; I’m royally fucked!” Jacqueline interrupted.

*So she’s been on the run all this time…* I shuddered at the thought. “Who is this stalker?”

Her shoulders slumped, like simply telling us about the man who’d been putting her through hell was a burden in and of itself. “He’s a vampire, and his name is Rafe Symanis. He’s been stalking me since I was twenty-one, since I was human. He wanted to be the one to turn me, but another vampire got to me first, and Rafe has been stalking me ever since.

I did the math on that. “Wait… You said he’d been stalking you since you were a twenty-one-year-old human?”

She nodded tearfully.

“So, this Rafe guy has been stalking you for over *sixty years*?”

Another nod, and this time a couple of tears trailed down her cheeks.

“Jacqueline… I’m so sorry,” Lola said. “I had no idea.”

I couldn’t even begin to imagine what the last sixty years must have been like for Jacqueline. She’d been avoiding this guy for three of my lifetimes. Sixty years of living in fear and looking over her shoulder. What kind of life was that?

Jacqueline’s chest hitched, and a few more tears spilled down her cheeks. “I’ve been doing everything I can to avoid contact with him, but no matter what I do, no matter how hard I try, he seems to find me every few years—or at least come close enough that I end up scrambling for cover.”

“Have you ever tried to get help?” I asked gently.

She shook her head. “I went to the vampire council early on, thinking they’d help me. Maybe come up with some kind of restraining order or something. But Rafe—he has friends in high places.” Her smile was bitter. “He’s been a vampire for well over two hundred years, and I was basically a newborn. I stood no chance against him. I never went back to the council again.”

“And then you found Tottenville,” Lola said.

“I thought it would be a place where I could learn to blend in with humans. It would help mask me from Rafe, keep me safe. But I knew I couldn’t stay there for the rest of my life. I was already tired of living there by the time you came along. And now…” She blew out a breath. “Now I don’t know where to go.”

“You should come back to the pack house,” I said. “Even if Rafe does find you, we can help keep you safe. I doubt a single vampire would be stupid enough to take on a whole pack of werewolves.”

Lola nodded. “She’s right; we’ve faced far worse threats than a crusty old vampire. Didn’t we defeat an army of revenants?”

“And what about Letifer and Silas?” I added.

“Not to mention warlocks and other supernaturals.”

Jacqueline sighed. “I’m still a bit nervous being around so many werewolves… Maybe that would give Rafe pause, too.”

“I understand that it’s not something you’re comfortable with yet,” I said, “but you have to admit, you’ll be safer with us than you would be hiding out on your own, especially in places like this. You’ll have the whole pack backing you, plus the Fae and probably the witches too.”

My chest expanded with a sense of pride. Life with the Redwood pack might be a little too exciting, and more complicated than I’d ever wanted it to be, but thus far we’d proven ourselves unstoppable. As long as we stuck together, I didn’t see why that should change.

“Thanks, Cali. Maybe I overreacted. A little bit.”

Lola laughed. “You think?” Then she let out a sneeze that echoed through the funhouse. “Can we get out of this place? It’s making my eyes water.”

We worked our way through the funhouse, and I let out a breath of relief when we finally emerged into the open air.

I glanced around, frowning again at how deserted the place was. “Why are there so few people here?”

“Because it sucks?” Lola shrugged. “I had such high hopes, but as carnivals go, this one rates a four out of ten.”

*That seems generous.*

“Should we go?” Jacqueline asked.

“We’ve made it this far. Maybe we can find a game to play, or a ride that doesn’t look like it’s going to collapse and kill us all?”

Lola nodded. “It’s worth a shot. Jacs, what do you think?”

She shrugged. “Fine.”

We walked through the carnival for a few minutes, trying to scope out anything that looked like it could be both safe and fun. The pickings were pretty slim. As we walked around, I felt myself getting more and more creeped out. I had that hair-raising sensation on the back of my neck, like someone was watching us or something. And thinking about Jacqueline’s stalker problem only made it worse.

“So the roller coaster is out,” Lola commented. “What about the carousel?”

She pointed to the most horrific carousel I’d ever seen in my life. Half of the animals were so worn down with time that the paint was gone, and it was difficult to tell what they were supposed to be. One of the carousel horses was missing its head.

Its *head*.

I shook my head. “I’m good. I’ve already got enough nightmare fuel for a while.”

The food was even worse. Not a funnel cake to be found in the whole carnival—at least not if you wanted one without mold.

“Oh my god,” Lola groaned. “Even the games are awful. Look.” She pointed at the darts game. “You win prizes by throwing darts at cute kitten pictures! How screwed up is that?”

I held up my hands. “Okay, I was wrong. Maybe we should just call it a day.” Greyson and Xavier were probably back at the pack house by now, anyway.

Jacqueline muttered a, “Thank god,” and Lola nodded. “Fine by me.”

We were heading for the exit, Jay’s car in sight, when a group of rough-looking carnival workers stepped into our path.

One of them shook his head and raised his chin to reveal a deep scar running down the length of his neck. “You can’t leave yet.”

**Episode 2535**

GREYSON

While the LIPS crew regrouped at the mobile lab to put together a plan to grab Xavier, Ravi, Zainab, and I were circling back through the woods, trying to pick up Xavier’s scent. We didn’t have any time to waste. Not only were the LIPS people bound to start trudging through the woods at any moment, but we had no idea what kind of condition Xavier would be in when we found him.

LIPS seemed to have an honorable mission, but it was impossible to forget how they’d tranquilized Rishika. They clearly had no qualms when it came to shooting tranquilizer darts—had they managed to get Xavier?

The drone footage I’d seen did offer one small comfort—I knew my brother had been alive and seemingly unhurt not that long ago. But had his status changed since then?

I kept looking up, above the tree line, as we raced through the woods. I had to assume I’d hear a drone coming, but it was possible that with everything going on, we could end up on the footage without knowing. At least I had the flash drive—whatever the drone may or may not have been filming, there would be no memory of it.

And if the drone did return, then I had to find Xavier before it did. The less LIPS knew about the Redwood pack, the better for everyone. The fact that they’d now seen two of us in wolf form was already unacceptable.

We followed Xavier’s scent to the edge of a steep ravine. It was stronger here and seemed to continue over the edge. Was that how he’d shaken the LIPS crew off his trail—by venturing into the ravine where it would be more difficult for them to follow?

We carefully worked our way down the ravine, and Ravi stiffened. *There’s blood.*

I followed his gaze to a dark smear of blood on a small tree trunk. I’d have known its scent anywhere. It was Xavier’s blood. Worry poured into my stomach, and I looked around wildly for any sign of what had happened.

*What the hell happened to him?*

Zainab snuffled around. *The trail keeps going this way. If Xavier was hurt, he was strong enough to keep moving.*

We continued to follow the scent trail, and as we did, I noticed human shoe prints marring the side of the ravine.

*The LIPS team must have followed him down here*, Ravi said. He circled around, following their scent and examining the trail. *They converged here, then stopped and went back up the ravine. Probably heading back to camp to regroup and figure out how to track down Xavier.*

That made sense. I’d heard the woman—Rhonda, I thought her name was—mention that “the big wolf” had gotten away. I nodded, then jerked my head toward Xavier’s trail.

*Forget the LIPS team. We need to find my brother.*

We kept following Xavier’s scent down the ravine. I noted, with more than a little relief, that his scent was less tinged with blood as the trail continued. Whatever had happened to him, he’d healed.

I remembered suddenly what it had been like when I’d first rejoined the Redwood pack. So many of them—pretty much all of them, really—had been so suspicious of me. If we’d been in this situation back then, they probably would’ve assumed I wasn’t interested in saving Xavier. They probably would’ve thought I was out here to hunt him down.

That had never been my intention. I’d never planned to hurt my brother. But my reputation, built on rumors and just enough truth to make the worst stories seem plausible, had always preceded me.

*At least Cali saw through it all.*

We’d reached the river at the far end of the ravine when something suddenly came rushing at us and slammed into me.

I nearly swallowed the flash drive as I fell into the shallow river.

Dripping wet and gagging around the plastic, I looked up to see Xavier in his wolf form, standing over me.

*What took you so long?* Amusement colored his tone. The bastard was *laughing* at me.

Relief and fury twined together. My brother really had a knack for inciting that particular reaction. I recovered and worked the flash drive closer to the front of my mouth so I could stop choking on it for half a second.

*We’ve been looking for you*, I replied. *Are you okay?*

His broad, lupine shoulders seemed to shrug. *I got hit by a tranquilizer dart, fell down a ravine, and might have been seen by a drone. Other than that, everything’s peachy. Tell me you got what you needed.*

*We did. And a lot more.*

Xavier cocked his head. *Why do I have a feeling I’m not going to like what you’re about to say?*

*Everything’s fine, I think. The LIPS crew seems determined to find you, but I was at least able to get the drone recording of you. The operator saw you on the remote, but he’s doubtful enough that I don’t think he’d ever put two and two together without having access to the recording.*

*Well thank god for that.*

*We got lucky. Now let’s get back to the pack house before our luck changes again.*

We started loping back to the house, circling wide through the forest to keep as much space between the LIPS team and ourselves as possible.

Xavier mind linked with me. *I didn’t rely on luck. I knew what I was doing to draw them away, and I did it.*

Irritation bubbled up in my stomach. *That’s not the point. It’s obvious the LIPS team has not only seen us—three of us, now—but they’re desperate to learn more.*

*I heard them talking while I drew them away. They think they’ve discovered a new wolf subspecies.*

Fuck. And there was nothing more alluring to a bunch of scientists than being on the verge of a huge discovery.

*The less we see of them, the better*, I said. *Maybe we should post a few “no trespassing” signs around the property, and keep the pack close to home until the LIPS team moves on.*

My brother was uncharacteristically silent. I wasn’t sure I liked that.

*Do you have a problem with that?* I asked. *Or a better solution?*

*I don’t think we need a solution. The problem’s not that complicated.*

*How do you figure?*

*There’s no reason to restrict the pack if we all stay in human form—the LIPS crew is only interested in wolves. If we don’t shift, we can go wherever we please.*

He had a point. I kind of hated it. *Seems like you’ve thought of everything. Are you planning to go somewhere?*

Xavier shrugged. *I might want to take a short trip.*

He offered nothing more than that. I had plenty of questions, but I knew better than to press for answers. Xavier was entitled to his own life, and he didn’t owe me any information—unless it was a concern for the pack. As long as his plans didn’t run counter to the pack’s needs or safety, they weren’t my business.

We picked up the pace as we approached the pack house. I couldn’t wait to see Cali, to show her we were safe, and that we’d successfully managed to keep the Redwood pack off the LIPS team’s radar . I knew she must have been worried, and I imagined Xavier was thinking the same thing.

By the time the pack house came into view, Xavier and I were practically racing to get back. We both shifted as we approached the porch, where Torin was stringing lights.

“Have you seen Cali?” we asked in unison, then glared at each other.

Torin shrugged. “I haven’t seen her. But she was hanging out with Jay and Lola earlier!”

I strode into the house ahead of Xavier. “I bet Jay knows,” I said to my brother, then to the Fae I said, “Thanks, Torin.”

We found Jay in the kitchen, eating a few of the never-ending supply of holiday cookies.

“How did it go?” he asked.

“Not bad,” I said. “We got the blood sample, so Rishika’s safe. But we also figured out who the drone—”

“Where’s Cali?” Xavier cut in.

“She and Lola went shopping.” Jay glanced at the clock on the wall. “I actually haven’t heard from them in a while. I thought they would have gotten back by now.”

That caught my attention. “Which mall were they going to?”

Jay scratched his chin. “Not sure.” Then his phone pinged. “There she is.”

The weight building in my chest lessened, but it started up again when Jay’s face twisted as he read something on his phone.

“What?” I asked. “Is it Lola?”

He nodded. “Look at this.”

He handed us his phone, and there was a message from Lola.

*Heyyyyy babyyy don’t be mad but Cali and I didn’t go shopping… we went to the Lorings carnival?? It was Jacs’s idea idk why she wants to meet here. Sorry I didn’t tell you baby, but I knew you’d never let us go otherwise. We will be safe I promise!!*

*Great*, I thought.

“The Lorings carnival?” Xavier said.

I frowned. “I’ve never heard of it.”

Xavier took out his own phone then scrolled through it for a moment before his brow furrowed. He shook his head. “That can’t be right.”

An uneasy feeling crept down my spine. If something had happened to Cali while we were gone, I was absolutely going to lose my shit. “What’s wrong?”

Xavier held up his phone. “That carnival closed six months ago.”

**Episode 2536**

XAVIER

Well, this was comforting. Cali, Lola, and Jacqueline were allegedly off meeting at a carnival—that was no longer in operation.

“Are you sure?” Greyson said. “It’s been closed all that time?”

“That’s what it says.”

“Shit. Let me get my phone,” he said, heading out of the kitchen.

This was one of the less convenient parts of being a werewolf, and taking on tasks like stealing Rishika’s blood sample from the LIPS team—unless we wanted to design and carry around special fanny packs, we didn’t tend to have our phones on us all the time.

“But it doesn’t make any sense,” I said. “Why would Jacqueline want them to meet her at a carnival that’s closed? I mean, the whole operation has probably packed up and moved on, so where are they? In the middle of an empty field?”

That wouldn’t have been the worst meeting spot in the world, but there were plenty that were a hell of a lot less sketchy.

Greyson came back into the room, his phone in hand. “No messages or calls from Cali. Xavier, why don’t you call her and find out what’s going on? She can tell you exactly where they are and what’s going on. It should be a pretty easy problem to solve, compared to the rest of the shit we’ve already dealt with today.”

*My brother, the voice of reason.* I kind of wished I’d thought of that first.

I was about to call Cali when a text popped up on my phone. It was a group text to both me and Greyson, and the message was from Cali.

*Stop me if you’ve heard this before, but we’re trapped in a haunted carnival and could use some help.*

What the actual…

“What the hell?” Greyson exclaimed.

I looked up, and our eyes met. “Is she kidding?”

He shrugged. “Why would she joke about that?”

“What’s going on?” Jay asked.

Greyson and I were too busy texting her back to reply.

*What?* I responded to the thread.

Greyson’s text popped up a second later. *Is this a joke?*

“*Guys*,” Jay snapped. “What happened?”

Greyson looked up with a sigh. “Cali just texted. Apparently, she’s ‘trapped in a haunted carnival.’ That’s a bit of a far cry from ‘don’t worry about us.’”

Jay nodded gravely. “Did she say anything about Lola?”

Greyson shook his head. “No, but it’s probably safe to assume Lola’s with her and they’re both in trouble.”

I looked back down at the group text. Cali still hadn’t replied. There wasn’t so much as the three little dots signaling that she was typing something. I started toward the door, and Greyson followed a second later.

“We’ll be back!” Greyson shouted at Jay over his shoulder.

But Jay was hot on our heels. “Fuck that. If Lola’s there too, then I’m coming. She lied to me earlier, and I’m not just going to stand by and wait here. I’m coming with you.”

“Great,” I said. “Let’s all go.” I knew Jay was as worried about Lola as I was about Cali. We needed to save them from whatever they’d gotten themselves into.

We took a couple minutes to dress and then headed toward my car. As tempting as it was to shift and race over to this carnival, if there were other people—actual *human people*—then it probably wasn’t a great idea to show up as a werewolf, or even a naked guy. We piled into the car, and seconds later, we were speeding toward the carnival.

“Cali, call me back. We need to know what the hell is going on.” Greyson ended the call with a frustrated growl and glanced at me. “She’s not picking up the phone.”

The silence from our mate gnawed at me. If this was some kind of joke, I sure as shit wasn’t laughing.

In the back seat, Jay was on his phone too. “There’s some news coverage on this carnival. Apparently, it closed down six months ago after several people were injured on the boat ride.”

I pressed harder on the gas pedal. I knew Cali was prone to exaggeration, but why would she specifically mention that the carnival was haunted? What did she even mean by that? She had to know that was a loaded term. There was the fake kind of haunted—like haunted house attractions at theme parks—and then there was the real kind of haunted, with ghosts and all sorts of other nasty supernaturals.

She wouldn’t have used that term unless it was the latter, would she? I gripped the steering wheel tighter. At this point, a terrible, uncharacteristically mean joke was seeming more and more like the best-case scenario.

After pushing the speed limit and rolling through more than a few stop signs, we made it to the carnival in record time. And we knew we’d arrived because all the rides and buildings were there. This was no empty field.

“It’s all still here.” I blinked, staring out at the carnival through the windshield. We all stared at it for a moment, perplexed.

“I guess the news of its death was premature,” Greyson mused.

We all scrambled out of the car, but as we approached, I noticed that the few other people in the vicinity were walking right past the carnival, without so much as glancing at it. Did they not see it too?

I nudged Greyson with my shoulder. “Look.”

He followed my gaze to a middle-aged couple who strolled on past the carnival, seemingly oblivious.

“Wouldn’t you at least be curious and look?” I asked under my breath.

He watched the people a little longer before nodding. “Yeah, it’s weird.”

*Everything about this place is weird.* My wolf senses couldn’t quite identify the source, but there was something off-putting about the carnival. Something that made my hackles rise. And the fact that Cali might be trapped somewhere inside made me want to tear the whole place apart.

We entered through the carnival gates. The place looked like hell had gone on vacation. It featured all the usual carnival rides, games, and other attractions, but everything looked like it had aged a hundred years. There was no way any of it was up to code.

“I can see why this place was shut down at some point,” I said. “But I don’t understand how it’s survived this long. Who would want to take their family here?” That gave me pause, as I suddenly realized we were the only guests I’d seen. “Wait, where is everyone?”

A few attendants were working various game booths nearby, and I stalked over to one of them, determined to find out what the hell was going on—and where Cali was. Greyson and I stopped at the first guy we saw. He had a vacant expression.

“Welcome to Lorings.”

“We’re looking for three young women,” I said. “You seen ‘em?”

The man smiled, revealing a row of rotted teeth. “Do you want to play the game?”

I glared. “I’m not here to play games.”

Rotten Teeth shrugged and turned away, tossing a small ring around one of the many bottles set up in the center of the booth.

I blew out a breath. Maybe if I wrung the guy’s neck, he’d be a little more helpful.

Greyson was already moving on. “We should keep looking. Find their scents.”

I fell into step beside him and Jay. “Did either of you get a weird vibe from that guy?”

They both nodded.

“There’s something very off about this place,” Jay said.

Screams ripped through the air as a roller coaster whipped by above us, but as the cars made a shaky hairpin turn, I saw they were empty. Who the hell was screaming? I glanced around. The carnival workers were the only ones here, as far as I could tell, and they definitely weren’t riding the roller coaster.

My suspicions were confirmed. When Cali had said she was trapped in a haunted carnival, she’d meant it.

I broke into a run. “Cali! Lola! Jacqueline! Can you hear me?”

Behind me, Greyson and Jay did the same.

I passed by another game—the water gun balloon game.

“You looking for someone?” the game’s attendant asked. He had a deep scar running down his neck, and bloodshot eyes.

“Have you seen a young woman recently? She goes by Cali? She’s with two others.”

Deep Scar’s head tilted to the side. “If you can win the race, you’ll get a prize. Want to give it a try?”

He held out the water pistol, and I slapped it away. “Answer my fucking question! Have you seen three young women or not?”

He laughed. “You should play the game. The grand prize includes first, second, and third place prizes—all three.”

“I don’t want any fucking prizes! I want my mate. Have you seen her? Answer me, or I’ll give you another scar to go with the one on your neck!”

Deep Scar gestured to the booth behind him, and a curtain opened, revealing Cali, Lola, and Jacqueline—all tied together and suspended above a board of knives. “Do you want to play the game?”

**Episode 2537**

MARTA

“Are you sure you don’t want to tell me where we’re going?” I asked, my eyes on the road ahead.

When Lilac had pulled me away from Okorie to tell me he needed to talk, the “talking” had turned out to be pressing the keys to one of Xavier’s cars in my hand and suggesting we go for a drive. That had been about ten miles ago.

“I am telling you.” I could hear the smile in Lilac’s voice, and I felt my own lips quirk up in response.

“No, you’re giving me directions, one turn at a time. I still have no idea where we’re going.”

“Oh. That.”

I rolled my eyes, still smiling. “Yes, *that*.”

“I guess you’ll just have to trust me not to lead you astray.”

My smile dimmed slightly. “Let me know when the next turn comes.”

I still couldn’t believe Okorie had readily agreed that I could cut my lessons short and go with Lilac on this… whatever this was. The warlock had as good as told me that a witch and a werewolf could never work out, which sort of made me wonder if he’d let me ditch the rest of our lesson for a reason other than that he was feeling uncharacteristically nice. Was this Okorie’s snarky way of allowing me to find out for myself whether or not Lilac and I had a real future?

*That seems more like him.*

Well, whatever. If he wasn’t going to answer one of the very few questions I’d ever asked him, then I’d just figure all of this out myself. It wouldn’t be the first time I’d had to muddle through, and I liked to think I’d gotten pretty damn far on my knowledge and wits alone.

I glanced over at Lilac, who was fiddling with the radio. *What could he possibly be planning?*

Then I wondered if it even mattered. Whatever he had in mind, it couldn’t be worse than committing flower mass murder all day long. Still, I couldn’t help but wonder. All of my anger had been replaced with burning curiosity. Where, exactly, was he leading me? And what was so urgent about it?

Lilac sat back in his seat and gave me a wide grin. I looked back at the road. “What?”

“You’re dying to know what’s going on, aren’t you?”

I laughed. “Dying is a little dramatic… But I am curious.”

“How badly do you want to know?”

“On a scale of one to ten? A six, maybe?” I decided to throw out a guess. Knowing Lilac, he could keep me in suspense indefinitely—and he’d be giving me that same shit-eating grin the whole time. “Are you taking me to a movie?”

“If I were, what movie would you like to see?”

My grip on the steering wheel tightened. “You’re not taking me to a movie, are you?”

He laughed. “You’ll find out soon enough. Take the next left.”

As I followed his directions, I felt a pang in my chest.

*This is so unfair. Not that I don’t know where we’re going, but that I had to go and fall in love with a guy like Lilac. A sweet, sexy, sometimes genuinely annoying guy, who will probably leave me when he finds his mate…*

I’d never thought about it before, but it struck me suddenly just how hard it was to date a werewolf. If you weren’t their true mate, did you even stand a chance? Did other werewolves even *try* to date before they found their mates?

Rishika had dated people before she was with Artemis. And I was pretty sure Artemis wasn’t her mate. But the rest of the pack? How did any of them handle falling in love with that big question hanging over them? I made a note to talk to her at some point soon.

I glanced over at Lilac out of the corner of my eye.

*Is there any future for us?*

Suddenly Lilac grabbed the steering wheel and jerked it to the right. “I said to turn here. We almost missed it.”

We swerved into a parking lot as the car behind us honked angrily. We came to a stop in front of a weathered building with a gigantic sign in the shape of a bowling pin.

Lilac had brought me to a bowling alley.

“What do you think?” he asked.

I didn’t know what to think. Bowling was fine, but I didn’t understand what was so important about coming here that Lilac felt it justified pulling me out of my mentorship.

“Umm… It’s surprising,” I managed, forcing a smile.

“I wanted to have a nice date with you,” he explained. “You know, do something normal and low-key. So why not have it somewhere we can have fun and not have to deal with pack house stuff?”

My smile widened, turning genuine. Bowling might not have been on my list of ideal places to go for a date, but spending time with Lilac? That might just be the exact thing I needed. A chance to enjoy his company and, hopefully, take my mind off all this mate stuff.

And, again, it was better than staring at the corpses of all the flowers I’d just murdered.

I reached for the handle on my door.

“Wait up.” Lilac pushed his door open and practically jumped out of the passenger seat before running around the car. He opened the door for me and offered me his hand.

I blinked at it. “Why are you doing this?”

“Isn’t that what you do when you love someone? You want to take care of them. Make them smile.”

His words should have placated me. Should have warmed me from the inside out. Instead, they only confused me more, and something cold, something like dread, began to take root. “Why are you trying so hard all of a sudden?”

He shrugged, but his smile dimmed just the tiniest bit. “I just want us to have a good time. Can we do that? Do I need any other reason than that?”

*I guess not.*

I took his hand, and he helped me out of the car—not that I needed the help. He really did seem to be going out of his way, though. I wracked my brain trying to remember the last time Lilac and I had spent time together outside the pack house. Had he ever opened a car door for me before? Did teenage boys actually do that kind of thing, or was this just something he’d seen in a movie?

Lilac whistled as he escorted me into the bowling alley. The place felt familiar, but I couldn’t remember the last time I’d gone bowling. Fifty years ago was a long time. Maybe I’d gone to the bowling alley for a friend’s birthday at some point?

Lilac seemed to know what he was doing, and we got our bowling shoes, selected our bowling balls, and headed over to our assigned lane.

“Take a seat,” Lilac said with a flourish.

Laughing, I sat down on one of the hard plastic seats at the head of our lane. I slipped my shoes off and carefully put my bowling shoes on, but as I reached down to tie the laces, Lilac held out a hand.

“Allow me.”

And then my boyfriend proceeded to lace up my shoes for me like I was some kind of invalid.

*What on earth is he up to?*

There was a group of teens in the lane next to ours. As Lilac started in on my other shoe, I watched our neighbors. They were laughing and smiling and joking, even though they were throwing one gutterball after another. They looked about sixteen—just a little younger than I’d been when Bert had trapped me in his house.

The teens were all wearing glasses and were a little on the scrawny side. If I were judging them by 1970s standards, I would have said they were classic nerds. Still, they seemed to be having the time of their lives.

I smiled as Lilac got to his feet.

“You’re all set. You can take the first frame.”

“Okay.” I grabbed my bowling ball, one of the lighter ones, and approached the lane. I looked down at the ball and the three holes in it, not sure how to properly grip it.

I glanced over at the nerds. Another wild throw—seemingly without any regard to skill—sent their ball into the gutter, and laughter exploded again.

I was about to throw my ball and hope for the best when Lilac came up behind me. He put one hand on my hip to steady me and placed the other hand on my wrist. “Here. I’ll show you.”

He stayed close as he showed me how to line up the ball with the marks on the lane, which fingers to put in the grips, and how to pull my arm back.

He brushed a lock of hair out of my face. “For every pin you knock down, I’ll give you a kiss. And I don’t mean chocolate kisses, either.”

My face heated up as he stepped away, and I was suddenly reminded of all the things that drew me to Lilac. His instructions fresh in my mind, I tossed the ball. It flew up, crashed onto the lane, rolled down the slick surface, and knocked down all nine pins in one go. A strike.

*Oh my god!*

Lilac came up behind me again and wrapped his arms around me. “That was amazing!”

The trio of guys next to me gave me thumbs-up.

“Great throw!” one of them said.

Suddenly, a voice cut through the air. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

**Episode 2538**

This was how I was going to die—hogtied to Lola and Jacs by some kind of mean supernatural carnie and dropped onto a bed of rusted knives.

Honestly? Not how I’d expected things to go.

At least, I hoped the reddish stains on the blades were rust. I didn’t want to think about the alternative.

We squirmed against our bonds, trying to break the rope. Surprisingly, it seemed strong, unlikely to snap. Everything else in this carnival was a million years old—why was the rope the one thing that had any structural integrity?

“Listen here, you ugly motherfucking piece of asswipe!” Jacqueline screamed at the guy with the deep scar. “If you don’t let us out of here, I’m gonna rip you apart! I’m gonna make you wish you were never born! I’m gonna make you beg for death!”

I blinked as she continued on with a colorful string of words that would have made even Artemis do a double take. I had never seen her so angry before—or use so many swear words all at once. Actually I didn’t think I’d ever heard *anyone* swear quite like that.

“I should shift and rip that bastard’s throat out,” Lola growled.

“Yes, do it—” I began, but Jacqueline turned that impressive anger on Lola.

“Don’t do that, you idiot! If you break the rope that’s holding us here, where do you think we’re gonna fall?” She speared me with a look. “Unless the Fae can somehow fly us to safety?”

I grimaced and shook my head. “Nope.”

*Damn, Jacqueline is kind of terrifying when she’s angry.* Which meant this Rafe guy who was stalking her somehow had to be even scarier. *I hope we never have to face him.*

Jacqueline let out another volley of threats, pulling me back to the present.

*Focus, Cali! One thing at a time.* First we had to survive this murder carnival. We could figure out the rest from there.

Suddenly, the curtain in front of us parted, and there was Xavier, talking with our carnival guy. I was about to call out to my mate when Xavier lunged toward the gamemaster. Only, instead of hitting him, Xavier passed right through him.

I gasped. “Did you guys see that?”

“Oh, dear god.” Jacqueline scoffed. “I hate poltergeists. They’re always so tasteless.”

*A poltergeist? Isn’t that the same thing that locked Marta in a fancy mansion for fifty years? I don’t want to be stuck here for five more minutes, much less five decades!*

The gamemaster laughed at Xavier, taunting him. “Run, run as fast as you can. You’ll never catch me. I’m the gingerbread man. But if you want to win your three prizes”—he pointed to me, Lola, and Jacqueline—“then you need to play the game!”

He held out a water pistol.

Just then, Greyson and Jay appeared, and I felt hope bubble up in my stomach.

“Jay!” Lola called out. “Get us down from here!”

Greyson mind linked to me. *Don’t worry, love. We’ll keep you safe.*

From where I was hanging, I could see the three of them arguing with the gamemaster—but what good could it possibly do to argue with a ghost? How the heck were we going to get out of this?

I watched as Greyson tried to hit the specter, but again, his fist went right through him.

Xavier finally grabbed the gun. “Fine. We’ll play your stupid game.”

Greyson took another gun, and they both aimed their pistols as Jay said something to Xavier and stepped away.

Lola gasped. “I can’t believe he’s not going to try to win me! If I get out of this, he is going to *get* it.”

“Maybe he’s mad because you lied to him?” I tried.

“That doesn’t justify leaving me to die!”

“Right. Sorry. But Xavier or Greyson could still save us!”

Lola muttered something under her breath, but I was too focused on my mates to hear. I watched with bated breath as Greyson and Xavier lined up their guns, readying themselves.

*Should I cheer for Xavier? Or Greyson? Or would the* due destini *curse consider that making a choice? Could I root for both of them?*

Ugh, I hoped one of them won, so we could get out of this mess. I didn’t care who managed it.

A loud alarm bell rang, and the game began. Dirty, light bright water began to shoot out the end of the guns and toward the balloons.

“Neither balloon is growing,” Jacqueline groaned. “Can’t they aim better?”

That didn’t seem right. Greyson and Xavier both were good at so many things. Plus, Xavier was a mercenary. Wasn’t he supposed to be good with a pistol—even if it was a water pistol?

“Come on, guys!” I cheered. “You can do it!”

Then I noticed something fishy, and it wasn’t just the color of the water. From my vantage point, the target they were aiming for was actually off to one side from where the water should go to fill the balloon.

*The game is rigged. Just like Lola warned me.*

“Aim to the left!” I shouted.

The gamemaster’s head spun around so he could glare at me. Like, literally spun all the way around. It was disgusting and chilling, but my mates had heard me. Both of them shifted their aim, and the balloons began to fill.

The balloons expanded rapidly—only requiring a handful of seconds to fill completely. But before either of my mates could win, the alarm bell rang and the game came to an abrupt end. Just a trickle of dark water came out of the end of the pistols.

“I’m so sorry, gentlemen,” the gamemaster said, sneering, “but it seems you’ve both lost.”

“We’re not finished here!” Greyson said.

“Yeah, we were literally seconds away from winning!” Xavier added.

Suddenly, the rope that held us suspended over the bed of knives jerked, and all three of us screamed as we dropped a few inches closer to our deaths.

*Oh god. Oh god. Oh god. This isn’t how I want it to end! I’m supposed to die peacefully in my sleep when I’m a hundred and ten! I can’t die at a ghost carnival!*

Xavier and Greyson weren’t giving up so easily.

“Turn the fucking game back on,” Xavier growled.

He was getting up in the gamemaster’s face, though I wasn’t sure what that would accomplish, since he was a ghost and all. I was still wrapping my head around that one. He’d sure felt corporeal when he’d been tying Lola, Jacs, and me up in these ropes.

The gamemaster grinned, revealing a set of rotted or missing teeth. “Oh, don’t you worry about that. They’re already finished.”

He pulled out a knife, and in one quick move, he sliced the rope keeping us dangling above the bed of knives.

Time seemed to freeze for a split second as reality rushed in. We were about to fall thirty feet onto a bed of sharp knives. All three of us were supernaturals of varying degrees, but I wasn’t sure any one of us could survive that fate.

Then, time sped up and we dropped like a rock, screaming all the way—

There was a blur of motion, and I shut my eyes, bracing myself for the inevitable impact as something slammed into my side. Was that the knives? No. No, it couldn’t be. I wasn’t falling anymore, but I wasn’t ripped to shreds either.

I cracked my eyes open and found Greyson staring back at me.

We all crashed to the ground in a tangle of limbs and rolled to a stop. My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it in my hands and face.

*How did we not die? Is this a dream?*

I sat up and found Greyson and Xavier grinning down at me, relief and love shining in their eyes. Their expressions were so similar that even though they were brothers, suddenly, I didn’t think I’d ever seen them looking so alike.

Behind us, Jay stood off to the side as he tossed the bed of knives away. I scrambled to my feet. The rope must have broken when we’d hit the ground, and I was so relieved to be free of it.

“Let’s get you out of here,” Xavier said.

I gave my mates a weak smile as Lola and Jacqueline scrambled to their feet. “Thank you,” was all I could muster.

Lola threw her arms around Jay. “I’m so sorry for yelling at you!”

“Can we please get the hell out of here?” Jacqueline said. “This place sucks.”

I looked around. “What about the creepy gamemaster?”

We all looked, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Greyson took one of my hands. “Are you hurt?”

Xavier took the other.

“I’m fine, and I’m sorry you both had to do all this,” I said, hoping they knew how much I meant it. “But I agree with Jacs—this place does suck.”

“Do you know what this place is?” Jay asked.

“How did you even get trapped like that?” Xavier asked.

There were so many questions, most of which I didn’t have answers for.

Then a desperate cry echoed through the carnival. “Please help me!”

**Episode 2539**

XAVIER

Some poor bastard was crying out for help. I let out a groan. “Seriously? What now?”

Whoever was in trouble, this really wasn’t my problem, was it? I’d almost lost Cali to a demented poltergeist carnie and a bed of knives—about five seconds ago. Could I just enjoy the fact that my mate was alive and get her the fuck home before some new problem popped up?

I looked down at Cali. She was pale, and her arms were bruised where the rope had been digging into them. It hadn’t slipped my notice that she’d been too weak with shock to do anything but thank us and smile weakly when we’d pulled her away from imminent death.

No, we weren’t sticking around to help anyone. The sooner we got the hell out of here, the better.

“Come on. We’re going home.” I pulled at her hands, but she planted her feet with a strength that belied her size.

“Xavier, can’t you hear that? Someone is in trouble!”

“Oh, I hear it, but I don’t care. You almost died, Cali. My priority right now is keeping that from happening again, so come on—we’re going home.”

She frowned. “That’s all the more reason to help them! What if this person is going through something like what just happened to Lola, Jacs, and me? We can’t just leave them here!”

I shook my head. “Actually, we can. It’s as easy as *getting in the car and going home.*”

“I think Cali’s right,” my idiot brother said. “We’re here, and nobody’s in danger right now. We should at least see what’s going on before we leave.”

“I’m sorry, am I the only one who remembers those three”—I jabbed a finger at the women—“almost getting sliced to pieces? Because in case you forgot, this place is probably crawling with a bunch more poltergeists just like that gamemaster, so let’s do ourselves a favor and leave!”

“Actually, I agree with Xavier,” Jacqueline piped up. “This was clearly a mistake on my part, and I think we should leave before some fresh hell unleashes itself upon us.”

The voice called out again. “Please… Don’t leave me!”

“Oh my god,” I muttered. “*Fine.* But if anything puts Cali in danger, I’m taking her out of here.”

“Does Cali get a say in this?” she asked, her eyes narrowing.

“If your choice puts you in danger, no.”

Her jaw dropped, and she let go of my hand.

Greyson sighed. “Come on, let’s go find that guy and see if we can help him.”

My brother the saint. He was probably loving this—being on Cali’s side against me. He might’ve thought he was hot shit, but the last time I checked, I was the only one here making a choice with Cali’s safety in mind.

“Hello?” Cali called out. “We’re here to help! Where are you?”

“Right behind you.”

We all turned, and my brows furrowed at what I saw.

*I don’t know what I was expecting, but this definitely wasn’t it.*

Another game booth was set up across the path from us—a ring toss with a scary clown face staring down over it. Fuck that.

*But wait. Where’s the voice coming from?*

The attendant leaned against the booth, a dark, menacing expression stretched across his face. He swirled a hoop through his twisted fingers as he met our eyes.

I’d never in my life met someone so utterly unafraid, and I was friends with Gabriel.

*Surely that bastard isn’t the one calling for help.*

Then I did a double take.

*Did the clown’s eyes just move? Fuck this place. Seriously.*

The voice called out again. “Please! Don’t leave me!”

I still couldn’t quite tell who was speaking, though the voice was definitely coming from the ring toss booth. The attendant turned to the clown face with a snarl. “Shut your mouth!”

Cali leaned forward to whisper in my ear. “He’s trapped inside the clown.”

*Oh god. Why does it have to be a clown?*

“Of course he is,” I snapped.

I’d had more than enough of this creepy-ass, *American Horror Story* nonsense. It was bad enough that this place existed at all, but it had crossed the line when that poltergeist had tried to kill Cali.

I stomped toward the attendant, who held out a hoop.

“Care to play?” he asked.

“Nope.”

I was done playing games. I walked through the poltergeist, jumped over the counter, crashed through a sea of bottles, and grabbed the clown’s face.

“You can’t do that!” the attendant cried.

“I just did.” The only rules I was playing by here were my own.

Moments later, Greyson and Jay joined me, and with our combined strength we tore the clown face off. Tucked behind the giant face, a terrified, absolutely filthy young man was bound in ropes.

Jay broke through the ropes, and we helped him down. The guy was shaking, tears running down his dirt-smeared cheeks as he threw his arms around Greyson, then Jay, then me. He smelled as bad as he looked.

I patted his back awkwardly, trying to inch out of the embrace.

*This is so unnecessary and awkward. The only person I want to hug is Cali. Is this what I get for saving the guy? Being smeared with dust and god knows what else?*

Looked like the saying “no good deed goes unpunished” was actually true.

When the guy freed me from his hug, I glanced around. The attendant seemed to drift away like a mist. The ring on his finger fell to the ground.

*Well, that wasn’t weird or terrifying at all.* I hoped his absence was a good sign, but my gut told me not to start celebrating yet. *We really need to get out of here.*

“What were you doing up there?” Lola asked.

The guy’s gaze skittered around the group, and his shoulders hunched forward. “We should leave. If you think this place is bad now, just wait for nightfall.”

“Finally, someone’s speaking sense,” I muttered under my breath.

As we headed toward the exit, the guy kept talking.

“The carnival is run by a bunch of spirits—ghosts, poltergeists. Maybe other kinds, too, I’m not sure. Honestly, they could be demons. All I know is, they lure in supernaturals, trap them in their games, and take their souls.” The young man’s face took on a faraway, haunted look. “It’s the souls that keep this place going.”

Cali looked the guy up and down. “What kind of supernatural are you?”

“I’m a werewolf.”

“You should head back home,” Greyson said.

He smiled weakly. “You don’t have to tell me twice. Thank you again. And please, for your own safety, don’t linger here after sunset.” Then he hurried away, walking down the street and turning out of sight.

I glanced up at the sky. The sun was setting. I wanted to take the kid’s advice and get the fuck out of here, but I kind of hated that this carnival was still standing. As long as it existed, it would just keep trapping more supernaturals.

Beside me, Cali tensed. “Look.”

We all turned to look where she was pointing. A group of carnies, maybe eight or so, was coming toward us.

I sighed. “I guess they’re not here to party.”

“Let’s go,” Lola said. “Right now. They’ll never catch up to our cars.”

Jay frowned. “But what if they capture more supernaturals and steal their souls? We have to stop them.”

Oh goddammit. He was right. I hated that he was right about this.

“How are we supposed to destroy a spirit carnival?” I asked.

“We can burn it down?” Jay suggested.

Meanwhile, the carnies were getting closer and closer.

“How are we gonna burn an entire carnival?” I asked. “I left my arson kit at home.”

Greyson eyed the approaching threat. “We should start retreating. Just because we can’t hurt them, doesn’t mean they can’t hurt us.”

Cali took a step forward. “Why can’t I stop them?”

What the hell was she talking about? God, I hoped she wasn’t going to try to reason with them.

She raised her hands. “I can use my Fae magic to stop them.”

Lola nodded. “Sure thing. You go, girl.”

“I have to see this,” Jacqueline said.

I glanced over at Greyson.

Cali took another step forward, arms raised. “I’m not asking your permission.”

Energy rumbled through the ground, rising up in the air like some kind of magical ozone. I felt it building and coiling—and then Cali unleashed a gigantic torrent of magic.

The carnies screamed in unison as the magic surged over and through them. The carnival structures rippled and shook. All the rides started up simultaneously, and the alarm bells in the arcade started going off in a crescendo before the magic hit a breaking point.

With an echoing boom, the entire carnival collapsed in on itself, leaving nothing but a heap of remains.

I looked over at my mate, who was staring down at her hands in shock. Then she looked up at me. “Did I really just do that?”

**Episode 2540**

I looked down at my hands, turning them over in shock. Then I looked up at the ruined mess that had once been the haunted carnival. It was nothing but old, crumbling and broken ruins in an otherwise empty field.

The dank, old smell was gone completely.

I couldn’t believe I’d had anything to do with any of that. I turned around slowly, expecting to see Big Mac step out from behind Xavier’s car with her arms raised, just oozing powerful magic like she always did. Something like this would probably be easy for her. Well within her abilities, unlike me.

But Big Mac wasn’t there, and neither was any other witch.

I turned back to look at the remains of the carnival.

No, this was all Fae.

All me.

Jacqueline was staring at me wide-eyed, like she was seeing me for the first time. I saw awe and respect and maybe even a tiny dose of fear in her eyes.

I gave her a reassuring smile and looked at my mates. Xavier and Greyson were the ones whose opinions I cared about most. Had *they* see what I’d done?

For so long, I’d been trying to convince them that I was powerful in my own right. That I could protect not only myself, but them and the pack too. That I wasn’t just some weak damsel who needed to be saved all the time.

That they could treat me like an equal, because I *was* one—even if my powers were different than theirs.

Was this the proof I’d been looking for all this time? And, more importantly, did they finally believe what I’d been telling them for so long?

Xavier let out a low whistle. “That was impressive.”

Greyson acknowledged me with a smile and nod, and I knew he was proud of me too.

I looked back down at my hands, a smile curling my lips upward. I felt strangely powerful all of a sudden, like I’d just passed some kind of supernatural test. What would my mom think of this? And Artemis? I couldn’t wait to tell them.

“Now that that’s taken care of,” Greyson said, giving me another proud smile, “we should probably head home.”

Nobody argued, not even Jacqueline, who had removed her disguise. As everyone piled into Xavier’s car, I glanced over at Jay’s borrowed car.

“Don’t you want to drive home?” I asked him.

He shook his head. “I’ll come get it later.”

I took one last look at the remains of the haunted carnival before sliding into the back seat. I got the middle seat, between Jacqueline and Jay. Lola was perched on Jay’s lap.

“Cali, do you want to sit up front?” Greyson asked. “I’ll switch with you.”

I shook my head. “I’m fine.”

I appreciated the offer, but if it was a tight squeeze for me back here, it would be nearly unbearable for him.

Xavier started the car. “Let’s go home.”

“Oh my god, Cali,” Lola gushed. “How did you do that? I mean, I knew you had Fae powers, but that was some next level stuff!”

I smiled. I’d never created such a strong display of power before. I still couldn’t quite believe it had happened. Was that something I could reproduce? Or an anomaly? “I’ve been practicing, and… I don’t know. I guess something paid off.”

Xavier shot me a shrewd glance in the rearview mirror. “I hope you don’t think this gives you license to get carried away the next time a threat appears.”

I frowned. “I beg your what? Get carried away?” I crossed my arms, glaring at the back of his head. “You all saw what I did, right? I used my powers, and it was pretty damn awesome. And isn’t this what I’ve been telling you all along? That I’m not some helpless damsel in distress?”

Greyson reached back and caught my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “I’ve never thought of you like that. You’ve always been a force to be reckoned with.”

“Of course you’re not helpless,” Xavier added.

The way he said it, glancing quickly at Greyson, like he felt the need to get some complimentary words in too, didn’t ring with nearly as much authenticity or support as Greyson’s words had.

And then Xavier added, “But you’re the one who allowed yourself to get captured in the first place. So maybe now that you know what you’re capable of, you can think of it as more of a self-defense tool. With a blast like that, nobody could ever hurt you again.”

I blinked, heat rushing into my face. “Are you blaming me for what happened back there? We were trying to find Jacqueline and help her. How was I supposed to know it was a haunted carnival? Or that some poltergeist was going to tie us up and try to make mincemeat out of us?”

“Yeah, don’t blame her,” Lola piped up. “You might have saved us, but she saved everyone else who might have been robbed of their souls. *Plus* she took down that group of poltergeists before they could touch us. She saved all of our asses.”

“I’m sorry.” Xavier sighed. “I just want to make sure you’re all more careful. Jay and Greyson and I aren’t always going to be around to pull you out of the fire.”

“Speak for yourself,” Jay said.

“Yeah, don’t lock me into that,” Greyson added.

Xavier grumbled something to himself and went quiet.

I still felt annoyed, even though Xavier had apologized. I couldn’t figure him out. He didn’t think I was helpless, but he still felt the need to lecture me about a situation that hadn’t even been my fault? And to think, I’d left the pack house earlier hoping to get back quickly so I could be with him.

Now, I wasn’t so sure.

“It’s all my fault,” Jacs said suddenly. “I’m the reason the three of us were there in the first place, and I’m sorry.”

“Why did you pick that place to meet?” Jay asked. His tone was gentle rather than accusatory.

“I was looking for someplace out of the ordinary, and I noticed it when I was passing through. I figured it offered a good layer of anonymity. I had no idea it was teeming with soul-sucking poltergeists.”

I put a hand on her arm. “Jacs, you can’t blame yourself. You didn’t know. It’s not like Lola or I knew it was haunted, either—at least until the carnie ghouls surrounded us.”

We pulled up to the pack house, and my relief was so great that I could have kissed the porch steps. After that hellish experience, I was back home. I was safe. There was no place else I wanted to be.

We all piled out of the car, and Greyson caught my arm. “Hey. You were amazing. I’m so proud of you for how hard you’ve been working to control your powers, and for how brave you were today against those poltergeists. Lola was right: you saved our asses back there.” He kissed my forehead. “Good work.”

I couldn’t keep the grin off my face as he and the others headed inside. I was practically glowing with pride from the inside out.

I made to follow him into the pack house when Xavier grabbed my hand and pulled me back. “Don’t go in there yet.”

“Why not?”

“Because then I can’t do this.”

He pulled me flush against him and caught my lips in a searing kiss. It was hungry and hot and exactly the kind of kiss I’d been hoping for ever since Big Mac had cast that spell on him. And then I remembered what he’d said to me in the car. Those snarky comments about getting captured and “not letting myself get carried away.”

I pushed him back, and he frowned, clearly confused. “What’s wrong?”

I crossed my arms. “I think you owe me an apology.”

“For what?”

“For those crappy things you said to me in the car. For the record, when you tell me you know I’m not helpless but then follow it up with some remark about how I let myself get captured, I don’t feel like you’re actually supporting me.”

Xavier pulled me into a hug, and I tensed. With a sigh, he let me go.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. The truth is, I was worried about you. When I saw you swinging above those knives, all I wanted was to help you. To save you. I got a little rattled, and I wasn’t my best self.”

“And I understand that, but you need to recognize that I’m strong in my own right.”

“I know that.” He smiled. “You’re one of the strongest women I’ve ever met.”

I eyed him. “*One* of?”

He laughed. “Okay, the strongest.”

He was pulling me into another hug when we heard the sound of tires on the gravel driveway. A car was approaching. We stepped back and watched as the car pulled up and came to a stop, and a very attractive woman stepped out.

Xavier’s eyes narrowed.

“Who’s she?” I asked.

His expression darkened. “Rhonda.”

**Episode 2541**

GREYSON

Standing in the living room, I frowned as I saw Rhonda step out of the car. I’d thought it looked familiar when it had pulled up into the driveway, and now I knew why.

I’d been watching Cali and Xavier from the window—so sue me. I hadn’t been thrilled to see them hugging and kissing, and I didn’t usually watch them together. I wasn’t some kind of creeper. But there had been a strange tension between the two of them in the car, and I’d been curious to see how that would play out.

I’d have been lying if I said some small part of me wasn’t hoping for them to fight. Just a little. I tended to agree with Xavier’s protectiveness over Cali—it might have been the only thing we actually agreed on—but even I thought he’d put his foot in his mouth on the car ride home.

And then Rhonda had shown up, and all my concerns about Cali and Xavier had gone out the window. I stepped out onto the porch to meet her as she approached the house.

What the hell was a LIPS member doing here? How had she found the house? And what did she want?

I glanced around the yard, hoping to hell that none of the pack members would choose this moment to come running up in wolf form. Or naked. I honestly didn’t know which would be harder to explain at this point. Though I guessed it was better that Rhonda thought of us as a bunch of crazy selective nudists, rather than her knowing the truth.

I came down the steps and joined Cali and Xavier just in time to overhear Cali ask, “Who’s Rhonda?”

Then she gasped softly as Rhonda adjusted her blue coat, with the large LIPS logo on it.

Cali looked over at me wildly and whispered, “She’s from LIPS? What is she doing here? Did everything go okay today?”

I remembered then that we hadn’t gotten her caught up on everything that had happened in our mission to get Rishika’s blood back. I’d have to catch her up later.

I looked at Xavier. “We have to be cautious around her. We don’t know what she knows.”

“Yeah. No shit.”

I resisted the urge to bite my lip. My stomach tightened even more as she approached. I’d gotten the flash drive, so there went the drone’s footage for today, but who knew what they might have seen? Or if they had backups of the footage on the fucking cloud, or whatever.

I still didn’t know why Rhonda would come to our home of all places.

“Hello, there!” Rhonda waved as she approached with a big smile on her face. That eased a little of the tension coiling in my gut. If she were truly aware of who and what we were, I doubted she would be all smiles. She probably would’ve been pointing her tranquilizer gun at us.

“My name is Rhonda Lowell, and I’m with an organization called LIPS.” She pointed at her coat.

“Hi, Rhonda. What brings you to this part of the woods? Isn’t LIPS based a little closer to the coastline?”

“Maybe you’re lost?” Xavier piped up, his voice oddly cold and aggressive. “Lots of people get lost around here in the woods.”

“Oh, I’m not lost,” she said brightly. “Though I can see why you get so many lost people around here. This home—it’s beautiful, by the way—is really out in the middle of nowhere, isn’t it?”

I blinked. I honestly couldn’t tell if she was being sincere, or if there was a hint of something else in her words.

*Is she digging for something?*

I cleared my throat. “What can we do for you today, Rhonda?”

“Well, I’ve been working with my colleagues, tracking the local wolf population, learning more about their pack habits, how they hunt, where they make their dens, that kind of thing.”

“Oh, that must be interesting,” Cali said politely.

Rhonda’s eyes lit up then, and it was like Cali had opened the floodgates. “Oh, you have no idea. It is absolutely thrilling! Oregon alone has over a hundred and forty wolves spread out over sixteen known packs. Each pack has its own dynamics, its own habitats and personalities. It is *so* fascinating. The packs are mostly clustered in the northeast portion of the state, but they’re moving farther westward every year, even into the Cascade Range. One day we believe they’ll even expand all the way to the coast. Can you imagine that? A pack of wolves on the beach?”

Cali blinked, seeming to take it all in. “Wow. That’s… such great news.”

“And to think, just twenty-five years ago there weren’t any wolves in Oregon at all. They had all been extirpated, and it wasn’t until plans for wolf population recovery brought Canadian wolves to Idaho and Wyoming that the population began to grow and spread to become what we have today.”

*Huh. I actually didn’t know any of that.*

This impromptu visit was becoming strangely educational. Still, I found the whole thing amusing, being lectured on wolves by a human. Rhonda was certainly an expert in her field, but there was no replacement for lived experience.

Of which I had over twenty years.

I had to bite my lip to keep from smiling. I didn’t want Rhonda to think I was laughing at her. I also didn’t really want her to keep this lecture up. The longer she was here, the greater the chances were that she’d see or hear something she wasn’t supposed to.

But hey, at least she knew her stuff.

Rhonda suddenly stopped, and her cheeks turned bright red. “I’m sorry. I’m really passionate about wolves. I was actually called ‘Wolf Geek’ in grade school. But I didn’t mind—I *am* a wolf geek. But I don’t want to bore you with facts and figures all day; that’s not why I came here.”

“Which begs the question,” Xavier drawled, “why *are* you here?”

She suddenly looked worried. “Oh, dear. Am I interrupting something? Should I come back some other time? I can reschedule if—”

“That’s okay.” I cut in before anyone took her up on her offer. “Why don’t you tell us why you took all this trouble to come out here?”

Xavier could be as pissy as he wanted, but I was going to get as much intel out of Rhonda as I could. Our biggest weakness against the LIPS crew was what we didn’t know what they knew. I intended to change that—starting with learning why Rhonda was here at the house. *If* Xavier could keep his shit together long enough for me to find out. I didn’t doubt he was pissed at her. After all, she was the one who’d nailed him with the tranquilizer dart. He was going to hold a grudge against her for a long time.

Rhonda nodded. “What I wanted to ask was, have you seen any wolves around?”

“Well,” I said carefully, “we do see them from time to time. It’s hard not to, living out here. But they keep their distance, and we try to do the same.”

“I’ve been tracking a pack nearby and recently came across a very unusual wolf—a couple of them, actually.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Xavier’s hands clench into tight fists. His jaw tightened.

I mind linked to him. *Keep it together.*

I forced a smile. “Unusual how?”

“The first wolf I tagged with a tracker—though we lost the signal—was huge. I mean, we’re talking two hundred pounds, easy. She was bigger than any wolf my colleagues or I had ever seen. At least, until I saw the second wolf. He was huge, much bigger than the first one. And so fluffy.” Her voice took on a dreamy quality. “Big Fluffy.”

“Big Fluffy?” Xavier said. “That’s your description?”

It took every ounce of my self-control not to fall on the ground laughing.

*Big Fluffy?*

Xavier was never going to live this down. I would personally make sure of it. And the fact that Xavier so obviously wasn’t taking this well made the whole thing even funnier. I avoided my brother’s eyes. I knew I wouldn’t be able to look at him without losing control.

Rhonda smiled. “Well, his fur was so dark and thick. Almost luxurious.”

“We’ve never seen anything like that,” Cali jumped in. “Just regular small wolves here. Average wolves. Wolves of usual size, as they say.”

I squeezed her hand, hoping to stop her.

Rhonda’s face fell. “I figured it was worth asking. I thought I shot Big Fluffy with a tranquilizer dart, but I either missed him or he was too powerful for one hit to stop him.”

“That was probably it.” Xavier nodded. “If he was as big as you say he is, he probably shrugged the drug off. He was too powerful for it.”

“Right.” Rhonda seemed to think about this for a moment, and then her eyes narrowed as she looked at Xavier. “Why do I think I’ve seen you before?”

**Episode 2542**

XAVIER

As Rhonda stood there looking at me, I flashed back to the drone hovering above me as I removed the tranquilizer dart she’d shot me with. Had the drone recorded me after all? Had Rhonda seen me shift? Was that why she thought I looked familiar?

I snapped back to the present. “I don’t think we’ve met, Rhonda. You must be mistaken.”

I was working overtime to keep my voice pleasant, but I was already over her little surprise visit and was finding it difficult to hide my irritation.

“Maybe… But I really do think we’ve met before. Did you study at the institute?” Rhonda asked.

“No,” I grunted, wanting the conversation to be over. I just wanted to grab Cali and get the hell out of there, but I was stuck talking to a nosy woman who couldn’t take a hint. “Maybe you’ve seen me before while trespassing on my property?”

Rhonda’s cheeks reddened. “Oh—I didn’t realize! I’m sorry!”

“No big deal,” Cali cut in. “There’s so much land around here, it’s easy to stumble onto someone’s property without even knowing it.”

I glared at Cali. Whose side was she on, anyway?I wasn’t worried about being polite to Rhonda. I wanted her gone—the sooner, the better. It was never good to let a human get too close or ask too many questions, and Rhonda was doing both.

“Well, anyway, I should get going. I just stopped by to inquire, and it’s clear you don’t know anything.” Rhonda started backing away toward her car.

“Yes, I think that’s for the best,” I said without bothering to smile.

Cali glared at me and shot me a mind link. *No need to be rude, Xavier.*

“If you do happen to come across Big Fluffy—or any of his pack—would you let me know? I just can’t wait to get my eyes on him again,” Rhonda said dreamily.

I gritted my teeth. *If she says Big Fluffy one more time…*

Rhonda held out a card, and I ignored it, but Cali quickly jumped in and took it, all smiles. “Of course we will, Rhonda. Nice to meet you.”

“Thank you, nice to meet you, too! And I really appreciate your help. I’m just really interested in learning more about Big Fluffy—we could be on the cusp of an amazing discovery. Such a majestic creature…” she said with a faraway look in her eyes.

*She’s so damn earnest I want to vomit. Or rip her throat out. Or both.*

I looked away and rolled my eyes, not caring if she saw me.

“I do want to warn you,” Rhonda continued, “regular wolves will generally shy away from humans—but these larger wolves, we don’t know. They seem to be more aggressive than other wolves we’ve come across, so please be careful. It’s possible that they’ve been forced out of their natural habitat, which could have put them a little on edge.”

“Is that so?” I said, not liking where this was going.

*Maybe the wolves are being so aggressive with you, Rhonda, because you won’t mind your own damn business.*

“Yes. I was thinking that it might be time to warn nearby residents to be careful.”

“Oh, and how do you plan on doing that?” Greyson asked.

Greyson must have been thinking what I was thinking. Was LIPS planning on attracting media attention? This was getting out of hand, fast.

“Oh, just going door to door in the immediate area,” Rhonda said. “I don’t want to alert more people than necessary to the situation here. It would only attract people to the area, and honestly, that’s the last thing I want. We need to protect the wolves’ territory, their habits, their way of life. Wolf conservation groups like LIPS will ensure that our wolf population thrives.” Rhonda flashed a wistful smile. “Wolves are the lifeblood of woods like these, after all. They make the entire ecosystem out here complete. Who knows where we’d be without them? Have you heard about the link between deforestation and dwindling wolf populations? It’s not pretty, I’ll tell you. It just burns me up! Wolves deserve privacy, respect, and to be protected, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to sit back and let—”

“Thank you, Rhonda. We’re pretty caught up on our wolf news.” I wasn’t going to be able to take much more of this. She was saying all the right things, but I still didn’t trust her one bit. We needed to get rid of her before things took a turn that we weren’t prepared for.

“Ah, impressive,” Rhonda said, clearly pleased. “The more you know, the better you can help. Now, if you see one of those big ones, call LIPS ASAP, or shoot us an email. Or, if you need to see us, don’t hesitate to drop by. We’re off the old logging road.” She pointed in the general direction. “We’re well equipped to deal with those big beauties, and we can move quickly. But again, *do not* try to approach the wolves yourselves. It would be extremely dangerous for you all—I can’t stress that enough!”

“Good advice; we won’t!” Cali said brightly.

Rhonda took one last look at me, shaking her head slowly. “I just can’t shake the feeling that I’ve seen you somewhere before.” She opened her car door. “Not to worry, it’ll come to me. I have a really good memory.”

She climbed into her car, waved, and pulled off.

Rhonda was barely out of the driveway before Greyson took his shot. He came to stand beside me. “So, should I call you Big Fluffy from now on? Or would you prefer something shorter, like BF? Or maybe just Fluff? Fluffy?”

“Shut up before I make you shut up,” I snapped. Not only had Rhonda thoroughly invaded our privacy, she’d also given Greyson the perfect ammo to piss me off with.

“What are we going to do?” Cali looked back and forth between me and Greyson as she handed him the business card.

“Not sure yet,” Greyson replied.

Cali narrowed her eyes at me. “You aren’t going to do to her what you did to Tony, are you?”

I shook my head. “Nah. Tony was a different story. He got exactly what he deserved for threatening you. This LIPS lady? She’s more of a pest than anything.”

Cali let out a breath, relieved. “Good!”

*That’s annoying.* “What, do you really think I just go around killing everyone who pisses me off? If that were the case, there’d be a lot of unsolved murders in Oregon, believe me.”

“That’s not funny,” Cali said.

“I’m not smiling,” I shot back.

I squinted into the distance, where Rhonda’s taillights were fading. *Good riddance.*

“I actually don’t think that there’s much we can or should do right now,” Greyson said. “If Rhonda had more evidence than a sighting, she definitely would’ve mentioned it. We have their drone footage, now, and we just need to be more careful for a while until they move on, make sure they don’t get any footage of any of us shifting—or give them an opportunity to get our blood.”

“You mean *another* opportunity,” I said.

He was the one who’d let Rishika get captured and have her blood taken in the first place. If he’d been more vigilant and taken care of the problem right then and there, we might not have been in this predicament.

Greyson rolled his eyes at me. “*Anyway*, as long as we can avoid all of that, the only thing she and her LIPS cronies will have is anecdotal evidence of large wolves. Don’t you agree, Big Fluffy?”

*One day, I’m going to kick that smug smile right off his face.*

I nodded, deciding not to engage. I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction. “Maybe in the meantime we increase patrols, put out a few ‘no trespassing’ signs.”

“I hope that works,” Cali said. “But they’re scientists, and it’s in their nature to just keep investigating. I mean, Rhonda seemed *really* passionate about wolves. Did you see the way she was fangirling? If we don’t play it cool, she and her people are going to start to wonder why we’re so cagey about helping.”

“I couldn’t give a fuck,” I said, getting annoyed all over again. I’d be damned if I was going to let some wolf-obsessed snooper get in the way of me living my life. “Let them wonder. This is my property, not theirs. I don’t need a reason to want to keep my private property private.”

“Yes, but if you hold to that, there’s a public safety issue here—at least from LIPS’s perspective. If you’re not careful, we’ll end up looking like the bad guys—getting in the way of public health and safety or something. We have to play this exactly right,” Cali said.

I was starting to get frustrated. “Why are you arguing with me about this, Cali?”

“Cool it,” Greyson said, cutting Cali off before she could reply. “Both of you have valid points. Right now, like I said, we don’t need to do anything rash. We just need to keep our guards up. In the meantime, I’ll warn the Blue Bloods.”

Cali nodded. “Shouldn’t we also warn the Vanguards?”

**Episode 2543**

Greyson and Xavier both turned to look at me.

“Warn the Vanguards? No way,” Xavier said.

“Not necessarily a priority,” Greyson added.

I was genuinely surprised by their reaction. “But why not? If you’re going to warn the Blue Bloods, why not warn the Vanguards?”

Both of my mates simply stared at me in silence.

“Listen, I know neither of you are fans of the Vanguard pack—I’m not either—but they’re werewolves, and they’re our neighbors!” It all seemed so obvious to me, but they were both looking at me like I’d grown another head.

“And they’re hardly our allies.” Xavier snorted. “What do we owe them? Nothing. Cali, may I remind you of the Seluna handprints that you *still* have, not to mention all the times Lucian has tried to kiss you? Fuck them.” Xavier turned to look at Greyson. “And I’ll take a wild guess that you’re not exactly in the mood to help Aysel out.”

“No, not in the least,” Greyson said.

“I can’t believe you two! You’re letting your personal feelings get in the way! I feel the same as you—I wish that the Vanguards would just go away and follow their damn moon goddess to the opposite end of the planet. But did it ever occur to either of you that if LIPS uncovers the truth—that werewolves roam these woods—that *all* the werewolf packs will be in trouble?”

If LIPS got their hands on any compromising footage or blood samples from the Vanguard pack, our little feud with them wouldn’t matter in the least. All of our days would be numbered. Why couldn’t they see that?

I was met with more silence, but at least now it seemed like they were starting to really consider what I’d said. When the silence went on too long, I continued.

“If you two don’t tell them, I will!”

This was getting out of hand, and I truly couldn’t believe that my mates were being so bullheaded about this. I didn’t understand why they couldn’t see the danger they were putting us all in because of their grudge. Some things were bigger than fighting—and protecting the Redwood pack’s entire existence seemed worth putting a grudge aside.

“Don’t you dare do that,” Xavier said. “I don’t want you going back there again.”

“You can’t stop me, Xavier.”

“I hate to say it, Xavier, but Cali’s right,” Greyson said begrudgingly. “A threat to one pack is a threat to us all. It’s the reason why we have the council in the first place.”

“Thank you!” I sighed. “At least one of you is finally listening to reason.”

“Fine,” Xavier finally said. “Then which one of us gets to be the messenger?”

“You,” Greyson said pointing at Xavier.

“Me? Why not you?”

“I’m the Alpha, and I said you’re going. Simple as that.”

“If you think that I’m going to just let you boss me around because you’re the Alpha, you’re even dumber than you look.”

“Have you looked in the mirror? No matter how hard it is for you to swallow, Xavier, I’m the Alpha, and I have to organize the patrols to deal with LIPS and make sure the entire pack is on high alert. While I’m doing that, you need to go fill the Vanguards in.”

“All that stuff you just mentioned takes no time at all. You can rally the patrols, update the pack, and then go see the Vanguards, easy. It’s official pack business, after all, right? Shouldn’t the *Alpha* be the one to deliver the message? Or do you want to let me take over as Alpha so I can show you how to multitask?” Xavier said with a smirk.

“I don’t need you to show me a goddamn thing!” Greyson hissed.

This was getting heated, and I didn’t want to see what would happen if it got any worse. “Calm down, both of you. Why do we have to go all the way over there, anyway? Greyson, can’t you just call or text Aysel and give her a heads-up?”

Xavier smirked. “That’s right. Why don’t you just give your princess girlfriend a call?”

Greyson turned a harsh stare on Xavier, looking like he was seconds away from socking him.

I kind of understood where Greyson was coming from, since I wanted to smack Xavier myself at the moment.

*Aysel is* not *Greyson’s girlfriend. Not even close. Even if they did kiss. More than once.*

“Xavier, why are you rubbing this in Greyson’s face?” I demanded. I was tired of them fighting. It was nothing new, and it was just the way the brothers were with each other, but that didn’t mean that I wasn’t tired of being collateral damage in their little spats. “You two had better figure out how you’re going to work together, and you’d better do it before LIPS figures out who you really are! You both think you’re Alphas—so maybe it’s time to think about what’s best for the pack?”

With that, I turned and went inside. I was so annoyed with them right now.

*Why does this always happen? Haven’t we all been through enough that they can finally at least* try *to put their jealousies aside? Aren’t they as tired of being at each other’s throats as I am?*

Artemis came up to me as soon as I walked into the house. “What happened today? Lola mentioned something about clowns and knives?”

I rolled my eyes, not even capable of reliving all of that at the moment. “I don’t want to talk about it. How’s Rishika doing?”

“She’s doing almost too well. She’s in the middle of something called a ‘P90X’ workout? I tried to stop her and tell her that she should take it easy, but she wasn’t having it. Why are werewolves like this?”

“I really don’t know, and I don’t have time for this.” I instantly felt bad for snapping at my sister once I saw the look on her face. “I’m sorry. I’m just not in the mood right now.”

I turned and stomped upstairs. *Great. Now Xavier and Greyson’s fighting is making me fight with my sister! It’s like their bad energy is rubbing off on me or something!*

I stalked into my room and shut the door, then I paced back and forth, trying to get my thoughts straight enough that I could calm down.

*Why am I so upset? The boys have argued over me since day one. Shouldn’t I be used to it by now?*

But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that I was much more annoyed with Xavier than I was with Greyson. He was being so difficult at a time when we needed to focus on making sure we were all safe, not our petty little issues.

There was a knock on my door. “Cali?”

It was Xavier. “Go away.”

Ignoring me, Xavier came in anyway.

“What do you want? I told you to go away.” I just needed a moment to myself, and this was one of the rare times where seeing him wasn’t making things better.

“I was thinking we could go to the old pack house together, spend the night, finally enjoy some quality time together.”

“Excuse me?” I couldn’t believe he was asking me that after everything that had happened. He was usually so much better at reading the room.

For the first time since he’d burst in, he looked uncertain. “I just thought it would be great to spend some time together away from the pack, away from the pack house.”

“Why?”

“Do I need a reason to want to spend time with you?”

“Why, Xavier? Is it so you can kiss me?”

Xavier paused and shrugged. “Well, yeah, that would be part of the appeal. A way to avoid Big Mac’s spell. I would’ve thought you wanted that, too.”

“Even if that spell didn’t exist, I’m not sure I’d want to kiss you right now.”

I knew that my words were hurtful, but I couldn’t help it. I was at the end of my rope with the constant back and forth, and I couldn’t hide my annoyance.

“What? Why not?”

“Because you’re being a total jerk!”

“What? Because of that whole Vanguard thing? I’m sorry about all that. I just get tired of Greyson trying to order me around all the time.”

“It’s your attitude, Xavier. You’re making things worse. It’s just like how you blamed me for getting captured at that ghost carnival. As if I willingly let a ghost tie me up and dangle me over knives!”

“And I apologized for that.”

“Did you really? Or were those just words? Because you should know by now, Xavier, that actions speak louder than words.”

Xavier looked completely baffled. “What did I do?”

“What did you *do*? You *told* me you were sorry, that you were worried about me, but then when I tried to talk about how to handle the LIPS stuff, you ignored me. You can’t have it both ways. How can I believe you when you tell me I’m strong when you don’t seem to listen to anything I say?” I was getting more upset by the second, and Xavier was getting angry too.

“Cali, I don’t get it,” he said, jaw tight. “Where the hell is all this coming from?”

**Episode 2544**

“Where is all this coming from? Did you really just ask me that, Xavier? Everything I’m talking about is coming right from you!” I snapped. “I’m so tired of you dismissing my thoughts and opinions.”

Xavier scoffed. “Don’t tell me you’re mad that I didn’t play nice with Rhonda.”

“You were completely rude to her!”

Xavier rolled his eyes.

“Big Fluffy? Why were you so pissed about that, anyway? It’s not like she knew it was you!” I thought it was kind of endearing that she’d come up with a nickname for Xavier’s wolf. It wasn’t like she was trying to insult anyone. In fact, it had seemed like quite the opposite.

“Either way, she was still annoying. She’s a human poking her nose where it doesn’t belong.” Xavier crossed his arms over his chest and looked away.

“I get that, Xavier, but Rhonda’s heart is in the right place. Why couldn’t you see that?” I knew that there were plenty of people we needed to be leery of, but I just didn’t think Rhonda was one of them. We just needed to keep an eye on her, and we’d be fine.

Xavier sighed. “Okay, okay! Next time Rhonda and her LIPS come calling, I’ll roll out the red carpet! As for the Vanguard stuff, you were right about that. I’m sorry I argued with you about it.”

“I want to believe you, Xavier, but I’m not sure that you really are sorry.” It had been a while since I truly doubted Xavier’s sincerity, but with the way he’d been acting, it was hard not to.

“What? Cali, I’m really confused about why you’re doubting me all of a sudden.”

“I get that you were upset about almost getting caught by LIPS and all that, but that’s no excuse for you to take out your frustrations on me.”

Xavier shook his head and chuckled, clearly incredulous. “I really don’t know how things got this off track, and honestly, I feel like this whole thing is just being blown out of proportion. Why can’t we just forget that any of it happened? Move on? Why should we let a couple of loose LIPS ruin our night?” Xavier crossed his arms. “Besides, I really am sorry, Cali. I didn’t mean to upset you. You have to know that.”

I looked at him, and he looked right back at me, waiting for my reaction. I could see now that he was being sincere, and a big part of me just wanted to move past it. Xavier was my mate, and I loved him—but we were still in a relationship. I couldn’t just pretend everything was fine and roll over like there wasn’t a problem when there so very clearly was one. In fact, it seemed like instead of the problem going away, it was starting to snowball.

*How can we have a future together if this kind of thing keeps coming up?*

“How do you expect me to be your Luna if you won’t even listen to me?” I said quietly.

Xavier raised his brows. “What does you being a Luna have to do with anything?”

“How can you *not* see how it’s all connected? If you won’t even listen to me about the little things, how would we handle the big things that are bound to come up while we’re in charge of the pack?”

I could see it now, the pack house being faced with some new threat and instead of consulting with me and taking my advice, Xavier would think he had it all figured out and ignore any suggestions I had.

“Oh, come on, Cali. It would work. This whole thing—it’s different. It wouldn’t be like this. I respect you. You know that, right?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that, so I just shrugged. I knew deep down that Xavier did, but sometimes he just… disregarded me. He had to know that wasn’t cool.

Xavier narrowed his gaze. “What’s that supposed to mean? Greyson disagreed with you about the Vanguard pack, too. Why are you taking it all out on me?”

“He did agree with you, at first, but then he started to see things my way and as soon as he did, you started arguing about who should tell the Vanguard pack.”

“Oh, so what? Am I just supposed to always agree with everything you say?” Xavier’s annoyance was starting to match mine.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying, but you should at least *consider* what I’m saying, and not be rude about it. Greyson managed to do that—why can’t you? Why do you have to hear my idea from Greyson before you’ll listen?”

Xavier looked a little taken aback for a moment before his eyes flashed angrily.

“Great,” he said calmly. “Fine, Cali. Then why don’t you go be with him, then?”

Without another word or even a second look, he turned and walked out of the room.

I collapsed face down on my bed, my stomach in knots.

*How did that go so wrong?*

I wasn’t wrong, I knew that much, but why did I feel so sad? It was the look in his eyes just before he’d walked out.I replayed the image of his expression over and over again in my head.Before the flash of anger, there’d been hurt. Real hurt.

That wasn’t at all what I’d intended. How had things gotten so out of control so quickly?

“Ugh!” I punched the bed.

*I shouldn’t have brought Greyson into it.* When I really thought about it, using one brother against the other was really a cruel thing to do. Dealing with the push and pull of the *due destini* was hard enough without my throwing it in either of my mates’ faces—especially when I knew better than anyone how strained their relationship was, and how my relationship with one never failed to trigger the other. *Bad move, Cali.*

I heard the front door open and close, and I got up to look out of my window. It was Xavier, and he was making a beeline for his car.

*Where’s he going? I hope he’s not just driving to get away from me.*

I turned away and sat back down on the bed. Maybe him leaving was for the best. It would give us some time and space to cool off before fixing things. Neither of us was in the proper headspace right now to come to any sort of resolution. What I didn’t want to do, though, was stew in my room alone, replaying our argument over and over again in my head. No, that wasn’t how I was going to end my night.

A cup of mocha sounded good, but as I headed for the stairs, I noticed that Lola’s door was open. Maybe seeing her would help. Over the years, we’d often comforted each other at times like these, and right now, I just needed the type of support only Lola could give. I rapped lightly on Lola’s door, and then entered to find her talking to Jacs.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I thought you were alone,” I said, feeling sheepish.

I started to leave, but, picking up on my mood instantly, Lola pinned me to the spot with an intense stare. “Cali, what’s wrong?”

I hesitated, thinking that maybe it wasn’t worth mentioning. I didn’t want to rehash the whole fight, especially with Jacs sitting there, but I was too torn up to keep it to myself, and I really needed Lola right now.

“Xavier and I got into a fight.” I decided to keep the details to myself for now.

Lola patted the bed beside her. “Do you want to talk about it? Or do you need a distraction?”

“A distraction would be perfect.” I sighed as I settled onto the bed beside her.

“Okay, then let’s talk about our little stroll through the carnival from hell today,” Lola said.

*Not this again.* “I don’t know… I don’t think that’s the best distraction.”

“What? I think it’s the perfect thing to get your mind off your mates. You were so amazing! You blasted the fuck out of those ghoulie ghosts!” Lola put her hands up and pretended to shoot magic. “Pew! Pew! Take that, ghost assholes! Boom!”

“Yeah, it was badass!” Jacs said with a half-smile.

I didn’t think I’d ever seen Jacs give anyone a compliment before. “Wow, you think so?”

She nodded. “It if it weren’t for you, who knows how many others might’ve ended up trapped in that place?”

I smiled, wondering why Xavier couldn’t be more supportive. If Jacs—who I barely even talked to—could compliment me and appreciate me for what I’d done with my powers, then why couldn’t my mate? Shouldn’t he have been the first in line to cheer me on?

Lola’s phone buzzed, and she picked it up and looked at it, furrowing her brow. “Who the hell is this texting me?”

I looked over her shoulder and saw that it was an unknown caller. “Yeah, who could that be?”

“See who it is!” Jacs said.

Lola opened the text. It was a close-up photo of the diner uniform, followed by: *See you soon, Jackie. xx RS.*

**Episode 2545**

GREYSON

Cali’s outburst had surprised me for sure, though Xavier could’ve been a little better at reading the room. I’d noticed immediately Cali was getting agitated during our conversation, but Xavier hadn’t, and he’d just plowed ahead—only to have it blow up in his face.

I hated to see Cali so upset, but I didn’t want to step in the middle of any disagreement between her and my brother. It wasn’t my place, and Xavier had just handled the whole thing so badly that it was on him to fix it, not me. Besides, if Xavier thought for a second that I was trying to get in the middle of things, it would only make things worse. Things were good with me and Cali right now, and I didn’t want to get into a fight with her after what we’d just gone through with the revulsion spell.

I was the pack Alpha, but I drew the line at getting involved in Xavier’s and Cali’s relationship. The three of us were already entwined enough without me complicating things further by throwing my two cents into one of their arguments. Who was I to… I didn’t even have the energy to think about it.

It wasn’t my job to be their peacemaker. I only hoped that Cali was all right. If at any point Xavier did something that really hurt Cali, I would definitely step in—that was a given. But I knew that even as angry as Xavier had seemed, he wouldn’t do anything to actually harm Cali. He was just hotheaded, one of his wonderful characteristics.

I peered up at the pack house and sighed. I had enough on my mind as it was. I needed to deal with the pack right now, and I wanted to check in with Rishika to see how she was holding up.

I went inside and looked around for her a bit downstairs before finally bounding up to her room. I found her sweating like crazy and working out like a fiend to a P90X. She had a rainbow of resistance bands hooked in her hands and linked around her feet, and she was just pumping away. She was so engrossed in what she was doing that she didn’t even notice me at first. I watched her from the doorway for a few minutes before I finally stepped in front of her.

“Oh, hey,” she said distractedly, not missing a beat in her workout.

I literally had to move right along with her to maintain eye contact. “Just came to check in and see how you’re doing.”

She started moving up and down rapidly and doing a twisting motion that I mimicked a few times before I got out of breath. I pulled back and leaned against the wall.

“I’m trying to whip myself back into shape after getting knocked out by that tranquilizer. You know what they say—no pain, no gain, and P90X is all pain, baby!”

I didn’t think I’d ever seen someone so into a workout in my entire life, and I was living in a house full of iron-pumping werewolves. “I think doing P90X is a little extreme—you were only drugged for a few hours, and I doubt that you fell out of shape in that small amount of time.”

“An attitude like that could come back and bite you in the ass,” Rishika said.

“Okay… I suppose.” I wondered if she were doing this to de-stress. Some people gorged on ice cream, and apparently others did super extreme hardcore workouts. *Whatever works, I guess.* “Would you mind stopping for a sec? I want to chat about what happened.”

Rishika finally stopped exercising, but I could tell that she was miffed that I’d interrupted her flow. “Yeah? What’s up?”

She threw her resistance bands over her shoulder and finally gave me all of her attention.

“We destroyed the blood sample LIPS got from you—I wanted to let you know.”

“That’s great. Thank you.” Rishika reached for her resistance bands again.

“But,” I added quickly, “we might have more problems. We got a little visit from the LIPS ringleader, Rhonda. She was asking a bunch of questions about the ‘big wolves’ she saw. She asked us to keep an eye out and alert her if we saw them again—and of course, she gave us lots and lots of warnings about how to be safe and how we shouldn’t approach because of the danger. I have to admit, it was kind of hard to keep a straight face through all that.”

Rishika laughed. “Really? Wow. So at least that means she has no idea who she was dealing with.”

“True, but I still didn’t like it. We could be under watch by them. We don’t know exactly how many of them there are, how far their reach is. They’ve set up a base of operations nearby, which doesn’t bode well.”

Rishika paused and cocked her head. “So I guess that means you want to beef up the patrols?”

I smiled. “You read my mind.”

“Cool, I’ll see what I can do.” She picked up her resistance bands. “Now, if you don’t mind…” She started her workout again.

“Nice talk,” I said as I left, still trying to figure out how we could make sure that LIPS didn’t encroach on the pack.

I totally agreed with Cali—LIPS was ultimately a good cause—but only so far as they didn’t tread on our pack. I knew all too well how good intentions could turn sour under the right circumstances. What if Rhonda found something, and no matter how much she wanted to keep it away from the media, it was leaked anyway? Then what would we do? The only way we could ensure that nothing like that happened was to be cautious, which meant I needed to explain everything to the pack at large.

*At this point I should call a meeting.*

My phone chimed, and I looked at it. It was a text from Xavier.

*I’m on my way to the Vanguards’.*

I slid the phone back in my pocket, relieved. As Cali had suggested, I could have just texted Aysel directly… But then again, it was Aysel. She’d probably read so much into that text that I’d never be able to shake her. I had absolutely no desire to contact her, and knowing her, she’d probably try to extort something from me in exchange for passing my message along to the princeling. Not to mention that this whole situation required more than a text. It was better to have a message like this one delivered in person… by Xavier.

*Well, at least that fight with Cali made him see things my way about him being the best person to go see them.*

“Better him than me,” I muttered.

I was just starting toward the stairs when Cali, Lola, and Jacqueline came out of Lola’s room. They were clearly freaked out about something. I assumed that it had something to do with the ghost carnival, or maybe Cali’s argument with Xavier.

“You okay?” I asked Cali as they passed by. I took her hand and pulled her close.

“Yes,” Cali said quickly. She looked away.

I put an arm around her, realizing again how natural it felt to hold her close, and how much I hated it when I couldn’t be with her. I still couldn’t believe we’d made it out of the curse.

“You and I were on the same page about alerting the Vanguards,” I said. “You were exactly right about how dangerous it would be for any of the packs to be compromised, and they should be notified any minute now.”

“That’s great,” Cali said.

*Hmm. I expected a little more excitement than that, but I’m definitely not about to push it. I don’t want to join Xavier on her bad side.*

“What do you think will happen if Rhonda finds out?” Cali asked, her brow knitted with worry.

“Don’t worry about that—one step at a time. I’m working on it. I’ve already spoken to Rishika, and I’ll talk to Mace about it tomorrow so that the Blue Bloods aren’t in the dark for long. Once everyone’s aware, we’ll just all have to keep on top of things and be super discrete, which is doable, in my opinion. Supernaturals are super natural at staying under the radar.” I hoped that Cali would laugh at my clever play on words, but she still looked troubled.

“I don’t know, I just hope everything works out okay,” she said.

“It will. Don’t worry, Cali. We’ve faced far more serious dangers than wolf conservationists.” Even as I said the phrase “wolf conservationist,” it sounded ridiculous to my own ears. Now I’d seen everything.

“That sounds great, Greyson, and I’m glad you’re trying to be positive, but there’s no guarantee that someone won’t slip up. We don’t know how much surveillance they’re doing—and what will happen if someone *does* slip up and Rhonda gets video and blood evidence and finds out that she’s discovered a pack of werewolves?”

“Cali—”

“I’m just being realistic, Greyson. If she gets proof—real, undisputable proof—it could put all of you, all of *us*, in danger if it gets out.” Cali looked me dead in the eye. “How far are you willing to go to prevent that from happening?”

**Episode 2546**

XAVIER

I had to keep taking my hands off the steering wheel and stretching them every few minutes. I’d been white knuckling it since I’d pulled out of the pack house driveway, and my fingers were starting to go a little numb. I just didn’t understand how things with Cali had spiraled out of control so quickly.

*This was* not *how this day was supposed to end up.*

First Big Mac had hit us with her version of a revulsion spell, and now we were fighting. Everything was a complete mess, and all I’d wanted was to whisk Cali away somewhere so that we could have some alone time. Now, I was driving away from the pack house without her, going on yet another errand boy run for Greyson.

I wanted so badly to blame my brother for what was happening between me and Cali. It would definitely be easier to swallow that way. Greyson was the entire reason we were in this mess in the first place, and now here I was, being sent to help clean it up. It just pissed me off that Greyson was coming across as some kind of hero in Cali’s eyes. Even the thought of how she’d compared me to Greyson stung even now.

*How dare she imply that Greyson’s a better listener? That I don’t respect her?*

I was getting mad all over again, and there was nothing I could do about it but drive faster so I could get this over with, get back to Cali, and try to fix things.

I’d decided that I was going to deliver the message to the Vanguard pack, but that didn’t mean I was wrong about how to deal with them.

*Cali might be fooled by Lucian and all his blathering on about Seluna, but when I look at the Vanguards, all I see are Aysel and Lucian—two people who cannot be trusted.*

I didn’t understand how Cali didn’t see it as plainly as I did. They’d proven themselves untrustworthy at every turn. If their past behavior was even the tiniest indication, the two moonsters were going to betray us the first chance they got. It was all just a matter of time. I’d hate to tell Greyson and Cali I told them so—well, I would hate to tell Cali. I would love to rub another failure in Greyson’s face.

Lucian was a prince, after all—why not let him deal with LIPS on his own? Certainly, he had the resources. The Redwoods needed to focus on looking out for ourselves. I didn’t understand why Greyson, the almighty Alpha, didn’t realize that. This was all going to backfire, and I was going to be right in the middle of the blow back.

*Fuck this.* I considered making a U-turn and going back home to tell them that I wasn’t going to be part of this obviously wrong decision, but I knew that if I did that, Cali would be proven right about my not listening to her or taking her seriously, and I didn’t want that.

*But if she’s so right about me not taking her seriously, then why does my stomach feel so twisted up right now?*

I didn’t feel good about this at all, but like my anger about how my day had turned out, there wasn’t much I could do about it. My only option was to go in, pass on the message, and let the chips fall where they may. I only hoped that the pack wouldn’t suffer in the end.

Before long, I arrived at the palace. I always got a bad feeling whenever I was within a few feet of the place, and today was no different. As I approached, I was resigned to getting this bullshit over with as painlessly as possible. Go in, find Lucian, relay the message, get out. Hopefully, it wouldn’t take more than ten minutes.

As always, there was a guard detail posted at Lucian’s front gate.

“Why are you here?” the guard barked from his booth as I pulled up.

“I’m here to see Lucian. Let me in.”

“Is he expecting you?”

“No, but that’s never been a problem before. Open the gate and don’t make this a thing.”

The guard hesitated for a second more before finally opening the gate. I couldn’t help but be a little disappointed that he’d let me in so easily. I was in the mood to kick some werewolf ass right about now—and his being a Vanguard werewolf definitely would’ve sweetened the deal.

I pulled up and parked, then slammed the huge doorknocker on the front door. I waited only a few seconds before I knocked again. I was eager to get this whole thing over with—even being at their door made my skin crawl.

After a few more knocks, Andrei finally answered the door.

“What do *you* want?” He looked me up and down and then looked around behind me, as if checking to see if I was alone.

*Stay cool, Xavier. Kicking Andrei’s teeth in won’t help matters.*

“Fetch the prince.” I barely made eye contact as I pushed past him into the house, daring him to stop me.

“I don’t fetch—that sounds like more of a Redwood thing. You should really show some respect,” Andrei growled.

“Respect is earned.”

Andrei glared at me, and I glared back, both of us waiting to see if either would make the move that would turn things into something way more intense than insult-hurling. Finally, Andrei turned and headed down one of the long hallways.

I looked around, thinking about how much I hated everything about the palace. It was so over-the-top and garish. I appreciated a bit more class, a little more subtlety than this. It didn’t surprise me that this was Lucian and Aysel’s style. It fit them perfectly.

*The sooner I’m out of here, the better.*

Andrei returned a short time later with a smile on his face. “You’re going to have to wait. The prince is occupied.”

I considered giving Andrei the warning about LIPS, just so I could get the hell out of there, but I didn’t trust that Andrei was smart enough to convey the message correctly. With my luck, he’d call LIPS directly and blow our cover. Besides, I was interested in seeing how the big bad werewolf prince reacted to this news. It would be nice to see his feathers ruffled, just a little. According to him, there was no threat he couldn’t overcome. It would be interesting to see if he could back that up.

I glanced around, not bothering to hide my impatience. “Where am I supposed to wait, then?”

Andrei gestured to a small room. “Wait in there.”

I entered the room as Andrei disappeared again, but I was barely over the threshold before I heard my name. I turned to see Ava coming down the grand staircase. She wore a shift dress that stopped mid-thigh. I couldn’t lie, she looked amazing. Almost immediately I felt the attraction—my mate bond with her—stirring to life as my wolf urged me to join her. Above all, I was surprised to see her. I’d left her in the woods, and yet this was where she’d ended up.

*Well, well, well, you sure do move fast, Ava. You’re just like a cat. Always landing on your feet.*

Ava glided over to me. “What are you doing here?”

“Not sure that’s any of your business.”

Ava stopped short a few feet away from me, but I could still smell her scent and perfume. “Well, I suppose you’re wondering what I’m doing here.”

“I don’t care.”

Ava smiled, clearly not convinced. “Surely you’re curious.”

I shrugged. “I know you, Ava. You needed a place where you could lick your wounds. Any port in a storm, right?”

Ava didn’t even flinch. “Aysel offered—”

“Didn’t you hear me? I said I don’t care. I didn’t come here for you. I’ve got business with Lucian, and once that’s done, I’ll be out of here.”

Even as I spoke the words, my wolf was pushing me, forcing me toward her. As always, I tried to fight it, but I was no match for it.

Ava’s eyes flashed. “What did you expect me to do, Xavier?”

“I should have expected that you would come here. To the Vanguard pack. It makes perfect sense, really. I can’t trust you, and I can’t trust them. You and the Vanguards make a perfect pair.”

“You made it clear that you didn’t want me around.”

“And I still don’t.”

“I can’t help it if you follow me around like a lost puppy. I didn’t come to you, you came here. And look at you—I can already see the struggle written all over your face.”

“Stop it!” I shouted, louder than I’d meant to. She was getting to me, and it was pissing me off. “Stop it with your nonsense. I’ve had enough of it. You’re doing what you always do—spinning lie after lie. I know that you were with Aysel at the diner. Admit it.”

**Episode 2547**

“What do you mean how far will I go?” Greyson asked.

I pressed my lips together. How was I supposed to say exactly the thing I was afraid of?

“I mean, werewolves aren’t always the nicest…” I said, wincing. “If they prove to be a problem… would you hurt one of them?”

Greyson blinked at me. “I really hope you’re not implying what I think, Cali.”

I winced again. “Everyone needs a plan B…”

“But do you really think killing Rhonda would be my plan B?” Greyson asked. He looked a little hurt.

“Of course I don’t! I don’t even want it to be your plan Z!” I admitted. “But the question still stands—what are you going to do if LIPS finds out about werewolves?”

None of us had any clue where this whole LIPS thing might end up. Considering the worst-case scenario seemed like a good idea to me, and I wanted Greyson to be realistic about how things could turn out—despite our best laid plans to be cautious. It wasn’t long ago that Phil, the trusty mechanic who fixed everything, had almost found out about werewolves. They’d been ready to take him out, so it felt… relevant.

“I really don’t think that’ll happen, Cali.” Greyson shook his head and looked away, as if he were picturing all the possible outcomes. “No, I just don’t see it. I think we can handle things delicately before matters get out of hand.”

“But what if things do get out of hand? Then what? What will you do? What will *we* do?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.” Greyson took my hand. “No use getting all worked up about what ifs. That’s not productive right now—though I know that you’re just trying to weigh all the scenarios, and I appreciate that. Look, I know that today’s been stressful for you.” He brought my hand up to his lips and kissed it. “I promise—and I’d make it a Fae promise if I could—that I will not hurt Rhonda. Does that help?”

I nodded, still trying to push down my unease. “I’m sorry, Greyson. I know you wouldn’t just go around killing people. But I’m worried! LIPS is a respected expert on wolves. If they expose us—expose the pack—people will take them seriously. Rhonda meant no harm in her plan to research the large wolves—”

“You mean Big Fluffy?” Greyson cut in.

I decided to ignore that, especially since it only reminded me of my fight with Xavier. “My point is, her intentions won’t matter if the public gets their hands on this. It’ll be a circus, and a dangerous one at that. We need to be careful—maybe more careful than we’ve ever been. If things went bad, like if someone slipped up and we ended up getting exposed, and removing Rhonda was the only thing that could prevent that and keep the pack safe, would you consider it? Alphas always have to put the pack first, don’t they?”

Greyson paused for a moment before shaking his head, his expression stern. “Yes, that’s true, but down the road, who knows what other options might become available to us? Werewolves have coexisted with humans for centuries. Killing humans to keep our existence a secret has always been a last resort. I don’t want to do that any more than you do, and I truly don’t think things will come to that this time. Trust me on that. I’ve been doing this werewolf thing for a little longer than you have.” He winked.

It felt good to hear that from him, especially after what almost happened way back when with Phil. It felt even better when he pulled me into a tight hug. I still had a lot of worries circling in my mind, but his assurances were definitely helping.

He moved in to kiss me, but I turned my head away slightly before he could make contact. “I’m sorry. I’ve had a long, weird day, Greyson. I hope you understand.”

The flash of disappointment on Greyson’s face was not unexpected, but he recovered quickly and smiled before placing a gentle kiss on my forehead. “I understand completely.”

“Thank you,” I said quietly.

I felt bad, but I just wasn’t in the mood, and I knew that he wouldn’t want me to pretend if I wasn’t feeling it. I was still so upset about my fight with Xavier, and this day had been rough on me. The only thing that sounded good right now was getting in bed, but it was clear that wasn’t in the cards for me at the moment.

Lola came dashing over. “Cali, are you coming?” I could sense the urgency in her voice.

Greyson gave both of us a look before releasing me. “I’ll leave you two to… whatever’s going on.” He gave me a pointed look. “I’m around if you need to talk.”

I looked up at him, wanting to explain more about what had happened and why I was in such a bad mood, but Lola had grabbed my arm and was pulling me in the other direction. I watched him go, both of us maintaining eye contact until he’d disappeared downstairs.

I took a breath and looked at my friend. “What now?”

As long as it wasn’t about the ghost carnival, I was pretty certain that I could deal with anything.

“What are we going to do about that text? Jacs is freaking the fuck out!” Lola yanked me back into her room, where Jacs was pacing furiously back and forth with her eyes trained on her feet. It looked like she was seconds from losing it.

“Are you okay, Jacs?” I asked, even though it was clear that she wasn’t. “Maybe you should sit down for a minute? Take a breath?”

Jacs looked up at me, her eyes flashing. “I’m not about to sit still, not when I know for sure that Rafe has found me. I’m fucked. Really fucked!”

“We don’t know for *sure* that it’s Rafe,” Lola said.

“Exactly, that text could’ve been from anybody,” I added. “Whose initials are exactly… Rafe’s name.”

Jacs wrinkled her brow and shook her head. “You two have to cut out this wishful thinking bullshit. It’s him, there’s no question in my mind. I would know better than you two how my stalker operates, wouldn’t I?”

“Okay, but how did Rafe get Lola’s number?”

“I might have… filled out a few forms,” Lola said slowly.

Jacs rolled her eyes. “Great. That’s all Rafe needs. Thanks a lot,” she said. “You two don’t understand—Rafe is obsessed with me. Any little thread of a clue he gets, he’s going to pull at it and see what unravels.”

I felt so bad for her. She was clearly upset. “So, let’s say it *is* Rafe. What does he want from you?”

“Hell if I know, and I don’t ever want to find out. He’s not a good guy. Not even close. That’s why I have to get the hell out of here.”

“That’s a terrible idea, Jacs. If you leave the pack house, you’ll be on your own with no one to watch your back. At least if you stay here, the pack can protect you,” I said, not wanting her to do anything rash.

Jacs gave me a look like I’d just said the most outlandish thing in the world. “Protect *me*?Really? Why would you? I’m a vampire.”

“Uh, excuse me!” Lola said, waving her hand.

Jacs rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean. And it’s not like we’re all BFFs.”

I was taken aback. “Well, *I* thought we were friends.”

“It doesn’t matter! My mind is made up. I can’t rely on anyone but myself.”

“Jacs, just stop being so stubborn and let us help you! You can rely on us. I promise,” I said.

“And just what are we all going to do?” Jacs asked, still not convinced.

“I know what I’d do,” Lola began. “Stake the bastard. Right through the heart.”

She made an extreme staking motion, her face scrunched into a scowl.

I was about to agree with Lola when I stopped myself.

*How can I even be having this conversation right now?*

I’d just been talking to Greyson about sparing Rhonda, and now here I was having a conversation about killing Rafe. The two situations were different, though. Rhonda seemed harmless, if not a little overzealous, while Rafe just sounded like a classic bad guy.

*If we killed the vampire, wouldn’t it be justified? Especially when he’s putting Jacqueline’s life in danger? Who knows what he’s capable of?*

It was a moral dilemma, for sure. How could I justify killing one and not the other? Both were potential threats to the pack’s safety, after all. How were they any different, when I really looked at it?

I sighed and rubbed my eyes, feeling really tired all of a sudden. I was in no mood to deal with a moral dilemma.

“Do we have to kill Rafe?” I asked. “Stalking is a crime, right? Couldn’t we just get the police involved and get him arrested? Isn’t there, like, a vampire prison we could lock him up in?”

Both Jacs and Lola were staring at me like that was the stupidest thing they’d ever heard.

“What are you talking about?” Jacs asked.

“I’m just saying that there has to be something—that doesn’t involve killing—that can get rid of Rafe.”

Lola paused, thinking it over. “Maybe there is.” She grabbed her phone and started to text.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

Lola looked up at me. “I’m texting him back.”

**Episode 2548**

MARTA

At first, I thought the question was directed at me. I glanced anxiously toward the booming voice and saw a tall, beefy guy with slicked back hair sneering at the nerds. He was easily seven feet tall, and he was chewing his gum like a cow chewing cud while tossing his bowling ball back and forth between his huge hands like it was a baseball. Two other guys were standing behind him, and while they weren’t as big as he was, they were equally menacing and clearly up to no good.

“I said, what the fuck are you doing here?” he said.

I pulled Lilac close as I heard a low growl escaping his lips. The nerds looked like deer in the headlights.

One of the other goons flicked a French fry at the nerds and cackled. “Answer when you’re spoken to! He asked what the hell you’re doing here!”

One of the nerds stepped forward. “Look around. It’s a bowling alley. What does it look like we’re doing?” The nerd held up the bowling ball to drive home his point, then rolled his eyes.

I couldn’t believe the nerd was being that flippant with the guy, who was at least three times his size.

“Looks to me like you’re stinking up the place,” the beefy ringleader said, popping his gum.

One of the nerds flicked the fry back, and it struck the big one in his massive chest. He dropped the bowling ball on his foot and howled a swear. “Fucking ouch!”

The nerds chuckled and exchanged a few high fives—which was good for them, because I was nearly sweating with anxiety. I just knew that this wasn’t going to end well, and I was afraid we were seconds from seeing a bloodbath. I’d seen enough of those in my life to know that I didn’t want to see one right now—or ever again.

The beefy guy hurriedly picked up his ball from the floor and aimed it at the nerds. “How about I try for a strike?”

His cronies laughed and high fived behind him like he’d just said the funniest thing ever.

Still growling, Lilac moved around behind him. “Hey, asshole, think fast!” Lilac tossed his bowling ball at the beefy guy.

*What the hell is he doing?* My panic was at a fever pitch now. Lilac had his wolf back, yes, but I didn’t want him to take things too far or get in over his head. It wasn’t like he could shift right there in the middle of the bowling alley if things got too dicey, and while I believed in Lilac and knew he could take care of himself, he was outnumbered and grossly outsized.

The beefy guy caught Lilac’s ball without even batting an eye and then turned his full attention on him, chewing his gum more furiously than before. He smiled at Lilac, but it was probably the meanest, most menacing grin I’d ever seen. It reminded me of one of Bert’s friends—a nasty vampire with a chip on his shoulder and onion breath. He’d liked to spend his time biting the heads off mice. I had a sinking feeling that this guy and Bert’s friend had more in common than I even wanted to consider.

“You just signed your death warrant,” the beefy guy said to Lilac. He reared back and hurled the ball at Lilac.

I screamed and pulled Lilac out of the ball’s path just in time, and it crashed to the floor behind us. Lilac jerked away from me, clearly not thankful for my quick reflexes.

“I could have caught it!” Lilac snapped at me. “I’ve got this under control.”

“I don’t get it, why are you acting like this?”

I’d never seen him act this way before, and I didn’t like it. Not only was he putting himself at risk, he was putting me at risk, too! And who the hell could catch a bowling ball thrown with that kind of speed? I looked up at the beefy guy as he laughed with pleasure. *Okay, well he could catch it, for sure, but I certainly don’t want to stick around to see what else he’s capable of.*

Lilac didn’t have time to respond before one of the nerds jumped in between him and goons and started taunting them. “Why don’t you three bozos go pick on someone your own size? I think I saw a fir tree out back with your name on it. Seems more your intellectual speed, too.” He and his friends laughed.

The beefy guy spun around to face him. “Don’t push me, asshole. You’re hanging on by a very thin thread as it is.”

I was getting more and more tense as the seconds passed. The nerds weren’t helping themselves by egging these guys on. *If they keep this up, they’re going to get massacred!* The beefy one had started to crack his knuckles, and his boys were following suit. They were the type that went out looking for a fight, and judging by the scars on their knuckles and faces, they always managed to find takers.

Lilac was on the move again, trying to get close to the ringleader, that low growl still rumbling in his throat. It was like he was under some sort of trance and wasn’t thinking straight.

*Oh no, he wouldn’t… He’s not going to shift, is he? Right here in front of all these people?*

I clutched at his arm and yanked him back toward me. “Lilac, don’t! Please don’t! Stay out of this!”

I wanted to be anywhere but there. Hell, I’d have taken being in the produce aisle wilting fruits and veggies with my hands again over this. I felt powerless and panicked as I watched it all spiraling out of control.

“I hate bullies,” Lilac said, trying his best to pull out of my hold.

“I do, too, but this isn’t our fight.”

I wondered if having Plum back was making him more aggressive. Something wasn’t right, and I didn’t recognize the version of Lilac standing next to me. I’d never seen him run so hot before. I glanced back at the nerds, expecting to see them running in fear, finally, but no, they were still holding their ground.

One of them stepped forward and beckoned to the goons. “Come on, let’s see what you got!”

He looked confident and calm, but I couldn’t help but think that wouldn’t help him against the monster lumbering toward him.

I’d seen enough—and I didn’t want to see a minute more. I tugged hard at Lilac, who was still practically champing at the bit to get involved.

“Let’s go!” I said. “Now!”

As I dragged Lilac away, the goons finally attacked the nerds. To my surprise, the nerds pulled out judo skills to defend themselves. It was mayhem, and the nerds were holding their own and tossing the goons around like ragdolls as the bowling alley staff finally caught wind of what was going on and descended on the mayhem, trying to break it up.

I turned away, still pulling Lilac toward the exit. We stopped by the desk on our way out to exchange our shoes before making a beeline for the door.

“Whoa, did you see how well those guys were defending themselves? That was awesome! Way to go!” Lilac called out as I pulled him outside. He was jumping up and down as he watched the fighting and was pumping his fists at the nerds in solidarity.

I was so pissed. “What the hell is wrong with you, Lilac? Why were you provoking those guys like that? They certainly weren’t worth all the trouble.”

Lilac finally jerked out of my hold and straightened his clothes. “I hate bullies, like I said. They deserved whatever they had coming to them. I’m just glad those guys are kicking their asses! I bet that’ll teach them not to pick on the little guy again! Besides, you wouldn’t just want me to stand around and do nothing, would you?”

“Of course not! But there are other solutions besides getting into a brawl with a bunch of thugs. You could have just called the manager—or the police! Do you really think that I find fighting attractive? Or sexy? Because I don’t.”

Lilac flinched, taken aback. “Don’t you want me to be your hero?”

“What? No, I want you to stop acting like you’re starring in some bad action movie. That’s what I want. In fact, you’ve been acting strange ever since you got back from Portland. It’s like ever since you got your wolf back, you’ve been a different person.”

“What? What do you mean? I’m the same as I’ve always been!”

“No, you’re not. You were acting all weird when you pulled me away from Okorie, and what’s with you opening the car door for me all of a sudden? You’ve never done that before! It’s nice and chivalrous or whatever, but honestly it weirded me out! And let’s not forget how you tied my shoelaces for me! What the hell?”

Lilac looked hurt now. “What’s wrong with that? Isn’t that what a good boyfriend does? Takes care of his girl?”

“Sure, and I appreciate it, but why are you doing all of this so suddenly? Out of nowhere? It’s like you’ve flipped a switch. Why are you acting this way, Lilac? What aren’t you telling me?”

**Episode 2549**

XAVIER

“Keep your voice down!” Ava hissed at me. She took me by the elbow and ushered me into the waiting room, then slammed the door behind us.

I snatched my arm free and rounded on her, preparing to let her have it, but my wolf had other ideas. It stirred inside me, clearly wanting more of her touch. I was already so pissed that I had to come the palace in the first place like some sort of messenger boy, and now to find Ava here, and looking like that… It just made everything that much worse.

*Fucking Greyson. If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be in this mess right now.*

“What’s all the secrecy about, anyway?” I asked, finally regaining a shred of my composure, though I wasn’t sure how long I’d be able to keep my wolf in check.

“I didn’t tell you about meeting Aysel at the diner because I knew that you wouldn’t believe my reasoning! And how did you even know about that in the first place?”

I barked a harsh laugh. “It doesn’t matter!” There was no way I was going to snitch on Lola. “Honestly, I’m surprised you admitted it. It’s the first honest thing you’ve told me in a while. But, of course, I had to confront you about it first to get it out of you. Typical. And you wonder why I don’t trust you!”

“Stop acting like a child,” Ava snapped. “It just proves my point. No matter what I say, what I do, you’ll always choose to be suspicious of me.”

“And I have every right to be.”

The hurt was obvious on Ava’s face. “What do I have to do, Xavier? How many things do I have to do to win back your trust? I’m tired of it! When will this stop? When will you stop punishing me?”

I shook my head. “It’s a lost cause. I won’t ask again, why are you with Aysel?”

*How are you going to spin this one, Ava? Don’t let me down, I can’t wait to hear your excuse.*

Ava turned away, revealing a keyhole in the back of her dress that exposed a smooth, tanned section of her back. “I’m not sure I even want to tell you now.” She gave a bitter laugh. “I mean really, what’s the point? It’s not like you’ll believe me anyway.”

She wrapped her arms around herself, stretching the keyhole wider and revealing even more of her skin.

Without realizing it, I’d started to reach for her, wanting to touch her bare skin. I stopped myself at the last possible moment and pulled back, clenching my fist. Maybe it was the close proximity, or the dress, or the perfume, or maybe all of it at once, but once again our mate bond was driving me mad, and I was having a hell of a time trying to keep my composure.

“Try anyway,” I said, my voice husky and alien to my own ears.

“Fine. Aysel first approached me with an offer to help me… reclaim you.”

“Like that could ever happen.”

Ava turned to face me, her hair fluttering in a thick, smooth curtain around her and sending wisps of her perfume into the air. Her eyes were fiery. “If you’re just going to be a dick like usual, I’ll stop wasting my time. I’m not in the mood to be treated badly by you today.”

I bit my tongue. “Go on. So, what did Aysel expect in return?”

“You and I both know that Aysel’s ultimate goal is Greyson.”

I mulled that over. *How far is Aysel willing to go? She’s already tried a warlock, and if she discovers that the curse is broken, what will she try next? Is there a limit? Anything she won’t do? And what about Ava? How far is she willing to go?*

It was all really starting to bother me. If it had only been Greyson’s problem, I would’ve been more than happy to just let my brother deal with it. But it was all complicated by two factors: one, Aysel clearly had to see Cali as an obstacle, and two, Ava might be involved now. As frustrating as it all was, both of those things made it impossible for me to just walk away and wash my hands of it—as much as that sounded like my favorite option.

I took Ava firmly by the shoulders. “What did you agree to do? If I find out that you’re lying—”

Ava covered my hands with hers. “Xavier, how many times do I have to tell you that I have no reason to lie? I haven’t agreed to anything. Aysel and I are still just ‘flirting’ with each other.” She flipped her hair over her shoulder and looked up at me, her eyes open and searching.

I wanted to look away, but I couldn’t. Allowing her warm, deliciously soft hands to stay on mine, I continued. “Then why are you telling me this? If Aysel can help you ‘get’ me, why didn’t you take her up on it?”

I couldn’t be sure if Ava was telling the truth or not, though she did seem sincere, and if she was rejecting Aysel’s help to win me back… That was a real shock.

“I’m telling you so that you know what you’re up against. The Vanguards are the ones who can’t be trusted, not me! Just like I told you before, I want you to come to me on your own, without any tampering or trickery, but when you realize what I mean to you. Then and only then.”

I was about to tell her what she really meant to me, all right. I was so fed up with all of her manipulative bullshit, and there was nothing I wanted more than to be rid of her for good, but then something occurred to me. Having her in the palace as a secret ally might actually prove useful. So I nodded and kept my mouth shut.

“You still haven’t told me why you’re here,” Ava said.

Before I could answer, Andrei came into the room. “The prince will see you now.”

I pulled my hands free of Ava’s. “I have to go.”

I followed Andrei out, resisting the urge to look back and get another eyeful of Ava in that dress, looking as good as she did. I imagined that she was watching me, though.

Her mind link broke into my thoughts. *Come see me after.*

I didn’t bother to respond.

Andrei brought me into a large sitting room where Lucian sat gazing out of one of the floor to ceiling windows, dressed in his usual flowing, silky robes.

He turned and greeted me warmly when I came in. “Ah, Xavier Evers. What an unexpected pleasure.”

I wasn’t in the mood to play nice with the prince today. I just wanted to deliver my message and get back to the pack house. I needed to make things right with Cali.

Lucian gestured for me to sit across from him in a large, ornate chair that matched his own. “Can I get you anything? I just had a marvelous glass of 2011 Château Lafite Rothschild—quite exquisite! Would you like some?”

“No, thanks,” I said gruffly, not liking how comfortable I was finding the chair.

“And how is the lovely Caliana doing?”

I wasn’t about to whet Lucian’s appetite for Cali by telling him a damn thing, so I ignored his question and got straight to the point. “I’m here about LIPS.”

Lucian furrowed his brow. “Lips? Whose lips?”

I had a feeling I knew exactly whose lips he was thinking about right at that moment.

“It’s an acronym,” I deadpanned. “The Lupine Investigation and Preservation Society. You’re a smart guy, so I’m sure you can put two and two together about what their deal is. They’re snooping around our woods—for a good cause, supposedly—and the Redwood pack is taking extra precautions to avoid further exposure. I’m here to tell you that the Vanguard pack should do the same. We’ve already had a near miss with them, and now they’re interested in the big wolves—namely, us—and we can’t let them get any information that would alert the human population to our existence.”

Lucian took it all in, looking unfazed. “I appreciate you coming here to give us a heads-up. A threat to one is a threat to all, after all.”

I stood up. “So yes, that’s all. If you have any questions or whatever, you know how to reach us.”

“Certainly. Oh, and be sure to give Caliana my greetings,” Lucian said as I moved toward the door. “I hope to hear from her soon.”

I ignored him as I stepped out of the room, just as another servant appeared to escort me out.

*How many servants does this guy have? He doesn’t even do anything but sit around crying about Seluna all day. How much help does he even need?*

As I followed the servant past the grand staircase, the smell of Ava’s perfume snaked into my nose and sent my wolf into a frenzy.

Ava’s mind link replayed in my mind. *Come see me after.*

My wolf was stalking around and growling inside me now, refusing to be ignored.

Before I could stop myself, I turned to the attendant. “Where is Ava staying?”

**Episode 2550**

GREYSON

I felt restless as I stared down at the drawing I’d done of the pack house. I was trying to figure out how the patrols could work now that we had LIPS to deal with, but it wasn’t going very well. This was my fourth attempt, and it wasn’t getting any clearer. I didn’t know if I couldn’t figure it out, or if I was just distracted. One thing was for sure—I couldn’t get my mind off Cali and the way she’d rejected my kiss. I’d been wracking my brain trying to figure out what I might’ve done to turn her off, but I was coming up empty.

I’d enjoyed our retreat in Portland and having her alone in my apartment like a real couple… I hadn’t wanted it to end. I’d thought she’d enjoyed it, too, and it had seemed like a turning point in our relationship, a moment when we’d both realized how important it was for us to spend real quality time alone together.

*So what the hell happened?*

Now that we were back, I’d had hopes that we might continue our celebration of the revulsion spell’s demise, but things hadn’t gone that way. In fact, things seemed to be as bad as they’d been during the spell. At least she’d *wanted* to kiss me, then.

I thought about Xavier and their fight. Was this happening because of him?Who was I kidding? There was no question about it. There was always the Xavier factor to consider. A flame of anger burned to life in my stomach, then died just as quickly. There was no use getting mad about it now, especially since there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. Xavier was going to be the third wheel in my relationship for the foreseeable future, and if I hadn’t learned to accept that by now, I was doomed. Still, that didn’t mean that I wasn’t going to do everything in my power to turn things in my favor when it came to my time with Cali. My decision to send Xavier to the Vanguard pack had definitely been fueled in part by my not wanting to cross paths with Aysel, but I’d also wanted Cali all to myself, even for a few more minutes. Still, I wanted to believe that sending Xavier was the right thing to do—for the pack.

*Did Cali suspect otherwise? Is that why she turned away from my kiss?*

Maybe it was a little of both. Either way, I couldn’t really see what the downside to sending my brother was. If Xavier went or if I went, the message was the same: beware of LIPS.

I peered down at the diagram and looked away quickly, suddenly annoyed by my inability to tackle this and get my shit together for the good of the pack. How was I supposed to even begin to do something this important with so much on my mind? I was still so distracted about Xavier’s behavior, and Cali’s worries about what would happen if Rhonda and her LIPS team became a bigger threat. I’d assured her that everything was going to be okay, but our conversation had forced me to realize that Cali might be right, that there might not be an easy way out of this whole mess. At least not a clean one. I’d told Cali that I would only resort to killing a human as a last resort, but what if that became the last resort? What then?

I leaned away from my desk and tapped my pencil against the diagram. The more I looked at it, the worse it seemed. If we couldn’t patrol for risk of being found out, then the pack’s safety was at risk.

I crumpled the diagram in my hand and let out a heavy sigh as I tossed it into the wastepaper basket. Another failed attempt.

Werewolves had to stay secret. It was an unspoken supernatural rule. Humans should never—*could* never—find out about us. It would send the world into a tailspin, and if it didn’t at least do that, then exposure alone would risk everything we held dear. Namely our lives. It was all too possible that we might have to confront this thing head-on, and if it came down to it, I would have to protect the pack—and all my fellow werewolves—by any means necessary. *Which means that Rhonda might have to go, no matter how good-natured she might be.*

I pushed away from the desk and got up to stretch. I paced back and forth a few times, trying to clear my head. Cali might not understand it if I had to take things to such an extreme.

*Will she accuse me of lying to her if things go sideways and I’m forced to kill Rhonda? Even if I have no other choice? Will she lose her trust in me?*

I’d meant what I’d told her before—I would exhaust every single option before resorting to harming Rhonda or the LIPS. But if it came down to a choice between not killing a human and putting the pack in danger of exposure to humans… Well, I would always choose the pack. I only hoped that Cali would understand—especially since it was the only way to keep her safe as well.

“Shit!”

I was so frustrated. There was nothing I wanted more at that moment than to shift and take a run through the woods, but I didn’t even have that option now that LIPS was crowding us. That was where Xavier and I agreed. It was definitely a pain in the ass that we couldn’t exercise our freedom for fear of LIPS finding out and ruining everything we’d built. I could only hope that LIPS would hurry up and finish their work in our area and move on before anything else happened.

I started to wonder how Lucian had taken the news. Would the princeling want to work with us? Or would he take matters into his own bejeweled hands? I glanced at the time.

*What’s taking Xavier so long?*

I sighed, and I had sat back down to start another sketch of the pack house and the surrounding property when Ravi came in.

“Hey, what are you doing in here? Shouldn’t you be setting up patrols?” Ravi asked, glancing down at my incomplete drawing and the other balled-up versions in the trash. Thankfully, he was merciful enough not to mention them.

I turned to look at him. “Yeah—that’s what I’m doing, more or less. I’m working on a plan.”

“Cool, glad to hear it. I have to say, those drones have me a little worried. How are we supposed to keep them from spying on us? We’ve got the ground covered fine, but the air? That’s another thing altogether. And for that matter, what if other organizations learn about Big Fluffy?”

I smiled, thinking about how much Xavier absolutely hated that nickname, which made it even funnier that it was catching on around the pack house. *He’s going to have a fit!*

“I’ve been thinking about all of that, and I don’t know if there’s an easy solution.”

Ravi gave me a thoughtful look. “Well, we took on Letifer and his army of revenants and came out victorious—and Letifer was a badass. So how hard can it be to dissuade a group of simple humans from poking around? They don’t even have powers or anything.”

“True,” I said. I appreciated that Ravi was being positive and supportive.

“We had all those battles with massive groups of zombies, and no one seemed to notice. That’s pretty awesome, right?” Ravi clapped me on the shoulder. “There’s got to be a way. You’ve got this.”

“I agree with you. There has to be a way.” I stared down at my drawing. “But this isn’t it,” I muttered. I crossed out the diagram and crumpled it up before I added it to the growing pile in the trash can.

“We could always frighten LIPS away the old-fashioned way, with a show of force. Maybe we could stage a fake battle, like one of those Civil War reenactments? Muskets going off and cannons blasting everywhere. Explosion after explosion, bayonet fights—the works. We could turn these woods into a battleground.” Ravi’s eyes were shining as he spoke. “I can picture how terrified those LIPS people would be. They’d probably go running for the hills, drones and all. What a sweet sight that would be.”

I laughed, but Ravi kind of had a point. *What if we* could *scare them off?*

I shook my head, dashing that thought away. “Scaring them off would be too risky. The LIPS folks clearly aren’t afraid of wolves. They’re infatuated—obsessed, if that Rhonda lady is any indication. I bet she has posters of wolves all over her room, and werewolf stickers on all her notebooks,” I said.

Ravi laughed. “Yeah, I heard that she’s quite the fan.”

“But… What if they lost interest? What if there weren’t any wolves around to research?”

Ravi gave me a look. “I don’t get what you mean?”

“What if we could somehow convince them that the wolves had disappeared?”

**Episode 2551**

Jacs screamed and lunged for Lola’s phone, but Lola dodged out of the way, her fingers busily texting Jacs’s stalker, Rafe. Jacs swiped at Lola again, this time succeeding in knocking the phone from her hands. It went sliding across the floor and stopped right at my feet.

I leaned down to pick it up, but I was too slow and Lola swiped it away before my fingers could even make contact. Jacs grabbed Lola’s legs, and the phone went flying once again, this time in the opposite direction from where I stood. Unfortunately, there was no way to get around the jumble of Jacs’s and Lola’s scrapping bodies on the floor to get to it.

“Stop it, you two!” I yelled, but they weren’t listening—they were probably screaming and grunting too loudly to hear anything but each other.

They were both scrabbling across the floor trying to get to the phone while also attempting to impede each other’s progress. It was like watching a capture the flag wrestling match—but between two people with superhuman strength who were moving faster than I’d ever seen.

“What the hell are you two doing? You’re being ridiculous.” I dove into the fray and tried to pull them apart, but I jumped backward as Jacs reared back, revealing her fangs. “Stop it before you kill each other!” *Or me*, I thought, looking at Jacs’s glistening fangs.

They still weren’t listening, and they both lunged at the phone and then at each other. Neither one could get the upper hand. I guessed that they were too equally matched. First Lola had the phone, but then a hissing Jacs pulled it out of her hold before Lola ripped it away again, and it went on like that over and over again with no signs of a ceasefire.

*How the hell am I going to stop them?*

I was afraid to use my magic since I could inadvertently hurt them—my magic was still a work in progress, after all—and I didn’t see how conjuring up my shield would do much for this particular situation. I had to pull them apart. It was the only way. *But what if I get bitten?* There were fangs flying everywhere, and the hissing wasn’t making me feel any better about getting in the thick of things. All I knew was that I did *not* want to be turned into a vampire.

*Okay, Cali, here goes nothing!*

I grabbed Lola by the waist and wrenched her away, struggling to pry them apart, but she and Jacs were both gripping the phone for dear life in a frantic tug of war.

“Lola! Stop it!” I said, yanking until I finally pulled her free—only to accidentally body slam her against the bed.

“What the hell, Cali?” Lola said, glaring at me as she righted herself and regained her bearings.

Both she and Jacs had lost contact with the phone when I slammed Lola, and now it was sliding across the floor once again. Jacs wasted no time scrambling after it.

Lola shoved me away and dove for it. “Oh no you don’t, Jacs!”

“Ow, Lola! What gives?” I wailed. She wasn’t even paying attention and had probably barely even registered that she’d shoved me to the ground.

In the ensuing struggle between Lola and Jacs, one of them kicked the phone, and it slid over to me. I picked it up and leapt to my feet, holding it triumphantly over my head.

“Now I have it!” I said. “So, cut. It. Out!”

Both girls turned to look at me, and I backed up in fear. Their fangs were out and glinting in the lamp light, and they had dark, menacing looks in their eyes. They were both breathing hard and looking like they’d positively lost it and were now mere seconds from losing it on me.

“Give me that phone,” Jacs said.

“It’s my phone, Cali. Give it to me,” Lola said.

“I’m not giving it to either of you!” I was still backing up, not sure what these two wild banshees were capable of. I’d never seen people fight over a phone—or anything—like that in my life.

“I was friends with you first, Cali. Don’t forget that,” Lola hissed, edging closer, her eyes on the phone.

“Hey, no need to resort to threats here, Lola. I know you don’t like this, but you shouldn’t have tried texting Rafe without checking with Jacs first.”

Lola’s eyes flashed. “So you’re taking her side?”

“Dammit! Don’t you two see what you’re allowing Rafe to do? He’s not even here, and he’s already managed to turn you both against each other. Is that what you both want?”

Jacs retracted her fangs but said nothing.

Lola did the same and heaved a huge sigh as she rubbed at her lower back, wincing. “I was only trying to help.”

“I know that, but if we’re really going to stop Rafe, we need to stick together, not tear each other to shreds. Literally.”

Jacs and Lola exchanged a sheepish look.

“Jacs, I know you’re probably terrified, but you’re not going to face this alone. You’re with the Redwood pack, and that means that you’re under our protection. I mean that.” As I said that, I just assumed that Greyson and Xavier would back me up on it. They might not feel an overwhelming amount of responsibility for Jacs, but there was no question that they wouldn’t just stand by and let some creepy vampire terrorize her.

“So, what do you suggest, Cali?” Lola asked, finally getting up from the floor and sitting on her bed.

“We stop fighting each other, first. As for what comes next, I haven’t gotten that far yet. But we’re smart, capable women—I’m sure we can come up with a plan that doesn’t involve a fight to the death over Lola’s cell phone.”

Jacs glared at Lola. “Just what were you going to text, anyway?”

“If you hadn’t freaked the hell out, you would’ve seen what I wrote.”

I looked down at the phone and read aloud what Lola had written. “Three question marks and ‘wrong number.’ Not bad, Lola.”

Jacs sighed. “Rafe isn’t stupid. He clearly suspects that I was at that diner. Do you really think he’s going to fall for the whole ‘wrong number’ thing? Think again. If it were up to me, you’d destroy your phone, Lola. Smash it to bits and then set it on fire. How do we even know that he’s not tracking you right now? Maybe he already knows I’m here!” Jacs sprang to her feet and started pacing again. “This is so fucked! I’ve successfully evaded this guy for so long, and now, after all that, he’s going to find me!”

I looked out the window and shuddered. I’d had enough unwelcome visits from vampires to last me a lifetime, and I definitely wasn’t interested in meeting another one—especially not this Rafe guy.

*Ugh. Sabyr. He was the worst. If Rafe is worse than him, we’re really in trouble.*

“Could Rafe really be out there right now, watching us?” I asked.

“Who knows? Probably! Rafe is capable of just about any creepy, messed-up thing you can think of. I just never should have come back here. This was a mistake. At least on my own, I could keep moving and keep my head on a swivel. Here, I’m just a sitting duck! He’s probably out there right now, planning his approach!” Jacs took a frightened glance out the window.

“Stop it, Jacs. It’s out of the question—we’re not going to let you go back out there alone,” I said. “There’s safety in numbers, haven’t you heard? At least if he were lurking out there somewhere and decided to try to break in here, he’d have an entire pack house to contend with.”

“Maybe we should talk to Jay?” Lola suggested. “This is getting scary.”

I thought back to my argument with Xavier. I didn’t want it to look like we couldn’t take care of ourselves. I’d given Xavier a hard time about not listening to me, not showing that he respected me, but now here we were, thinking of running to our mates at the first sign of trouble.

I took a deep breath and looked back and forth between Lola and Jacs. “We’re a vampire, a vampire-werewolf hybrid, and a Fae. We should be able to take care of one musty old vampire without the guys’ help. Don’t you think?”

Lola cocked her head. “That sounds great in theory, Cali. You’ve fought a few battles, yeah, but let’s face it, you’re not the best fighter. I mean you’re working on it and all, but you still have a huge amount of work left if you want—”

“Oh, save it! You’re not the best fighter either!” I snapped.

“Please. I’m more than capable of taking care of myself.” Lola looked at Jacs. “And it’s not like Jacs is much of a fighter, either.”

“And why would I be?” Jacs hissed. “I’m too classy to fight.”

*She must have already forgotten her little tumble with Lola only seconds ago.*

I sighed. “This is exactly what I’m talking about. We’re doing it again, turning on each other when we should be cheering each other on and having each other’s backs! That’s it, we’re not asking any of the guys—but I doknow who we *can* ask.”

**Episode 2552**

XAVIER

I followed the attendant up the very stairs that Ava had descended only minutes ago. Ava’s scent was only getting stronger as we went, and I was struggling big time. It felt like I was being pushed up the stairs against my will.

*But where does my will end, and the will of my wolf begin?* I’d been asking myself that question more and more lately, and I was starting to worry about the answer. *It’s getting harder to convince myself that we’re one and the same when it seems like my wolf keeps wanting to sabotage me at every turn.*

I knew it was wrong, but my feet were moving on their own, and I couldn’t stop them. Each step was bringing me closer to where my wolf was leading me, right where my wolf wanted to be. With Ava.

I could hear Greyson’s voice in my head, questioning me. *Are you sure you want to do this?* Colton’s voice came next. *Bro, even I wouldn’t tap that.* And then I heard Cali’s voice, telling me that I needed to see this through to the end so that I could be done with it once and for all, so that the torture would end. But I knew that she would be crushed if I did, and there was no way to know if being with Ava would stop things or make them worse. It wasn’t worth figuring it out.

*So why can’t I stop? Why am I heading to her room, fantasizing about her more and more with every step?*

I didn’t want to hurt Cali. It tore me up inside that I’d hurt her today, and I wanted nothing more than to make it up to her. Going to see Ava was not the way to do that.

*Turn around, Xavier. Turn around and get the hell out of here! Just turn around and walk back the way you came and go back to the pack house, back to Cali!*

Before I knew it, we’d come to a stop in front of a door.

“We’ve arrived at Miss Reed’s room, sir,” the servant said with a slight bow. He lingered for a split second before turning and leaving me standing there alone with my wolf growling and urging me on.

I hadn’t needed the attendant to tell me that we’d arrived. I’d picked up exactly where Ava’s scent had led as soon as we reached the top of the stairs. My wolf probably could’ve tracked her down in seconds without the attendant’s help, truth be told.

*And now here you are, with nothing more than a door keeping you from her. Go inside.*

I put my hand on the doorknob. All I had to do was open it. She’d told me to come see her after I was done with Lucian, and so she was most likely expecting me. I closed my eyes and pictured her in that dress… Or maybe she was taking it off right now, sliding it down achingly slowly over her shoulders, arching her back as she stepped out of it, ready to present herself to me. I’d seen her body so many times, and my wolf was hungry to see it again. I shook my head and opened my eyes. All of this was my wolf’s doing. I pulled my hand away, unable to go in, but unable to step away.

“Fucking get it together, man,” I muttered under my breath. “Get your thoughts in order, see this through.”

As I was about to turn away, someone called out to me.

“Hello, Xavier.” Aysel appeared at the end of the hall.

I hesitated. If I answered, Ava would hear me, would know how close I’d come to losing to my wolf, just like she’d said I would that day in the woods when I’d assured her that I was in control. Then again, she’d probably already picked up my scent. Even the thought of her sensing me, waiting for me, excited my wolf.

I stepped back from the door and forced myself to turn my back on Ava’s room.

“Aysel,” I said stiffly.

She was dressed in a low-cut emerald blouse and jeans, and she was all smiles as she approached. “I didn’t know you were here. Are you coming or going?”

My thoughts were finally coming back into focus, and I wasn’t interested in Aysel—for a host of reasons. She was Greyson’s problem. But if what Ava had told me was true, I needed to be cautious. I didn’t want to antagonize Aysel and cause more issues than we already had.

“Going,” I said. “I came to give your brother a message, and now I’m leaving.”

“Oh? Why didn’t Greyson come? He’s the Alpha, isn’t he? Seems like this would be his job.”

*He didn’t come because he was afraid of this exact interaction*, I thought, though I would never tell Greyson that he’d been right to avoid this place like the plague. It was like a minefield for both of us now that Ava was here, too, though he couldn’t have predicted that. Still, it was too bad that I was the one dodging explosions that were threatening to blow my life to pieces.

“Greyson’s busy,” I said. “In fact, I should probably head back to the pack now. I was just leaving.”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s what you were about to do,” Aysel said with a sly smile. “The way out is that way.” She thrust a perfectly manicured finger toward the stairs. “And you, my friend, were lingering right outside the room where Ava’s staying. Seems like you had some business to attend to?” She arched a perfectly shaped eyebrow at me, waiting to see how I would respond.

*She sure knows how to press a person’s buttons, and she certainly doesn’t mind doing it.* I could feel my anger bubbling under the surface, but I knew that this was a very delicate situation, and I needed to handle it with kid gloves.

“I wasn’t going to do anything,” I said simply.

“Does dear Caliana know you’re here?”

I paused, thinking that Cali knew for sure that I was here, but not that I was hanging around outside Ava’s door. What would she say if she knew what my wolf had been about to drive me to do? But it wouldn’t have happened, right? I was in control. *Right?* I was so angry at myself for letting my wolf take over and drag me up here in the first place.

Aysel flashed a knowing smile. “It must be so difficult for you, Xavier. I can see on your face that you’re struggling, and believe me, I don’t envy you. Ava is a very desirable woman, yet you find yourself torn between her and Caliana. What a position to be in.”

I stared at Aysel, at a complete loss. I had no interest in letting this conversation go any further, but I had no idea how to stop it. It was like a runaway train with Aysel at the controls.

“My life isn’t your business.” It wasn’t the best comeback I’d ever come up with, but it would do the job. “And I didn’t come here to discuss it.”

“It must be difficult, having a mate who isn’t a werewolf,” Aysel said, completely breezing past my statement as if I hadn’t said anything at all. “A mate who will never understand the carnal urges that come with being a wolf. The way you sometimes can’t stop how you feel, and you just have to take what…” Aysel’s gaze flitted toward Ava’s door. “Or who, you need.”

I wanted to tell her she was wrong—hell, I wanted to simply leave her standing there—but her words struck a chord within me, and I could feel my wolf starting to take over again. All I could think was that there had been a time, long ago, that I would’ve acted on what she was describing. Colton had even tried to get me to be more open to that part of my nature. But in the end, I was loyal. I always had been, and I always would be. I’d never been into meaningless hookups. For me, it had always been about my mate bond, a connection, and that was why Ava was a real problem. If the mate bond that lingered between us hadn’t still been there tugging at me, nearly overcoming me, Ava would’ve been nothing to me.

Cali was the one who’d brought me back from the brink, not Ava. I just had to remember that, and make sure that my wolf did, too—especially in those moments when it was fighting for dominance over my desires. Cali was the one who mattered the most. She was my true mate, and no amount of “carnal urges” was going to change that.

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand my situation, Aysel. You have no idea what it’s like to be in a *due destini* relationship. Surely you must know the story?”

Aysel nodded slowly, her smile still there. “Ah, yes. It’s a classic, after all.”

“So if you know the story of the *due destini*, you must know how strong it is. So that begs the question—why are you trying so hard to interfere with it?”

**Episode 2553**

MARTA

Lilac shrugged. “Can’t we just enjoy the rest of the day?”

“Are you seriously not going to answer my questions right now?” I asked incredulously. “You’re acting like a different person—it’s like aliens abducted you and dropped a mirage in your place!”

Lilac smirked. “Mirage-me is still hot, though, right?”

He was making a joke out of the situation while I was feeling more frustrated by the second. Groaning, I turned my back on him and walked straight out of the bowling alley. I had no idea why Lilac was acting so weird, and his behavior was only fueling my insecurity about the whole mate situation.

I’d hated seeing that fight break out at the bowling alley, and I was still feeling a little shaken about it. Violence had always made me feel uneasy—especially since it reminded me of all the fights that used to happen in Bert’s house, just for fun.

I hoped that Lilac realized how much it had affected me—that I didn’t want him to punch anyone in the face, especially under circumstances like these. It wasn’t like we were at war with freaking Letifer and the revenants—this stupid nerds vs. jocks situation had been nothing to get rough over.

Shaking my head, I reached for the car, used the keys to unlock it, and paused. I looked over my shoulder to see that Lilac hadn’t come out yet. Was he still watching the fight? What even was it with guys and fighting? *Ridiculous!*

Scowling, I got in the car and grumbled to myself. “*‘I’m acting weird because I’m trying to be a good boyfriend,’* he says. Hah! Is this how a good boyfriend behaves?”

Lilac hadn’t even come after me after I’d stormed off. Hadn’t he seen any romantic comedies? The guy was supposed to run after the girl—I expected to be pursued at this point, dammit! Couldn’t he see I was upset?

*Shouldn’t* I be upset?

It wasn’t like I had no reason to be sad or mad right now. There was a shadow hanging over us, a huge question mark about the mate bond—something I was never going to experience with Lilac, no matter how much I felt for him. We’d said that we’d stay together—Lilac had said so, and he had seemed to mean it—but would it be enough?

Would loving Lilac be enough when I could never be his mate?

The thought made my chest tighten, my eyes burn. Treacherous tears dripped down my cheeks, and it was still so jarring to feel myself cry. I hadn’t teared up in years while staying at Bert’s—there’d been no point when nobody would ever comfort me—but now it felt like the waterworks had been turned on, and I was helpless to stop them.

Everything was becoming too much.

The notion of losing Lilac to someone else, my damned mentorship with Okorie that wouldn’t go well no matter how hard I tried, the endless dangers that the pack had to face… Why was everything so hard? Didn’t I deserve a break? Hadn’t I suffered enough?

A knock on the window startled me.

“Marta?”

I turned to see Lilac frowning, all confused, this adorable lost-puppy look on his face. I hated how cute he was, even now.

“Why didn’t you wait for me?” he asked in the kind of voice that said *he* was the one who was upset right now.

*Unbelievable.*

I quickly wiped my cheeks before facing him. “Just go away,” I said loudly. I didn’t even think about the words before saying them—I didn’t want him to see me like this, so weak.

Lilac huffed playfully, shaking his head at me like *I* was being the obnoxious brat, and walked over to the passenger seat. He reached for the handle, his gaze fixed in mine and a smirk on his mouth, as if he thought this was a game.

It wasn’t.

I locked the doors, and his expression instantly turned worried.

“Hey, what’s going on?” he asked, tapping on the window. “Wait, have you been *crying*?”

I crossed my arms over my chest, sniffling. “*No*.”

He looked devastated. “Marta!” He placed his hand on the glass. “Please talk to me.”

“Well, you didn’t answer my question before, so why should I answer yours? Fair is fair,” I said.

I had never been so petty in my life, but there was a first time for everything.

“I’m sorry if I got carried away in the bowling alley with the fighting,” he said through the glass, putting on his best innocent face. “I was just trying to help, I swear! I just got a little carried away, you know? I’ll make it up to you—how about some ice cream?”

I scoffed. “You think you’ll get out of this with ice cream?”

“Name your price, then,” Lilac told me seriously.

I sniffled, all the fight draining out of me. “Why are you being so weird today? I need an answer, Lilac.”

Lilac gave an awkward little choking laugh. “I’m not being weird!”

I dangled the keys. “If you don’t answer right now, you can find your own way home.”

He took a deep breath, rubbing his face. Looking around, he said, “Please, open the door and let me in. I don’t want to shout through the windows—is that so bad?”

The boy had a point. Huffing, I reluctantly unlocked the door, and Lilac rushed in, closing it behind him. He sighed deeply, leaning his head back against the headrest. He then turned to me and innocently said, “Thank you. That was very kind of you.”

“Cut the bullshit,” I declared.

He rolled his eyes. “Marta! What’s so wrong and weird about wanting to take my girlfriend out?” He reached for my hand, but I yanked it back.

“We’ve been out before, we’ve been on actual romantic dates before, like the picnic in Greyson’s car overseeing your favorite view—”

“Oh, yes! That was a good one—”

“Yes, that was a good one, and this is a weird one,” I said sharply. “That felt organic and sweet, but this felt… over-the-top? For no reason? Like, sorry to break it to you, but bowling isn’t the most romantic thing ever, even if you open the door for me.”

Lilac gasped, clearly offended.

“What are you trying to prove, Lilac?”

He deflated instantly, shaking his head. His expression turned remorseful, and his obvious sadness made me feel sad too. “I thought you liked bowling.”

“This isn’t about bowling!” I repeated impatiently. “It’s *you*!”

“But what did I *do*?” he asked, looking like he genuinely had no idea what was happening.

“I know you wanted me to have fun,” I said, “but it felt like there was a theatrical aspect to it—opening doors and tying my shoes, all things that you never normally do. And you just felt so… awkward.”

He cringed. “That showed, huh?”

“Yes!”

He rubbed his face, hanging his head low. “I just…”

“What?”

“I’m just worried about losing you,” he said quietly.

I blinked in shock. “Are you serious?”

“I can see how upset you are that you’re not my mate. Even though I told you I don’t care, I can tell you don’t believe me. So all I was trying to do with these weird little romantic gestures was to show you what a good boyfriend I could be. To prove to you that I don’t need a mate—not when I have you.” He swallowed, looking between my eyes and my lips. “You’re all I need, Marta.”

Now, this little speech? It *was* romantic. The heartfelt way he said the words had an impact; the way he looked at me made my heart flutter. But that didn’t mean that any of it made sense.

“I’m all you need… So you decided to get into a fight?” I asked incredulously.

Lilac winced. “I hoped you’d think it was sexy.”

Oh, *wow*.

“There’s nothing sexy about what you did, Lilac,” I said.

“I’m sorry,” he said, looking down at his lap. “I just wanted to show you how much I care about you.”

“By fighting people we don’t even know?”

Lilac opened his mouth. Closed it. I had never seen him so tongue-tied. It would’ve been endearing if I’d had any idea how he’d gone so far off the mark.

“I know now that it probably doesn’t make any sense. But at the time, it seemed like a good idea…” He trailed off.

“It wasn’t,” I said, my voice cracking. “If you really love me the way you claim, you shouldn’t have to work so hard at it. You shouldn’t make it look fake, or like a performance.”

He took a deep breath, mumbling, “I’m so sorry. I just ruin everything, don’t I?”

His remorseful expression—full-on puppy mode now—made something in my chest twist. I patted his shoulder. “You didn’t ruin anything. You just have to be honest with me.”

He looked up at me hopefully. “So you forgive me?”

“Yes. But don’t try to get into a fight again,” I said seriously.

He chuckled, pulling me into his arms. “I promise,” he said against my temple, and a shiver ran through me. The warmth between us made me feel so safe.

“Okay,” I mumbled, facing him. “Maybe I overreacted too. A little.”

He smirked cheekily and raised an eyebrow. “A little?”

“Okay, a lot.”

His full lips parted, and I couldn’t resist. I leaned in for a kiss, for the reminder that Lilac and I were real and would always *be* real, despite any mate mumbo jumbo—

*POP!*

We jumped apart.

“The fuck is *that*?” Lilac blurted.

A letter had appeared in front of us. I recognized the seal instantly, and my stomach tightened with anxiety. It was from the witch council.

What the hell did I do this time?

**Episode 2554**

I led Jacs and Lola outside in a very official search for Artemis.

“She must be in the back,” I told them.

Sure enough, we found my sister practicing her bow and arrow skills, hitting bullseye after bullseye in the next five seconds.

“Damn,” Lola said, whistling appreciatively. “She really is like Robin Hood.”

“Actually true,” Jacs said, which was a huge compliment coming from someone as bratty as her.

I preened like a peacock at the acknowledgement of my sister’s greatness, grinning wide as we walked over to her. Artemis noticed us and smiled, waving.

“You look like you’re in a good mood,” I said. “How’s Rishika?”

“Much better, thank the gods,” Artemis said. “What’s up with you three?”

“We have a huge—”

“Ahem,” I said, stepping in front of Lola. “Let me handle it, please. This is my sister, after all.”

Lola rolled her eyes. Artemis raised an eyebrow. “Cali?”

I folded my hands before me primly. “I was just wondering if you could help us with something?”

Artemis narrowed her eyes. “A Fae, a vampire, and a hybrid walk up to a bounty hunter to ask for a favor… That sounds like the beginning of a bad joke.”

“I wish we were kidding,” Jacs said wryly.

“Nobody’s laughing,” Lola said.

I nodded, staring at my sister. “We actually do need your help to stop a stalker who’s after Jacqueline.”

“How much?” Artemis immediately asked.

I frowned in confusion. “How much what?”

“How much is it worth to you? Bounty hunters aren’t cheap,” Artemis deadpanned, and I realized… she meant payment.

“But I’m your sister!” I protested. “We share blood! We like the same waffles my dad makes!”

“You are blood, but these two are not,” Artemis said in that cold way of hers that made me feel like I had no idea whether she was joking or not. “And if you think you’re getting a family discount, forget it.”

I gaped. “Seriously? Why not? You know I love getting special treatment!”

“*Wow*,” Jacs mouthed. Lola elbowed her.

“Oh, Cali,” Artemis said, her stern expression breaking with a teasing grin. “Can’t you tell when I’m kidding? Sort of, at least.”

I wanted to wag my finger at Artemis and say that I’d tell our mom she was being mean to me, but I REFUSED to stoop so low, dammit!

“What are you, a witch? You won’t do something just to help?” I demanded.

Artemis sniffed. “I have years of experience as a bounty hunter. I should be compensated. The human world is expensive.”

“What would you even *buy*?” I asked.

Artemis narrowed her eyes. “None of your business.”

“This feels like a family conversation,” Jacs whispered to Lola.

Lola shushed her. “Shut up, it’s getting good now.”

I suddenly regretted bringing these two with me to talk to my apparently very reward-oriented sister, who stared at me expectedly.

“Oh my god, *fine*,” I snapped, flushed and embarrassed. “What do you want?”

Artemis smirked. “That’s all I wanted to hear.”

*Wait, so I’m* not *gonna have to pay her to help me?*

I was very confused, but since Artemis seemed willing, I wasn’t going to push it.

“So,” Artemis said, walking over to the target to retrieve the arrows. “Who’s this stalker?”

Lola launched into a quick, hushed explanation that left Artemis looking intrigued. To the point where I was alarmed, really. Why did she look like a cat, wiggling her butt, ready to attack?

*Uh-oh!*

“We should go inside and discuss this,” Artemis said, looking around as if she were ready for any imaginary threat.

“We’d rather talk out here,” I said, before Jacs could agree.

“But I thought vampires can’t go into places uninvited,” Artemis said. “Isn’t it safer inside, where this Rafe creep can’t get to you?”

Jacs turned to me, as if waiting for my agreement. Her expression was far more vulnerable than usual, but I couldn’t budge here. If we went inside, Greyson would overhear, and if Greyson overhead he’d feel like he had to tell Xavier, and we *all* knew how Xavier fucking felt about my ability to take care of things. And Greyson would probably agree, not because he wouldn’t trust me, but because he wouldn’t want me to take any risks right now.

*Which is a valid point, but oh well! We have to help Jacs before it’s too late!*

I wouldn’t let my mates gang up against me. This was an all-girls operation.

“Okay, you have a point,” I told Artemis, “but we shouldn’t go inside either. Not fully at least. Let’s stay on the porch and keep our voices down—we don’t want to anyone to worry.”

“Anyone” meant Greyson and Xavier.

“*Everyone* should be worried!” Jacs exclaimed indignantly.

Lola offered a theatrical sigh and patted Jacs’s arm. “Of course, sweetie. She just means worry more than they would already would. You’re obviously fundamental to a werewolf pack, being a vampire and all.”

Jacqueline nodded. “Thank you. I *am* fundamental.”

It was good to see that sarcasm wasn’t Jacs’s strong suit, but I didn’t have the time to laugh about that right now.

“Can we please focus on finding Rafe?” I asked with a huff.

A few moments later, all four of us were on the front porch. I immediately peeked inside to make sure Greyson wasn’t within hearing range. Nothing. Where was he, actually? I wished he could be here to give me a comforting kiss and—

I refocused on the other three.

“I need to know everything you know about Rafe,” Artemis said seriously. “Do you have a picture?”

“I don’t,” Jacs said, “but I could probably draw a picture of him.”

“You know how to draw?” Lola asked, intrigued. “Aren’t you full of surprises.”

Artemis hummed in agreement. “A drawing is good. That’s what we used to use in the Fae world. What’s his fighting style like?”

Jacs blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Fighting style!” Artemis threw some punches—into the air, thankfully. “Where does he hang out? Does he have any friends?”

“I haven’t seen him in over forty years, so I don’t know that much about him,” Jacs explained, scowling. “I just know he’s very old and has lots of powerful connections.”

I paused, processing. “But how did he even find you if you’ve managed to stay hidden for so long?”

Jacs pointed at Lola accusingly. “Well, thanks to this one over here—”

“Oh my god, it was an accident!” Lola protested.

“—my name was exposed when Lola used it at the diner. I know that Rafe has been using a witch to generate a tracking spell. Something that tells him whenever my name appears.”

I gulped. “Wait, like a supernatural Google alert?”

Jacs rolled her eyes. “Yeah. Something like that.”

Lola huffed, crossing her arms. “But there are probably thousands of Jacqueline Markovs out there. How does he know this one’s you?”

“The spell is specific to me. And since you were thinking of me when you stupidly gave my name at the diner, that must be how he tracked me.”

Lola glared at Jacs. “For the millionth time, it wasn’t intentional!”

Jacs pressed her lips together, turning to Artemis and me. She looked… worried. It was a weird expression on someone as haughty as her. “I never really thought Rafe’s spell could have made the connection, but clearly it did. Once I realized that, I left the pack house.”

“That was a bad idea,” Artemis said. “It was far safer for you here.”

“See?” I declared. “Didn’t I tell you so?”

Jacs pouted. “I guess…”

“I was right, and stop pouting about it,” I told Jacs before turning to Artemis. “So you’re going to help us, right?”

Artemis shrugged. “I will. After all, you’re going to help me find Adair. So that might make us even.”

I blinked.

*Might? MIGHT?*

Was Artemis kidding again?

*I can just never tell when she’s fucking kidding.*

Either way, Artemis looked very serious as she addressed Jacqueline. “I just need to know one thing. If he finds you, is he going to kill you? Along with anyone who’s involved with you, including”—she pointed at Lola and me—“these two?”

“I’ll be fine,” I said, rolling my eyes.

Artemis waved me off. “Cali, you have to stay safe.”

My god. My sister had been hanging out with Greyson and Xavier way too much!

“Yes,” Jacqueline muttered, looking between Lola and me.

“Shit,” Lola breathed. “Are you sure murder’s the thing on his mind?”

“Of course, idiot,” Jacs said. “I don’t see any other option as to why he would’ve played this cat and mouse game with me for so long.”

Artemis nodded and stood up from her chair. “Well, that’s all I need to hear. I’m in.”

Artemis’s arrow gleamed, and I suddenly felt very, very nervous. I suddenly remembered that, actually, my sister used to track down people and monsters, killing them if necessary. Her voice was low and stern as she looked between Jacs, Lola, and me. “Let’s kill this creepy vampire before he dares hurt any one of us.”

I swallowed roughly, growing increasingly worried. Was there a chance that we were already in way over our heads?

**Episode 2555**

XAVIER

“If you know the story of the *due destini*, you must know how strong it is. So that begs the question—why are you trying so hard to interfere with it?”

I waited for Aysel’s answer, but I didn’t think she’d actually have one. What the fuck could she possibly say other than, *You’re right, the* due destini *is stronger than anything I could hope to have with your brother*.

It wasn’t like I was ecstatic about the *due destini* either, by the way. If Greyson ended up with someone else, like Aysel, Cali would be all mine. That sounded good to me.

Then again, Aysel was kind of the worst, so maybe not *her*. Besides, I didn’t want to be Cali’s default choice—I wanted her to actively choose me—but if Greyson did get with someone else, it sure would help.

Again, though, I couldn’t wish Aysel on him.

Like, the guy was annoying, but Aysel was as pleasant as the fucking plague, and I didn’t hate my brother *that* much.

“Well, then, Xavier,” Aysel said in that sneaky voice of hers that made me want to punch something. “My wolf just knows what she wants. Don’t you know how that is?”

It was true. I knew exactly how that felt, but I wasn’t going to admit it to her.

“I’ve never tied anyone to my bed after they’ve said no to me, Aysel. That crosses the line,” I told her, which was another truth right there.

She literally completely ignored my comment—which I’d thought was surprisingly nuanced for me, so I felt pretty proud of it—and went on.

“The thing is, my wolf is attracted to Greyson, but it goes far beyond that,” Aysel said. “Seluna has blessed us—she wants the union. I can feel the pull, like the moon affects the tides.”

Oh, fucking hell. More stupid moon crap. Was I supposed to play along? I guessed I had to. The truth had to be in there somewhere. Underneath all the bullshit.

“Do you think that Seluna is more powerful than the *due destini*?” I asked, skeptical.

“Of course,” Aysel said. The nerve of her was almost admirable. “You’re as caught up in the *due destini* as your brother is. But if he can see through it, you can too.”

“Isn’t waiting around for Greyson to rid himself of it hurting you, though?” I asked, as if this evil succubus had a heart. I still felt very proud of myself for not snapping at her.

“Oh, Xavier.” Aysel kept on smiling, like she was part of a creepy toothpaste commercial. “My wolf doesn’t bow to destiny. I make my own. The moon goddess is the basis for all we do, all we believe. She’s my guide.”

“Right,” I said. On the inside, I was wondering what she was smoking. On the outside, I said, “But if Seluna’s so powerful, I have to wonder why she hasn’t broken the *due destini* yet. Why won’t she make Greyson free to choose you, if all she wants is for you to hop on Greyson’s d—” I cleared my throat. “Uh, Greyson’s *life*.”

Aysel shook her head. “That’s not how it works.”

“Isn’t it?” I asked. “If some higher being did this to me, Cali, and Greyson, is it just some kind of sick joke? To watch us struggle with it?”

“We can’t possibly understand Seluna’s motivations,” Aysel said. “Only that Lucian and I have devoted our lives to her, and we must do as she wishes.”

“So she *does* control your destiny,” I said.

“Of course,” Aysel said, fluttering her eyelashes.

“But didn’t you just tell me that you control your own destiny?” I asked.

Aysel chuckled. “Of course.”

I was officially confused now. But I wasn’t sure if I was confused because it was my fault or Aysel’s. Probably Aysel’s, because she made no fucking sense, and that pissed me off. I wanted to grab her and shake her, tell her to stop rambling and bothering us before slitting her throat.

Unfortunately, Cali didn’t approve of murder. Also, pack diplomacy was a thing, or whatever. I wondered if Aysel knew that those were the only reasons she was still alive.

Before I could question Aysel further about her obvious bullshit, the door opened and Ava appeared. I was both pissed off and relieved about this.

“Xavier,” she breathed, “I thought you’d left.”

I’d thought so too, but here the fuck we were. My wolf was having a field day, and I wanted to kill something.

Aysel smirked. “I suppose you and Xavier have some things to work out, sweet Ava.”

I wanted to gag.

“I’ll leave you two alone now,” Aysel said, then drifted away down the hall, off to be an entitled, delusional, evil bitch somewhere else.

“I was on my way out,” I told Ava gruffly.

She raised an eyebrow. “How is it that you ended up at my door, then? It’s not exactly ‘on the way out,’ is it?”

It *was* on the way to eternal fucking damnation, though, but my wolf didn’t give a shit. He rejoiced at the sight of Ava, her short dress, all that bared skin, her pink lips, her eyes—the way she *looked* at me.

The way she fucking looked at me was torture.

“Why don’t you come in?” she asked in a low voice. “Isn’t that what you want?”

My wolf did. That was the only fucking credible thing Aysel had said—my wolf knew what he wanted. I wanted something from Ava too, though.

“I need answers, Ava,” I said, jaw clenched.

She took a step to the side, letting me in. Her scent was everywhere in this room, and my wolf was riled up and frantic, itching for me to touch her. I instantly moved to a safe distance.

“What kind of answers are you looking for?” Ava asked me in the most innocent way possible. It just infuriated me further.

“You said that you want me to trust you,” I said thickly. “I’m willing to give you that chance, but I have my reservations. Obviously.”

“What will it take for you to believe me? What are your terms?” she asked, closing the door.

I could see her back again—and the one button that was holding her dress to her shoulders.

My wolf’s internal growl made my whole body vibrate. My thoughts twisted inside my head, polluted by his need.

*Take her dress off.*

*She obviously expects you to.*

*She wants you.*

*She wants you so badly, you can fucking smell how she—*

I turned away quickly, turning my hands into fists. I moved to a chair, far away from the door. I wasn’t about to lose control again and let my wolf take over. It just wasn’t a fucking option.

“What it is that Aysel is offering you?” I asked. “What would it take to sway you and get you to work with the evil princess?”

Ava approached, and I had to hold my breath to fight away her scent.

It got even worse when she stopped just before me, looking down at me as I sat on the chair. Her voice made the hairs on the back of my neck rise. “I have no intention of working with Aysel. I told you, I’m only here because you told me to leave.”

“And you came directly to the Vanguard pack, a pack we are all suspicious of. How can I be sure that you’d be on my side?”

It wasn’t like Ava had given me a lot to prove that. But if I looked at what Ava had at least *tried* to do recently, she had been with the Redwood pack more often than not. She’d fought alongside Letifer, she’d helped save Cali from the vampire Sabyr, she’d been an ally during the milk bath… And she’d made a vow to my mother to protect me. A vow my mother must have believed, in some capacity.

Was that enough for me to trust her?

Once, it wouldn’t have been, but I had no fucking idea about anything anymore.

I wondered if I was rationalizing all this bullshit in my head because my wolf needed to justify my attraction to her, my desire for her. For as many reasons as there were to trust Ava, there were just as many—if not more—*not* to trust her.

“I can see you’re struggling to believe me,” she muttered.

And then she reached behind her neck and unbuttoned her dress.

“What the hell are you—”

I didn’t finish my sentence. Couldn’t. She let the dress fall, and then she was naked. Of course she hadn’t been wearing a damn thing under it.

My wolf stirred violently.

“I just want to show you what you’re asking for,” she said in a soft voice that made my stomach clench. Shifting into her wolf form, she stared at me, a regal creature that excited my wolf. It made me grab the arms of the chair tightly, fighting to resist. I had no fucking idea what to do when Ava crouched down, rolled on her back on the floor, and showed her belly to me.

A werewolf’s submission, never to be taken lightly.

A clear sign of fierce loyalty that a wolf only gave to a mate, or to an Alpha.

Or both.

Ava mind linked with me. *I’m yours, Xavier.*

**Episode 2556**

GREYSON

“What if we can convince them the wolves have moved on?” I asked.

Ravi paused, processing. “How would that work?”

“I can mind link with the natural wolf pack,” I said. “I could go to the wolves in my wolf form and talk to them.”

“What about shifting while Big Brother’s drones are watching?” Ravi asked.

“I’ll be careful,” I said.

“What are you gonna tell the wolves?” Ravi asked.

“I might be able to get them to help me out by pretending to ‘migrate’ somewhere else,” I explained. “Maybe if the natural wolf pack leaves an obvious trail for LIPS, they’ll stop searching this area.”

Ravi pressed his lips together, eyebrows arched. “That’s an impressive idea. It solves our problem with no need for bloodshed.”

I nodded, thinking that this plan would also make Cali feel much better. She was obviously upset at the idea of causing any harm to Rhonda and LIPS, and I was determined to deal with LIPS in as non-threatening a way as possible.

“Humans are annoying, but I don’t want to hurt them,” I told Ravi. “The less involved we are with them, the better, regardless.”

Ravi smirked. “It’s like they’re a spider that you’re gonna take out into the yard instead of squash.”

I scoffed. “I guess I’m *that* guy.”

Ravi grinned, shaking his head, but his levity faded quickly. “There’s only one problem, though. If these guys have drones everywhere, and we have no idea of their location at any given time, how are we going to make sure that LIPS doesn’t see you shift? How are any of us gonna shift while we know they could be watching?”

Getting caught shifting would be the absolute worst thing possible.

“We can shift in the house before we leave, but if we’re in a bind and already outside… we’ll need to create a distraction that’ll keep LIPS out of the forest while we try to find the natural wolf pack,” I told Ravi. “There won’t be any drones to deal with that way.”

Ravi hummed thoughtfully. “What kind of distraction?”

Ravi and I brainstormed a few suggestions—including starting a fire, which I instantly shut down—before I said, “We could just enlist our secret weapon.”

Ravi stared at me.

I stared at him.

“I’m not gonna sleep with Rhonda to distract her, Greyson. It’s completely unethical,” Ravi said gruffly.

I snorted. “That…” I paused, realizing. “That’s actually a great idea.”

Ravi scowled. I waved him off. “Anyway, that’s not what I meant—*Big Mac* is our secret weapon.”

“Oh, right!” Ravi nodded thoughtfully. “She could do a spell. Something witchy.”

“Maybe cause their vehicle to break down, jeopardize their research,” I said.

“That’s a good idea,” Ravi said. “Is Big Mac gonna agree to help, though?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Only one way to find out.”

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I found Big Mac and Sabine in the kitchen, making eyes at each other. This could work well for me.

“Hello, Mom,” I said, then turned to Big Mac. “Mom’s fiancée.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes so hard I thought they’d fall out of her head. “What the hell do you want this time, Greyson?”

I was going to fucking sell this for all it was worth.

“Well, I, the son of the love of your life—”

Sabine was literally covering her mouth to stop herself from laughing.

“—was wondering if you’d be willing to help Ravi and me out with distracting LIPS.”

Big Mac narrowed her eyes. “Continue.”

“We’d like you to create an issue and compromise LIPS’s refrigerated truck, where they keep all their blood samples. Also, their drones. They have to go.”

Big Mac raised her eyebrows. “Why?”

“It would give me the time to get to the natural wolves and talk to them without fear of LIPS seeing any giant wolves, a.k.a. Big Fluffy,” I said.

Big Mac stared at me.

“Are you going to help?” I asked.

Sabine took Big Mac’s hand in hers. “Of course she will.” My mother smiled. “MacKenzie is as concerned for the pack as any of us—aren’t you, honey?”

“I’ll do it to protect you,” Big Mac grumbled.

At least the witch was honest. I knew she would’ve probably refused if it weren’t for my mother, or she would have demanded something in return, like most witches. Hopefully not my eye, but I couldn’t be sure.

“I don’t like the idea of leaving Kira alone right now, though,” Big Mac added. “Especially after she found Cali and Xavier together.”

I cringed internally at that thought and shoved it aside before my blood pressure spiked.

“I doubt it’ll take long,” I told her. “And it’s important. LIPS could be a huge threat to the werewolf secret as a whole, and humans finding out about supernaturals would affect witches too.”

The stakes were too high, basically. And as much as Kira had been helpful, as impressive as her powers were, she couldn’t be my priority right now.

“I’ll give it a try,” Big Mac finally said.

“I’ll come with you,” Sabine said. “I get that things didn’t go so well when Rhonda showed up, so maybe I can bring some mocha and some treats as a gesture?”

It should’ve been gesture enough that I wasn’t ripping their throats out, but anyway.

“Sure,” I said. “If you think that will smooth things over.”

My mom smiled at me brightly, and I was glad she couldn’t hear my thoughts.

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As everyone got ready for our little expedition, I looked around for Cali. I wanted to let her know that I was going to talk to Rhonda and make her feel better about everything. She was already pissed enough at Xavier, and I wasn’t going to make things worse.

Speaking of my annoying brother…

Where the fuck *was* Xavier?

I checked the time again. What was taking him so long? All he had to do was warn Lucian about LIPS. Then again, nothing was simple or easy when it came to the Vanguard pack. If Xavier wasn’t back by the time I returned from dealing with LIPS, was I going to have to organize a search party?

Did I have to fucking babysit Xavier *yet again*?

My annoyance faded when I found Cali on the porch with Artemis, Lola, and Jacqueline. They looked pretty focused on whatever it was they were talking about, and Artemis was all puffed up.

“Sorry to interrupt,” I said, and Cali flinched. As if she were guilty.

“Just wanted to talk to you for a moment, love,” I said.

“Right!” Cali smiled at me—a little too widely. “I’m coming.”

She sauntered over to me, and I followed her inside.

“Cali, are you okay?” I asked.

“Of course,” she said, waving a hand. “Artemis is just being Artemis. She likes violence just as much as Xavier.”

That did sound like Artemis. And like a reason for Cali to be rattled. The timing was good, considering what I wanted to tell her.

“Anyway, what did you want to talk about?” Cali asked.

“I’m going out, actually—”

She frowned. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to take care of LIPS.”

Cali’s eyes went wide. “What? What do you mean?”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “Don’t worry, Rhonda will stay alive.”

Cali glared, crossing her arms. “Don’t joke about that, Greyson!”

I rested my hands on her shoulders. “It’s far from a joke to me. In fact, I just crafted an entire plan to make sure no nosy humans will be harmed in the process of keeping our existence a secret.”

Cali’s expression softened. She looked up at me hopefully. “You did?”

“Of course I did.”

Anything to make her happy.

She smiled a little. “I like the sound of that.”

I glanced at her pretty, plush lips and swallowed. “Can I kiss you?”

Cali blushed deliciously. “You don’t have to ask.”

I remembered earlier, when I’d tried to kiss Cali on the mouth, but she’d been upset with Xavier and had turned away. That had stung.

“Should I kiss you here?” I asked, sliding my index finger over her cheek. “Here?” Then over her forehead. “Or here?” I traced my thumb over her lower lip, and her breath hitched.

She got on her tiptoes and kissed me full on the mouth. Hard.

This was much, *much* better.

“Gotta go now.” I broke the kiss off, and she whined at the loss of contact. I laughed. “I really have to go, love.”

She sighed. “Yeah, I have a thing with the girls too.”

I gave her one last hug. “I’ll let you know when I’m back.”

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It was only later, while I was driving with Ravi, Sabine, and Big Mac toward the LIPS camp, that I realized Cali hadn’t told me what she and “the girls” were up to.

Curious. Very curious.

“Stop right here, this is a good spot,” Ravi said, interrupting my thoughts. He gestured at the side of the road, and we let him out of the car so he could keep watch.

The camp was close by, and Sabine, Big Mac, and I arrived only a few minutes later.

“Remember the plan?” I asked.

“Obviously,” Big Mac deadpanned.

“Everything’s going to be fine,” Sabine said, squeezing the witch’s hand.

All three of us got out of the car…

Only to see Rhonda come *running* toward us.

“Oh my goodness, thank god you’re here!” she called. “I have something to show you!”

**Episode 2557**

XAVIER

Ava’s wolf lay at my feet, her stomach exposed. It was a rare show of submission from Ava—from *anyone*, for that fucking matter. You didn’t do something like this unless you were ready to be completely obedient.

It had to be another of her never-ending ploys.

“What else do you have in your bag of tricks?” I asked, my voice shaking.

My wolf was going nuts.

*It’s not a trick. It can’t be, Xavier, and you know that*, Ava mind linked. *You’re my Alpha.*

“You can’t just say that,” I said, fighting to keep my voice even.

*But I can*, Ava replied. *Only a wolf like me understands what that means. And only an Alpha like you will ever see me in this position*.

I gripped the arms of the chair, fighting for control. “Stop. I know what you’re trying to—”

*You asked for honesty, Xavier, and that’s what I’m giving you.*

Her soft voice echoed in my head, sending chills down my spine.

*I know you have your reasons to doubt me*, Ava went on, *but I hope that me submitting to you will make you see the reality between us. I accept you, Xavier. I submit to you. I am here for you, only.*

I was holding my breath.

*There is no other Alpha for me, and I hope this alleviates your doubts*, she finished.

It felt like she’d grabbed a bomb and thrown it right at my walls of resistance. My wolf was unleashed, and I had to get the fuck way from her before things got even worse.

“I *can’t*,” I hissed, standing up, but my body automatically froze the second I got closer to her. My wolf was howling with need, and even taking a step toward the door was painful.

I couldn’t look at Ava’s wolf, lying on the ground, belly up, fully submitting in a way that only a mate could inspire. An Alpha.

She’d always chosen *me* as her Alpha.

*Look at her*, my wolf said, making my head throb. *She’s doing what Cali can’t. She’s just like us, a werewolf, the same kind.*

I fought to shut him out, my chest heaving. I was panting with the effort. The pull that Aysel had described, the one she’d attributed to Seluna—I could feel it now. But this was no mumbo-jumbo bullshit that I could blame on a so-called moon goddess.

This was the real deal.

This was my wolf reacting to a mate bond that I’d tried to break again and again.

Why didn’t my wolf fight for Cali like this? Ava’s death had chased my wolf away, and Cali had been the one to bring him back.

Without Cali, my wolf would be wandering and lost, with no direction.

With Cali, my wolf had purpose, had power that he shared with me to protect our pack.

How the hell could he ignore all the ways that Cali had saved us both just by being herself?

*You’ve been hiding your Alpha ever since your brother returned, Xavier*, Ava whispered in my head.

“That’s not what—”

*Oh, but it is*, she interrupted. *You’re hiding your true self. You don’t need to hide anymore.*

I thought about that. There was an element of truth to what Ava had said. I’d wanted to be Alpha, and Greyson had taken it from me, even though it had always been my right.

It *was* my right.

My destiny.

My claim over everything that I deserved and desired.

My wolf growled hard enough for my whole body to shake.

*We. Are. The.* Alpha*.*

The urge started from my chest and spread in seconds, the shift so sudden I had no control over it. My wolf was suddenly towering over Ava’s, growling, panting, jaws and teeth clenched, but Ava didn’t cower.

Her wolf looked up at me, and all I saw in her gaze was awe.

*You look so powerful, so amazing*, she mind linked. *You should be with someone who gets that. Who will let you dominate her like an Alpha should.*

*Like an Alpha should*. Her words called to a deep part of me that knew she was right. This wild thing inside me begged to come out, to overrule everything around it, a call from my true nature that was clawing its way out.

I was the Alpha.

And Ava was all werewolf—I would never have to hide that part of myself around her, to pretend to be something I wasn’t. I could be myself, every brutal raw angle of it, and I’d be accepted.

I’d be forgiven.

Ava’s wolf pulsated under me, her heat maddening. *Why are you so reluctant, Xavier? You should stop worrying about what others think—follow your wolf’s instincts.*

That would be easy to do.

But it would be so bad, too.

Because my mate bond with Cali was pulling back at me, reminding me of everything I could lose if I allowed my wolf to win. I couldn’t ignore everybody’s feelings—I had a pack to consider. I couldn’t be dominant without respecting other people’s desires—I’d become a selfish fucking monster who only cared about power.

Without Cali, I could have become a monster.

I couldn’t let that happen.

I forced myself to look away, stepping back.

My body still ached with need when I shifted back to human form.

Ava shifted back too, but she was still on the ground, on her knees in front of me.

Seeing her like this made my wolf bite at every inch of me.

I had to get the hell away from her.

“I’m done here,” I snapped, and was about to take a step back when Ava grabbed my wrist.

Her touch shocked me into stillness and made my wolf rejoice.

“Don’t walk away,” she whispered.

She pleaded with me.

And I just about lost my mind. I grabbed and pulled her up to her feet, her face inches from mine. I wanted to scream at her, to tell her to leave me alone. My wolf had other ideas, though.

And when I opened my mouth, it wasn’t to speak.

When our lips met, I knew I’d lost. My wolf was in charge, and as Ava pressed against me, she was in charge too. She moaned into my mouth, kissed me back with just as much fiery passion, her fingertips digging into my nape, her skin hot against me. She broke the kiss only to kiss and lick up my neck, to whisper, “Xavier… My one and only.”

*My one and only.*

It felt like I’d stepped out of my body. Like my wolf had taken over. I could only watch as I grabbed Ava by the waist, picked her up and threw her down on the bed. I caged her on the mattress with my whole body, the scent of her desire beckoning me in, seeping into me like a drug.

We were both breathing so hard that I felt like I was losing my mind.

The friction and heat between our bodies made me feel like I had no mind left.

*This is wrong*, a voice whispered. *This is fucking wrong! Think of—*

Cali.

Clarity landed on my head like an anvil. Cali made me feel like I was one with myself, not broken down, animalistic pieces.

“What is it?” Ava said. She’d sensed the change in me instantly.

“I’m sorry, I just…”

I was just back to reality. I was one with my body again, and my wolf was no longer in charge.

“I can’t,” I choked out, breaking away from her, leaving the bed.

Ava didn’t move.

She didn’t try to cover herself. Her chest was flushed, her legs spread, the insides of her thighs glistening with arousal, everything about her one massive trap. And yet, she just stared at me with those eyes, always pleading. She looked broken as she whispered, “I get it.”

Did she? How could she? I’d expected her to argue, to get angry, like I was.

*No.*

There was no anger in me right now. I just felt… sympathy toward her.

Empathy?

Ava had told me that she’d been overpowered by her wolf as well. That this was humiliating to her, and she couldn’t stop wanting me, couldn’t stop needing me. Could I blame her for that? I’d been able to regain control because of my mate bond with Cali.

Without Cali, my wolf would have triumphed, and Ava would’ve been mine.

“I have to go,” I said, my voice shaking.

Ava said nothing. She just stared at me sadly, and I wanted to look away from her—like a coward. But I couldn’t be a coward. I refused to be. Ava had exposed her soul to me time and time again, and I owed her at least a tiny bit of something good.

Even if that was just a warning.

“Be careful with Aysel,” I muttered.

And then I stepped the fuck out of that room and closed the door behind me.

Ava’s scent still taunted me, the readiness and craving of her body lingering under my nose. This had been another close call, and I felt sick with guilt over it.

If only Cali knew.

I had to be more careful with Ava, but that was easier fucking said than done. Case in point, my clothes were in shreds in Ava’s room. Shaking my head at myself, I checked out the hallway hanger before me and picked up a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. I’d been told in one of my other trips to this damned castle that hallway-hanger garments were always available to Lucian’s guests, because going through clothes quickly was just part of shifting and being a werewolf.

At least Lucian’s “hospitality” had these kinds of perks, because I hadn’t wanted to leave this place fucking naked. Taking a deep breath, I got dressed quickly and headed downstairs, my head still heavy with all that had just happened.

Should I even fucking tell Cali about all this? What would her reaction be? Did I even want to know?

My guilty thoughts were interrupted by a voice.

“Mr. Evers!” the attendant exclaimed. “So glad you haven’t left. Prince Lucian requests your presence.”

**Episode 2558**

Artemis and I were getting ready to go to the vampire diner to do some serious scouting for our serious investigation, which I was still intimidated by but determined to deal with.

Good times.

I was brushing my hair a little too vigorously, finishing up getting ready. Artemis was in her room as well, probably stocking up on knives and all the other shady stuff that made her the badass she was. Jacs was in Lola’s room, getting Rafe’s drawing ready for us.

Artemis had told me that Rafe wasn’t going to make it easy for us to find him. He was obviously dangerous from what Jacs had told us, and I’d had enough dealings with dangerous vampires to last me a lifetime, thanks very much.

*But am I going to back down now? Of course not.*

Greyson and Xavier weren’t here to keep me from going on this mission, which was their fault, obviously. They would’ve been horrified to know that I was heading off on a quest to scout for someone like Rafe, but I needed to prove to them that I didn’t need them to protect me. Sure, there might have been moments where I needed their help—perhaps too many too name—but who was counting?

*Also, I am totally coming into my own as a Fae, dammit!*

In the beginning, I hadn’t even known that I had magic powers, and then I’d struggled to control them. My control might not have been perfect yet, but I was getting better, like, all the time. And now I had the ability to create shields—still a work in progress, but how cool was *that*?

Besides, I had Artemis to help with this little spy mission, and she was quite ruthless, to the point where I was glad I wasn’t her enemy. Together, we’d be able to handle a creeper like Rafe. And it wasn’t like I hadn’t fought vampires before.

*If I have to stake him, I’ll be ready. So there.*

“Cali?”

I flailed, floundering with the brush before I dropped it on the floor.

“You okay?” Artemis raised an eyebrow when I faced her.

“A little warning next time,” I huffed. “I’m fine, just eager to get going.”

Artemis smirked. “Right.”

“Should I bring a stake or something?” I asked seriously, standing up while hopefully looking dignified. I could totally do this.

“I think a stake might be a little obvious,” Artemis deadpanned. “This is just a scouting mission—I have no intention of confronting Rafe. I doubt we’ll even see him during our very first outing. The odds are very low.”

“You think so?” I asked, swallowing.

“I know so,” Artemis said.

I nodded as Artemis smiled a little, reaching out her hand to me. “Come on. We can do this.”

When I took Artemis’s hand, I couldn’t help but feel everything would be okay.

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Of course, everything went wrong immediately.

“Hello, you two, look at you!” Our parents accosted us as we climbed down the stairs.

“What are you up to?” Dad asked, smiling.

I cringed, glancing at Artemis, not sure what to say. If I said the truth, my parents would literally freak out and probably try to talk us out of our quest. But I hated lying…

*Is there a middle ground of an explanation to soothe my guilty coincidence?*

Artemis had an answer to that. “Cali and I are going out for some milk-glass things that humans drink and are really melted iced cream.”

I blurted, “She means ice cream. And it’s milkshakes, really.”

Dad’s face fell. “But what about dinner? I’m making Bolognese,” he said sadly.

Bolognese should never be a sad occasion.

“It smells fabulous!” Torin piped up from the kitchen.

“I’m sure they’ll be back for a late diner,” Mom told Dad, patting his shoulder. “And actually, a milkshake sounds wonderful right now.” She looked between Artemis and me. “Would it be okay if I came along?”

“No!” I blurted without thinking. *Oh crap.* “I—I mean, I’m sorry. It’s just that Artemis and I were going to have a little sister-to-sister jam sesh. I hope you guys understand.”

Mon grinned widely, pleased. “Of course! The more time you two spend together, the better.”

I smiled, relieved. “What kind of milkshake do you want? I’ll bring one back to you.”

“Great idea,” Artemis said. She turned to Dad. “You like milkshakes too?”

Dad looked between us, huffing. “Please don’t bother. I don’t want some diner milkshake to ruin my wife’s appetite.”

“Dad, I promise we’ll try out your Bolognese,” I said.

“That’s what they *all* say,” Dad said, sighing.

“You can’t get in the middle of this, honey—I’ll eat whatever I want,” Mom told Dad, teasing but firm. “See you later with my shake, girls. I like vanilla. Have fun!”

“‘Sister-to-sister jam sesh’?” Artemis hissed at me once we headed toward the exit. “Don’t ever use that term again. Next time, just let me do the talking.”

“Oh, come on,” I hissed back. “I had to think of something.” I narrowed my eyes at her. “Do you even feel a *little* guilty over the fact that we’re lying our asses off to our mom?”

Artemis shrugged. “Technically, we didn’t lie. All we have to do is order milkshakes while we’re scoping out the diner.”

Artemis was the epitome of a morally grey character. I admired her, almost.

“There’s Cali,” Lola’s voice said. She and Jacs walked down the hallway and straight to us.

“Here’s my drawing of Rafe,” Jacs said, and handed it over to Artemis.

Both my sister and I were very impressed. Who would have thought Jacs had a secret talent as an artist?

“Wow. This looks almost lifelike,” I said.

“Great work,” Artemis added.

Jacs shrugged. “I thought about becoming an illustrator back in the 90s.”

“Enough backstory. A recap of the plan, please?” Lola asked impatiently.

“We go to the diner, case the place, get any available info about Rafe, and come home,” I recited. “I promise to let you know when we get back.”

Lola sighed. “I wish I could come with you guys…”

“But you’d be recognized, and that would create a whole big mess again,” Jacs told Lola, raising an eyebrow.

Lola elbowed her and turned to Artemis and me. “You two be careful—Rosaura and the rest of the staff are vampires.”

Artemis grinned. “Sounds like fun.”

For some reason, though, I was definitely less than thrilled.

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Artemis was smart enough to let me drive, because she was super bad at it. We picked out one of Xavier’s still-undamaged cars—hopefully it would stay that way today. My stomach was all fluttery with nerves, and I wished Xavier and Greyson were with me.

I’d never admit that, though. Never out loud.

Besides, realistically speaking, Artemis and I could definitely handle one vampire. Even if he was two hundred years old…

“I can’t believe I’m actually vampire hunting,” I said, letting out an awkward little laugh. “Maybe we should have invited Charlie—he *is* a hunter.”

Artemis looked out her window, cool as a cucumber. “Don’t worry, we don’t need anyone. I told you before, we’re only scouting. And even if we do get lucky and Rafe is at the diner, we can’t just take him out right there. There would be too many witnesses—not to mention the vampires who work there might not be so happy if we did.”

Describing finding a dangerous vampire as a “lucky” happenstance was a debate that I wasn’t going to have with my sister right now. I just nodded at the part that made sense. “True. We can’t start a vampire fight in public. It’ll be fine.”

I said those words repeatedly on our ride there, and by the time we arrived, I almost believed them.

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“The key to being a successful bounty hunter is the ability to blend in,” Artemis told me as we paused in front of the diner’s entrance. “You have to act as natural as possible—just pretend we’re really here to get milkshakes.”

I nodded seriously. “Well technically we are. I can handle that.”

Artemis grinned, and we entered. Ignoring my still-fluttering stomach, I looked around. The place looked about the same as it had with Iñigo in charge.

“Hello,” said a bored-looking, almost yawning waiter. “Let me get a table for you—”

Before he could lead us anywhere, Artemis said, “Actually, we’d like that corner booth.”

Mr. Yawning led us to the corner booth with no objections. We took a seat, and once he was gone, Artemis leaned closer and whispered to me, “We can see the entire restaurant from here.”

I was impressed. I actually felt much safer doing this with Artemis instead of Lola—who would’ve thought?

“You’re really good at this spy stuff, huh?” I asked.

Artemis smirked. “Experience.”

I looked around—the place was nearly empty, and when the waiter returned with our menus, Artemis said, “This is a cool place. Has it been busy today?”

The waiter shrugged. “You see what I see.”

Once he was gone, I spoke in a low voice, my menu half covering my face like I’d seen in the movies. “What should we do now?”

Artemis flipped through the milkshake list. “We order a couple of these and just watch.”

I nodded seriously, feeling great about myself and the situation. This would be a piece of cake.

Artemis flagged the waiter down and turned to me. “I’m thinking chocolate milkshake. You?”

We ordered two chocolate milkshakes, along with a to-go vanilla one for later. The bored waiter jotted it all down and left.

Everything seemed to be going well, until a heavy male voice behind us spoke up.

“Can you pass the ketchup?”

I grabbed the bottle, always glad to be helpful, then turned to hand it over to—

The man in Jacs’s drawing.

*Oh my god… it’s him. It’s Rafe!*

**Episode 2559**

GREYSON

“I have the evidence my team and I have been hoping for!” Rhonda exclaimed.

At least she wasn’t alarmed or anything. But, man, her excitement made her loud.

I hoped to hell that the evidence wasn’t an 8x10 glossy of my brother, mid-shift. How the hell would I be able to talk my way out of that?

“Come on, follow me.” Rhonda was all smiles as she led us to the mobile lab.   
All three of us—Sabine, Big Mac, and myself—exchanged glances when we saw a slab

of white plaster on a table.

“Well?” Rhonda asked me, looking up at me like a kid, all jittery. “What do you think?”

I looked closely, and it was a footprint. Of a werewolf. I obviously knew what it was, but what did *Rhonda* think it was? God, this was a mess. I had to fix it.

So I put on my best smile and whistled appreciatively.

“Wow,” I said. “That’s quite a sight.”

“Right?” Rhonda clapped her hands. I’d hadn’t seen anyone so excited about something since Lola discovered glitter bombs. “It’s a footprint of the new species of wolf we were talking about. Big Fluffy is real!”

There was a part of me that would have loved for Xavier to have been here right now.

“We thought maybe we imagined what we saw before,” Rhonda’s teammate said, “but no regular wolf can make a print like this—it has to weigh over two hundred pounds.”

“And the average male grey wolf is only about a hundred pounds,” Rhonda said, grinning wide. “How exciting is it that we found it on your property?”

Big Mac spoke up wryly. “Not sure ‘exciting’ is the word I’d use here.”

Rhonda looked confused, and I cleared my throat loudly. “Let me make some introductions here,” I said. “Rhonda, this is my mother, Sabine, and MacKenzie, her fiancée.”

Sabine thankfully took the lead before Big Mac could tell Rhonda that her hair looked bad or something.

“So good to meet you.” She shook Rhonda’s hand, smiling brightly. “I’m so happy to meet someone else who has an interest in wolves. Sometimes it feels like I’m alone in my love for them, you know?”

Rhonda gave Sabine a sympathetic smile. “Of course I do.”

My mom opened up her backpack, still with that blinding grin of hers, and said, “I understand that my family and I may have given you a poor impression—it’s just that my fiancée over here is a little bit private—”

Big Mac continued to give Rhonda the death stare.

“—but I definitely want to make up for any misunderstandings and make you feel as welcome as possible.”

Sabine pulled out a whole box of Torin’s cookies, a loaf of Tom’s banana bread, and a thermos of her white chocolate mocha. As she rattled on about each treat, Rhonda and the other guy were stunned.

“That’s so nice,” Rhonda said, looking genuinely touched.

“*Tho nithe!*” the guy repeated through a mouthful of cookies.

“Please tell me more about your thoughts on wolves,” Rhonda told Sabine, all happy. “Have you ever seen anything like this?” She gestured at the footprint.

My mom’s eyes went wide. “Oh, no—never. That’s definitely a revelation.”

I hid a smile. Sabine was deceptively good at lying. I kinda liked it.

“Try one of the cookies, they’re perfect,” the guy told Rhonda, and I made sure to jump back into the conversation.

“I’d also like to apologize for us getting off on the wrong foot,” I told Rhonda, trying to appear as earnest as possible. “You got in the middle of a little family situation—things were tense earlier. We’re just protective, as a whole—this land has been in our family for years, you understand.”

Rhonda and the guy nodded. “Of course.”

“We’d love to work with you in whatever way you need, but we do have some limitations to avoid any family disputes,” I said. “My brother has a say as well, you see.”

Rhonda seemed mollified by my explanation, thankfully. “For sure. I can understand being protective of such beautiful land. Though I’d like you to always remember that LIPS is committed to preservation of the wolves and their natural habitat. We’re not here to trespass in any way, so your help would be much appreciated.”

“Sounds great,” I said.

That was what I said, but as Rhonda and the guy kept on chattering about wolves with my mom, I processed this new information. Rhonda meant well, I could tell, but she also had a passion. Which meant that once she was focused on something, she probably wouldn’t let it go.

And I needed to make sure that she *would* let it go.

She couldn’t be out here focusing on “giant wolves” that she’d seen gallivanting around the forest. As for the pawprint she’d acquired—I had to make sure it wouldn’t make its way off the property. I had to do damage control and focus on that.

I wasn’t going to disappoint Cali and hurt any innocent humans, but I also knew that as Alpha, I needed to protect my pack and our supernatural society’s secret. If humans ever realized that werewolves were much more than caricatures from *Twilight*, there was no knowing what they’d do. They’d probably react out of fear and try to hurt my pack, and I couldn’t allow that.

“… right, Greyson?” My mom spoke up, nudging me, and I realized I’d been lost in my thoughts. Rhonda was frowning at me, so I made sure to refocus.

“Uh, right, excuse me,” I said with an awkward smile. “Long day.”

Rhonda’s expression softened. “I was just telling your mother that I think this forest is particularly special. There’s so much about the wolves that live here that fascinates me.”

I wish she would become fascinated with literally anywhere else on the planet.

“Actually, my family has lived here for generations, and I’ve heard that the wolves have been known to migrate,” I said, trying to look as thoughtful as all the wolf nerds around here.

“Really?” Rhonda looked dubious. “That’s odd. Once wolves have a territory, they don’t tend to abandon it unless there’s a reason.”

I shrugged. Casually. “If these wolves are different than normal ones, then maybe it’d be worth following them to study their migration pattern.”

Rhonda looked intrigued. I could see her taking the bait. I restrained myself from improvising any more facts about these “mysterious” wolves.

“All this sounds so interesting!” Sabine gushed. “Could you please tell me more about what else you’ve been observing in the wolves’ behavioral patterns?”

“Of course!” Rhonda and the guy chirped, both thrilled to tell my mom. Though the guy was still attacking Torin’s cookies.

As they rambled on, I pulled Big Mac aside.

“Can you do something to the vehicle?” I whispered.

Big Mac nodded. “On it.” She raised her hands and mumbled something in some ancient language. I had no idea what to expect now—an explosion? An earthquake? Aliens?—but nothing seemed to be happening.

“Uh, did it work?” I whispered again. “Maybe try once more?”

Big Mac scoffed at me. “Just give it a chance.”

Before I could breathe another word, an alarm sounded from inside the vehicle.

“What’s that?” Rhonda jumped out of the van, and all of us followed her lead—anything to look natural and surprised.

Rhonda’s teammate bellowed, “Oh, no! It sounds like the refrigeration unit just went out!”

I hid a smirk and vowed never to doubt Big Mac again.

“I’m so sorry,” Rhonda told Sabine and me, “but we have to save our samples. They’re vital!”

“Of course,” I said. “We’ll be going—you have important research to save, and the last thing we’d want is to interfere.”

Sabine gave me a proud look, and I wondered if I’d gotten my smooth lying skills from her.

“Oh my god, look what happened!” Another researcher ran up to us, looking frantic. He held up the bent frame of a drone, all panicked.

“Did you hit another tree?” Rhonda asked him with a scowl.

The researcher gasped. “I swear I didn’t! It just suddenly dove straight into the ground. And now the remote isn’t working at all—I can’t use any of the other drones!”

Meanwhile, a few feet away, Big Mac was smiling smugly. I should have known she wouldn’t let me down.

“Sounds like you and your team have a lot to deal with,” I said, lacing my tone with urgency. “We should talk again another time.”

Rhonda nodded a lot, looking like she was stressing out but trying to be polite. “Yes! It was great meeting with you.” That was directed toward my mother. “But we just have to, well…” The alarm was still blaring. “*Deal* with all that.”

The entirety of the LIPS team ran into the vehicle. Big Mac, Sabine, and I headed to the car, exchanging conspiratorial looks.

“Well played,” I told the witch.

Big Mac shrugged “Eh, an old trick… but a good one.” My mom smiled over at her.

“What’s next?” Big Mac asked.

“I need to get that plaster cast,” I said, “but I can’t go after the wolves and deal with that now, so I’ll have to come back for it another time.”

“Makes sense,” Sabine agreed.

Once we got to the car, I said, “I’ll see you two back at the pack house.”

After thanking Big Mac one last time and hugging my mom goodbye, I ran into the woods and shifted. I had to find Ravi so we could move into phase two of the plan.

*Where are you?* I mind linked him.

Ravi replied instantly. *I’m over at the south end, and I’ve found the wolves’ trail. We have to get a move on.*

**Episode 2560**

I was so stunned I dropped the ketchup bottle.

It inevitably splattered on Artemis, who glared at me with disgust. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

*There’s a vampire behind me! That’s what’s wrong!*

I so wished I could mind link with Artemis. But I couldn’t, so I went for the second best thing. I kicked my sister under the table.

“Ouch!” she grumbled, just as I picked up the bottle, wiped it off with a napkin, and thrust it behind me at Rafe.

“Sorry,” I said in a voice that I hoped was even instead of squeaky. He stared at me with dark, sinister eyes and smiled. I got the feeling that he would’ve been attractive in another universe, which just made this whole thing even *more* fucked up.

“It’s all good,” he said, taking the bottle and turning back.

*Oh, it is so not.*

“You need to look into your clumsiness, Cali,” Artemis said when I faced her. She was still grumbling and wiping ketchup from her shirt—my shirt, actually, which she’d borrowed without asking me. *Ugh!*

I had to tell Artemis what had happened. But vampires had amazing hearing, and I was sure that this guy would definitely be interested to tuning in now to see if the weird girl thought he was hot or something. My hands shaking, I grabbed my phone and typed it all out.

*That’s Rafe!!!!!*

I held it up. Artemis read it and nodded casually—what the *hell*? I’d honestly expected a bigger response, but Artemis was much better at staying calm under fire than I was. Still frantic, I typed out another message.

*What do we do???*

Artemis rolled her eyes and grabbed the phone to respond.

*Stop acting weird.*

I was about to tell her that there was nothing weird about how I was reacting to meeting a vampire stalker when the waiter returned. I let out a small, automatic thanks as she dropped off the milkshakes before going back to my phone.

*What if he heard what we were talking about earlier????* Then another thought hit me, and I typed, *Can he smell that we’re Fae???*

Artemis read the message, shook her head, and replied.

*Vampires tune out useless chatter in public places, just like werewolves. Also, the stench from all the grease has most certainly masked our scents.*

That kind of appeased me. Artemis gave me a cool look. “Try your milkshake, Cali.”

I wished again that I could mind link with my sister. Knowing the vampire was seated right behind me was giving me the creeps. I needed eyes in the back of my damn head.

*Calm down, Cali*, I told myself. *Everything will be fine, everything—*

Oh my god, but what if he attacked us? What if Artemis was wrong and he already knew we were Fae and the Eau de Grease in here did nothing to disguise that? Vampires had super sensitive noses!

“Cali,” Artemis said. “The milkshake.”

She slurped on hers, and I tried to do the same, but it was just so sweet it made me feel a little queasy. Or maybe that was my nerves and the need to not die today. Speaking of death, Rafe got up just then—thankfully I wasn’t drinking my milkshake because I’d have spat it out. I saw him walk toward the cash register. He was tall and looked murder-y, which wasn’t good.

*None of this is good!* I thought to myself, internally freaking out.

He was going to get away, and we needed proof. Like, real proof. I grabbed my phone, opened the camera, and turned to Artemis. “Smile.”

Artemis stopped mind-slurp to frown at me. “What?”

I looked over her shoulder where Rafe was, my eyes wide, and she caught my drift, striking a pose. I was glad we’d had the “What the hell are photographs?” conversation with her weeks ago, because my patience was already running thin.

As Rafe paid his bill, I fought to frame him in the background. I told Artemis, “That’s great, give me a frowny face now!”

As my sister pretended to keep posing, I fired off a series of pictures. A moment later, a manager came out from the back and made a beeline for Rafe.

She led Rafe through a back door.

*This is suspicious, right?* I thought. Well, technically anything Rafe could have done at the diner would have registered as suspicious in my mind since I already knew the guy was a Grade A creeper.

Or maybe I was just getting good at all this spying.

“Show me,” Artemis muttered, reaching for my phone.

“We should send these to Jacs for confirmation,” I said, and then we swiped through the pics.

Artemis frowned. “Why are they all red and blurry?”

I paused, scowling. I had fired off the pictures so fast I hadn’t really been looking at the screen to check them after the fact. Were my spy senses already failing me? Did I accidentally use a filter? Artemis grabbed the phone and huffed.

“Here’s the explanation,” she said, wiping the ketchup from the lens. “Nice try.”

I deflated, feeling like this was a huge blow to my budding spy career. Rafe looked like a fucking out-of-focus red blob in every picture.

“What should we do now?” I asked Artemis.

Artemis gave me a wry look. “Honestly, it would be great if you calmed down. He has no idea who we are, which gives us the upper hand.”

“But how can we know it’s him?” I persisted, my voice still low enough that only Artemis could hear. “We came here to find clues—we never expected to actually find *him*.”

Safe to say, I was feeling a little unprepared. A *smidge*. Maybe I *should* have brought a stake. I kinda wished Xavier or Greyson were here with us…

*Oh, god. Is this what’s become of me? Admitting that my mates are right?*

No. I refused.

Meanwhile, Artemis continued to drink her milkshake and offered questions that had tricky answers. “I wonder why he went into the back with that woman? She’s gotta be what you humans call a business manager?”

“Awkward phrasing, but A for effort,” I told Artemis. “And yes, that had to be her. Lola said she’s”—I lowered my volume to a whisper—“a vampire.”

Artemis frowned. “But what kind of business could they be up to?”

I cringed at the possibility that Rafe was getting blood, remembering how Iñigo had turned Xavier into a blood buffet for vampires.

Vampires were actually the worst. Lola and Mikah excluded.

“Cali,” Artemis said, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Are you gonna drink that?”

My sister’s priorities were outstanding. Truly.

“Here you go,” I said, pushing the shake toward her. In a lower voice, I asked, “What do we do now?”

Artemis shrugged. “We should get Mom’s milkshake and head back.”

I blinked in surprise. “But what about Rafe?”

Artemis leaned closer, looking around to make sure nobody was paying attention. She muttered, “If he’s here for blood, chances are he’ll be back. Now, at least we have a way to track him. How many times do I have to remind you this was a scouting-only mission?”

Before I could speak another word, Artemis finished up my milkshake too in one giant slurp and stood up. She walked over to the counter, picked up Mom’s milkshake, paid super casually, and headed out. I followed her, scowling with my arms crossed over my chest.

“But what if we’re wrong?” I hissed as we walked toward the exit. The tables in this area were deserted. “What if we stake the wrong guy?”

“We’re not staking anyone—not yet,” Artemis said. “And it’s pretty clear he’s the guy—look at Jacs’s drawing.”

She showed me the thing, and I huffed. “I just really want to make sure this guy is Jacs’s stalker. Isn’t that what a good spy is supposed to do?”

“Who said you’re a good one?” Artemis asked wryly.

I smacked her arm, and she snorted.

“Cali, come on!” She lowered her voice as we stood by the door. “We can’t bring Jacs here, so what do you propose we do?”

As if ready to answer all our prayers, Rafe came back from the back of the diner.

*This is our one shot! Our one opportunity… Wait, isn’t that a song?*

Before I could go on a find-the-song-lyrics spiral inside my head, I grabbed my phone and whispered to Artemis, “We’ll facetime Jacs and Lola and show him to them.”

“That’s a terrible idea,” Artemis deadpanned.

But I was already making the call, fighting to frame Rafe in the background as he chatted with the cashier. Artemis groaned and grabbed me by the collar as if I were a kitten or a puppy, which was totally rude, and pulled me outside.

“Hey!” I whispered indignantly. “I’m spying here!”

“At least don’t make the call where he can see and hear you!” Artemis whispered in that same tone. “Chances are Rafe will come out, so move away from the door but not so far that you can’t make out who he is.”

“Okay, that’s a good idea,” I said and nudged her. “Act casual.”

Artemis’s eye twitched. “You’re telling me to act casual when you’re the least subtle Fae to ever walk the Fae world?”

I was about to get very offended here, like very, but there was no time for it. I glared at my sister and called Lola.

She answered instantly. Her eyes were wide on the screen. “Cali? Are you on your way back?”

“We found Rafe,” I whispered. “But we need to make sure he’s the right guy.” I fought to take a shot of Artemis while framing the inside of the diner. “Ask Jacs to look, okay?”

Lola shoved the phone in Jacs’s face.

After waving her off, Jacs squinted at us. “I can’t see anything. Where is he?”

I glanced at the diner. Rafe was gone.

“Where the hell did he go?” I grumbled.

Artemis rolled her eyes. “Doesn’t matter, we should go anyway. Mom’s milkshake is melting.” She grabbed my arm and was about to pull me away, when—

There was a heavy male voice from behind us.

A voice I’d heard before.

“You should be careful at a place like this—it’s not safe for Fae like you.”

I dropped the milkshake. It splattered at our feet. Artemis gripped my arm as I faced Rafe. He sneered at me and grabbed my hand so quickly that not even Artemis had the time to react.

“Hello, Jackie,” he said to the screen. “How nice to see you again.”

**Episode 2561**

GREYSON

Ravi and I were shifted and running through the forest, picking up the scent of the natural wolf pack. I just hoped that the damage to the drones would last long enough for us to get away without being seen.

I kept all my senses attuned to the forest for any sounds of the pack. The scent was strong—they couldn’t have gone too far. A river came into view, and I stopped running. Ravi followed, and both of us scented the air.

Fuck.

*I lost their scent*, I mind linked.

Ravi’s wolf huffed. He jumped over to the opposite bank and sniffed the ground before shaking his head*. Can’t pick it up.*

I frowned. This was odd, and I didn’t like odd. Wolves didn’t usually walk in a river. It was as if they were trying to hide their scent. Were they hiding from me? Or were they hiding from LIPS?

My jaw clenched. How much longer did I have before Rhonda and her team resolved the damage Big Mac’s spell had caused to their vehicle? I hadn’t counted on having the wolf pack intentionally try to hide. I weighed the pros and cons, mulling things over for a few seconds before looking up at Ravi.

*We have to keep looking*, I said.

*But what happens if LIPS comes after us?* Ravi asked.

*We’ll have to do our best to avoid LIPS—and do* not *get fucking tranquilized like Big Fluffy*, I deadpanned.

LIPS were already excited over their run-in with “Big Fluffy,” and I didn’t want to give them anything else that offered credence to their theory about a new species. Also, I definitely didn’t want them to give *me* a nickname.

*Which way did the wolves go?* Ravi asked, looking around.

*Upstream would lead them closer to the pack house*, I replied. *The wolves probably don't want to come near us, given my last encounter with them, so let’s go downstream.*

I hoped I was making the right decision here. Ravi didn’t seem to mind splashing through the river, at least. He was a good sport in general, and highly effective—I was glad he stuck around after Joss’s loss. He helped me keep her memory alive in a way. I pushed the thought of her out of my head—I had no time to get fucking mushy—and focused at the task at hand.

Finding the wolves.

Convincing the wolves to help us out.

I had to take the pressure off the pack—they deserved that. And from a selfish perspective, that lack of pressure would allow me to explore a future with Cali without fear of exposure. If we had children—children who would probably be hybrid werewolves—I wanted them to grow up in a safe, welcoming environment. To have the home life I’d never had.

I wanted to grow old with Cali and be happy. I hoped that I deserved happiness after all I’d been through.

*Do you smell that?* Ravi asked, cutting off my thoughts. He suddenly stopped moving.

I nodded. *The wolves.*

We proceeded cautiously, and I followed the scent to one side of the bank. The trail led to a clearing, the scent of the natural wolves more intense with every passing moment. I moved to the front, leading as Ravi followed, gazing around…

And then we found them.

The wolves were massed together in the clearing, baring their teeth.

There were a whole fucking lot of them, and they were pissed.

*Uh, is this the same pack?* Ravi asked. I could hear the nervousness in his tone. I hadn’t realized there were so many.

I did a quick count. There had to be at least twenty wolves. Angry wolves. This did not look good, and I needed their cooperation. Turning around and leaving wasn’t an option, though—if anything, it would make me look weak, and that would make matters worse.

These wolves were angry because deep down, they had to be scared.

I needed their cooperation, and I had to tread lightly here.

*I got this*, I told Ravi, who nodded.

Stepping forward, I spotted the Alpha, who was still snarling. *I’m here as a friend.*

The words rattled through the pack, every single one of the wolves listening and going rigid. The wolf Alpha stared at me, bringing himself to the front to face me.

*Go away!* he snarled.

His anger was jarring. Shocking. What the fuck had I done to these wolves to deserve this?

*I’m just here because I need help protecting my pack*, I mind linked.

The Alpha wolf let out a growl. *Leave us alone!*

*I understand something has upset you*, I said*. What happened? Why are you acting like this? I’m an ally to your wolf pack. I have never caused you harm, no matter how long you’ve roamed near my territory. I have never, not once, disrespected your ranks.*

The Alpha stared at me, his yellow eyes gleaming. At least I didn’t get more growling this time. It gave me the courage to go on.

*I’d never cause you any trouble*, I continued*. I just need help leading some humans away from this forest so that I can protect my own pack from harm.*

*I am doing the same for my pack*, the Alpha spoke. *Humans have seen us. And now you are leading them back to our trail!*

I shook my head. *I promise you, the humans won’t harm your pack, but they will harm mine. You know you and I are different, and it’s that difference that makes us of interest to the humans. Do you understand?*

The Alpha glared, not a word coming out of his mouth.

*I need your assistance*, I pressed. *Please. I want you to lead the humans away from our pack house.*

The Alpha snarled. *No. Playing with humans or your kind has never done us any good—all they do is steal and pillage and destroy.*

I blinked. *But—*

*I am not going let my pack get slaughtered just so you and your humanwolves can survive and thrive*, the wolf hissed in my head. *I have my own family to take care of, my own young and elders, and you are nothing but a nuisance.*

*I will help you protect your elders and your young*, I said. *If you migrate up north, I can tell you which parts of the land would be most suitable for—*

*Leave, humanwolf*, the Alpha said. *You are human too, and humans cannot be trusted. We have no reason to leave. This is our land. Your problems aren’t ours.*

Then the wolf howled to the sky, the rest of his pack following suit. I flinched as he turned his back on me, not sparing me another look. He led his pack away, the last of the members looking over their shoulders threateningly, as if to make sure I knew I was not to follow them.

This was bad.

Ravi and I stood there, stunned, in the middle of the empty clearing. His wolf broke the silence, whining. *Maybe we should follow them? Try to explain how serious the situation is?*

I shook my head, jaw clenching. *I already did that. He didn’t seem all that touched, did he?*

*It sounds like he’s had bad experiences with humans in the past*. Ravi huffed. *Fucking humans.*

Humans had a way of messing everything up that way.

*This is pointless*, I told Ravi. *That Alpha isn’t going to change his mind.*

*What do we do?* Ravi asked.

*We should head back to the pack house for now*, I said. *LIPS will probably have made their repairs. They’ll start tracking us again. They’re nothing if not tenacious.*

*I’ll say*, Ravi grumbled. *Rhonda is like a weird excited stalker fan girl.*

That… was a very apt description, actually.

*Let’s go home*, I said. *We’ll do as the wolves did—follow the river back upstream for as long as we can.*

As we headed back and Ravi’s thoughts were closed off to me, I couldn’t help but feel that I’d let the pack down. The natural Alpha werewolf had facts on his side—he owed me no loyalty, and god knew their species had been endangered time and time again by humans, despite being vital to the ecosystem of a forest.

LIPS didn’t want to harm them, they wanted to help, but the Alpha couldn’t know that, and he couldn’t risk it. I respected his decision, even though it fucked everything up for me. LIPS was becoming much more of a problem than I was willing to admit out loud.

It wasn’t like it was an option for the Redwood pack to stop shifting, to stop existing as we did just because Rhonda wanted to get all freaky with her scientific discoveries. Being half wolf was in our blood—something we needed to indulge in order to keep our inner balance.

I’d promised Cali I wouldn’t hurt Rhonda…

But if I couldn’t convince the wolves to leave, how the hell would I keep our pack safe?

**Episode 2562**

XAVIER

His Royal Highness, the Prince of Bullshit, wanted to see me.

What an honor.

Grumbling as the attendant led me into yet another fancy-ass room, I made sure to keep my head held high. Lucian grinned when he saw me.

“Xavier!” He beckoned me closer. “I’m so glad you found something to amuse yourself with instead of leaving right away.”

Amuse myself with? The fuck was that supposed to mean? Had Aysel seen me go into Ava’s room? She probably had, but had she *really* needed to go directly to Lucian like a huge-ass gossip? Wow.

“I just wanted to thank you again for telling me about LIPS,” Lucian said, breezing by as he gestured for me to sit. I preferred to stand and stare down at him.

“You’re welcome,” I said stiffly.

“Based on your information, I have already made a decision about how to handle them, and I thought I would share my plan with the Redwood pack,” Lucian said in a cheerful tone that worried me.

“Right,” I gritted out. I was born for this diplomacy shit, wasn’t I?

“Indeed!” Lucian nodded vigorously. “After all, we are neighbors and share so many common interests.”

I had to suppress a growl. Lucian liked luxury and daily massages and rambling about fake gods. He also deluded himself into believing he was royalty. The only real interest I shared with Lucian was Cali.

“What do you have in mind?” I asked tightly.

“The Vanguard pack will deal with LIPS the same way we deal with any threat to werewolf secrecy,” Lucian told me in a casual tone.

That set me on edge. What did the princeling mean by “deal with”? From my experience, that was the same as *kill*. I’d just gone through this, dealing with Charon and Lakini.

“Elaborate,” I said.

“Well, every so often,” Lucian replied, “humans make the fatal error of discovering that we do exist. But so far, we’ve managed to remain a secret. The Vanguard pack has managed to exist undetected for centuries. How do you suppose that is?”

I stared at him. “Sheer luck?”

Lucian laughed as if I were hilarious, which I wasn’t. Humor definitely wasn’t one of my strong suits.

“Oh, Xavier,” Lucian said, shaking his head. “You must know that no werewolf could trust a human enough to bargain with them. They are pesky, treacherous little things that are so hard to kill in numbers. Like cockroaches, really. And what does one do with cockroaches, Xavier?”

I did not like where this was going.

“What are you saying?” I asked slowly.

“Just that it’s best to deal with humans quickly before the problem takes on a life of its own,” Lucian said with a shrug.

Shit. Cali was going to be *mad*…

“You’re planning to kill all of them? The entirety of the LIPS team?”

Lucian shrugged. Again. “It is the most likely outcome of several possibilities.”

“And you don’t think an actual massacre would invite only more humans to the area?” I asked.

Lucian snorted. “Oh, dear. Do you have a problem with my treatment of humans? I sense a bit of hesitation—perhaps it would be better to have this conversation with your Alpha?”

I bristled at the dig.

“I told you about the situation out of courtesy,” I said. “But the Redwood pack will take care of LIPS in our own way.”

Lucian chuckled. “Do you not realize that the longer you allow LIPS to roam freely, the greater the threat is to all werewolves? As the leader of my pack, I simply can’t wait around while a threat is given a chance to grow.”

So we were fucked. We *would* be fucked, at least, if something didn’t happen soon. Good luck to both Greyson and me, dealing with Cali if Lucian did what he was planning. I hoped to hell that Greyson had at least fucking managed to get the wolves to cooperate with his little migration scheme, because things were looking pretty bleak over here.

“You gotta chill, Lucian,” I told the princeling. “Just be sure to avoid our territory for the time being. Give the Redwoods a chance to clear things up as we see fit. It’s our land they trespassed on, after all. Not yours.”

Lucian paused, eyeing me with those bi-colored eyes that gave me the heebie-jeebies. When he spoke, his tone was a warning. “My patience will only go so far. If the Redwood pack makes a mess of things, I won’t be responsible for what happens when the Vanguard pack has to clean it up in our own way.”

I locked eyes with him, making sure to stand to my full height. “Is that a threat?”

Lucian stood up from his chair, walking up to me. He stared back, his eyebrows arching as he offered a smile that reminded me of a shark. “Must everything be seen as a threat with you? It’s merely a statement of fact,” he said. “The Vanguard pack has been around for centuries upon centuries, our accumulated wealth makes that obvious—”

Yeah, I was getting some definite “we’ve pillaged a bunch of foreign countries over the years” vibes over here.

“—and we know how to deal with humans. We just have more experience than the Redwood pack, and that is fact.”

“What’s *fact* is that you will back off and let us deal,” I said.

Lucian smiled again. “For now.” He dismissed me with a flick of his wrist—I wanted to grab it and break it. “Be sure to let us know how your little plan works out. And give my best to Caliana.”

The idea of my telling Cali that Lucian said “hi” or whatever made me want to gag. How dared he flirt with my mate so openly, so unabashedly? If the pack hadn’t been through so much shit recently—Silas, Letifer—and needed time to recuperate, I knew that Greyson would agree with me that this kind of disrespect was enough to start a war.

I turned around to leave, fighting the urge to beat the shit out of Lucian. Perhaps now wasn’t the best time, especially not with LIPS running around, but I couldn’t guarantee that it wasn’t going to happen at some point. The moon boy could mock the Redwood pack and kill humans all he wanted, but he wasn’t allowed to fuck with Cali.

As I walked outside, I expected to find the servant waiting to escort me out, but the hall was empty. All the better. I was retracing my steps toward the exit, attuned to any weird sounds and scents, when I noticed a light appearing through a crack in the wall.

I frowned.

It was a hidden door that someone had closed in a rush. This palace was just chock full of mysteries, wasn’t it? I was about to search for a way to open it—couldn’t exactly help my curiosity—when I heard footsteps approaching. I moved away.

The attendant turned around the corner, his eyes widening when he spotted me.

“Ah, Mr. Evers!” He walked over to me briskly. “I had to step away for a moment—can I show you out?” he asked. At the same time, he casually touched a wall switch, and the light behind the hidden door shut off. The attendant tried to play it off as normal, as something that I didn’t have to pay any attention too, but I’d registered the movement.

Of course I had.

“That’s not necessary,” I said, all casual. “I’ve visited the palace enough to know my way out.”

I turned my back on him and started walking toward the exit.

He rushed to follow me, sputtering, “Are you sure, sir? And can I offer you a beverage before you leave, that’s—”

A yell made the guy freeze.

“Oy!” a different, older attendant barked. “Master Lucian demands that his bath be prepared. What are you doing out here?”

“Just showing Mr. Evers out,” the younger attendant said. “I was just—”

“I’ll be fine,” I said, “just go.”

After the two of them hurried off, I pretended to admire one of Lucian’s gold-embossed paintings for a moment before making sure that I was all alone. Then I returned to the secret door, tracing the wall around the spot the younger attendant had pressed.

I found the switch, and the light reappeared.

*There we go.*

I searched the door, looking for the way to open it, cursing under my breath. I sure hoped nobody caught me groping the fucking wall, but it was what it was. Thankfully, soon enough, I felt the wall give way.

There was a soft click, and the wall retreated.

The door opened.

I frowned.

It was a small room, set up like…

Like someone was obsessed.

There was lots of moon stuff on the walls—images of Seluna, in full-blown Lucian fanboy fashion. It all looked extremely creepy, but the setup itself had to be the most disturbing thing of all. It drew my attention as I took a step inside, my head vibrating with the words, *What. The. Fuck?*

There was a picture mounted on a podium.

And it was—

It was *Cali*.

**Episode 2563**

I shuddered as the vampire tightened his cold grip on my hand. My first instinct was to fight, and it hit me full force.

“Let go of me!” I snapped, struggling to break free. I yanked myself and the phone away as Jacs let out a scream.

The video call ended.

“How sad,” Rafe sad, theatrically disappointed. “I didn’t even get to say goodbye.” He glanced from the phone to my face and smiled, making me shudder. “I’m sure I’ll get another chance, though.”

Artemis shoved him back, her face spelling out danger. I’d forgotten how fucking terrifying she could look.

*YES! That’s my sister!*

“You’d better watch yourself,” she growled.

“Hey,” Rafe said, holding his hands up. “I got no quarrel with you two.” His sly smirk made me want to gag. “Though I’ve heard that Fae blood is sweet as nectar. I’ve always wondered if that’s true. Maybe I’ll have a chance to find out.”

“You’d better keep your fangs away if you don’t want me blast you into fucking oblivion,” I declared.

*Oh my god… Did I really just say that? Am I becoming a badass, or is the adrenaline driving me nuts?*

Rafe laughed, regardless, and licked his lips in an obvious gesture. “Oh, don’t worry. I’ve already had my fill.”

“What do you even want?” I asked, furious. “Why are you so obsessed with Jacqueline?”

“You need to leave her alone,” Artemis said sharply. “Isn’t forty years enough?”

Rafe sighed dreamily and looked up the sky, as if he were talking about a long-lost lover. “Forty-four years, seventeen days, six hours…”

My heart was pounding. Artemis and I exchanged a look. I didn’t need mind linking to know that this guy was giving us both the creeps.

“Forty years is nothing,” he told Artemis. “Jackie is worth waiting a lifetime for.” He smirked, leaning closer into us. “The question is, whose life? Maybe yours?”

“Listen here, you—” I was about to march toward him when Artemis wrapped her hand around my elbow, holding me back.

“You have no idea who you’re dealing with,” she told him coldly. “We, on the other hand, know everything about you. We know who you are and why you’re hanging around, so you’d better watch your back.”

Rafe paused, looking between us. “A threat, huh? And I didn’t think Fae were all that mean.”

I glowered, still high on fury. Who the fuck did this stalker think he was? He didn’t know me.

Artemis kept holding me back and raised an eyebrow at him. “Do you *really* think Fae are harmless? Ever heard of Fae deals? Of Fae stealing souls and turning any living creature into their puppet?”

I actually choked at that, but Rafe just shrugged. He was playing it cool, all right. “I’d like to stay and chat with you pretty ladies, but I have more pressing business to attend to.” He looked between us, smirking as if this were a fucking fun meet-up. “I look forward to seeing you again.”

In the blink of an eye, he whooshed away.

And then he was gone.

“Oh my god,” I breathed, my hands shaking. I hated vampire super-speed with a passion.

Artemis squeezed my shoulder. “Are you okay?”

I swallowed, facing her. “I think… I think I was high on adrenaline just now. But also terrified.”

Artemis smiled a little. “You did good.”

She looked so calm that I wished I had at least half her composure. Then again, I hadn’t been through any of the horrible things she’d been forced into. Artemis had learned how to deal with danger from very early on.

The thought made my stomach throb.

“We should get back to the pack house,” Artemis said, looking around. “We have to let Jacs know what happened.”

I nodded sharply. The sooner we got back, the safer I’d feel. No matter the brave face I’d put on, Rafe had rattled me. Scared me. He was like an abusive creepy ex, only with supernatural strength. A horrible combination.

As we headed to the car, I accidentally stepped through the remains of the vanilla milkshake.

*Damn. I guess I’ll have to give Mom a raincheck.*

My hands were still shaking after we got in the car. I fumbled with the keys as I tried to start the engine.

Artemis placed her hand softly on my shoulder. “It’s okay, Cali. You know I’d never let that bloodsucker do anything to hurt you.” My sister leaned down and pulled a wooden stake from her boot, adding, “I will always have your back.”

I swallowed thickly, surprised. “You made such a big deal about not wanting to stake a vampire in public, and now… Why didn’t you use it when we had the chance?”

“If he’d attacked us, I would have skewered him like a pig on a spit,” Artemis said. “But he was just playing with us. I didn’t want to risk drawing attention. If a human saw us stake a vampire, there’d be a lot of questions. And if a vampire saw us, they’d probably attack us, and we didn’t need a whole coven breathing down our necks.”

Those were both great points. I felt my breathing even out.

“Can you drive right now? I know you’re upset,” Artemis told me softly.

I laughed a little. “I think letting you drive would upset me even more.”

Artemis huffed, pretending to be offended, while I started the engine and pulled out of the parking lot and into the empty road. We were silent for a moment, and I gradually felt my heart rate return to normal.

My voice was low when I spoke. “I really was ready to blast Rafe. I definitely would have if he’d tried to do anything to you.”

Artemis smiled. “I know that. Which was why I held you back. Blasting a vampire in public would also draw unwanted attention.” Affectionately, in a way that was so rare for her, Artemis ruffled my hair. “But thanks for looking out for me.”

I smiled. “Thank you too.”

My good mood faded when I noticed a car behind us, though. “Wait, what if Rafe is following us? We would be leading him right to Jacs!”

*Oh my god, did we just make things worse?*

Artemis shook her head as the car sped up in front of us. Not Rafe, thank god. “Rafe would just follow us by foot. Vampire speed is a huge advantage. I suspect he’ll figure out where Jacs is eventually, though. It’s not like we can avoid it at this point.”

I swallowed audibly. “That sounds bleak.”

Artemis shook her head. “He can’t do anything. Not while Jacs is inside the house. We don’t invite him in, we’re good.”

*Don’t invite him in, don’t invite him in, don’t—*

“Do you think Rafe could smell the werewolves on us?” I asked.

Artemis shrugged. “Not sure. But he definitely has no idea that Jacs would be hiding out at a werewolf pack house. Jacs is a vampire—hanging with werewolves is not something a vampire would expect another vampire to do.”

I nodded in relief. “That’s true.”

“And if he does decide to attack, it will be a terrible mistake,” Artemis said. “I know nobody from the pack will take it lightly.”

The image of the entire pack attacking Rafe made me feel much better.

*Wait, since when did I become so accustomed to violence? Has hanging out with Alphas changed me?*

I ignored my existential crisis and focused on my sister. “I just hope we can convince Jacs to stay inside. We don’t want her running off again and straight into danger.”

“Right,” Artemis said. “That’s *your* move.”

Her teasing tone made me scoff.

By the time we got close to the pack house, I had regained my confidence. I owed it all to my sister. Artemis had talked me down, and the more I thought about it, the more I was convinced that we could help Jacs resolve this.

*It’s going to be fine! Truly!*

As I turned toward the pack house, though, I noticed headlights appearing in the distance behind us. I choked, my heart thumping all over again.

“It’s him!” I sputtered, turning to Artemis. “Rafe followed us!”

Artemis frowned, looking back. “If it’s him, I’m ready.”

She removed the stake from her boot, still so calm it made me admire her even while I screamed inside my head.

*I’m going to blast him! I’m going to blast him into bits and pieces, so help me—*

I came to a screeching stop in the pack house yard, and we both jumped out of the car. Artemis was elegant about it. I was just pissed off and flailing, running on adrenaline again, definitely ready to get some blasting going.

“Yeah!” I called at the car. “We’re ready for you!”

Artemis raised an eyebrow. “Your intimidation techniques remind me of an angry little bird.”

I gasped in offense when the car pulled in, and it was—

*Xavier?*

“Okay then,” I said, exhaling sharply. “Maybe there won’t be any blasting.”

“What’s going on?” Artemis asked a grim-looking Xavier after he came out of the car. He’d turned to look at me and was about to open his mouth when Greyson and Ravi came out of the woods and shifted back to human.

*Oh, right. Everyone was out*, I thought, recalling that Greyson had gone to deal with LIPS, and Xavier had gone to the Vanguard palace to warn them about LIPS. I was so glad they were all back safe and sound. But it was kind of weird that they only waved at me and went straight to talk to each other.

I was about to walk over and ask what was happening when Lola burst out of the house.

“You guys! What the hell did you do?” she demanded. “Jacs is freaking out.”

“Rafe didn’t attack us or anything, but he…”

As Artemis started to explain what had happened to Lola, I moved closer to Xavier, Greyson, and Ravi, half listening. All I could make out was Xavier saying, “… take care of LIPS. They’ll all be dead, and the problem will be gone.”

**Episode 2564**

XAVIER

I was on the verge of telling Greyson more of what Lucian had said when I’d been at Vanguard palace when Cali strode over to us, Lola at her heels. Cali’s eyes were flashing, and she was clearly upset.

“*Hey!*” she said, drawing near. “You told me—*both of you* told me—that you wouldn’t kill Rhonda!”

I stared down at her. “What are you talking about?”

“What do you *think* I’m talking about?” Cali snapped.

I rolled my eyes. “I never said I was going to do anything to Rhonda—”

“Don’t lie to me!” Cali retorted.

“I’m not lying,” I shot back. “You’re jumping to conclusions. Whatever you think you heard, you didn’t.”

“I know what I heard,” Cali started, looking furious. “You—”

“Whoa, let’s just slow down,” Greyson said, putting up both his hands. He turned to Cali. “I think you must have misconstrued something. Xavier was just at the Vanguard palace, and he was relaying what Lucian said to him.”

Cali opened her mouth to fire back a response but stopped herself. “Oh,” she muttered, looking down. “I just thought…”

I knew exactly what Cali had thought, and frustration burned in my chest. “Didn’t I already tell you that I don’t just go around killing humans?”

With a few exceptions.

But it definitely wasn’t something I had done lately. Who did my mate think I was, anyway? I knew Cali was still upset with me for what I’d said before, about her getting into trouble at the carnival. But if her big complaint against me was that I didn’t listen to her, the same could be said of her where I was concerned.

“Why would you just assume I would kill this Rhonda person?” I demanded.

Cali lifted her chin defiantly. “You did kill Tony.”

Should’ve expected her to bring him up. “I explained that already. There’s a big difference,” I said through gritted teeth. “Where is this all coming from? Is all this suspicion because you’re still mad at me?”

Cali’s cheeks flushed. “I am still mad at you, but this has nothing to do with that.”

“Okay, okay,” Greyson said, clearly trying to lower the temperature of the conversation. “So it was just a misunderstanding. Xavier and I are not conspiring to kill Rhonda—”

“If you’d just stopped freaking out for a half a second and listened, you would have heard that I was warning Greyson that Lucian was threatening Rhonda,” I said. “And if we don’t do something about it soon, the Vanguard pack might kill Rhonda and the rest of the LIPS team.”

Cali’s eyes went wide. “You can’t let them do that!”

I bit back a sharp response. “That’s what we were discussing,” I growled. “But, really, would it be so bad to just let them go at it? It would solve a lot of our problems—”

As soon as I heard those last words come out of my mouth, I stopped myself, wishing I could take them back.

Cali’s eyes darkened. “I *knew* it! I knew you wanted Rhonda dead.” Then she turned on her heel and walked away.

Lola shot me a glare and went after her.

I watched them retreat, wondering if I should follow. I didn’t even know why I’d said what I said. I was irritated and frustrated, and it had just come out, but it had clearly upset Cali—along with everything else.

“Nicely done,” Greyson said.

“Fuck off,” I snapped. The last thing I needed was Greyson rubbing it in.

I turned to go after Cali, but Greyson put a hand on my arm.

“I know it’s not in your nature to take my suggestions, but you should give her some time to cool off before you go talk to her—”

“You’re right about one thing,” I said, wrenching my arm away, “I’m not looking for suggestions.”

Greyson rolled his eyes. “We still have to talk about LIPS. Now that we don’t have the wild wolves, we’re going to need a new approach.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What the fuck does this have to do with me?”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“This is your problem, Alpha.”

Greyson took a deep breath. “I can see that you’re pissed, Xavier, but can’t you just put that aside long enough to deal with this situation? We need to come up with a plan for LIPS—”

“I don’t give a fuck about LIPS,” I snapped. “If Lucian wants to wipe out the whole lot of them, who am I to stop him? We’ve got a bigger problem.”

“What?” Greyson asked.

“Whatever Lucian has in mind for Cali,” I said, anger rolling through me.

“The moon stuff?” Greyson asked, perplexed.

I hesitated. I hadn’t really wanted to involve Greyson in this, but—since it involved Cali—I didn’t want to take any chances. Especially not when it came to that moon boy freak.

“What happened when you went to see the Vanguards?” Greyson asked.

I had a sudden flash of being with Ava, and how close I’d come to losing control of my wolf. But I gave my head a little shake. *That* was something that Greyson never needed to know.

Instead, I pulled out my phone and pulled up the photo I’d taken.

“It’s this weird setup he’s got,” I said, enlarging the photo. “And he’s obsessed with Cali.”

Greyson stared at it for a moment, clearly horrified. Then he looked up at me. “Do you have any idea what it’s for?”

I shrugged as I slipped my phone back into my pocket. “Just off the cuff, I’d say the princeling’s a serial killer and Cali’s his next victim.”

Greyson glowered at me. “That’s not fucking funny, Xavier.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “I assume it’s got something to do with the Seluna moon stuff, but regardless, I don’t like it.”

“I don’t like it much myself,” Greyson muttered. He thought for a long moment. “Maybe we should go have a talk with Lucian about all this.”

“It is starting to seem like Lucian’s interest in Cali might be more complicated than we thought,” I admitted. “Maybe we should go back and find out what he’s got in mind.”

Greyson nodded. “And no matter what Lucian has planned for Cali, we’re both going to need to keep a careful watch. Agreed? No matter what, we both need to put whatever grievances we have with each other aside and work to keep Cali safe.”

“You should know by now you never have to question my motives when it comes to Cali. I don’t need a lecture,” I said sharply. “Anyway, what are we going to do about LIPS?”

Greyson shook his head.

I wondered if it would make sense to let the Vanguards deal with them. I knew how Cali felt, but it wasn’t like she could blame Greyson or me for it if another pack killed the researchers. Besides, it was her idea to warn the Vanguards in the first place. Though, Greyson had agreed to it ultimately.

But even as I thought about it, I knew Greyson wasn’t really a workable loophole. I could practically feel Cali calling me out for it—telling me that I was responsible for Rhonda’s death. I didn’t want that, even if it would be an easy solution to our problems.

And I had to admit, she would be right. If I just sat back and let Lucian kill Rhonda, I *would* be responsible. It would be as though I’d killed her myself.

“I’m going to call a pack meeting,” Greyson said. “Let’s gather everyone.”

I followed him toward the living room, but I didn’t want to call a meeting. I wanted to talk to Cali. I felt uneasy. I hated that we were arguing. I wanted to find her and fix things.

And as I sat on a wing chair by the fire and watched as the pack slowly gathered in the living room, I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of guilt. I’d come so close to giving in to Ava. I’d almost done it. Should I tell Cali about it?

Maybe I should, but not yet. Not now, while we were fighting. I’d tell her later, when things were better between us.

But—*fuck*—even thinking about Ava caused my blood to race and my wolf to stir. I tried to get more comfortable in my chair, but I knew it was useless. Very suddenly, all I wanted to do was shift and sprint back to the Vanguard palace.

What the hell was *wrong* with me?

This was my pack! This was my house! I belonged *here*.

“Thanks for gathering, everyone,” Greyson was saying, and I looked up, trying to pay attention.

“We’ve got a lot going on right now—which is kind of the usual around here. I’m sure you all have some questions, and I want to answer them so we all feel like we’re on the same page. But before I do, as of right now, we’re all on lockdown—”

The pack stirred and muttered, reacting to this news.

“—and nobody is allowed to shift until further notice,” Greyson went on.

I felt my hackles rise at my brother’s words. What the hell? Something weird was happening to me. I looked down at my hands in my lap and saw—to my total shock—that my right hand was shifting without permission.

**Episode 2565**

I paced the room, growing more agitated with every lap. Were they going to be upset with me for skipping out on the pack meeting? I wasn’t sure, but I hadn’t wanted to go. I didn’t feel ready to see their faces yet.

“Knock, knock.” It was Lola. “Meeting’s done. It was boring mostly, but there’s a no shifting rule.”

“Because of LIPS?” I asked.

“Yup,” she said. “No one’s happy.”

I didn’t blame them.

“Did they say anything else? About Rhonda?”

Lola shook her head.

Then it all just kind of spilled out of me.

“I just don’t see how he can be so casual about this kind of thing!” I vented. “I mean, I can’t believe he’d talk about hurting a human when I begged him not to. How can he talk about killing a person so callously? This is exactly like the fight we had about Lakini, when Charon wanted us to kill her!” I picked up a pillow from my bed and hurled it across the room in frustration.

Lola caught the pillow before it hit the mirror over my dresser. “Cali, listen, I don’t want to discredit what you’re feeling right now, but… Didn’t it turn out that Xavier had a plan for Lakini that didn’t involve killing anyone?”

With a gusty sigh, I flopped down onto the bed. “That’s not the point!”

“And what *is* the point?” Lola asked, bunching the pillow beneath her and stretching out at the foot of my bed.

“The point is that Xavier talks about killing like it’s not a big deal at all!” I exclaimed.

Lola nodded slowly. “That’s true. And he needs to realize that not everyone was raised as a werewolf or a Rogue.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, peering at her.

She shrugged. “I just think I’m a little more used to that side of the werewolf-slash-supernatural life. And you, being from the human world, are a lot more sensitive about human lives.”

I frowned at this, but because what Lola had said *felt* true, and I didn’t know how I felt about it. It made me feel like I wasn’t truly a part of the supernatural world. Which was crazy! I *was* a part of this world. I had two werewolf mates, for crying out loud! And my mother was Fae, and my father was a werewolf now. My sister was Fae! And so was *I*!

But… I hadn’t grown up in this world, just like Lola said. Did that mean that I was going to feel like this forever? Like an outsider?

I put my hand over my eyes, feeling like I was going to cry. “Is it so bad that I care about human life?”

Lola sat up and put her arms around me. “No, of course not, Cali. That’s not what I meant. There’s nothing wrong with being compassionate.”

I took a deep, shuddering breath and nodded. “How’s Jacs doing?”

Lola sat up with a sigh of her own. “Well, she’s barricaded herself in her room again.”

“Ugh, poor Jacs. I feel so bad for her,” I said, thinking of what Artemis had said. “Rafe would be a fool to try to attack a werewolf pack house. He knows it, too. I’ll talk to Jacs,” I said, getting to my feet. “Explain it to her.”

Lola gave me a wary look. “You look exhausted, Cali. Maybe you should rest. I can go talk to her.”

Like Lola had just reminded my body of how tired it was, I felt myself swaying on my feet. “Yeah, I am pretty tired. If you could tell Jacqueline, that’d be great. Thanks, Lola.”

Lola gave my hand a squeeze and walked out, pulling the door shut behind her.

I dropped back into bed and stared up at the ceiling. I needed to go talk to my mates—especially Xavier. I didn’t want to fight with him, but I was still angry, and that was never a good way to start a conversation. I needed to calm down first.

I was exhausted. Physically and emotionally drained.

*Maybe Lola’s right*, I thought as a huge yawn overtook me. *Maybe I just need to get some rest.*

But frustration was still coursing through me, and I didn’t think I could fall asleep angry. Maybe I could just shut my eyes and try to meditate. That might work.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t very good at meditation. I could never keep my thoughts from swirling around and my mind from going to dark places. But as I closed my eyes, I realized how incredibly tired I was. Maybe I could just take a short nap.

The edges of my consciousness blurred. I was on my feet again, back in Minnesota, on campus. I was back in college, and it was the night of the party. I was outside with Tony. It was just like that night, all those months ago. The damp night air, the muted music from inside… When I looked over at Tony, he looked completely normal. He smiled at me. I tried to smile back, but I couldn’t get my face to move properly.

The smile slid off Tony’s face, and, before my eyes, he transformed. His eyes deepened, sinking into the sockets, his face grew thin and skeletal, and blood bloomed all over his clothes. When he looked at me, the smile stretched his face like a grimace.

“You could have stopped this, Cali,” he said, his voice rumbling inside my head. “You could have stopped him from killing me.”

He was coming toward me, closer and closer. I stepped backward, but soon enough my back hit a wall and I couldn’t retreat any further.

“I didn’t mean for anything to happen to you,” I gasped. Though—in fairness—Tony had tried to attack me.

“But what about them?” Tony asked.

“Who?” I breathed.

Tony gestured behind him, and there, over his shoulder, I could see the bodies of Rhonda, Alex, and a handful of other humans all lying still, their limbs tangled together.

“Them,” Tony says. “Nothing is stopping them if a human gets in their way.” His vacant eyes narrowed. “And you’re just like them!”

“*No!*” I shouted, sitting up straight in my bed. “Don’t kill anyone!”

Breathing hard, I looked around, confused. I must have fallen asleep and been dreaming. I was alone, but there was a blanket spread over me. I had no idea how it had gotten there. My heart was beating hard, and I felt spooked and shaken and very, very awake.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm down. I knew Xavier and Greyson. I knew their hearts. But… did the Tony in my dream have a point? How many human lives had been lost because of supernaturals?

The thought made my mind spin, and I lay back down and pulled the blanket up to my chin.

But I couldn’t get comfortable. The room was dark, so I knew it was late. I wondered if anyone was up.

I got to my feet and padded into the hallway. The hallway was dark, so I could see the light streaming out from behind Greyson’s shut door.

I knocked, but when he didn’t answer, I pushed the door open. The bedroom was empty, but the bathroom door was shut, and I heard the shower turn off.

“Greyson?” I called.

A moment later, he opened the door with a towel wrapped around his waist and a worried expression on his face.

“Cali? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, fine,” I said vaguely, shutting the door behind me. “I wanted to ask you what exactly happened with LIPS earlier.”

Greyson looked surprised by the question. “They’re fine. Everyone’s fine.”

“So, you and Xavier didn’t hurt anyone? Or… kill them?” I pressed.

Greyson’s expression softened, and he stepped toward me. He took my hand and pulled me down to sit next to him on the bed. “The plan was created to keep everyone safe. I promised you that, and I meant it. I hoped to find a way to get the wolves out of the area and draw LIPS away from the Redwood pack.” He sighed and ran a hand through his wet hair, which showered droplets of water onto his shoulders. “Even if that didn’t work out, I’m not going to give up. That’s still my plan right now—with *no killing*.”

I was relieved to hear the emphasis on the last words.

“I knew you’d try to find a solution that wouldn’t hurt anyone, Greyson,” I said quietly. “It’s just so stressful to think about. You can’t kill innocent humans. You just can’t. Because if you do, you’ll become the monsters you’re afraid they’ll think you are.”

Greyson looked at me closely. “Are you okay, Cali? This seems… intense. Like, bigger than a normal fear.”

I looked down at my hands in my lap. “I had a bad dream,” I admitted. “It really scared me. But I’m okay now,” I said, looking up at him. “Now that you’re back.”

He smiled. “I’ll always be here for you, love. And if you have another bad dream, you can always come find me.”

He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to my forehead. His lips stung like fire against my skin. I felt him take a deep breath in, then he leaned close and kissed my cheek.

When I looked up at him, his eyes were blazing, but he wasn’t moving, so I took charge and grabbed his shoulders, pulling him close as our lips met with a kiss.

**Episode 2566**

GREYSON

Still kissing me, Cali pushed me gently down onto the bed. It was a reversal of our usual dynamic, but I could sense that she needed to feel like she had control. And I wanted to give her that feeling. There was something strange to her kisses—they felt almost desperate.

I loved the course she was setting, but I needed to be sure, so I pulled back a little, looking into her eyes. “Are you okay, love?”

She didn’t answer me, just pulled me close again and pressed her lips to mine.

This time I didn’t stop her. This was what she needed, and I wanted to make her feel better. I ran my hands up the inside of her T-shirt, feeling her satin-soft skin, and she melted into me. There was no part of her that resisted my touch, or the pressure of my lips.

I was getting lost in her, and all the worries I’d had about LIPS and Lucian and what the hell he was up to fell away. I just wanted to be here, with Cali, in this moment. I hadn’t realized it before, but now I knew that I needed her as much as she needed me.

I flipped her over and covered her body with mine, pressing her into the mattress, and dragged my kisses down her neck.

“*Greyson*,” she breathed, dropping her head back onto the pillow.

The sound of my name on her tongue did something to me, and I pulled my towel away, throwing it to the ground. I wanted to feel her skin against mine.

Cali must have felt the same way, because she pulled off her T-shirt and her bra. The sight of her perfect breasts made me moan with pleasure, and I dropped my head, kissing them.

Beneath me, she wriggled out of her shorts and panties and pressed herself against me. I could feel the seam of her sex against my cock. She moaned and rocked against me and, unable to stop myself, I eased into her.

“*Greyson!*” she gasped, and wrapped her legs around my waist, driving me deeper into her. She tilted her pelvis, inviting me further still, and I felt like I was going to catch on fire. Everything about her felt perfect and right, and I never wanted to stop touching her.

“Cali,” I breathed as I thrust into her. “Love. *Fuck*.”

Again and again and again. The feeling of her tightness around my length made my vision blur.

I was starting to shake. Every atom in my body felt alive and pulsing. Cali was shivering now, digging her fingernails into my back as she came.

She seized around me, and the feeling of it sent me over the edge. I pulsed into her, gasping for breath, her name on my lips.

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Afterward, as we lay together, sweaty and happy, I pulled her close. I leaned into her, drinking in the smell of her, the stress of the day magically gone from my shoulders. I knew I was going to have to deal with LIPS, and the Vanguards—even great sex couldn’t make that go away—but for just a moment, I let myself believe that it didn’t matter.

Cali turned over so she was facing me. “There’s something you should know about Jacs,” she said, her face grave.

“If it’s about her being a vampire, cat’s already out of that bag.” I chuckled.

Cali swatted my arm playfully. “I’m being serious here,” she said with mock severity.

“Okay,” I said. “What is it?”

Cali took a deep breath. “Jacs has a stalker.”

“Seriously?” I asked, surprised.

Cali nodded. “I know. It’s this guy Rafe. He’s been after her for years. Decades. I met him, and he’s intense. And not giving her up anytime soon.”

As she spoke, my thoughts drifted. So much for my moment of peace. Sometimes it felt like there was no escape from the constant barrage of threats that seemed to rain down on the pack.

“I hope you didn’t put yourself in any danger,” I said grimly.

Cali shrugged. “We didn’t really expect Rafe to be there. Besides, I think we can handle him if he does decide to come after Jacs. But,” she added quickly, looking up at me, “I wanted to let you know, since you’re the Alpha and all.”

I sighed, feeling worried and frustrated. “Why didn’t you tell me this before you risked going to meet him?”

“I thought about it,” Cali said, her fingertips trailing across my chest, “but I was still upset because of Xavier. Besides, Artemis was with me the whole time. We were completely in control.”

I pulled her close and dropped a kiss onto the top of her head. “Love, I don’t ever want you to feel like you can’t confide in me.”

“But I could handle it—”

“I’m not going to think of you as a damsel in distress if you ask for help,” I assured her, “but I’m always going to try to keep you safe. It’s okay to ask for backup, even if you *can* handle something. I want you to know that. I know you have your Fae magic, and Artemis is… well, she’s Artemis. But please, Cali,” I said looking into her eyes, “please don’t risk yourself just to try to prove something that you don’t even need to prove.”

Cali nodded, but her eyelids looked heavy and half-closed. She was falling asleep, and I wasn’t even sure she’d caught the last part of what I’d said.

I smiled. “I’m going to go get something to drink,” I said quietly.

Slipping out of bed, I pulled on a pair of sweats and a T-shirt. I hated the idea that Cali had confronted this bloodsucking stalker, but I knew I couldn’t let my love for her cloud my judgement of her abilities. She was a lot stronger than people gave her credit for.

I leaned over and kissed her softly, then slipped out of the room, pulling the door shut behind me.

Downstairs, I headed toward the kitchen, but I slowed down when I heard the low rumble of voices.

“—and how the hell does he expect us to get any exercise if we can’t shift?” said a brittle voice.

“What does Greyson expect me to do, go for a *walk*?” another chimed in.

“Fucking bullshit,” said a third, bitterly.

“Hey, Greyson?”

I spun around to see Rishika standing behind me. “Hey, what’s up? I didn’t hear you come up.”

Rishika raised an eyebrow. “Clearly.” She gestured over her shoulder toward the front door. “Let’s talk outside for a second.”

I followed her out the door and into the cold night. The sky was clear and studded with stars.

“So,” Rishika said, turning to me, “I assume you’ve heard how the pack feels about this no-shifting policy you’ve introduced.”

“I’m starting to hear some rumors,” I said sourly.

Rishika nodded. “I know you’re the Alpha, and I don’t think anyone’s questioning your decision—”  
 “It’s fine,” I said, holding up a hand to stop her. I sighed. “I understand why they’re upset. Being a werewolf who isn’t allowed to shift is like being imprisoned in your own body. It’s not natural. I know that. But for the moment, with so much at stake, I can’t see any way around it.”

Rishika thought about this for a moment. “What would happen if we were on patrol and something came up? Would we be able to shift then?”

I was thinking about LIPS—and I knew Rishika was too—and now this creepy stalker vampire. I didn’t want Cali to have to deal with any of that if she didn’t have to. I’d heard her assertions that she could handle herself, but I’d meant what I’d said—I would *always* protect her.

But to Rishika’s point.

“We’re talking extreme circumstances here?” I asked, scrubbing my hand along my jaw. “I suppose if there was no other choice, and shifting was the only option. I don’t want to put individual pack members in danger. But I want to make it clear that it’s still not an option unless there is no other way. Unless a pack member is in imminent danger, under no other conditions should anyone shift.”

The reality of this directive flashed across Rishika’s face. She recovered a moment later—taking it in stride—but I knew it wasn’t an easy thing to consider for any werewolf.

“I hope you know I’m not taking this lightly. It’s going to be just as hard for me as it is for everyone else,” I said quickly.

Rishika nodded. “You realize you’re setting yourself up for one hell of a cranky pack, right?”

“I know,” I said with a sigh. “But I’m sure each Redwood will do what’s best for the pack.”

Though, as I said this, I caught sight of some movement from the corner of my eyes.

Xavier was coming around the side of the house. He was tearing at his clothes, and before either Rishika or I could say anything, he’d shifted into his wolf form and was sprinting into the woods.

**Episode 2567**

XAVIER

I couldn’t seem to get my clothes off fast enough as I ran through the cold December air, but when I finally shifted, it felt amazing. Like the most cathartic release, and I was a wolf. *Finally*.

Ever since Greyson had ordered the lockdown, I’d felt so restless, it was like I was going to crawl out of my skin. I knew I needed to talk to Cali, but I felt too wound up—too agitated. I’d had all this crazy electrical energy coursing through me, and I hadn’t known what the hell to do with any of it. But now it was clear. I had shifted and was sprinting for the trees, sucking in deep lungfuls of crisp, cold air.

In the distance, I could hear Greyson calling my name, but I didn’t stop, and I didn’t look back.

*Xavier! Stop!* The sound of Greyson’s voice came through the mind link, but I ignored that, too.

I knew what he was going to say—that I shouldn’t be doing this. I knew that already. But it wasn’t my fault. Not really.

It was my wolf.

My wolf was moving through me, and for the moment I felt almost like a passenger in a car—just along for the ride.

But… why? Why had my wolf exerted himself so strongly? And why now? Even when Ava was doing her absolute best—being as tempting as she possibly could—and as close as we’d gotten, I’d still been able to rein my wolf in.

Had it been too close a call with her today at the Vanguard palace? Had something shifted, allowing my wolf to gain the upper hand?

Before I could think too hard about that, I hit the tree line and was in the woods, running deeper and deeper, as my mind cleared. *Just run*. I was too far away from Greyson for him to try to mind link. It was too late anyway—I’d already shifted. The cat was out of the bag, so to speak. Or the wolf.

I should turn back. I knew I should. And I almost did, but then I caught Ava’s scent. It was an old trace, just a hint of what it might have been, had she passed by more recently, but it was enough. Enough to make my wolf run harder. He was urging me forward.

*Follow it.*

I tried to slow, tried to turn back, but my wolf was pushing me, refusing to be pushed off-track.

*We need to get to her. Get to our mate.*

*Our mate is back at the house*, I reminded myself, fighting back.

But my wolf didn’t listen. My wolf didn’t want Cali—he wanted Ava.

Fuck.

I wished now that I’d seen Cali before I’d left. I was sick of this damn fight—sick of the old mate bond with Ava overpowering me. If I’d been able to fight my wolf one-on-one, I would’ve kicked its ass.

My wolf was leading me deeper into the woods, toward the Vanguard palace—and toward the area where the LIPS team had been conducting their research.

I struggled to slow my wolf down when I heard something approaching me from behind. I’d started to turn my head when Greyson’s wolf barreled into me.

I didn’t resist the attack, but my wolf had other ideas.

*We need to keep going. Ava is waiting for us.*

*What the fuck is wrong with you?* Greyson asked me, outraged.

He leapt to his feet and, using his paws, held me down on the cold forest floor.

*Stop fighting!* he hissed.

But that was easier said than done. My wolf was raging.

*He’s wasting our time!*

*Why did you shift, Xavier?* Greyson demanded.

I was barely able to answer, trying as hard as I could to keep my wolf from ripping into Greyson. *I didn’t want to shift.*

Greyson’s eyes looked skeptical. *I find that hard to believe. I saw you shift with my own damn eyes.*

*I couldn’t help it!* I exploded.

Greyson tipped his head. *What do you mean?*

After a long moment, I was able to finally suppress my wolf enough that I stopped struggling, but I had no idea how long I’d be able to contain him. And I wasn’t sure about opening up to Greyson about what was happening, but I was kind of at a loss. I had no idea what to do.

And I’d come so close to falling into Ava’s grasp again—she already had a hold on me that my wolf was exploiting.

*I’m having trouble controlling my wolf*, I admitted.

Greyson took a cautious step back. *Since when?*

*Let’s just say a while*, I said reluctantly.

Inside, my wolf stirred again.

*Stop wasting time. You wanted to beat Greyson so you could be the Alpha—don’t give in to him now*.

And with that, my wolf snarled again and lunged, trying to bite Greyson.

*Stop, man!* Greyson said, taking another step back. *You’d better put a leash on your wolf.*

*That’s what I’m trying to tell you!* I snapped. *I’m not responsible for what my wolf is doing right now. You’re going to have to pin me, man.*

*What?* Greyson asked.

*You’re the fucking Alpha*, I said, growing furious. *Act like one. If you don’t, this is going to turn into a death match.*

Greyson took this in, then leapt on me just as my wolf tried to scramble to my feet. Greyson did his best to get me back down on the ground, but my wolf was putting up one hell of a fight. He was determined to get back to Ava.

Greyson gave me a shattering kick with his back legs, which sent me slamming into a tree. Pine needles shook loose and rained down, but I managed to get my breath back and went after him again, growling and snapping.

*Get it together!* he snarled.

But before I could respond, we both heard it. Somewhere above us we heard a steady, buzzing sound.

It was a drone. We both knew it, too, because I felt Greyson tense.

*You’d better get your wolf under control, or you’re going to risk exposing us all*, he snapped. Then he leapt off me and started into the trees. *Follow me.*

I got to my feet and followed. I could feel my wolf trying to regain control, but I pushed back with a new level of force.

*If I get caught*, I reminded the animal, *so do you*.

Greyson and I sought cover in a thick copse of trees. We hunkered down, trying to stay still, though we were both still breathing hard. Our sides heaved, and I could feel blood in my mouth. I wasn’t sure if it was my blood of Greyson’s. Maybe it was both.

The sound of the LIPS drone got louder and louder. Those things were earsplitting close up. I didn’t know how I’d missed it before now.

It sounded like it was passing right over us, and I held my breath, but it continued on. Finally the sound started to fade.

When it was nothing more than a distant hum, Greyson turned to look at me.

*Are you in control now?*

Was I? I took stock for a moment, then nodded. *Yeah. Enough, at least.*

*Then let’s get back to the pack house*, Greyson said shortly. *We can talk about this there.*

He sounded pissed, and for once I couldn’t blame him. By shifting and running off the way I had, I’d put the whole pack in danger—not to mention Cali. It hadn’t been intentional, of course, but I hated it just the same.

Greyson’s eyes were on the sky. *There could be more drones in the area, or that one we saw could come back. Either way, we should shift. It’s better if they see us wandering around naked.* *Thinking we’re nudists or weirdos is still probably better than them seeing wolves and getting all riled up again. We should get back to the pack house in human form.*

I didn’t disagree, so Greyson shifted back.

He looked over at me, still in my wolf form. “What are you waiting for?” he asked out loud.

I didn’t know.

Greyson looked up again, and I knew what had drawn his eyes. The sound of the drone was growing louder again.

“Shit,” he hissed, “it’s coming back. Shift!” he yelled, looking down at me.

My heart was beating hard, and I tried shifting, but it didn’t work. My heart was racing so hard I could feel it pounding in my chest. All my muscles locked up as I tensed, trying so damn hard to get any part of my body to begin shifting. Nothing.

“Shift!” Greyson looked panicked. “Dammit, Xavier!”

I tried again, but I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t shift. What the hell was going on?

“Shift now, man!” Greyson said, furious and terrified.

The sound of the drone was getting louder and louder. It was almost on us.

I tried one more time, but nothing within me stirred in transformation.

*I can’t do it.*

“*What?*” Greyson demanded.

*Greyson, I can’t shift!*

**Episode 2568**

XAVIER

I tried again to shift, but my wolf remained. The drone was getting closer every second.

Greyson looked up for just a moment, then back down at me. “We don’t have time for this. LIPS got their drones working again. We can’t be seen. C’mon, follow me.”

I wasn’t sure what the right move was, but I followed Greyson. I had no choice. If I stayed where I was, the drone was going to record me, and LIPS would have the evidence. I couldn’t let that happen.

Greyson led the way carefully through the trees back toward the pack house. My wolf wanted to run, but I fought it down and kept to a slow pace. Together we found where the trees were thickest, and where we were less likely to be observed by a drone flying overhead.

And then, off in the distance, I heard the sound of a woman’s voice.

Greyson and I looked at each other for a moment. It was Rhonda. We both knew it.

Was she following me?

Desperate now, I tried to shift again. I focused, concentrating as hard as I could, but my wolf remained in control.

I remembered when my wolf had left me—how incomprehensively lost I’d felt without him with me. It was weird that I was thinking of that now, because this was the complete inverse of that situation. I didn’t feel lost now, I felt trapped. Trapped by my wolf. I saw now how reckless it had been for me to shift like that. I should have tried harder to contain him—to control him. But I hadn’t even thought of it. It was like I hadn’t been able to think at all. The drive to shift—and to find Ava—had just been too much. It had been overpowering.

Hadn’t it?

Self-doubt rolled through me like a wave. It *had* been overpowering, hadn’t it? Or could I have done more? When—or *if*—I was able to shift back to my human form, what would happen then? Could this happen again?

“Come on, Xavier,” Greyson said, his voice low. “Keep moving. You’re going too slow.”

I tried to focus on what we were doing, but it was hard. My thoughts were all over the place.

“We’re almost at the house,” Greyson said quietly. He glanced into the sky. “I want to make sure the drone didn’t follow us back. I don’t want it around while you make a run across the yard to the house.”

*I don’t want to expose the pack*, I said quickly, as guilt began to creep through me. *Maybe I should just stay in the woods.*

Greyson shook his head. “No way. LIPS would find you a lot easier out here than inside the house.”

I gritted my teeth. *Then you’re going to have to lock me up so I can’t get out.*

Greyson looked at me for a moment, then back up at the house. “Don’t worry about that. Not yet. We’ll figure something out.”

When we finally reached the yard, Greyson put up a hand, signaling for me to stop.

“Hang on,” he said softly.

He stepped out of the trees and into the land around the house. The ground was muddy and frozen in spots, and everything seemed quiet. He looked around, scanning the whole area, then looked up into the sky.

“Okay,” he muttered. “Let’s go.”

I leapt out of the woods and sprinted toward the house. I dashed up the porch steps and found Rishika standing at the top.

She looked at me, baffled, then up at Greyson. “What’s going on? Is he okay?”

“He can’t shift back,” Greyson said when he’d reached the top of the steps. “We have to get him inside.”

He held the door open. “Inside.”

I felt my blood pound. I *hated* this. I hated being ordered around by Greyson, and I hated appearing weak in front of the pack.

“Hang on,” Greyson said as he shut the door behind us. “Wait here, I’m going to go find Big Mac. We need to figure out what’s going on.” He looked up at Rishika. “Don’t let him out.”

She nodded. “I won’t.”

Greyson grabbed the skin on the back of my neck and yanked me toward him. “And don’t you fucking try, either. You got me?”

Seeing the sudden anger flashing in Greyson’s eyes, my wolf growled a warning.

“I don’t particularly care if you got a problem with that,” Greyson said. His face looked flushed.

This time it was *me* who wanted to pounce on my brother as he pulled his Alpha act, but I managed to keep my temper under control as Greyson let go of me and headed upstairs.

Anger was coursing through me, and my wolf was snarling inside me, but I knew I had to fight hard. I couldn’t let my wolf win this round. It felt like I was being pulled in two, but I had enough sense to understand what was happening: my wolf was acting on impulse, fueled by the remains of the mate bond I shared with Ava.

*But Cali is my mate*, I reminded my wolf. *Cali needs us, and if you keep this shit up, you’re going to endanger her.*

Losing my wolf had been a nightmare, but as bad as that was, I would rather lose my wolf all over again than risk doing anything that would harm Cali.

My wolf had other thoughts and made a break for the door.

Rishika stepped in front of me, blocking my path and grabbing me by the scruff of the neck. “You might be the Alpha’s brother, but if you do anything to risk the safety of this pack, that’s not going to matter,” she said in a low, dangerous voice.

My wolf bristled at this. I knew she was right, but it was hard to hear from Rishika, who I knew had always favored Greyson.

*Ava’s always favored you*, my wolf reminded me. *She told you—you will always be her Alpha.*

The image of Ava—submissive on the floor at my feet—flooded my mind. And just as my wolf started panting at the thought, Cali walked down the stairs.

She froze when she saw me, her eyes darting up to Rishika, who was still holding me back.

“What’s going on? What’s wrong?” she demanded, her eyes wide and scared.

My wolf growled as she drew near, and Cali stopped, shocked, and stepped back.

My heart broke as I watched fear dawn on her face. I wanted to shift and put my arms around her, hold her, reassure her that she was safe.

*I’m sorry*, I said, my whole soul aching. *You know I would never hurt you.* “What’s wrong?” she asked again.

I was about to mind link her when Greyson returned, followed by Big Mac. And behind the witch came Ravi, Lola, and Jay.

“What’s all this about you being stuck?” Big Mac asked in her usual irritated tone.

“Stuck?” Cali repeated, her eyes widening. She whirled around to look at Greyson. “What happened to Xavier?”

“He can’t shift back,” Greyson explained.

Ravi frowned. “Is it because of the tranquilizer?”

“*What?*” Cali gasped. “What tranquilizer?”

“I doubt it,” Rishika said. “I didn’t have any problems shifting after I was darted.”

“Why did no one bother telling me that Xavier had been shot with a tranquilizer?” Cali demanded, looking around.

“We were a little busy when we ran into you at the carnival,” Greyson said.

*I’m going to be okay*, I told Cali, trying to reassure her.

“What can you do?” Greyson was asking Big Mac.

Big Mac shook her head. “Nothing.”

“*Nothing?*” Cali said. “But you always have an answer. Remember Lola’s shifting problem?”

Big Mac gave her a withering glance. “This isn’t magical. This is between Xavier and his wolf. This isn’t like it was with Lola. Her issue wasn’t her wolf being unwilling.”

That didn’t sound good, as my wolf and I weren’t exactly seeing eye to eye at the moment.

Lola crouched down next to me. “I went through sort of the same thing. I know how you must feel.”

Her face was gentle, and I could see pity in her eyes, and I *hated* it. I hated all this attention. My wolf was stirring, and it was all I could do to keep him in check. I wished Greyson would just drag me down to the basement and lock me up.

Cali stepped tentatively forward. She reached out a hand, trying to stroke my neck, but she couldn’t even get close.

Damn Big Mac’s stupid spell.

*I know you can do it*, Cali said, her voice soft in my head. *Just shift back.*

But as comforting as it was to hear her voice, it had the exact opposite effect on my wolf, who leapt into action.

*Get away from me*, I pleaded with her. *Please. It’s not safe.*

My wolf was fighting, and more images of Ava appeared in my mind. Her body, her hair, her lips, her hands on me…

And it occurred to me—there was only one person who might be able to help me.

Fighting my wolf, I turned to Greyson. *You have to fetch Ava from the Vanguard palace.*

**Episode 2569**

“*Ava?*” Greyson said incredulously, looking at Xavier.

I stared at him, startled, then at Xavier. “Ava? What are you talking about? What does Ava have to do with any of this?”

Wait, had Ava done something to Xavier? Something that was making it impossible for him to shift back? I already hated the woman, but if she’d done anything to hurt my mate, it was going to be all-out war.

Greyson looked up at Rishika. “Take him down to the basement,” he said gruffly. “Lock him up.”

“What?” I gasped. “Greyson! What are you doing? What did Xavier do to deserve getting locked up? This isn’t his fault!”

*It’s okay*. Xavier’s voice came to me. *I asked him to do it. It’s for your protection, Cali.*

I my stomach twisted as I looked into his blue eyes. *I don’t understand. You said you wouldn’t hurt me. I don’t need protection from you, do I? We’re mates, Xavier. We love each other.*

I didn’t understand what was happening. I knew Xavier and I had had an argument—I was still pretty upset about it—but that didn’t mean I wanted to see him locked up like some kind of wild beast.

Greyson grabbed my arm as I reached out to touch Xavier. He pulled me sharply back.

“No, Cali,” he said gently. “Don’t.”

Heart breaking, I watched as Rishika led Xavier away, still snarling and fighting to get away from her.

“What’s going on?” I asked, looking up at Greyson, my throat tight with tears.

Greyson ran a hand through his light hair. “I’m not exactly sure, but something happened to Xavier, and he’s lost control of his wolf.”

“*What?*” I asked, shocked. “What does that mean? How can you know that?”

“It made him shift after I told the pack not to, for one,” he said, looking grim. “He’s fighting it hard, but until he’s able to shift back to human and regain full control, we have to keep him locked up. He’s a danger to the pack.”

“Greyson, are you—” I stopped myself. I was about to ask Greyson if he was doing this because he was angry at Xavier, or jealous, but I knew that wasn’t it. I knew Greyson, and he would never do anything like that. But there was something else I didn’t know. “Why did you mention Ava?”

He shook his head. “I’m not sure about that either. I think Xavier thinks she can help him.”  
 I stared at him, stunned. “Ava? Are you kidding me? Of all people, and considering everything she’s done to him?”

Greyson shrugged. “I know. I’m with you. It defies logic.” He sighed. “But a werewolf’s connection to his wolf is strong, and very complex. If Xavier thinks Ava can help him, then we have to let her try.”

I chewed my lip, thinking hard. I hated the idea of asking Ava for any kind of help, but I didn’t see that we really had a choice. I wanted to help Xavier. No matter how distasteful that help may be.

“Do we even know where Ava is?” Even as I asked, I realized I hadn’t seen her around lately. Not that I was complaining.

“She’s at the Vanguard palace,” Greyson said.

I frowned. “Why would Ava be hanging out with the Vanguard pack?”

“Because she and Aysel have been talking,” Lola piped up.

This brought me up short, and I looked at Lola, shocked. “Talking? Nothing those two do is ever just talking.”

“I overheard them at the diner,” Lola said. “Aysel is giving Ava a hard sell. Trying to get Ava to collaborate on some sort of scheme.”

“Why am I *just* hearing about this?” I demanded. “Did Xavier know about this?”

“Yeah, he knew,” Lola said. She shifted uncomfortably on her feet. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about it. I was going to, but then I got distracted by the whole, you know, stalker thing.”

“Well,” I said, feeling irritated, “you should have remembered to tell me.” But then, suddenly, all that anger left me, and I felt the cold hand of fear gripping onto me instead. “Wait. Could Ava have gone to Aysel to make a deal with Charon or Lakini, maybe?”

“To do what?” Lola asked.

“To put a spell on Xavier, like Aysel did with you,” I said, glancing at Greyson. “Is it possible this is all just some elaborate ploy to make Ava look like the hero?”

Greyson thought about this for a moment, but he shook his head. “It doesn’t matter either way. The cause doesn’t change the result. We just have to get Ava. With the threat of the LIPS people hanging around, we need to fix this. Right away. Xavier can’t control himself, and we can’t have wolves shifting outside whenever they feel like it. It puts all of us in danger.”

I nodded. I understood what Greyson was saying, and I agreed, but I hated the idea that Xavier was locked up. I glanced toward the door through which Rishika had led him. He was in the basement now, probably feeling helpless. My heart pounded hard. I couldn’t just let him stay down there alone.

But as I started toward the basement door, I felt a hand on my arm, holding me back.

“Where are you going?” Greyson asked.

“To see Xavier.”

“Cali—”

“Wolf or human, Xavier is my mate,” I said firmly. “He needs me.”

Greyson gave me a long look. “I really wish you would wait, but I suspect you won’t.” He let go of my arm. “I get it. But someone should go down there with you. Xavier’s wolf is still volatile.”

“I know,” I said sadly. I’d heard his wolf growl at me when I’d tried to touch him. It had been excruciating to hear, but I believed that deep down, his wolf—like Xavier—would never actually hurt me.

“I’ll go with you,” Lola offered. She shrugged. “I’ve been through this, too.”

I ignored Lola and looked over at Big Mac. “Yeah, what about that?”

“What about what?” Big Mac asked.

“Why can’t you give Xavier the potion you used to help Lola?” I asked.

Big Mac shook her head. “The situation is entirely different. It wouldn’t work.”

“Why not?” I demanded.

Big Mac raised a warning eyebrow. “For one, Lola is a hybrid. What’s happening with Xavier probably has nothing to do with his ability to shift, and everything to do with his mate bond with Ava.”

I went back to chewing on my lip. I hated to hear that. I didn’t want to be reminded of Xavier’s bond with that woman.

Big Mac heaved a gusty sigh. “Fine. I’ll take a look at him.”

“Thank you,” I murmured, and stepped after her as she headed toward the basement door.

“Don’t you want me to come with you?” Lola asked.

I glared over at her, anger surging through me again. “I think you’ve done enough, don’t you?”

Lola’s face went pink. “I’m sorry, Cali. I really wasn’t trying to keep it from you. With everything else going on, it just slipped my mind.”

I wanted to snap back at her, but I tried to take a deep breath. Lola was my best friend, and as angry as I was at her, I didn’t want to say or do anything that would cause irreparable damage to our friendship.

“It’s okay,” I finally managed. “But I think it’s probably best if I go down to talk to Xavier alone.”

“I don’t think that’s the smartest idea right now,” Greyson repeated.

I looked at the door, feeling frustrated. “I need to go. Xavier needs me.”

“I get that,” Greyson said firmly. “But *I* need you to be safe. And Xavier needs some time to cool off.”

I knew deep down that he was right, but I couldn’t help wondering if there was something I could do to help Xavier.

“I don’t know what’s going on with him, but his wolf had a really strong reaction to you. And if Big Mac is right, and this is actually about his mate bond with Ava, then you need to be extra careful—” Greyson started.

“I know all that, I promise I do. I just hate feeling so helpless. I can’t sit around and do nothing when Xavier is like this. I couldn’t do it if it was you on the other end of this either, and you know it.”

Greyson stepped over and put a comforting hand on my shoulder. I was still a bit upset and nearly shrugged him aside, but I didn’t. I let his offered comfort wash over me and take the edge off my frustration. “I know Xavier would appreciate that, but I also know he wouldn’t want you to put yourself in a position where he could hurt you while he’s not in his right mind. I have to respect that. You should to.”

I sighed, giving in and nodding.

Rishika coughed from the corner. I had almost forgotten she was here. “This is all touching, but… who’s going to get Ava?”

Well… here was something I could at least contribute to. I stepped forward, Greyson’s hand falling from my shoulder. “I’ll do it. I’ll get Ava.”

**Episode 2570**

GREYSON

“There’s no way you’re going to the Vanguard palace,” I said, turning to Cali.

When she looked up at me, she frowned. “But it would be safe. It’s not like I would be alone,” she said. “I’m just trying to help Xavier.”

I took a deep breath, reminding myself that she was stressed. “I know Xavier’s condition is worrying you, love, but I can’t let you make these kinds of rash decisions. Think about it, Cali; the Vanguard pack can’t be trusted. We know that.”

I didn’t mention what Xavier had told me about the weird little room in the palace where he’d found Cali’s photos, though I couldn’t get the thought out of my mind. I wouldn’t have been into the idea anyway, but knowing what Xavier had seen made me even more certain that I couldn’t risk sending Cali there. Lucian already had a shrine to Cali—he didn’t need the genuine article wandering into his path.

The question was, how could I convince her of this without worrying her even more?

“Let’s go somewhere to talk,” I said.

I took her arm and led her into the small office off the entryway. Her whole body was tense, and I hated it. I hated to see her so anxious, and I tried to think of what I could do to ease her stress.

But Cali didn’t give me a chance. As soon as we were in the office, she rounded on me.

“We talked about this before, Greyson. I’m capable of taking care of myself. I’m not totally helpless.”

I rubbed my forehead. “I know you’re not; I would never say that you are. And I’m just as anxious as you are to get Xavier whatever help he needs, but we have to be careful.”

I didn’t think that the drone had seen us, but I could very well be wrong. Adding the Vanguards to things I needed to think about with everything with LIPS going on wasn’t ideal. I needed to address the pack and how we couldn’t shift until LIPS had moved on. I couldn’t do all that and worry about Cali, too.

My eternal struggle.

“We can’t forget about the wild card factor with the Vanguards. Lucian and Aysel. And Ava, of course.” Cali and Ava were never a good combination, but seeing how mad Cali already was, I kept that observation to myself. “I know you’re more than capable of taking care of yourself, love. But I’m asking you to please wait and give me time to handle things.”

Cali crossed her arms, biting her lip. “But what if something happens to Xavier in the meantime?”

I gritted my teeth. She had dug her heels in on this, and it was clear if I tried to stop her, she was going to be hurt or angry with me. Or—worst case—she might even try to sneak off on her own.

I sighed and ran my hand through my hair. “Okay. You should go to the Vanguard palace.” Her eyebrows rose in surprise at these words. “But I’m going with you.”

Cali stared at me. “*You’re* going with me?” she asked, stunned.

“I don’t see that I have much choice,” I said grimly. “I don’t trust the Vanguard pack, and since there’s no way I’m letting you go by yourself—especially at this hour—yeah, I’m going with you.”

I reached for her hand and covered it with both of mine.

“I know you’re upset about all this, love,” I said. “It’s hard to see this happening to anyone. And I’m going to do everything I can to make sure Xavier gets better.”

Cali’s eyes roved my face, like she was gauging my sincerity. After a moment, she nodded. “Okay.”

It was a relief to hear that word, and I pressed a kiss to her forehead. I was just glad she wasn’t arguing with me—for the moment.

“I’m going to go tell Xavier what we’re doing,” she said, pulling her hand from mine.

“Hang on,” I said, reaching for her arm as she turned.

“What?”

It would be better if Cali didn’t mention to anything to Xavier. Hearing anything about this plan would only upset him. He’d be mad at me for letting Cali go the Vanguard pack at all.

“If you really want to help Xavier, I think it’s best if you don’t taunt his wolf,” I said.

Cali frowned. “Taunt? I’m not going to *taunt* anyone.”

I shook my head. “I know that, but just seeing you will upset Xavier’s wolf. You saw how he reacted to you.”

She rolled her eyes. “I really don’t think—”

“If you want to go to the Vanguard palace, that’s one of the conditions,” I said firmly.

Cali frowned.

“It’s just until we get back,” I told her. “You’re right, we don’t know what might happen with Xavier in the meantime, and my goal—and what Xavier would agree with—is that I need to keep you safe. Even if it’s from him.”

“But he needs to know—”

“I’ll talk to Xavier,” I said, gently taking her hands in mine and squeezing. “I’ll explain what’s going on. Okay? Will you trust me to do that?”

Cali’s expression was all concern. I knew this was killing her inside, but I had to do what I felt was right. And I knew that Xavier would ask me to do this. If there were any chance he’d hurt her, he’d want me to intervene.

“Okay,” she finally said. “Thank you for telling him, Greyson.”

“I will,” I promised, and opened the door.

As I headed down the stairs, I saw Big Mac at the bottom.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I put up a barrier spell to keep Xavier from escaping,” she explained.

“Oh, that’s a good idea. Thanks for that.”

Big Mac gave me a curt nod and headed up the stairs.

With a sigh, I turned toward the closed door behind which Xavier was being kept. I knew he wasn’t going to be happy to see me—but that wasn’t quite the same as Xavier’s wolf reacting to seeing Cali. One way or the other, I knew I could handle whatever my brother threw at me.

Xavier looked up at me as I opened the door.

*Is Ava coming?* he asked.

There was a sense of urgency in his tone, and it surprised me. *We’re going to get her. We’ll make sure she comes.*

I was debating telling him that Cali was coming with me, but I had another question I wanted to ask.

*Why didn’t you tell me that Ava and Aysel met at the diner?  
 I didn’t think it was that big of a deal*, Xavier said dismissively.

*Not that big of a deal?*

*I was handling it—*

*Handling it?* I repeated, infuriated. *In case you fucking forgot, man, this goes way beyond you. Those two meeting together is a big deal, and it requires more than you handling it. This is about the pack. Aysel is doing everything she can to get to me—did it ever occur to you that Ava’s doing the same thing to you?*

Xavier gave me a long look. *So you say.*

Fury coursed through me. *I do say, and what I say matters, because I’m the Alpha. And by the way*, I added, feeling bitter, *Cali is coming with me to the Vanguard palace.*

Xavier lunged toward me, stopping short when he hit Big Mac’s invisible barrier. *What did you say? You’re taking Cali to that madhouse? What the fuck is wrong with you? Why would you do such a stupid thing?*

The barrier was strong, but I had to stop myself from taking a step back as Xavier threw himself against it, baring his lethally sharp teeth.

*You know that Cali hates Ava—and it’s a mutual feeling, in case you missed it. And the princeling is spiraling into serial killer territory with that fucking room devoted to Cali*, Xavier went on. *Why the hell would you risk bringing Cali to that place? What the fuck are you thinking—*

*She’s going because she cares about you*, I snapped, which shut Xavier up in a hurry. *I don’t want her to go—I’m not a fucking idiot. But I can’t stop her. And I can’t stop her from loving you, either.*

Xavier dropped back, his chest still heaving. He stared at me but didn’t say anything.

I shook my head, disgusted. This was a mistake. I wished I’d never even come down here. I turned to leave but stopped myself. There was one thing I’d been wondering about, and my curiosity got the better of my anger.

*Hang on, I have a question for you.*

Xavier just looked at me.

*After you shifted like an ass and I caught you, when we were heading back, you said something about how this had been coming for a while. Do you remember that?*

Xavier didn’t answer.

*I have to ask—do you think Ava put a spell on you?*

**Episode 2571**

The black night pressed in on the windows of the car as we sped toward the Vanguard estate. Greyson drove with one hand on the steering wheel and one hand holding mine. His eyes were focused on the road in front of us.

I looked down at our fingers, intertwined in my lap. His warm hand felt comforting, and—at this moment—I needed all the comfort I could get.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice low in the darkness.

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Greyson glanced over at me, an eyebrow raised. “You sure about that?”

I sighed. “No, I guess not. I’m just worried about Xavier, you know that. And even though this was my idea, I’m not looking forward to seeing Ava—or asking her for her help.”

Greyson nodded. “I get it. I guess this isn’t ideal for anyone.”  
 I stared out at the dark trees flying past for a moment. “What if this doesn’t work?”

“What do you mean?” Greyson asked.

“What if Ava doesn’t agree to help us?” I asked, voicing the worry that had been spinning in my mind.

Greyson squeezed my hand. “I know this is hard for you to think about, but Ava and Xavier are still bound to each other by their own mate bond.”

He was right—that *was* hard to think about.

“And?” I asked, a sour taste in my mouth.

“And because of that, Ava will do anything to help Xavier. It’s the bond. I doubt she’ll refuse to help.”

I was quiet for a moment. Greyson was right, and that should have made me happy—I wanted to get Xavier help—but I hated hearing it. I hated that Xavier needed Ava for anything. I wanted to be the only one who could help Xavier through this—whatever *this* was. He and I were mates, too.

“Xavier tried to break his old mate bond with Ava,” I said. “She was supposed to be dead and their mate bond broken. His wolf chose me. Why doesn’t his wolf understand that anymore?”

“*Xavier* understands that,” Greyson said. “That should be enough to give you hope, love.”

There was a strange edge to Greyson’s voice, and I looked over at him in the darkness.

“I’m sorry,” I said, an ache in my heart. I shouldn’t have been talking about this with Greyson. I felt horrible instantly—how could I not?

“Greyson?”

His jaw worked for a moment. “I’m not going to lie to you—I wish you weren’t bound to my brother, Cali, but I’m looking at the bigger picture here. Xavier’s a member of the Redwood pack, and his condition—whatever it is—is threatening the pack’s safety.” His voice turned hard. “I’ll do whatever I have to do to protect the pack.”

I nodded. That sounded… right. Officially right, at least. “But I know this is still hard for you—to reassure me about Xavier. I’m sorry if I put you in that position—”

“Cali,” Greyson said. He looked over at me. “This isn’t your fault. We’re all bound by the *due destini*. I don’t want to hear you blaming yourself for this, or feeling guilty about it.”

My heart thumped hard, and I pressed a kiss to his knuckles. I wanted to believe him so badly.

Greyson slowed the car. “The Vanguard estate is just up ahead.”

He pulled the car to a stop at the gates. The guard stepped out of the shack, squinted through the window as us, and waved us through.

I glanced at Greyson, but his eyes were on the road, his mouth pressed into a grim line.

We parked, and the sound of the doors slamming shut echoed through the dark night. Anxiety coursed through me as I stared up at the imposing palace. Masked in shadow, it was huge and hulking, like a crouching predator. I didn’t want to go in there. I didn’t want to see Lucian, and I didn’t want to get sucked into another one of his weird Seluna pool parties.

*It’ll be okay, love.*

I nodded and took the hand Greyson offered me. Then we walked to the front doors.

They opened before we could knock, revealing Andrei, who looked at us coolly.

How was it possible that the guy looked even bigger than the last time I had seen him? It felt like he grew in bulk every time I encountered him. Was that possible? Was I imagining it, or was this wolf on steroids?

“Andrei,” Greyson said, inclining his head.

“I’m surprised to see you here,” he said, eyeing Greyson. “Lucian isn’t expecting you. Neither is Aysel,” he added, his voice becoming a growl.

“We’re here for Ava,” Greyson said.

Andrei smirked. “Ah. I see. Our guest has been very popular today.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

Andrei looked over at me. “This is her second visit from the Redwood pack.”

I felt myself bristle. I knew Xavier had come over here to tell Lucian about LIPS, but he hadn’t said anything about seeing Ava. Why hadn’t he mentioned anything? Had something… happened? Was that what had triggered his wolf?

I had a million more questions buzzing through my head, but the smug look on Andrei’s face shut me up. I didn’t need him to feed my fears, and besides, I didn’t know if I could trust anything the guy said. Maybe Xavier hadn’t even seen Ava. Maybe Andrei was just trying to get a rise out of me.

“This way,” he grunted, and started off in the direction of the grand staircase.

“Just tell her we’re here,” Greyson said, stepping into the entrance hall.

Andrei looked at us for a moment, then headed up the stairs.

When he was gone, Greyson looked over at me. “How are you doing?”

“I’m fine,” I said, flexing my fingers and curling them into fists at my sides. “Nervous, but I’m ready.”

Before Greyson could respond to that, another voice rang out through the huge entryway.

“To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?”

Lucian had appeared, and he was smiling at us.

I looked him over for a moment. He was standing tall and straight, dressed in an embroidered dressing gown tied loosely around his waist. Despite his state of undress, everything about him exuded confidence and entitlement. He looked just as royal as ever. Next to him, Aysel stood, her eyes trained on Greyson.

Greyson’s hand tightened on mine.

I hated the way Aysel was eyeing Greyson—like a carnivore eyeing her next meal. Of course, she *was* a werewolf, so maybe that image wasn’t too far off the mark.

I let go of Greyson’s hand—we had to be careful not to alert Aysel that the revulsion spell she’d placed on us was gone. I needed Greyson’s support right now, but I knew that we were going to have to keep that minimally physical.

Lucian strode purposefully forward and took my hand. He grasped it hard and pressed a kiss to my palm. “Have you heard from Seluna, dear Caliana?”

“No, I haven’t,” I said, as Greyson took my arm and tugged me away from the prince. “I’ll let you know if I do.”

Lucian looked deeply disappointed to hear this. “I don’t understand this. Why is Seluna taking so long?” He gave his head a frustrated shake. “I’m just going to have to do more to appease her.”

Before I could wonder aloud what the hell that meant, Greyson spoke.

“We’re here to see Ava,” he said. “We have to talk to her. We won’t be long.”

I could hear the tension in his voice, and I glanced quickly up at him.

“I’ve enjoyed having Ava as a guest,” Aysel said smoothly. “It’s nice to have someone to talk to, besides my brother.”

Remembering what Lola had told me about Aysel and Ava meeting at the diner, I eyed the woman closely. Clearly, she and Ava *had* been talking, and I was willing to bet their conversation had involved both of my mates.

My shoulders were starting to ache with tension. I didn’t like being here, and I just wanted to get the hell out. I considered just bolting for the door, but at that moment, Ava appeared at the top of the grand staircase.

Irritation rankled as I looked up at her. How was it that she always managed to look so damn glamorous? All she was doing was walking down the stairs, but she did it looking like a fucking movie star.

Aysel greeted Ava with an air kiss, then glanced at Greyson and me. “They’ve come to speak to you.”

Ava looked over at us, surprise written across her face. “Really? About what?”

“Is this more information about the LIPS?” Lucian asked.

“No,” Greyson said quickly. “This is personal business. Is there somewhere the three of us could speak alone?”

Lucian’s expression hardened. “I’m afraid that won’t be possible.”

“What?” Greyson asked, his tone a warning.

Lucian’s eyes had gone steely. “You either speak freely, Alpha, or you don’t speak at all. Which will it be?”

**Episode 2572**

At Lucian’s words Greyson’s shoulders tensed up—as if he wasn’t tense enough already.

Next to him, Aysel smiled her catlike smile. “Yes, I admit I’m also curious about what brings you both here at this late hour.”

“Like I said, it’s personal business,” Greyson repeated, his voice hard as stone.

“Personal?” Lucian shrugged causally. “I don’t see how that could be a barrier for us. After all, we’ve all come to know each other somewhat *intimately*,” he said, his eyes straying to me as he uttered that last word.

I suppressed a shudder as he spoke. Everything about that dude made me uneasy.

“Well, maybe we should leave that up to Ava,” Greyson said.

Everyone’s eyes turned to Ava.

She glanced around. “I guess I’d like to know why you want to talk to me. What is this about?”

“It’s about Xavier,” I said, locking eyes with her.

Her reaction was instantaneous. Her face paled with fear, and her shoulders hiked defensively. “What about Xavier? Is he okay? Is something wrong?”

I could see the panic in her face, and I didn’t like it—and I didn’t know how to respond to her question. There *was* something wrong, of course—that was why we’d come—but I couldn’t see any good reason to discuss the situation in front of Lucian and Aysel. Especially if there was a chance that Ava and Aysel were working together on some scheme.

I took a deep breath, steeling myself to say what I had to say. “We’re here because Xavier asked for you. He needs you,” I said, forcing the words out of my mouth.

Ava’s eyes lit for a moment, filled with something that looked like hope. Then she narrowed them suspiciously. “Did Xavier really ask for me?”

“Do you really think we’d be here if he hadn’t?” Greyson asked curtly.

Aysel reacted to this, looking injured. Maybe she was hurt that Greyson had come to see her against his will.

Ava swung her gaze to me. “But why did *you* come? Where’s Xavier? If he needs me, why didn’t he come himself?”

I ground my teeth. I wished I could just turn around and go home. I wish I didn’t have to speak to this woman at all, or answer her questions. I wished none of this was happening. I knew I couldn’t tell Ava the truth about Xavier—not in front of Lucian and Aysel, who were listening closely to every word I said. One word about the situation and they would think Xavier was weak or vulnerable, and I knew how much he’d hate that. I would never do that to him. I was determined not to give Xavier any reason not to trust me.

“He had to take care of something,” I said shortly.

I watched Ava carefully, waiting for her response to this explanation. And, to my surprise, she shrugged.

“Okay,” she said, accepting my response.

My reaction to that was mixed. I was relieved that she was willing to go along with things, but also annoyed because now I was going to have to drive back to the pack house with Ava. And after we got back there, I didn’t know what was going to happen.

All I knew was that I hated the idea of Xavier *needing* Ava—for anything. He had me! Why wasn’t I able to help him?

But I knew I needed to keep it together. I was angry and hurt at feeling cut out, but I knew whatever I was feeling was trivial compared to the larger issue. Whatever I felt, when I thought of how Xavier was struggling with his own wolf—and how that wolf had reacted to me—I knew I’d do anything I could to help him. Even if that meant begging for Ava’s help.

No matter what, I would always do whatever I had to to help Xavier. Every time.

Obviously, I hoped it wouldn’t come down to my begging Ava for help. And this time, at least, it didn’t look like I’d have to.

“Great,” Greyson said briskly. “Let’s go then.”

Lucian and Aysel watched as Ava started toward us, but as we turned toward the front doors, Lucian called after us.

“Caliana, stay alert for Seluna. She will be coming for you. I can assure you of that.”

I forced my face into a polite smile. “Okay, I’ll do that,” I started, but I was distracted by Aysel, who was striding across the entrance hall.

She stepped toward Greyson and leaned forward, speaking quietly into his ear.

My hands curled into fists at my side. I wanted to do something—push her or kick her away. I knew she was doing this to piss me off. And it was working.

“Didn’t you say we should be going?” I asked Greyson, pulling him roughly away from Aysel.

“Yeah,” Greyson said, looking a little flummoxed. “Let’s go.”

I was relieved to step out the door and into the freezing air of the December night, but Aysel’s voice floated after us.

“Bye, Greyson,” she called, her voice an annoying singsong. She sounded like a schoolgirl, waving to her high school crush.

I took a deep breath of the frigid air. We were done with that part at least, and I was very glad. There was something about being inside that palace that really put me on edge.

And at least Ava had agreed to go with us. As much as I hated to admit it, maybe Ava would actually be able to help Xavier.

But as soon as we reached the car, Ava stopped dead and stared at Greyson and me.

“All right,” she said shortly, “what the hell is really going on?”

“We told you,” Greyson said. “Xavier needs your help.”

Ava crossed her arms over her chest and surveyed us both. “I don’t buy it. You two must think I’m an idiot if you think I’m actually going to get into your car without any information.”

“This isn’t a mafia movie, Ava,” I shot back. “We’re not going to bump you off.”

“I don’t know *what* this is,” Ava said, her voice like ice, “but you’d better tell me what the hell is going on, or I’m turning around and going back inside.”

*I wish you would*, was what I thought, but I managed to bite my tongue. “Xavier’s having a shifting problem,” I said, fighting to keep my voice even.

“So?” Ava asked. “What does that have to do with me?”

“He’s stuck as a wolf,” I blurted out. “He can’t shift back to human.”

Ava looked at me, shocked. “And he asked for me? Why?”

I rolled my eyes. “Nice surprised face, but you’re not fooling anyone.”

“What are you talking about—”

“This is probably all your fault!”

She stared at me. “How is this *my* fault?”

“Stop lying! We know about the diner; we know you were talking with Aysel. You’re living *here*, of all places! I know you did something to cause this!”

Ava snorted with laughter that didn’t reach her dark eyes. “The only thing I did was spend some time with my mate—”

“He’s *my* mate,” I snapped, “and you have to stay the hell away from him!”

Ava laughed at this. “What do you want, Cali? Do you want me to help him or not? I can’t really help if I stay here, can I?” she said, her voice a taunt.

Inside, I was boiling with anger. How could she put me in this kind of position? Of course we needed her help, but she was lording it over me without a care in the world. I opened my mouth to tell her she could go straight to hell, but Greyson spoke over me.

“Okay,” he said loudly, “I think I’ve heard enough. If the goal here is to help Xavier, and I think we can all agree that is the goal,” he added, giving me a hard look, “then let’s just go and help him.”

I knew he was right, but I was still fuming. “You wanted this to happen,” I spat, glaring at Ava. “How convenient this is for you, for you to be the one who helps Xavier.”

Ava’s cool gaze gave way to a satisfied smile. “I can’t help but notice that you sound quite jealous.” She tipped her head. “Do I make you jealous, Cali?”

I didn’t want to answer her, but of *course* she made me feel jealous. The idea that Ava could be Xavier’s savior was eating me up inside. I hated everything about this situation.

“Listen, we can have this argument on the ride back to the pack house, can’t we?” Greyson asked. He glanced up at the house. I knew he was as anxious to get away from this madhouse as I was.

“Fine,” I huffed, and reached for the car door. But as I pulled it open, I turned to Ava, who hadn’t moved.

She was looking at the both of us, her arms folded across her chest, her feet planted stubbornly.

Greyson rolled his eyes. “Oh my god,” he sighed. “Are you coming or not?”

**Episode 2573**

XAVIER

I paced from one side of the small basement room to the other, feeling edgy and anxious. Still in my wolf form, unable to shift back, I was counting down the seconds until Cali and Greyson got back—hopefully bringing Ava with them.

My mind was reeling with a ton of unanswered questions, but one kept coming back to me. It was Greyson’s question—*had* Ava used a spell to screw up my ability to shift?

On the surface, the question made no sense. Why would Ava curse me to stay in my wolf form? But the apparent lack of sense didn’t make much difference—there was a lot Ava did that didn’t make any sense.

And if Ava *had* hired a witch or a warlock to cast a spell on me, then the only explanation was the most obvious one—she was setting herself up to be the only one who could cure me.

I could kind of buy that story, but still, I was skeptical. Ava had said over and over that she wanted me to want her. That she didn’t want to use magic or trickery, that she wanted me to honor our mate bond. And I couldn’t deny that it was still there. I’d felt this pull toward her building within me for a long time now. It was getting worse—a lot worse—and I was convinced the mate bond was solely responsible.

The doorknob rattled, and I looked up hopefully. Was Cali back?

But it was Jay who walked in. He stood in the doorway and looked at me, his face tense.

“I wanted to see how you were doing,” he said, by way of explanation. Then, without waiting for an answer, he started stripping off his clothes.

This surprised me so much I stopped pacing for a moment. Why the hell was Jay taking his clothes off in the basement? Did he do this a lot? Did Lola know about this?

Jay tossed his T-shirt to the ground and shifted to his wolf form. *I thought you could use a friend. Also, Lola’s driving me nuts, so I could use a break myself.* He paced over toward me. *So, what’s the deal, man? What happened?*

I was relieved to see Jay in his wolf form, and to see the patient look on his face as he waited for my answer. I’d tried to talk to Greyson about all of this, but it had been too awkward. I didn’t like to talk to Greyson at the best of times, and especially about something as fraught as mates. But I could talk to Jay.

*The mate bond with Ava is getting too powerful*, I said bluntly.

Jay took this in. *In what way?*

I shook my head. *In the way it feels like it’s taking over my life.*

*What do you mean?*

*My wolf wants Ava*, I said, frustration coursing through me. *It keeps pushing me toward her. I… I almost slept with her earlier today.*

Jay’s eyes got wide. *Did you want to?*

*Of course I didn’t*, I answered angrily. *But tell that to my damn wolf. And there’s just nothing I can do about it. That’s what it feels like. My wolf just wants Ava more and more, no matter what I do.*

Jay nodded his shaggy head slowly. *I wonder if Lola was right.*

*Right about what?* I asked warily.

*What would happen if you gave in to your wolf?*

*I don’t even want to find out*, I said quickly.

*Xavier—*

*Absolutely not*, I snapped. *I have no idea what could happen if I did that. What if it affected my mate bond with Cali? No way. And anyway*, I added, *I don’t like Ava, and I definitely don’t want to sleep with her.*

*Okay, okay*, Jay said. *Sorry. I didn’t realize it was that bad. Sorry*.

*Like this whole* due destini *thing hasn’t been hard enough, now I have this to deal with, too?* I raged. *This thing with Ava is only making everything worse. It would’ve been so much easier if she’d just stayed dead.*

*Okay*, Jay said slowly. *Well, short of killing her again, is there anything I can do to help?*

I heaved a gusty sigh. *No, I don’t think there is. But I appreciate you coming down here to talk.*

*No problem, man. You doing okay down here?*

I looked around the small room. I was the one who’d told Greyson to put me down here—to keep everyone safe—but I still felt like a prisoner. *Not only am I trapped in my own house, but I’m trapped in my wolf’s body.*

Jay gave me a long look. *How much of this have you told Cali?*

*What are you talking about?* I asked.

*I just wondered if you’ve shared all of this with her. When I’m upset, the first person I want to talk to is Lola. I just wondered if you’ve done that.*

*I want to talk to Cali*, I insisted, *but she’s still mad at me, I’m pretty sure. And asking her to bring Ava here isn’t going to help that.*

Jay tipped his head. *I don’t know. I just think that maybe if you were more open with Cali about what’s going on, she wouldn’t get so upset.*

I glanced out the minuscule window, but the darkness gave away nothing. *It’s a great idea in theory, man, but when you factor in Cali’s personality, the whole thing kind of falls apart.*

I looked up when I heard footsteps coming down the stairs.

*She’s coming*, I said, my wolf jerking forward toward the door.

Jay shifted back to human and grabbed for his jeans. Through the still-open door I could see Cali and Greyson coming down the stairs, and behind them, Ava.

My wolf howled at the sight of her.

Cali was back, and she’d brought Ava. I wanted to hug Cali, but I knew that wouldn’t be safe—plus I couldn’t exactly do so in my wolf form.

*Thank you*, I told Greyson. *I knew it must have painful for her to ask Ava for help.*

*You said your wolf needed her*, Greyson said curtly. *Here she is. Now what?*

Now what?

Honestly, I had no idea. I could barely think. Ava was here, and my wolf was going wild. If it hadn’t been for Big Mac’s barrier spell, my wolf would already have jumped at her. I wanted to get my wolf under control, but what the hell did my wolf really want Ava for?

She was here—that was what my wolf wanted, wasn’t it?

Ava caught my eye. *The only reason I’m here is because you asked me to come. I hope you remember that.*

I needed her help, and I knew I should tell her that, but I couldn’t bear to say it. Not to her. Not with Cali standing next to her.

But her scent was filling the room, and it was driving my wolf out of its mind.

*Stop this*, Ava said firmly, staring at me in confusion*. Just shift back. Xavier. You can do it. I know you can.*

I concentrated on her words—letting them repeat in my head—and tried to shift back, but it didn’t work. I could tell my wolf was still fighting me. It wanted none of this.

“Okay, obviously this isn’t going to work,” Cali said, her voice hard. “Ava, you can just go. Thanks for trying, but it’s not going to…”

But Ava wasn’t listening to Cali. She was looking right at me. *Just do it, Xavier. What are you waiting for? Shift back.*

I couldn’t do it. I wanted to, but my wolf was just too strong. If anything, being around Ava was making the mate bond stronger than ever. It felt more resilient and harder to ignore.

Ava stepped forward—into the room—and knelt down so we were eye to eye. *Let me help you.*

Reaching through the barrier spell, she put her arms around my neck, bringing us practically nose to nose.

*Shift, Xavier. You can do this. Of course you can. You can do anything. Do it for me.*

Her touch, her scent, her voice—everything about her was sending my wolf into frantic overdrive.

It was distracted by her, so I seized the moment and, concentrating, started to shift back. It was a fight—I could feel my wolf trying to claw me back.

It took way longer than it should have, drawing out the process, but I managed to shift fully back to human. As I lay on the ground, breathing hard from the exertion, I could still feel the wolfish tendencies inside myself. It was as though I’d only shifted on the outside, but on the inside, my wolf was still fighting for control.

I got to my feet, and—before I could stop myself—I reached out for Ava. The feel of her against my skin shocked me, and my wolf was singing. I grabbed hold of her, pulled her close, and kissed her.

**Episode 2574**

I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t believe this was happening. Xavier and Ava were kissing right in front my eyes. And not only that—*Xavier* had initiated it! *He’d* reached for her. *He’d* kissed her. And he was naked!

Ava was grasping onto a naked Xavier. To *my* naked Xavier. I knew they had the mate bond—I couldn’t really kid myself, could I?—but seeing this? Like this? After Ava just got to save the day?

It hurt.

My heart was hammering hard, and my eyes were stinging.

Jay cleared his throat awkwardly, which was enough to make Xavier open his eyes. Ava moved her kisses down to his jaw, but Xavier looked around, confused, like he’d just woken up. His eyes widened when he saw me, and then widened even more when he looked down at Ava, whose hands were traveling southward on his body.

“Stop,” he muttered, pulling away from Ava.

He’d pushed her away from him, but it wasn’t enough to keep my chest from constricting with a searing internal pain. All my fears about Ava and Xavier and their mate bond came crashing down on me, like a collapsing building. This was unbearable, and I had to get away.

Eyes blurring with tears, I spun on my heel and raced up the basement stairs. At the top, I nearly ran into Torin, startling him so much he dropped a tray filled with fresh Christmas cookies.

“I’m—” I started, trying to apologize, but the words just wouldn’t come.

“Cali,” he said, his faced lined with concern as he stood amidst the broken cookies. “Are you okay?”

I couldn’t speak, so I just shook my head—swallowing a sob—and raced past him, through the kitchen and out the back door.

I tried to take a breath—to suck some oxygen into my aching lungs—but I just couldn’t. The air was cold on my flaming face, but my lungs felt paralyzed. I bent over, hot tears streaming down my face, trying so hard to catch my breath. I had to fight it back—I was about to be overwhelmed—but I just couldn’t seem to do it. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw it again: Xavier—*naked*—stepping into Ava’s welcoming arms.

But of all the people Xavier could’ve needed in that moment, it had to be Ava?

It was too perfect. There was something I wasn’t seeing here. *Had* Ava planned all this? She’d agitated his wolf and made it so she could play heroine? If so, her plan had worked perfectly. If she had done something to Xavier, then it looked like she’d won him back, and I was helpless to do anything about it at this point.

I had all this Fae magic coursing through my body, and I couldn’t do a damn thing about it.

I jumped when I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I spun around.

Greyson was standing behind me. He gave me a small smile, and when I buried my face in his chest and started to cry, he just held me close.

At some point, I realized he was practically holding me upright, as I was crying hard enough that I’d stopped trusting my own legs to keep me straight, but he didn’t seem to mind. Greyson was just holding me tightly and stroking my hair softly.

“It’s okay,” he whispered, barely audible over the sound of my sobs. “It’s going to be okay, love.”

I shook my head hard, a fresh wave of tears overtaking me.

“I know that was hard, Cali. What you just saw… It really sucked. There’s no tother way to put it.” He sighed. “I can only imagine what you’re feeling right now.”

“Betrayed!” I rasped, leaning back to look up at Greyson. “I feel betrayed. I know Xavier has something going on with his wolf, and maybe it’s not right for me to feel like that, but I can’t help it. How could Xavier do that?”

Greyson’s expression was grave. “I know it’s hard for you to understand, but you have to try, love. Most of the time, man and wolf work together seamlessly. But Xavier’s wolf is fighting him. It’s creating a lot of inner turmoil. He’s trying to fight it. You know he is. But—even for someone as strong as Xavier—you can’t win every fight.”

I covered my face with my hands, tears streaming through my fingers.

“Hey,” he said gently. “Look at me, Cali.” He put his finger beneath my chin and lifted it so I was looking at him.

“What?” I said, my voice a gasp.

“You know it pains me to take my brother’s side on this,” he said softly, a small ironic smile on his face, “but I don’t think you should blame Xavier for what you just saw. I’m not making excuses for him,” he said quickly, seeing the look on my face, “but it’s very hard to explain what he’s going through.”

“Hard to explain because I’m not a wolf?” I asked.

Greyson’s eyes were sad. “That’s part of it.”

I looked away, feeling anger, sadness, and pain roiling through me. Maybe if I were a werewolf, none of this would be happening. We didn’t know whether the bite would kill me… I was Fae. Wasn’t that supernatural enough? I hated feeling like I wasn’t.

“I think that deep down, you know your bond with Xavier is strong. Stronger than you’re thinking it is right now. He’s still in love with you, Cali. He doesn’t want to be with Ava. Deep down I think you know that. Though”—he gave a wan smile—“for my own sake, I wish that wasn’t the case.”

This made me laugh, and I dashed away the tears on my cheeks. “You know, Greyson, I think you’re a better brother than you let on.”

Now it was Greyson’s turn to laugh. “Don’t read too much into this, love. I’m just worried about making *you* feel better. I hate to see you in pain. And if I have to do that by giving my brother some respect”—he heaved a long-suffering sigh—“then that’s what I’ll do. But don’t get too used to it.” He winked.

The back door opened and closed, and when I turned, I saw Xavier standing on the porch, looking over at me. My chest felt instantly tight again, but at least he wasn’t naked anymore. He’d managed to pull on a pair of joggers and a T-shirt.

“Do you want me to stay?” Greyson asked quietly.

*Yes*, I wanted to say. I just wanted to hold onto him forever, but I knew I had to speak to Xavier at some point.

“No, I’m okay,” I said, smiling up at him. “I can handle this.”

Xavier drew near, and up close I could see that his face was pale and he looked miserable.

Greyson took a step back, keeping his gaze steady on his brother. “I’ll just be over by the shed, in case you have another shifting problem.”

Then he glanced at me, and his gaze softened. *Give him a chance, okay?*

As he turned to walk away, he shot a look at Xavier. “Don’t blow it.”

But I wasn’t sure if Xavier even heard him. His eyes were intent on me.

“Cali, I—” He faltered, his face flushed, and he reached for me, pulling me into his arms. “I’m so sorry, Cali. I’m so sorry I made you feel that way.”

Tears streamed down my face again. I thought of everything Greyson had just said to me, about how hard Xavier’s wolf was fighting with him, how strong our bond was, and how much Xavier really loved me.

Xavier pressed a kiss to my forehead and leaned back to look at me, wiping tears from my cheek with his thumb. “I never meant for you to see that, Cali. Hell, I didn’t even mean to *do* that. I was barely aware it was even happening. It was like some kind of walking nightmare. I’ve been fighting so hard to control my wolf. Every day has been a struggle, and today…” He shook his head. “It was just too much.”

“I wish you’d said something to me,” I whispered, my throat tight with tears. “I didn’t realize how hard it’s been for you. I wish you’d told me. You don’t have to keep this kind of thing—*anything*—from me, Xavier.”

“I’m sorry,” Xavier said, pressing his forehead against mine. “I tried to—I wanted to—but I didn’t want to hurt you. I really thought I could keep it under control.”

I wrapped my arms around Xavier and hugged him close, then pulled away enough to look him in the eye. “I have to ask you a question.”

“Anything.”

I took a shuddering breath. This question was gnawing at me, but I needed to know the answer. “Do you love her?’

Xavier’s eyes went wide with shock. “Cali—”

“Not your wolf,” I said quickly. “But you, Xavier. Do you love Ava?”

**Episode 2575**

XAVIER

Cali’s question gave me pause.

*Do I love Ava?*

On the surface, it was almost laughable. Of course I didn’t love her. She was like a bad penny I just couldn’t seem to get rid of, no matter how hard I tried. But I knew I couldn’t write off Cali’s question so easily. I’d already tried that what felt like a hundred times, and yet here we were.

I needed to be honest. Cali deserved that much.

I sighed. “I did, once.”

“And now?” she pressed.

“No… I don’t, but I think my wolf still does. The mate bond between Ava and me—it’s still pulling the strings.”

Cali was quiet for a moment, and a crease furrowed its way between her brows. I wished, not for the first time, that I could read her mind, figure out what was going on in that head of hers.

She looked away, and my stomach twisted.

“You don’t believe me?” I asked.

Her gaze snapped back, but she wasn’t quite making eye contact. “I want to. I… I need to.”

“Then just believe me. Believe me when I say I love you. That you are the only person *I* love.”

Her eyes slowly locked on to mine, and a smile curved her lips. “I know you mean it.” That smile dimmed. “But what happens to our love if your wolf has feelings for Ava?”

I had to pull in a deep breath, to remind myself to be patient, that my issue here was with Ava, not Cali.

“He has feelings for you too,” I reminded her. *God, I hope he still feels that way.* “You’re the one who brought him back, who made it possible for him and me to coexist again. Cali, you and I are still mates. None of that has changed, even if my mate bond with Ava is… doing whatever it’s doing.”

Her smile was completely gone now. “But you kissed her. Right in front of me. And you *wanted* to. Did you?”

I ground my molars together. “I know. But that was my wolf.” I held a hand up when she frowned, quickly adding, “And I know that sounds like the worst excuse in the world, but it’s the truth. I wish it weren’t. Because if it were only about what *I* want—me, Xavier—I wouldn’t go near Ava with a ten-foot pole.”

“I believe you,” she said after a moment. But I wasn’t sure she was telling the truth now. She’d taken far too long to respond, and her voice was so weak, like she was saying what she was saying because she wanted to comfort me, not because she actually agreed.

“Are you just saying that?”

She shook her head. “I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it, but it’s still hard, Xavier.”

I sighed, daring to take a step closer. She didn’t step back. “If you believe me, then can you forgive me, at least?”

“I want to.” She bit her lip and heaved a sigh. “I know you’re hurting too.” She reached out and took my hand, dropping a kiss to my knuckles. “I… I forgive you. But it’s going to take some time still to shake off what I saw. It doesn’t mean I don’t believe you. You know that, right?”

I did. I really did. But understanding all of the reasons why Cali was saying what she was… It didn’t comfort me one bit. If anything, I almost felt worse now. This wasn’t some stupid argument we could fix and move on from. I couldn’t go back at any point right now and not kiss Ava in front of her. It was done, thanks to my wolf. I wanted Cali to stop hurting.

I didn’t know how to fix any of this.

And I really, really wished my brother wasn’t listening in on our private moment right now.

I squeezed Cali’s hand. “I’ll give you as much time as you need. But know that I love you with all my heart. And even if you have doubts, I know that you’ll eventually remember—there’s a reason why we’re mates. Don’t let my asshole wolf make you forget that.”

“I won’t.”

She held on tight to my hand. “Promise?”

“I promise.” A small smile tugged at her lips, and I leaned in to kiss her. It was a quick, chaste thing, but I needed the comfort of feeling her lips against mine after recent events. Plus, if Greyson wanted to linger near our private moment, then he was going to get a show out of it.

After a beat, Cali shivered.

“It’s cold,” I said. “You should go inside.”

She nodded and turned to head in, but she stopped when she realized I wasn’t doing the same. “Aren’t you coming with me?”

“I need to talk to my brother first.”

She glanced at Greyson, then looked back at me. “Promise me one thing.”

“What is it?”

“Promise me you two won’t get into a fight.”

I huffed out a laugh. “I can’t promise you that, but I will promise that I’ll try not to.”

I grinned, and she rolled her eyes. She was smiling though, so I didn’t think I was in trouble.

She made it a few steps before something else occurred to me. “Cali, wait.”

“What is it?”

“I want to apologize for what happened before. With the carnival and LIPS. I was a complete asshole. I should have been more sensitive about your feelings and thoughts.”

“Thank you.” She leaned close to kiss my cheek and then headed inside, her scent lingering behind her.

I heaved a sigh of relief. *We’ll get through this. I know we will.* I just hoped it would happen sooner rather than later.

As I watched her disappear into the house, Greyson approached.

“Did you work things out?” he asked.

“I hope so.”

He nodded. “You probably won’t believe me, but I’m glad to hear that.”

I snorted. “You’re right—I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t want her to suffer.”

“Yeah, that’s what we both want,” I said, rounding on him. “And if you think that I intended for any of this crap with Ava to happen—”

He held up his hands in front of him. “I don’t. But I also want to make sure it doesn’t happen again. What do you think we can do about that?”

I frowned at my brother. There was no missing his use of *we*. I didn’t trust him to have my best interests at heart, but I did believe him when he said he wanted to keep Cali from suffering. Maybe that was good enough—for now.

“I don’t know,” I finally said. “I hate to admit it, but I suspect that the answer to all of this lies with Ava.”

He frowned. “And I hate to say it, but I think you might be right. Just… be careful. Now that she’s possibly working with Aysel, the sky’s the limit on the crazy, destructive shit that could happen.”

“I know.”

Greyson eyed me for a moment. “I’m here to help, Xavier. I mean it. I’ll do what I can, so keep me in the loop, okay?”

I nodded. I couldn’t believe I was even having this conversation with my brother. That he wasn’t taking advantage of this mess to win points with Cali. It was what I would’ve done if the situation were reversed.

And the fact that Greyson wasn’t trying to screw me over only meant that he was definitely a few points up on me now. I needed to even the score and regain Cali’s trust. I couldn’t let anything jeopardize the future I truly believed was within my reach—a future where Cali chose me.

It was what kept me going, and I couldn’t give up on it.

“I’ll talk to Ava,” I said, and started toward the house.

“You can thank me anytime,” my brother drawled.

I flipped him off over my shoulder and went inside, his laughter chasing after me. After a quick search through the house, I found Ava sitting on the back porch.

“Hey.”

She looked up at me. “Hey.”

“I guess I should thank you.”

She scoffed. “You could just *thank* me. There shouldn’t be any guessing involved.” Then she speared me with her gaze. “Are you grateful enough to give me a ride back to the Vanguard palace?”

That gave me pause. After my conversation with Cali, I didn’t think it would be smart to put myself in a one-on-one situation with Ava. “I’ll find someone else to give you a ride.”

“Are you afraid of me?”

“You know damn well why I don’t want to give you a ride,” I snapped.

Her eyes narrowed. “I sincerely hope you’re not blaming all of this on me. I didn’t do anything. It’s just like I’ve been telling you the whole time—our mate bond matters. It’s pulling me the same way it’s pulling you. Maybe it’s time to stop fighting it.”

She stood and moved closer so I was engulfed with her scent. And god dammit if it didn’t make my mouth water, make my wolf itch to take control again. I forced myself to stay still.

“When you’re ready to stop denying this, you know where to find me. And if you don’t, I’m sure your wolf will.”

She moved toward the door, and my wolf was champing at the bit to go after her.

“Wait.”

She paused and looked at me.

The words tumbled out of my mouth before I could stop them. “I think you should stay.”

**Episode 2576**

I tossed and turned in my bed, squeezing my eyes shut. No matter how many calming breaths I took, how I tried to force my body to relax and just go to sleep, restlessness itched beneath the surface of my skin.

How was it possible that, after this exhausting nightmare of a day, I couldn’t fall asleep?

And oh, I wanted to. I was so, so tired—in every way possible. I wanted to rest, to escape everything that had happened today and hopefully wake up feeling a lot better. Maybe even find a zen perspective on all the crazy stuff that had happened today.

You know, like watching my mate kiss another woman.

*Get over it, Cali. You’ve got to.*

But sleep wasn’t coming. Maybe it was because of that weird nap I’d taken and the haunting dream I’d had about Tony. Thinking of that dream made my stomach clench, and I forced myself out of bed. This wasn’t working. Maybe a cup of chamomile would help.

As I stepped out of my room, I stopped short. Just down the hallway, Ava was disappearing into a bedroom.

And just like that, my mood turned sour again.

*Why does she have to be here? And why is she going into a room? Shouldn’t she be back at the Vanguard palace? Or the mouth of hell that she crawled out of?*

*Xavier*,I told myself. *Chill the fuck out, Cali.*

I bit my lip as exhaustion and fury washed over me in equal parts.

*I should confront her. Tell her that when all of this is over to get the hell out of my house, and away from my mate.*

My grip on the doorknob tightened, and I was ready to launch myself down the hall when I saw Xavier approaching from the other direction.

He stopped when he saw me, his gaze tracking from my face to the door that Ava had just disappeared through. The door closed, presumably by Ava, and Xavier sighed before striding over to me.

And I *knew*. Knew it from the slouch of his shoulders and the grim determination in his face. Knew it from the way he *wasn’t* surprised to see Ava in his home, from the way he wasn’t dragging that bitch out of here.

Xavier must have invited her to stay himself.

When he stopped in front of me, it took every ounce of self-control I possessed not to slam the door in his face. Hadn’t we just talked about this? Hadn’t we just gotten past this hurdle? How were we already doing this again?

“I was hoping to talk to you before you saw that,” Xavier said.

“Is she staying the night?” I asked, keeping my voice low.

Xavier’s jaw worked for a moment before he moved to step into my room. I didn’t budge.

“Can we talk privately?” he asked.

I stepped back and let him into my room before closing the door behind him.

“Did something else happen?” I asked.

His shoulders seemed to curl forward a little bit more. “I asked her to stay.”

I blinked. The fact that he was confirming what I’d already suspected didn’t make me feel any better. Not. One. Bit.

He groaned. “I know how this looks, Cali, believe me, but if you’ll just listen—”

“Like you listen to me?” I snapped. I couldn’t stop myself from saying it. Pain flashed across his face, and instantly I regretted being so harsh.

“I thought we were past this,” he said softly.

*So did I.*

I sighed. “I’m sorry, Xavier. I’m just tired. And more than anything I'm tired of fighting with you,” I said. “I’m tired of Ava, and I wish she didn’t have to be here.”

“I know. And I’m sorry.” He really did look sorry. “The truth is, I asked Ava to stay because I’m worried my wolf might try and shift again to go after her. That we’ll be stuck in this loop. And if it does come to that…”

“You’d need… You’d need Ava to help you shift back, right?” I asked, finishing for him.

Xavier hesitated. “It’s possible.”

I nodded, gulping down the emotion caught in my throat. “Okay then. You’re probably right. We should have her stick around. I want you to stay safe and in control.”

He didn’t outright agree. “With LIPS sniffing around, it’s just too dangerous to have her so far away. My wolf has already forced me to shift. If having Ava nearby will help keep him in line, then… I don’t know what else to do. It’s not just about me—it’s about keeping this entire pack safe.”

God, I hated this. Hated just how much sense it all made.

“I know you don’t like the idea,” he added. “Frankly, I don’t either. I’m sorry, Cali. I just don’t know what else to do, or how long LIPS will he hanging around, or—”

“How long Ava will have to stay here,” I finished for him.

He looked pained, but he nodded.

I didn’t know what to say. This situation, which was already so, so crappy, just seemed to be getting worse at every turn.

*I don’t understand. I’m the one who brought Xavier’s wolf back the first time around. Why is his wolf trying to get back together with Ava? Is it some first love thing? First mate? Is it because Ava’s a werewolf and I’m not? Doesn’t the* due destini *trump everything else?*

“I know this sucks,” Xavier finally said. “But like I said before—I love you. I don’t want to fight with you. I know this is hard, but nothing has changed for me.”

“I know,” I said weakly. “I love you too. I just need some time to adjust.” *And maybe for things not to get worse every time I turn around.* “But… I’ll get used to it. And you’re right. As much as it pains me to admit it, Ava should be here.” The words tasted like poison. I forced myself to meet his eyes. “I’m sorry I was upset initially.”

“It’s okay. I get it.”

I smiled. “I’m going to grab something to drink. Do you want anything?”

He shook his head. “I’m good.”

I ducked out of my room, passing Kira in the hallway.

The witch narrowed her eyes at me, and I ducked my head and hurried past. The mess with Ava was already more than enough—I didn’t need to add a fight over “Geoff” to my list of problems.

I headed downstairs. *Maybe instead of a cup of chamomile, I should have a shot of whiskey…*

If only I actually liked whiskey.

As I reached the ground floor, I ran into Greyson heading toward the stairs. He took one look at me and frowned.

“What’s wrong, Cali?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know what you mean.”

He snorted. “I can read you like a book, Caliana Hart. Something’s on your mind.” His smile dimmed. “Something heavy. Do you want to talk about it?”

Laughter echoed from the kitchen. It sounded like Torin, Artemis, and Rishika. Maybe I didn’t need that drink after all. I’d never wanted to be around people less.

Greyson’s eyes never left my face. “Come on. We can talk in my room.”

I didn’t want to talk—about any of it, to any*one*. But some time with Greyson sounded nice, especially compared to what was happening in the kitchen. And keeping my own company didn’t sound much better.

He led me upstairs and into his bedroom, closing the door behind him. Thankfully, we didn’t encounter anyone in the hallway. Not Xavier, not Kira, and not Ava.

Greyson turned to me, a question in his eyes, and I shook my head. “Can you just hold me? Please?” My voice broke.

“Of course.” His arms wrapped tight around me, and I held onto him like he was my lifeline. After everything, a hug was exactly what I needed. Just some good, old-fashioned comfort. Something solid. Something I could cling to.

So many parts of my life were a total mess right now, but Greyson wasn’t. He was my grounding force.

He kissed the crown of my head. “Do you want to talk?”

I shook my head. I was tired of talking. It wasn’t like it would change anything at this point.

“Can we just lie down?” I asked.

“Sure.” He scooped me up, carried me to his bed, laid me down, and slid in next to me. I rested my head against his chest, listening to the steady thump of his heart. He was so strong, solid, and there for me. It was soothing, and exactly what I needed. I closed my eyes, enjoying the warmth of his body.

The stress of the day finally started to melt away—until someone grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me so hard my bones rattled.

I tried to scream, but nothing came out. My eyes snapped open, and I saw Seluna hovering over the bed.

“It’s time, Caliana.”

**Episode 2577**

I bolted upright, my chest heaving. With wide eyes, I glanced around the room. I was still in Greyson’s bed, but where was Seluna? Was it all just a dream? I could still feel the ghost of her hands on my shoulders.

*Maybe it was a vision.*

I turned to Greyson, but he wasn’t in bed. My heart skipped up into a new rhythm, and my mind raced with worst-case scenarios. Had something happened? Where was he?

*Calm down, Cali. Just breathe and try to think.*

My dream—vision, whatever the hell it was—had calibrated me for worst-case scenarios, for panic. But that didn’t mean there was anything to panic about.

I pulled in a breath. *I’m here. In Greyson’s bed. The sun is shining in through the window. I’m here. No Seluna in sight.*

Once my heart slowed and my mind stopped throwing blaring alarms at everything, I tried to replay my dream. Tried to piece together what I remembered. I’d seen Seluna. I’d felt her shaking me. She’d told me it was time… I knew this had been coming, but what did she mean? Time for *what*?

My stomach clenched. It couldn’t be anything good.

I remembered what Seluna had told me after Lucian had tried to summon her. That she would summon me when the time was right, and not a moment before. At the time, it had been a stark reminder of who exactly was pulling the strings—and it wasn’t Lucian.

But now… Was that the message Seluna had promised me? Had the time finally come? If so, what was I supposed to do now? Lucian had said I should let him know when I heard from Seluna, but the last thing I wanted to do right now was go back to the Vanguard palace. Once in one day was enough, and with LIPS hanging around and Ava and Kira making my life difficult, I really didn’t need another source of grief. I just didn’t have the patience to deal with Lucian right now.

Hell, right now, I never wanted to see him, his sister, or that stupid palace ever again.

The bathroom door swung open, and Greyson stepped out, bare-chested and wearing a pair of exercise shorts that did nothing to conceal his powerful thighs. He was holding one of his workout tanks, and he faltered when he saw me sitting up. “Oh, sorry. I hope I didn’t wake you. I was just heading out to do some cardio.”

My mouth was dry, and I swallowed as I tried to figure out what to tell him. I didn’t want to alarm him. What if it had just been a dream—not a vision or a message or anything worth worrying about?

A crease appeared between his brows, and he slowly approached me. The mattress dipped beneath his weight as he sat next to me. “Are you okay? You look like you’ve just had a nightmare or something.”

I hoped it was *only* a nightmare.

“I was… startled,” I finally managed. “I didn’t know where you were.”

“I never left the room,” he said gently. “I was going to wake up and tell you before I went to work out, but if you want me to stay, I will.” He leaned in and kissed my forehead.

Any comfort he might have given me evaporated when I felt a pair of phantom hands on my shoulders, squeezing me just like they had before, when I’d seen Seluna in my dream.

I jolted away. “It’s okay! I’m going to take a shower! Have a good workout!”

He didn’t look convinced. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.” I nodded wildly. I probably looked like a crazy bobblehead. “Go get your steps in, your reps, or whatever.”

After a beat, he stood, a small smile tugging at his lips. “I’ll find you later, okay?”

I forced a smile of my own. “Okay.”

I waited until I heard his footsteps on the staircase before darting out of his room and back to my own. Fortunately, I didn’t encounter anyone in the hallway. I could only imagine how crazy I looked. And if I were to encounter Ava… Well, I didn’t know if I could be held responsible for my actions.

I closed my bedroom door behind me and raced to my bathroom, tugging down my shirt and contorting my body to look at the handprints in the mirror. Was it my imagination, or were they almost glowing with renewed heat?

I bit my lip. I honestly couldn’t tell if this was real, or if I was just panicking. Fear and shock could make people believe all kinds of things.

The only logical thing I could do was jump in the shower, turning the heat up as high as I could tolerate before I started to scrub at the handprints. My skin turned raw before I realized exactly what I was doing.

*You can’t scrub them off, Cali. They’re not going anywhere.*

My hand, still clutching the washcloth, fell to my side.

Okay, so maybe I was panicking a little.

Had that dream truly been a visit from Seluna? Something beyond a run-of-the-mill nightmare? If the handprints were any indication, it sure seemed to be. The question was: what was I going to do about it?

I wished I had an answer.

I turned off the shower and dried off. Wrapped in a towel, I checked the handprints in the mirror again. Were they still glowing? It was hard to tell. They stood out against my skin like a beacon, regardless.

*Maybe it was just a trick of the light.* My shoulders relaxed. *I probably imagined the whole thing. It was just a bad dream, and thanks to all the crazy stuff that’s been happening, I panicked and assumed it was a real summons or something.*

The thought eased the panic slipping through my body. Because it definitely wasn’t a real summons.

Was it?

I shook my head and stared at myself in the mirror. “Get a grip.”

I went into my bedroom and got dressed for the day, pulling on a sweatshirt so nobody would be able to see the handprints. Just in case. And hey, if I didn’t have to look at them constantly, then I wouldn’t have to think about Seluna or Lucian.

It was a win-win.

By the time I was fully dressed and heading downstairs, the worst of my fear had abated. I was almost certain it had just been a bad dream, which made sense because Lucian had asked me about Seluna when I’d seen him yesterday. I’d panicked earlier because I was just worried that my regular bad dream was one of *those* dreams. Which it obviously wasn’t. I had a lot to worry about right now, a lot of things stressing me out—Lucian, Seluna, LIPS… and Xavier and Ava.

My stomach twisted. I’d hoped a good night’s sleep would give me a new perspective, but no matter how I looked at it, all I could see was Xavier kissing Ava.

I hesitated in the kitchen doorway. Was Xavier in there? I wasn’t sure I was ready to face him just yet. Even though I knew I forgave him and that all of this was because of his messed-up mate bond with her… It was still difficult, and I needed time.

Torin spotted me and rushed up, putting an arm around me. “Hey, Cali, are you okay? I saw you rush out last night. You looked upset.”

“I was just worried about Xavier, but I’m okay now,” I lied.

We walked into the kitchen together. No Xavier in sight. I breathed a sigh of relief and then turned to Artemis, who was seated at the table, looking at something on a laptop.

I made a beeline for the coffeemaker. “Morning, Artemis.”

My sister waved, then turned to Torin. “It’s a terrible idea.”

He pointed. “I think they’re really cute.”

“They’re not. Trust me. Cali, what do you think?”

I finished pouring the coffee into my mug then looked up at my sister. “What’s going on?”

“Torin’s thinking these would be great Christmas presents.” She turned the laptop toward me so I could see the screen.

The page featured holiday boxer briefs in red, green, and white with sayings like, “Santa’s Ass,” “Ho, ho, ho…,” and “Santa baby.”

*Oh my god.*

I tried to keep my expression neutral.

“Who are these for?” I asked. Like there was anyone in the world for whom these boxers would be appropriate.

Torin beamed. “Tom?”

Artemis and I grimaced. “I agree with Artemis. You should look for something less… spirited?”

“Gross?” she supplied.

Torin sighed. “I spent a lot of time choosing those. What now?”

“Why don’t you get him a mug, or some of those hot chocolate bombs? You know, anything except those boxers.” I sipped my coffee and made a face. *Why is it so bitter?*

Then a realization hit me.

Christmas present. I hadn’t gotten any presents for anyone yet. So not only did I have all the pack stuff to worry about, plus Ava and Xavier, but unless I got my act together, I was going to have a major Christmas failure on my hands.

I was already responsible for my two mates’ Secret Santa presents, plus my family and friends. And I’d also planned to get something special for Greyson and Xavier in addition to their Secret Santa gifts.

Maybe Christmas shopping would be a good way to take my mind off everything.

*I should ask Lola if she wants to go to the mall…*

Footsteps sounded in the hallway, and I looked up as Xavier came in, looking grave.

Our eyes locked, and he approached me, ignoring Torin and Artemis completely. “Can we talk?”

**Episode 2578**

MARTA

I woke up in my bed, Lilac snoring lightly next to me. As I sleepily turned to face him, a smile tugged at my lips. Despite starting out as a complete and utter mess, last night had really turned around once Lilac finally opened up to me.

My smile dimmed. At least, until I’d received that message from the witch council.

I tried to free myself from Lilac’s embrace. The arm slung over my midsection was surprisingly heavy. As I lifted it so I could escape, he pulled me in tight, and I bit my lip to hold back my laughter. When I glanced up at his face, he still seemed to be asleep.

Slowly, I struggled to ease myself out of his grip and reach the drawer on my nightstand. His arm was still slung across my lap as I plucked the letter out of the drawer and sat up. My heart racing, I peeled the letter out of the envelope and read the same three words I’d already read what felt like a hundred times.

*That’s strike one.*

I sighed. What did that even mean? What had I done to earn a “strike”? It wasn’t as if I’d used any magic outside of my training sessions with Okorie.

The only possible reason I could think of was that the witch council somehow knew I’d gone out with Lilac, that I’d skipped out on my mentoring session. But Okorie had pretty much given me his blessing to go with Lilac—it wasn’t like I’d ditched him.

*Should I tell Okorie about this? He might know what’s going on…*

But I wasn’t sure I wanted to loop him in. What if there was something horrible waiting for me when I got to the end of my strikes? And just how many strikes was I gonna get before I ran out? Baseball had three, but did witch councils work the same way?

“What’re you doin’?” Lilac grumbled, clearly still half asleep. “S’too early. Come back here and keep me warm.”

I leaned down to tuck the letter back into my nightstand drawer, but Lilac wasn’t going to wait any longer.

With a growl, he grabbed me from behind and pulled me into him. He playfully growled in my ear, and in my shock, I dropped the letter.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“It’s time for one thing: snuggles and sleep.” He tucked me against his body and pulled the covers back over us.

“That’s actually two things.”

“Are you trying to start something?”

I laughed. I much preferred this kind of “fight” to the ones Lilac and I had been having lately. I pushed those memories away. Lilac was acting like himself again, and mate or no mate, things were good.

I rolled over in his arms so I could face him. “There’s only gonna be a problem if you create one,” I teased.

His brows rose, and he rolled on top of me, so I could feel every inch of him pressing against my front. His fingers entwined with mine, pressing my hands into the mattress on either side of my head.

His voice dropped into that low timbre that made my toes curl. “Is that so?”

Butterflies were dancing in my stomach as he leaned down to kiss me. I kissed him back with abandon, pouring everything I had into it.

And then, for a while, neither one of us had anything left to say.

Sometime later, I headed downstairs to grab something to eat before my mentoring session with Okorie. Like anything else, my magic seemed to work better with something in my stomach, and I’d worked up quite an appetite with Lilac that morning.

The letter from the witch council was burning a hole in my pocket. I didn’t know for sure if I wanted to show it to Okorie when I arrived at our training session, but I hadn’t been able to bring myself to just leave it in my room either.

I found Dani in the kitchen, eating some toast.

“Hey.” I grabbed a banana out of the fruit bowl and took a seat next to her.

“How was your date with Lilac yesterday?”

My brows rose. “How did you know it was a date?”

She rolled her eyes. “It was pretty obvious. It must have been nice to get away for a little while.”

My stomach tightened with guilt. It had never occurred to me just how Dani probably wanted to get away and take a break from the mentoring—even just for a day. It was so taxing on both of us, mentally and emotionally. Not that I’d ever assumed it’d be easy, but I hadn’t been prepared for it to be so much *work.*

Now that I thought about it, Okorie probably wanted a break too. Scratch that—I *knew* he did.

“It wasn’t exactly what I expected,” I admitted, thinking back to Lilac’s checklist of “good boyfriend” behavior. “But it ended up being really fun.”

It was an oversimplification, sugarcoating a whole lot of not so nice stuff, but it wasn’t like I was gonna tell Dani that Lilac and I had spent most of the date fighting.

A *pop* sounded near the doorway, and Okorie strolled in. My jaw dropped.

He looked… different.

Casual.

Comfortable?

Okorie was wearing sweatpants. And a hoodie. And sneakers. He lowered his sunglasses and nodded to us in greeting. “Hey.” His voice was low and rough. Like he hadn’t slept.

I blinked. Had I woken up in some alternate universe?

Dani and I exchanged wide-eyed glances.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Do you want some mocha?” Dani added.

He speared me with a look before turning to Dani with a considerably gentler expression. “Yes, please. Hit me with it.”

As she hurried to make his drink, I looked him up and down. “Okay, seriously. What happened to you?”

I’d never seen him like this. I hadn’t even thought Okorie *owned* sweatpants. Or a hoodie. Or anything else he was wearing. He always looked so professional and put together. So posh. But this… He looked like a television character who was hungover for the first time. Or going through a breakup.

Neither one really seemed his style.

He waved me off. “Nothing you need to worry about. How was playing hooky? Or should I say, nooky?” He snorted. “If anyone still says that.” He tilted his sunglasses down again and seemed to size me up. “Maybe you do.”

I scoffed. Where the hell did he get off, talking about my personal life like that? Sure, Lilac and I might have made up last night, and then again this morning, but that wasn’t any of his business. And as my mentor, it definitely wasn’t appropriate.

*Should I mention the letter?* I was as unsure now as I had been last night. This version of Okorie didn’t seem particularly kind or trustworthy. He’d probably just judge me for getting back on the council’s radar.

Dani brought over a mug of mocha and set it down in front of him. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.” He grabbed the mug and started to chug it.

Again, Dani and I looked at each other in alarm.

“Um, maybe you should slow down,” she said.

He paused, the mug resting just beneath his lips. “If you’d had a night like the one I had, you’d be drinking it too.”

I grabbed the mug from him and set it down on the table.

“Are you going to stop being so secretive and just tell us what you were doing last night?”

He let out a long-suffering sigh that made me want to choke him. “If you must know, I was speaking with Judge Hawthorne. I was called to a very late-night meeting in San Francisco at the witch council.”

I pulled in a breath, and I heard Dani do the same. My stomach twisted so tight, I suddenly felt ill.

“What for?” I managed to ask.

Okorie down the rest of the mocha, then snagged the remaining piece of Dani’s half-eaten toast. “Judge Hawthorne called me in for a meeting to check in on the two of you.” He took a large bite of toast, chewing obnoxiously loud. “The council decided they wanted an update on you two, so I had to go provide it.”

Dani swallowed audibly. “What did you say about us?”

“You both got glowing reviews.” He shrugged. “You *are* both making progress, slowly but surely, even if you don’t think so.”

The vise around my stomach released, but only a little bit. *If Okorie was with Hawthorne last night, is that why I got the letter from the council?*

“Don’t look at me like I’m the Grim Reaper,” he said. “You both got A pluses, so you can relax. Now, why don’t we get started?” He gestured for us to get up from the table.

Dani immediately headed out, but I grabbed his sweatshirt and pulled him back. “What did you tell them about me?”

He rolled his eyes. “You mean, did I tell them about your hooky date adventure? No. I told them you’re an upstanding mentee. I don’t care what you do. Your progress is on you, and you’re still making progress. One day off isn’t going to hurt.”

But what if it did? I pulled the letter out of my pocket and handed it to him. “What happens to us if they know you lied?”

**Episode 2579**

XAVIER

At first, Cali didn’t answer me. She just sipped her coffee in silence with a grimace. Either she didn’t want to talk to me, or she just didn’t like the way her coffee tasted.

I hoped it was the latter.

“Please,” I pressed. I hated that so much was hanging between us, that she was looking at me like that, that there was a scenario in which she wanted any space from me at all. All I wanted was to clear the air. To talk about last night now that she’d had some time to rest and come to terms with things, and emphasize the true reason why Ava was staying. That I wasn’t doing it for me, or my wolf, but to keep the pack safe.

If there were any other solution here, I’d take it. But I didn’t think that was likely to happen at this point. This was the best we could do.

Cali set her mug down. She still hadn’t said anything. I could tell from the tense line of her jaw that she was upset—*still* upset. I knew, deep down and despite all her assurances, that she probably hadn’t stopped being upset from the moment she’d seen me kissing Ava. Maybe even before that, too.

But right now, my mate was trying to save face. Probably for me. Which made me feel about ten thousand times shittier—not only was I the reason why she was going through all this shit, but she was also trying to hide all of her feelings about it for my benefit.

“Can we talk outside?” I asked.

She answered me with a nod. “I’ll get my coat.”

I forced a smile as I watched her disappear down the hallway. This was something. She was speaking to me now, and she was willing to speak to me somewhere private. Somewhere I could touch her without any magical interference.

That had to be a good sign, right?

Maybe, just maybe, I could put everything out there on the table and Cali would forgive me.

While I waited for Cali to return, Torin sidled up to me, laptop in hand. “Would you wear these?”

He turned the laptop around to show me the screen. He’d found an online store selling Christmas-themed underwear. My brows nearly disappeared into my hairline as I took in the red- and green-striped boxers complete with a dancing reindeer design on one ass cheek and actual tiny bells stitched into the hem.

I’d never seen something so horrifying in my entire life—and I was a mercenary. It was pretty incredible, actually.

“Absolutely not,” I said shortly.

Torin seemed to deflate. “Are you sure? Because I think they’d look really cute on you and Greyson. Just imagine—brothers with matching underwear!”

I did imagine it. Briefly, and against my will. Fingers crossed that with enough time and liquor, I’d forget all about it.

I cleared my throat. “I’m sure. They’re just not to my taste. But you’re right—they would look amazing on Greyson. I really think he’d love them.”

“Really?” Torin’s whole face lit up.

“Really.” I smiled, and it was one hundred percent real. “In fact, I think you should get him a pair for every day of the week.”

“That’s a great idea!” Torin set the laptop down and started clicking through the website with new purpose. “Thank goodness for Tom’s magic credit card!”

I pursed my lips, glancing over at Artemis, who had a front row seat to Torin’s and my interaction. She rolled her eyes, but I could see a smile tugging at her lips.

I wondered if Cali had said anything to Artemis about last night. Probably—they were sisters, after all. Was Artemis on Team Greyson after what happened yesterday?

*At least Torin doesn’t hate me. He doesn’t hate anybody. He probably could have found something to love about his worst enemy.*

But I imagined there were a few people around here who did actually hate me, thanks to this mess with Ava.

Cali came back in, zipping up her coat as she went. She was all bundled up now, and she looked so cute. She grabbed her coffee mug and followed me outside.

When we got to the porch, she stopped and leaned against the railing, her hands still full with her coffee mug. “I’m listening.”

Her tone was a hell of a lot colder than I would have liked, but I forced some brightness into my voice as I shook my head. “Not here.”

I wanted to talk to her where no one else could hear—unlike last night, when Greyson had been conveniently eavesdropping the whole time. Plus, I wanted to be able to touch her the way I wanted to. To hold her hand and maybe more. To do all the things I couldn’t while Big Mac’s spell was in place.

She set her coffee down on the banister and sighed. “Fine. Lead the way.”

I led her through the yard, past where Rishika and Sage were doing some kind of workout. It looked like a million burpees. Rishika was red-faced and determined, while Sage looked like she wanted to cry.

Not exactly the backdrop I had in mind.

“How about we go for a walk through the woods?”

She nodded, her only response.

This was going great.

As we walked along the trail, leaving Rishika’s panting breaths and Sage’s loud groans of pain behind, Cali glanced at me. “Why is your hair wet? Did you shower?”

I frowned. “Um, yeah. Why wouldn’t I have showered?”

“Why did you?” she pressed.

I could tell she was accusing me of something. I just didn’t know what it was. “Don’t I usually shower in the morning? Didn’t you do the same?”

Then realization hit.

*Wait. Does she seriously think I showered this morning because I slept with Ava last night?*

I pulled in a deep breath and forced myself to stay calm. Cali’s assumption might not have been logical, but this was just as hard for her as it was for me. Maybe even harder. I needed to be patient—even if it killed me.

I didn’t want to fight again. I didn’t want to be angry. I wanted to convince her how much I loved her, how sorry I was for everything that had happened.

Cali suddenly lurched to a stop. We were maybe a few minutes away from the pack house. “You wanted to talk. What’s up?”

I reached for her hand—and she yanked it back before I could make contact.

I sighed. “Cali, I don’t want to fight with you.”

“I don’t want to fight either.”

I moved as close to her as she would allow. “I know you’re upset. And I know you have every reason to feel that way. And if I could take back everything that happened last night—”

She cut me off. “It’s okay, Xavier. I understand why you had to ask Ava to stay. I shouldn’t have gotten so upset yesterday. I’m sorry about it. It was just… a surprise.”

“I can imagine. I’m sor—”

“You don’t have to apologize again. I want you and your wolf to be safe, and if that means we have to have Ava here, so be it. I can handle her.” She gave me a small smile that didn’t look one hundred percent forced, which was probably the best I was going to get.

I pulled in a breath. “You have no idea how much it means to me that you’re willing to put up with this. I know how hard it must be, and I want you to know that I’m not taking it for granted. But I need to be honest with you. Brutally honest, if necessary. You asked me to be.”

Cali swallowed audibly. “I did. What is it?”

“I’m struggling to overcome the mate bond with Ava, and my wolf is having an even more difficult time of it.” Her smile had disappeared, but I forced myself to continue. “I know that’s not what you want to hear, but I need you to understand. My connection to Ava—it’s similar to the *due destini*. I’m being pulled in two directions. Only, I don’t have a curse; I have two mate bonds. But the one I have with you is the only one that truly matters to me.”

I reached out to take her hand, and she let me.

“I may not have fully understood what you’ve been through with the *due destini* until now,” I continued. “I’m sorry I didn’t before, but the one thing I’m not sorry about in all of this is my love for you. I don’t love Ava, mate bond or not. I know it, she knows it, and I want you to know it too.”

Cali was looking down at the ground. She hadn’t said a word since I’d told her the full truth.

I tilted her chin up. “Say something. Tell me what’s going on in that head of yours.”

She wiped her eyes. “I was so scared. For a minute I thought I was losing you, and I don’t want to.”

I pulled her into a hug, and her arms wrapped tight around my waist. Her warm body sinking against mine was the best feeling in the world. “I’m so sorry, Cali. I never wanted you to feel that way, but please know that you’re never going to lose me.”

She pulled back so she could look into my eyes. “Do you mean that?”

“I’ve never meant anything more.”

Her arms slipped around my neck, and I tilted my head down and kissed her.

**Episode 2580**

Tears slipped down my face as I threw myself into the kiss. Xavier’s fingers sank into my hair, tilting my head up as his teeth caught my full bottom lip. I gasped as he deepened the kiss, taking charge of my mouth.

If he noticed the wetness on my cheeks, it didn’t seem to slow him down. So I held on tight, my fingers linked behind his neck, and just focused on Xavier. On being here with him in this moment and forgetting everything else.

I hadn’t wanted to talk to him when he’d approached me in the kitchen, but now I was glad that I had. Because I believed him. Or, at least, I wanted to. He’d just opened his heart to me, told me the full truth—even if it was a heavy one. How could I not believe him? How could I take that gift he’d given me and return it with anything other than love?

Ava would still be a problem, of course. I struggled to imagine a scenario in which Ava would ever, for even one full day, stop being a problem. But right now, right here, with the crisp winter air wrapping around us, tucked away from the pack house and all its troubles, it was just Xavier and me. Much like how it had been when I’d first fallen in love with him.

He’d just told me I would never lose him, and now I was holding onto him for dear life to keep him here with me for as long as we could stay away. All our other problems—Ava, Kira, Seluna—none of that mattered right now, not as long as we were out of the house, away from all the other distractions.

We were safe here.

Xavier broke away from my mouth and began kissing a hot trail down my throat, yanking down the zipper of my coat to expose more skin. “Fuck, I missed this. All I’ve wanted all this time was to be with you again.”

I’d missed him too. Even when I was in Portland with Greyson, I’d missed Xavier.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, still peppering my neck with kisses. “I know I’ve said it before, but I really do mean it. I never ever wanted to hurt you, and I don’t ever want to fight with you again.”

“I know.” I smiled and released one of my hands from the back of his neck to card through his hair. “It’s okay. Everything’s going to be okay.”

“I know I’ll have to deal with Ava—”

I pressed a finger to his lips. “I know you will. But I don’t want to talk about her. Not here. Not now. Not when we’re together like this. Can we just… pretend she doesn’t exist? Just for a little while?”

He smiled. “Of course.”

And then he picked up right where he’d left off: kissing my neck.

I savored the sensation of his lips against my skin, even as some small part of me steeled myself for the reality that Ava was still in the house, and was as much a problem for Xavier—and for me—as ever.

Xavier had confessed that he was struggling. But he was doing his best to take control, and I didn’t want to make him feel even worse. I believed in one thing: that his mate bond with me was strong, and that I was gonna do everything I could to keep it that way.

I caught Xavier’s lips with my own, and he walked me backward until my back met a thick tree trunk. His fingers entwined with mine, holding my hands above my head as he kissed me with renewed passion. Xavier always did love taking control, didn’t he?

We had this moment, and there was no telling when we’d get another one. I wasn’t going to miss it for the world. He kissed me and kissed me until I was gasping for air, and then he kissed me some more.

His hands finally let go of mine, and one hand wrapped around the long length of my hair and yanked—tipping my head back to offer better access to my lips and throat. I twisted my fingers into his shirt, pulling him closer, needing more.

More kisses, more pleasure, more of the man who never failed to set my blood on fire. His teeth snagged on the crook of my neck, nipping just hard enough that the dose of pleasure-pain went straight to the apex of my thighs.

“You have no idea how much I’ve wanted this,” he rasped into my ear before kissing his way down to the shallow indentation his teeth had left in my neck. His fingers tugged impatiently at the hem of my shirt beneath my unzipped coat, and electricity coursed through me when his warm hands landed on the bare skin underneath. “I love you so much, tiger. I need you so badly.”

His broad, warm hand skimmed up beneath my shirt to tease at my breast through the material of my bra, and I let out a soft moan.

“You can have me,” I breathed. “Right here. Right now.”

He pulled back far enough to look at my face. Was he surprised I agreed to have sex in the woods with him? Probably. Anyone could stumble across us. A bear could come attack us for all I knew. But what I did know was I didn’t want to be anywhere else right now. I wanted to be here with him, feeling him. All of him.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

I nodded. “I want you, Xavier. If you stop, I’ll never forgive you.”

My words seemed to break whatever sense of self-control had been holding him back. In a blur, his lips were sealed over mine, and his hands slipped down to the button of my jeans while my own fingers made quick work of his pants.

Once my legs were freed from my underwear and jeans, Xavier knelt at my feet, flashing me a boyish grin before he slung one of my legs over his shoulder.

“Xavie—oh!”

His lips made contact with my center, and my vision whited out. I grabbed onto his head and the tree trunk behind me to stay upright. He ate me like a man starved, and in no time at all, I was biting my lip as my orgasm washed over me.

He lowered one shaking leg back to the ground, grinning, his mouth and chin still shiny with my slick.

I couldn’t remember the last time he’d looked so gorgeous.

“You’re fucking delicious,” he said, and just like that, I was ready for more.

I pulled him in, kissing the taste of myself out of his mouth. He lifted me by my waist, and like a seamlessly choreographed dance, my legs wound around his hips. His hardened cock rocked against my wetness once, and then he was sheathing himself inside me.

His hand covered my mouth, smothering the cry of pleasure that threatened to come out of my throat. Xavier held himself inside me for just a moment, breathing heavily into the hollow of my neck, his fingers still curled over my mouth. Then, when he felt me buck my hips, he began to move.

His mouth took charge of my own, and I moaned against his lips. He lifted me against him, leveraging for just the right angle, and stars burst behind my eyes as sensation lit up my base. I cupped his face in my hands, kissing him back as good as he gave.

He broke away from my mouth, resting his head against my neck as he thrust into me so deeply it felt like he was trying to brand me from the inside.

“Cali,” he whispered against my skin. “*Mine.*”

I clutched him closer to me, my legs tightening around his hips. Always closer. Desperately trying to savor this moment for as long as I could, because god only knew when we’d get another chance.

White-hot light coiled low in my belly, and I fought against the impending tidal wave.

“Not yet. Not yet. Not yet,” I whispered frantically as my toes curled against my will. I wasn’t ready for it to be over.

“Come for me, baby.”

His hand reached between us, rubbing that bundle of nerves just right. A shockwave smashed into me, and I screamed into his mouth as my muscles clamped down on him, triggering his release. I moaned through each aftershock, and every one of Xavier’s stuttering thrusts and moans was bittersweet music to my ears.

We were still catching our breaths when Xavier set me back down on my feet. He tucked a lock of hair behind my ear and kissed me gently, sweetly, telling me without words just how much I meant to him.

A twig broke nearby, and I jumped at the sound, looking around wildly. Was someone watching us?

But, as far as I could tell, there was nobody there.

I tugged my clothes back into place. “We should probably go back to the house.”

“I think that’s—” Xavier froze next to me, and I looked up at him. His eyes were locked onto my exposed arms. “Cali, what happened to your shoulders?”

**Episode 2581**

GREYSON

I jogged through the woods, the crisp December air heaving in and out of my lungs as I made my way back to the pack house at the end of my run.

Normally, I shifted into my wolf form when I did cardio and pushed myself to run at increasingly breakneck speeds through the forest. But with LIPS out and about, and their drones literally capable of popping up just about anywhere, I was sticking to my human form. It was safer, but so much slower in the grand scheme. I’d probably pushed myself a little harder than was strictly necessary, just to get a fleeting feel of the air rushing through my hair and the trees whizzing past.

It was a pretty damn cheap imitation, all things considered, but it was the best I was going to get right now.

Running was also a great excuse to scope out the woods for those drones, or any LIPS team members out searching for Big Fluffy.

A smile tugged at my lips. Rhonda’s nickname for Xavier’s wolf form would *never* not be funny to me.

I hadn’t encountered anyone else on my run—no other people, no wolves, no drones, no LIPS. It was, dare I say, quiet on the Redwood pack grounds. And as comforting as that thought was, it also kind of made me itchy. I’d forgotten what it was like to feel a sense of peace around the pack, even for just the duration of a jog.

I slowed as I approached the house, glancing up at Cali’s window. I hoped she was feeling better. Yesterday had been so hard on her, and even this morning I’d been able to tell she was holding something back. Her reaction when I’d come out of the bathroom seemed to go beyond simply waking up and being surprised that I wasn’t there beside her.

*She was probably worried about Xavier.*

My molars ground together at the thought. I completely understood why, but that didn’t mean I had to like it. Ava seemed to be a flashpoint in her relationship with Xavier, and while I had tried to explain how a werewolf could struggle for control against his own wolf, it wasn’t really something a non-werewolf would ever be able to truly understand.

But if Cali were a werewolf…

God, the thought was so tempting, it hurt to think about. I couldn’t linger on it, because I knew the more I thought about it, the more I’d want it, and I still didn’t even know if such a thing was possible, or advisable.

But how amazing would it be if Cali were a werewolf? If I could shift with her, see her face as we ran through the woods. I could mark her as my mate officially.

And finally make her my Luna.

I pushed the thoughts away. I didn’t want to get ahead of myself, and even if she wanted it, I didn’t believe Cali was ready to be turned. She might never be. After everything that had happened with Ava lately, the whole idea might have been soured for her.

Still, what Cali was going through right now was Xavier’s problem to solve, not mine. The best I could do—and the most I was willing to do—was help Cali through the difficult time the only way I knew how. I was going to show her my support and love her with all my heart.

I entered the house and was immediately met with cheers and clapping and laughter and shouts coming from the living room. As I headed that way, I had to weave around what looked like all the furniture that had previously been located in the living room.

*What the hell is going on?*

When I reached the doorway to the living room, I stopped short, completely dumbfounded at what I was seeing.

The entire living room had been cleared out, save for the giant Christmas tree. It was one large, mostly empty space now, and pretty much every member of the pack was crammed inside. Torin was standing on a chair off to one side with a stopwatch while Ravi and Zainab were in the middle of the room, stripping off their clothes.

Sage stood at a whiteboard that I’d had no idea the pack even owned as Torin counted down, “Three, two, one!”

The room exploded into cheers, overpowering the sound of cracking bones as Ravi and Zainab shifted. It happened in a blur, and then Torin shouted, “And Zainab is the winner of round four by a tenth of a second!”

I blinked. I’d been gone for all of an hour. Maybe less. How had the entire pack lost their minds in such a short time?

I spotted Rishika nearby and pulled her aside. “Um… What the hell is going on?”

She was red-faced and smiling, clearly just as into this sideshow as everyone else. “We've been having a contest to see who can shift the fastest.”

I blinked. I understood what she was saying, but her words didn’t make any sense. “You’re joking, right?”

She shrugged. “I know it sounds… excessive—”

“I was gonna say crazy.”

“—but everyone was getting restless. They can’t shift, and it’s unnatural for us to stay in our human forms for so long. They’re missing a huge piece of what makes them tick. So Torin came up with this contest. This really weird contest.”

“Really weird,” I agreed.

“But I think it really is helping. You can see it on their faces. Everyone’s laughing and having a good time. They’re getting a chance to shift and get their blood pumping.” She smiled. “It’s a good solution.”

I had to laugh, and I shrugged. “I mean, I’m not against it if it’s helping.”

It was so bizarrely funny though, I didn’t know why they thought I would’ve been upset about it. Apart, I suppose, from the fact that they were shifting, but the pack members were following the rules and not shifting outside. It was an option that kept us safe and allowed pack members to shift. A win-win.

*Torin might be a genius.*

“And now for the second half of round four,” Torin bellowed from his place atop the dining room chair. “How long to shift back to human and get fully dressed? The round will start in three… two… one!”

This time, I heard the usual cracking sounds as Ravi and Zainab shifted back. They scrambled and fumbled with their discarded clothes, practically tripping over themselves in their hurry to get dressed.

Again, so fucking weird. But even I had to laugh when Ravi pulled his shirt on and got it stuck around his head.

“And….” Torin drawled as the competitors righted their clothing. “We have a tie!”

More cheers echoed through the room, and Sage added the times to the bracket on the board.

Torin looked around. “Who’s next?”

To my utter shock, Tom stepped forward. “I’ll give it a shot.”

Another round of cheers and clapping.

*Huh. I guess this is happening. They’re stuck inside, so they’ve invented a new sport: competitive shifting.*

And as long as they kept it inside, I had no problem with it.

Rishika nudged my shoulder. “You should join the contest.”

I hesitated, but some of the other pack members had overheard her.

“Alpha! Alpha!” Sage cheered. “Come on! You have to show us how it’s done!”

There was no getting out of this now.

“I’ll take on the winner,” I announced to more cheers.

Barely containing my grin, I ducked into the kitchen to get a glass of water as Cali came in from outside. She looked… disheveled. Pine needles and leaves were stuck to her hair and her clothes.

She stopped short when she saw me, her eyes going wide. “Oh. Hi!”

I was about to ask her what had happened when my brother came in right behind her—looking equally disheveled. All the puzzle pieces snapped into place.

My jaw tensed. I wasn’t stupid. I knew what had happened. I couldn’t honestly say I was surprised, and I didn’t want to blame anyone, even if it did hurt to see it.

All I could do was make a concentrated effort not to breathe through my nose.

Cali glanced over her shoulder at Xavier, who was looking at me. The expression on his face just dared me to say something. Even with the laughter and cheers going on in the other room, the tension was so thick in here, I could hardly breathe.

“We have a problem,” Xavier said suddenly.

*No shit.* I didn’t need someone to explain what I knew had likely just happened.

I forced myself to stay calm. “I guess we’ll add it to the list. What’s going on now?”

Xavier glanced at Cali. “Show him.”

With a grimace, she took off her coat and then tugged the wide neck of her sweatshirt down to reveal her shoulder.

“Take a look,” Xavier said.

My gaze was instantly riveted to one of the handprints. It looked darker now, almost luminescent.

“Are you okay?” I asked her. “When did this happen?”

She didn’t quite meet my eyes. “This morning. I think it’s what woke me up.”

A hundred questions sprang to the tip of my tongue, the first of which was: *why didn’t you tell me earlier?* But I held back. I didn’t want to get into this in front of Xavier.

“Seluna came to me this morning,” Cali continued. “I thought I was dreaming, but the handprints… I think Seluna’s telling me it’s time to go to Lucian and do another ceremony.”

Xavier shook his head. “I don’t want you anywhere near the princeling.”

On that, at least, my brother and I agreed. “Cali, what happens if you don’t go?”

**Episode 2582**

CHARLIE

Violet, Lilac, and I watched the competition going down in the newly cleared-out living room. Admittedly, I’d only been a werewolf for a little while—I was practically a newborn compared to everyone else here—but I couldn’t help but wonder if I was the only one who found this situation a little… *off*.

You know, even by Redwood pack standards.

Not that I wasn’t impressed by the speed and skill with which my fellow pack members shifted. I just didn’t understand why this was happening. It’d been a little frustrating, the last couple days, to stave off that desire to shift, but it wasn’t like it was unbearable. Was everyone really so desperate to shift that they couldn’t make it a couple days without needing this weird contest to blow off steam?

Or was I the weirdo because I didn’t need it?

“I bet I can beat you,” Violet said, nudging Lilac with her elbow. Both of them had had their eyes glued to the competition from the moment it had gotten started, and I had a feeling it was only a matter of time before my mate and her twin brother started stripping down.

I kept waiting for the moment when life as a werewolf would stop surprising me. Today was evidence that I hadn’t reached that point just yet.

Lilac scoffed. “Yeah, right. Everyone knows I’m faster.”

“Says who?” Violet asked.

“Everyone. I mean, I was even born first. I’ve been beating you across the finish line since the day we were born.”

Violet rolled her eyes. “That doesn’t mean anything.”

“Fine. My bond with Plum is new and fresh—we’ll totally whip your butt.”

“All that means is that I had plenty of time to gain experience while you weren’t shifting.” Violet turned to me. “You should face Charlie. He’s more your pace.”

I frowned. “Um… Sick burn, I guess?”

Lilac looked shocked. “Uh, yeah. It is. I’m way out of the new guy’s league.”

Violet shook her head. “You two have the freshest bonds with your wolves. You’re totally on the same page. But then again, Charlie is also a hunter, so he’s probably one of the fastest shifters here.”

I cleared my throat. “I, um… I think I’d rather just watch. Cheer everyone on.”

“But you look great as a wolf!” Violet protested.

“Plus, you’re a natural competitor,” Lilac added. “What, are you afraid I’m going to embarrass you when I wipe the floor with you?”

I laughed. “I’m not worried about that.”

Still, though, my stomach twisted at the thought of competing in this strange contest. I’d never been afraid of a little competition, and the rules here were easy enough. Back in Minnesota, before I’d become a werewolf, I’d been the captain of several sports teams. I loved competition.

But none of my many athletic activities had required me to be naked in front of everyone.

Violet frowned. “Why don’t you want to join in?”

I forced a smile and lowered my voice. “Because you’re the only one here I want to be naked in front of.”

She playfully pushed me. “But you’d probably win! You’re so fast and strong. Seriously, you’re such a natural. You should give yourself more credit.”

Wow, she was really trying to butter me up. And it was kind of working.

“It does look fun,” I conceded. “And I have been itching to shift lately. Not as bad as some others, but… it would be nice.”

She laughed. “Oh, believe me. I have, too.”

“I think it has something to do with not being allowed to. The second you make something off limits, it’s all anyone’s gonna want to do.”

“You’re right.” She nodded. “So… Are you going to do it, or not?”

Lilac leaned in with a smirk. “Or are you gonna wuss out?”

I had to hand it to my mate’s brother. He really knew how to push my buttons. I wasn’t thrilled about it.

I sighed. “I guess I can’t refuse the challenge. Count me in.”

Both Violet and Lilac cheered, and in that moment, they’d never looked more alike. I was struck by what a fearsome force the two of them made.

*Forget werewolves, they should go into law. They could convince a jury of anything.*

Tom and Mrs. Smith were next in the competition bracket, and I grimaced as they stepped up to face each other.

I wasn’t sure I wanted to see this, and judging by Big Mac’s expression, she didn’t want anyone to see it either.

“So did you fix things with Marta yesterday?” Violet asked conversationally, never taking her eyes off of the older competitors on center stage. “If you didn’t, I’m going to have to hit you.”

“Marta and I are fine. It’s all worked out,” he said.

I leaned in and nudged Violet. *Remember what we talked about?* I asked her through our mind link. *You’re not in charge of Lilac’s love life. You don’t have to fix anything.*

Artemis approached us with Lola and Jacqueline in tow.

“Charlie, can we talk to you?” Artemis asked, then glanced over to where Tom and Mrs. Smith were getting ready for their round. “Maybe in another room? I have no desire to see this.”

“You can say that again. I’m ready to lose my breakfast,” Jacqueline chimed in.

“Sure.” I breathed a quiet sigh of relief. Maybe if I was busy talking to Artemis, Lola, and Jacqueline, I wouldn’t have to go commando in front of the whole pack after all.

“I’m staying,” Lilac announced. “I’m putting my money on Mrs. Smith for the win.”

I glanced over at the older wolves. “I don’t know. Tom could be a sleeper.”

“I guess we’ll find out, won’t we?”

“Can I come?” Violet asked.

Artemis shrugged.

Taking that as a yes, Violet and I left Lilac to watch the competition unfold and stepped out into the hallway with Artemis, Lola, and Jacqueline.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“We might need your hunter expertise,” Artemis said.

“Oh?” I was pretty surprised to hear that. “Who are you hunting?”

“And why?” Violet added.

“It turns out Jacs has a stalker—a scary, mean vampire stalker named Rafe who’s been making her life a living hell for the past few decades,” Lola explained.

I frowned, glancing at Jacqueline. “I’m so sorry to hear that.”

She shrugged. “He’s an old, experienced vampire.”

“And a top shelf creep,” Lola added.

Jacs rolled her eyes. “But the point is, he’s beyond dangerous. Not the kind of guy you try to fight.”

“But you’re thinking about it now, aren’t you?” I asked. “What changed?”

“She has us now,” Lola said simply.

“Okay… How old is this Rafe guy?”

Jacs grimaced. “Oh, maybe two hundred plus years?”

My brows rose. “That’s pretty old. But I’ve dealt with a bunch of different vampires. I’m not really sure how old they were, but that shouldn’t matter.”

Jacs stared at me like I was an idiot.

“What?” I asked.

She turned to Lola. “I thought you said he was experienced?”

“He is! And he comes from a long line of skilled hunters, *and* he’s got werewolf senses too!”

“He’s the whole package. You’re not going to find a hunter who’s like Charlie,” Violet added, and I squeezed her hand in thanks.

Jacs shook her head. “No, you guys don’t understand. The fact that Rafe is ancient doesn’t mean he’s some old dude in a nursing home. Vampires get stronger, wilier, and more deadly as they age. Don’t you think I would have killed him years ago if it was really so easy?”

I shrugged helplessly. “Sorry, I guess I’ve never really thought about vampires getting old before.”

“Okay, stop joking around,” Artemis said. “Hunting is something to take seriously. If you’re not going to do that, then you can deal with Rafe on your own.”

“We’re being serious,” Lola said. “And we need everyone’s help.”

This Rafe guy sounded pretty serious. Was he more powerful than the other vampires I’d faced? I thought I was a pretty good hunter—I’d been one of the best hunters at camp, even if Chad would disagree with me on that point. Plus, I had a ton of vampire kills under my belt. Could this guy really be so much more powerful than all the others? Should I be worried?

“Does Rafe have some special skills or abilities I should know about?” I asked. Then I glanced thoughtfully at Lola and Jacs. Did *they* have any special abilities? It’d been something covered at hunter camp, but that was feeling like eons ago at this point.

“Well, in addition to having the usual vampire strength and speed, Rafe can use compulsion—mind control. He’s very good at it. I know because he used it on me once before, and he almost succeeded. It’s easy for vampires to compel humans, but it takes a serious amount of power for it to work on another vampire.”

I thought back to my training. Sergeant Pepperdine had given a lecture on dangerous supernatural abilities. Compulsion was near the top of the list.

“So how do you stop it?” Violet asked.

Jacqueline shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know how I did it.”

I cleared my throat. I wasn’t sure I should be giving away hunter secrets, but I wanted to help. “There’s some hunter lore on this, and from what I understand, you need to have something that anchors you to your life. That way, when a vampire tries to compel you, you’re grounded.”

“Huh.” Artemis crossed her arms over her chest. “I wonder why Jacs was able to prevent it.”

“Maybe she had her mom’s bracelet—the daylight item. That was probably what saved her.”

Jacs looked down at her bracelet but didn’t say anything.

Artemis nodded. “The only way we’re going to defeat Rafe is if we catch him. Charlie, will you help us set a trap for him?”

**Episode 2583**

“She’s not going to see that goddamn prince!” Xavier growled.

“I don’t like it any more than you do,” Greyson said, “but the fact remains: if there are consequences for putting this off, we need to think about those too!”

While they argued about the best way to deal with the handprints and my connection with Seluna, I was becoming increasingly aware of said handprints. Like they were exerting a tiny amount of pressure on my shoulders, along with a slight heat. Like maybe some new and terrifying kind of magic was taking root. It was like an itch—the more I thought about them, the worse they got.

One thing was becoming abundantly clear: Seluna’s surprise visit last night had *not* been a dream, no matter how much I wished otherwise. Both Greyson and Xavier could see the same change to the handprints that I saw and felt. I hadn’t been imagining things this morning, and it wasn’t a coincidence.

I kind of wanted to pinch myself. Maybe if I did it hard enough, I’d wake up and find myself back in my bed—no handprints, no Ava, no LIPS. Just the simple life I’d given up the moment I met Xavier.

Xavier slipped an arm around my waist, and there was no missing the way Greyson’s jaw tightened at the casual touch.

“Letting Cali go back to the palace is a mistake,” Xavier said. “Or have you forgotten all the shady shit they’ve pulled? The bathtub of milk? Lucian kissing Cali? Hell, Lucian and Aysel teaming up to give her truth serum? That place is a viper’s nest, and every time we go over there, we’re tempting fate. I’m not going to put Cali in their crosshairs again.”

“She’s already in their crosshairs,” Greyson snapped. “She’s been there from the moment those damn handprints showed up! This is magic we know nothing about. I abhor Lucian and his sister and everything they’ve done to us, but we can’t just put our heads in the sand and hope the problem goes away.”

Privately, I sided with Xavier. I was less than thrilled by the idea of going back to the Vanguard palace. In fact, it scared the hell out of me. Every time I went into that place, I worried that I wasn’t going to come back out. Like Xavier had said, they’d done some shady shit to us. Greyson and me, in particular.

All this time, Lucian had made a point of telling me he was trying to help me. And yet, every single time I saw him—and the instances were really stacking up—I couldn’t help but feel like he was hiding something, or had some other purpose in mind.

And god, I really didn’t want to step into another milk bath with him. That whole ritual had been embarrassing and invasive and… violating.

I’d definitely had enough of his lips to last me a lifetime.

“So, what?” Xavier scoffed. “You’re saying we should just throw her to the wolves?”

Greyson’s eyes narrowed. “No, that’s not what I’m saying at all, and you know it. I don’t want Cali to go *at all*,but we need to consider the consequences if she chooses not to. I honestly don’t know how much of this Seluna goddess stuff to believe, but it’s pretty clear that it’s affecting Cali. If she doesn’t do what Lucian wants, will she be worse off?”

Xavier shook his head. “She’s not—”

“Do I get a say in this?” I cut in, frowning at both my mates. “This is my life, and my decision, right?”

“Of course,” Greyson said quickly.

I pinned Xavier with a meaningful look, and he sighed. “Fine. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking I’d love to be rid of these annoying, occasionally painful, handprints. If Lucian is telling the truth—”

“Big *if*,” Xavier grunted.

I narrowed my eyes at him but continued. “If he’s telling the truth, going through with the second ceremony will put an end to the handprints and purge Seluna from my dreams. I think it’ll break my connection with her. This time Seluna knows we’re coming, and I’m on Seluna’s good side. That way, asking for this favor will work. Ideally.”

“Ideally?” Greyson frowned. “So… wait. She’s an all-powerful moon goddess who’s imbued you with some kind of magical connection, but she didn’t know you were coming the first time around?”

I blinked. “Okay, when you put it like that…”

“Good lord,” Xavier muttered. “That pack is a fucking cult, and Lucian is its leader. That’s all there is to this.”

I shook my head. “I’ve seen Seluna. Several times now. And I’ve talked to her. She’s real. And Lucian… I’m not saying he’s not a liar, or that any of this makes sense, but I don’t think he’s making this all up.” I swallowed. “I don’t want to go back there. I don’t want to see him again, but… I think I have to.”

“No, Cali, you don’t have to do anything. Especially not for that moon prick.”

I grimaced at Xavier. “What I mean is, I think it’s worth the risk.”

My words seemed to pain him. “What if I don’t want you to take any risks?”

I shrugged. “Then I guess you should stop being a werewolf. And I should stop being Fae. And we should cut all ties to everyone we know.”

Xavier sighed. “Lucian is clearly far more interested in Seluna and all that she stands for than we are. If he wants to commune with Seluna so badly, why don’t we demand that he comes here? If he wants to stand in my tub while we pour milk in it, fine, but I see no reason to send you back to the palace.”

Greyson nodded. “That’s actually a great idea.” He looked at me. “The more I think about it, the more I believe you shouldn’t go near the palace again. It’s a good compromise.”

“Lucian wanted me to come after I heard from Seluna again,” I reminded them. “I don’t know if Seluna contacted him as well. If she did… Well, he’s impatient already. He’s going to suspect something’s wrong if I don’t show up.”

Xavier scoffed. “Screw him. If he wants you so bad, he can come and get you.”

“I appreciate your concern, but I’ve already been to the palace a few times. And while it was all very, very weird, nothing really awful happened.”

“Except you being drugged, kidnapped, and made to kiss that asshole in a fucking milk bath,” Xavier muttered.

I shrugged helplessly. “I’m not crazy about going, but what choice do I have?”

“The choice has been made,” Greyson said. “You’re not going.”

I frowned. I didn’t understand why they were being so adamant. Usually, it was one or the other. They almost never teamed up like this. I noticed them exchange a look, and the beginnings of suspicion nagged at my gut.

“What is it you’re not telling me?” I asked.

Neither of them said anything, and I groaned.

“Fine. I’ll go straight to Lucian now if you two don’t explain what’s going on.”

Xavier pulled out his phone and shoved it at me. “Look at this and tell me what you see.”

It was a picture of what looked like a small shrine, complete with candles. “Um… What is this?”

“We’d like to know, too,” Greyson said.

I zoomed in and gasped. “Is that a picture of *me*?”

The picture had been taken in the palace pool the first night we’d met Lucian and company. I was wearing that silver dress, and I was soaking wet and wiping water from my eyes.

*Oh my god. I look like hell!*

“I found it in a hidden room in the palace,” Xavier explained. “I think it’s Lucian’s personal Cali Pinterest board.”

I shuddered. “Has Lucian been stalking me the whole time?”

“That’s why we don’t want you to go back,” Greyson said. “We don’t know what this shrine is all about, but it can’t be good.”

“Either the guy is obsessed with you, or he’s a serial killer, or who even knows?” Xavier’s jaw clenched. “Regardless, it’s not safe for you to go back.”

“Why did you keep this from me?” I asked, suddenly freaked out *and* annoyed. “Is there anything else you’d like to tell me? And what the hell am I supposed to do? The shrine thing is freaky, but what about Lucian?”

“Are the handprints hurting you?” Greyson asked.

“They’re annoying, but nothing I can’t handle.”

“Then we shouldn’t do anything,” Xavier said. “Let’s wait until Lucian makes the first move.”

I still didn’t feel right about that, but it was getting to a point where I didn’t think we *had* a right option.

Lola poked her head in. “Cali, we need you.”

I pinned each of my mates with a look. “Let me know if you hear from Lucian.”

I followed Lola out, only half-listening as she filled me in on the plan to get rid of Rafe.

“… need your help. He’s a powerful vampire…”

I couldn’t stop thinking about Seluna, Lucian, and the shrine.

We stopped in the hallway, where Charlie, Violet, Jacs, and Artemis were saying something about someone being bait.

“Yeah, Cali can do that.”

I stopped in my tracks, trying to put together the pieces of what I heard. My head was feeling so jumbled. I faced my sister. “You want *me* to be the bait?”

**Episode 2584**

XAVIER

As soon as Cali left the room, tension started bubbling up between Greyson and me. Only it was a new kind of tension, and I knew exactly what was causing it.

I’d just been with Cali. Having sex with her in the woods. And Greyson knew. There was no missing the clues, what with the leaves and pine needles all over the two of us and the smell of sex that clung like a second skin to Cali and me both.

My brother was a lot of things, but unobservant wasn’t one of them.

Normally, I would’ve made a point of rubbing the whole thing in Greyson’s face, but I surprisingly didn’t feel like doing that. This time, I was just relieved that I’d been able to work things out with Cali. And thanks to my never-dying mate bond with Ava, I had a newfound empathy for this love triangle shit.

But I wasn’t going to make a habit of being too nice to my dear older brother.

Greyson was definitely jealous. Probably hurting, to some degree. And while that might have amused me a while back, now I couldn’t think of the position he was in without thinking of how Cali was in a very similar one.

I fucking hated it—even if we’d found some kind of resolution for the moment.

Obviously, there was no getting around this Ava problem. Keeping her here as a safety measure to keep my wolf contained was the best course of action we currently had available. But that didn’t mean I wasn’t aware of what it was costing Cali for Ava to be here.

I could only hope that we could sort this out fast so I could avoid hurting her any further. Which, of course, meant that I’d have to deal with Ava. In some ways, it had been easier to put her off, to pretend our mate bond didn’t exist anymore, when she’d been living at the Vanguard palace.

I wouldn’t be able to pretend anymore, and I had a sinking feeling that having her back here at the house would only make things worse before they got better.

“We should probably talk about this Lucian thing,” Greyson said. I appreciated that he wasn’t going to make an issue of what Cali and I had just done.

I shrugged. “Unless you’ve changed your mind, I still think our best course of action is waiting until Lucian makes a move.”

He nodded. “Do you believe in any of this Seluna stuff?”

“Honestly? No, not really. Or, at least, I didn’t. I thought it was nonsense from the moment Lucian started spouting off about it. And I still would think that—except so many weird things have happened. The handprints, the dreams, the dome that formed during the ceremony… How do we write that off?”

I still wasn’t convinced that Seluna existed—or if she did exist, that she was a moon goddess instead of say, some kind of evil demon—but the things I’d seen at the Vanguard pack house had gone beyond the realms of what I knew to be possible.

“I don’t think we can write it off,” Greyson said. “But have you ever considered the possibility that everything we’ve seen has nothing to do with the moon goddess? What if Lucian is doing the same thing that Aysel did? What if he hired a witch to make all the stuff happen? What if it’s all just some elaborate ruse to fool people into thinking he has power?”

I considered this. “At this point, I wouldn’t put anything past the moon boy. He could be a hardass, quirky Alpha, or a psychopath serial killer, or anything in between.” That was one of the things about Lucian that drove me crazy—for as much time as I’d spent with the guy, I couldn’t pin him down.

During my work as a mercenary, I’d learned that the biggest and hardest part of the job was figuring your enemies—or targets—out. One you cracked the code on who they were, everything else was child’s play. But Lucian’s code was proving more difficult than I ever would have thought.

I heaved a sigh. “Whatever’s going on over there, it’s obvious he is full-on obsessed with Cali. The question is, what do you and I do about it?”

“And what about Ava?” Greyson added, his tone mild.

I winced. I’d had a feeling this would come up sooner or later.

“I agreed with your decision to keep Ava here while you’re dealing with your shifting issues,” my brother continued, “but we have to take into account that she could very well be working with the Vanguard pack. Which is a risk to this pack, and Cali. Ava could very easily be telling you one thing while doing another.”

“You think I haven’t thought of that?” I asked. “Do you think it was easy for me to ask her to stay? Knowing how Cali would be hurt?”

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew Greyson wasn’t being unreasonable by bringing this up. He loved Cali. Her happiness was important to him. Plus, he was the Alpha, and handling these sorts of threats to the pack’s safety and well-being was in the job description.

But that didn’t mean I had to like Greyson—of all people—shoving his nose into my personal business.

He held his hands up in front of him. “I’m sure you’ve thought of all of this, and believe it or not, I’m not trying to start a fight. The bottom line is, we both want to protect Cali—that hasn’t changed. I’m just not sure how best to do that with Ava around. Half the time it seems like she’s a walking grenade just waiting for you or Cali to pull the pin.”

Much as I hated to admit it, I couldn’t argue with that. Ava’s presence in my life had been blowing up in my face since the day she’d come back to life. Since before that, even, when she’d killed my mother.

“I think Cali’s going to do her best to avoid Ava,” I said. “And I imagine Ava will do the same in return. That should help.”

Greyson nodded, then reached over and flicked a twig out of my hair. “You might want to take a shower. That would help, too.” I bristled as he added, “I’m going to check on the contest, make sure things aren’t getting out of hand.”

He headed to the living room, and I went upstairs to shower. While I washed away the dirt and leaves and scent of Cali that clung to me—the latter with more than a little sadness—I couldn’t help but think of just how wonderful it had been to be with her again.

*Clearly, Greyson doesn’t agree. Too bad*.

A few minutes later, I pulled on some clothes and returned downstairs, where the shifting competition was still in full swing. The competition was one of the most batshit things I’d ever heard of, but in reality, it was pretty fun to watch.

I stopped next to Jay. “Who’s winning?”

“It’s come down to a tie-breaker between Ravi and Mrs. Smith.”

My brows rose. I wasn’t at all surprised about Ravi, but Mrs. Smith? I hadn’t realized she had it in her.

“The tie breaker requires shifting to and from your werewolf form,” Torin explained to the crowd, every bit the Redwood pack’s Fae cruise director, “and then getting dressed—all in one, so to speak.”

“Go, Mrs. Smith! You can do it!” Lilac cheered. “I know you’re gonna ace this!”

A smile pulled at my mouth. “If I were playing, I’d wipe the floor with all of them,” I said to Jay.

He shrugged. “Actions speak louder than words. You should have competed.” Then he seemed to remember my situation and grimaced. “Sorry, man. I know you’re having some, er, problems right now.”

“It’s fine. I had more important things to deal with.”

“Cali?”

He really did know me well.

I nodded. “I’m pretty sure we’ve worked things out.”

Jay clapped me on the back. “I had a feeling you would. I know you’re going through a difficult time, and it’s always better if your mate is on your side.”

I couldn’t have agreed more. The thought of not having Cali with me while I was navigating this shifting nightmare was too much to think about.

“Just… keep an eye on your own feelings, too,” Jay suggested. “When Lola was having shifting problems, it took a toll on her.”

“I know. I promise.”

Suddenly, Torin gave an ear-piercing whistle. All the pack members grimaced and covered their ears.

“Sorry!” Torin winced. “But the moment we’ve all been waiting for has arrived!” He gestured to Ravi and Mrs. Smith with a flourish. “Are you ready?”

They nodded.

“Three… Two… One!”

With a flurry of cracking bones and motion, they started to shift. As I watched the competition, I felt my wolf stirring inside me.

*Wouldn’t it be nice to shift right now?* I asked.

Then I smelled Ava’s scent nearby, and my wolf became interested in something else entirely. Someone else.

“Hey.” Ava appeared at my side. I tried to ignore the excitement from my wolf that she was so close. I’d just been with Cali—why wasn’t that enough?

Jay nodded a greeting. “How long do you think you’ll be with us?”

“I don’t know.” She put a hand on my shoulder. “How long am I staying, Xavier?”

**Episode 2585**

*No way. Absolutely not. Hard pass.*

I’d already had to watch my mate kiss another woman, then listen to him confess that he was bonded to her in a way he was struggling to overcome. Oh, and then there was the fact that a moon goddess was haunting my dreams and branding my skin, and that her favorite acolyte, Lucian, had a creepy-ass shrine to me, featuring probably the worst picture I’d ever taken.

I held up a hand. “I’m so sorry, but with everything else going on, I’m not about to become vampire bait. I wish I could help—I really do. But I have to draw the line somewhere.”

Silence settled in, punctuated only by the laughter and cheers spilling in from the living room as Lola, Violet, Charlie, Artemis, and Jacs all stared at me in complete bewilderment.

“What are you talking about?” Jacs asked.

Heat rushed into my cheeks. “I thought I overheard…”

Lola shook her head. “You heard wrong. We’re not using you as bait. We’re using Jacs. Only not really, because it won’t be Jacs. We’re actually using me.”

I frowned. “Okay, sorry. Now I’m confused. Maybe we should take this from the top?”

“I’m going to disguise myself as Jacs, lure Rafe out, and then we can attack him,” Lola said, as if this actually explained anything. Why the disguise when we had the real Jacs right here? And how and where was she planning to lure him out? And how the heck were we going to fight him, even if he took the bait?

These all seemed like really important steps to figure out—you know, *before* we started poking the two-hundred-year-old vampire and luring him in.

“Won’t Rafe realize you aren’t Jacs and refuse to take the bait, or worse?”

“Not if Big Mac puts a spell on me to help me look like Jacs.”

I sighed. “I’m sorry, but this sounds way too complicated, and take it from someone who has actually used witch magic to try to deceive someone powerful—it doesn’t always work as advertised, or according to plan. And what makes you think Big Mac is going to help?”

Artemis, who had been leaning against the wall, her arms folded over her chest, leaned in with a slight frown curving her lips. “That’s exactly what I’ve been telling them. We don’t need to *lure* Rafe in. I’m a bounty hunter. Charlie’s a vampire hunter. We can find Rafe without resorting to crazy schemes that are bound to blow up in our faces.”

I agreed with Artemis’s logic more than Lola’s, but I didn’t like the idea of my sister tracking down a powerful, homicidal vampire any more than I liked the idea of Lola being his bait.

“What will you do once you find him?” I asked.

“We’ll stake him,” Jacs said solemnly. I noticed a dark gleam in her eyes that sent chills down my spine. But then again, if someone had stalked me for forty years, forcing me to go into hiding and put my whole life on hold while I was constantly looking over my shoulder, I’d probably want to kill him too.

“We’re in a stronger position if we’re on the offensive side,” Artemis said. “We’re going after him, and we’re going to take him down so fast he’ll never know what hit him.”

I watched my sister with awe. It had been one of the best surprises of my life to learn that I had an older half-sister, and I was thrilled she’d come to the human world and had chosen to be part of our family, but Artemis really came alive when she went into bounty hunter mode. It was like seeing her in her element, where she was perfectly capable, confident, and in control.

I wished I could be more like her.

“Okay, so we hunt him down,” Violet said with a nod. “When are we going to try to do this?”

“We should probably let Greyson know, right?” Charlie said. Immediately, the conversation screeched to a halt, and Charlie blinked. “What?”

“We can handle this ourselves,” Lola said. “Besides, this isn’t really pack business. We’re all just supporting Jacqueline.”

For once, I actually agreed with Lola on her plan. Greyson and Xavier had their hands full with LIPS (and Ava, but I wasn’t going to think about that). Plus, I was still kind of pissed off at Xavier for doubting me back at the carnival.

This could be another chance to prove to Xavier, to both of my mates, that I was strong and capable and didn’t need to go running to them for every little thing.

“Lola’s right,” I said. “We don’t need the guys. There’s no reason why we can’t do this.”

“Well, what about me?” Charlie asked. “You all asked me to help.”

Lola nodded. “Okay, but *just* you.”

He smiled. “We’re like Charlie’s Angels.”

Every set of eyes turned on him.

“No,” we all said in unison.

Violet shook her head. “Don’t ever say that again, okay?”

“So, what will we need to pull this off?” I asked.

Still a little red-faced, Charlie answered, “Well, if Rafe really is a master of compulsion, we should all get anchors to protect ourselves.”

I frowned, imagining a big metal anchor attached to the side of a ship. What were we going to do, try to crush Rafe with them? “Sorry, what do anchors have to do with anything?”

“Not an anchor like a boat,” Lola said. “An anchor like a meaningful personal object that helps ground you to reality. It can help you keep control of your mind.”

“Oh.” That made only slightly more sense than us lugging around gigantic metal anchors. “Okay… Where are we going to get those?”

“Maybe we should talk to Big Mac,” Lola suggested. “She knows pretty much everything about magic, right? I’m sure she’d be able to help.”

*Not when she hears this half-baked scheme*, I thought. But still, better safe than sorry.

We headed back toward the living room.

“For the record,” Lola said, “I still think my disguise plan would have worked.”

Cheering drowned out the rest of what she said as Torin grabbed Mrs. Smith’s hand and raised it into the air. “We have our winner!”

I was the only one not cheering. Across the room, I saw Ava talking with Xavier, her hand on his shoulder.

My kneejerk reaction was to mind link, but I stopped myself. It pained me to see this playing out right in front of me, but I knew I couldn’t keep letting myself get upset.

*Xavier won’t do anything with Ava. He told me.*

And I believed him. And as much of a struggle as it was for him to overcome his wolf’s stupid urges, I truly believed he’d make it through. And while he struggled, I’d be struggling along with him. But just like Xavier, I’d make it through too.

I turned back to the others.

Big Mac was hugging Mrs. Smith as Torin presented her with a gingerbread trophy.

*Seriously, how does he have time to make all this stuff?*

I smiled as Big Mac kissed Mrs. Smith’s cheek. I really liked seeing her like this. It seemed out of character, almost, for her to be so affectionate.

*She must really love Mrs. Smith.*

“And as a special treat,” Torin announced, “the winner will take on the Alpha—a mother-son competition, probably the first of its kind!”

The room exploded with cheers, but I was kind of shocked.

*Did Greyson agree to this?*

We managed to pull Big Mac aside, and Charlie quickly explained our need for a custom-made set of anchors.

The witch shook her head. “That’s not really a witch thing. That’s a *you* problem. It’s your relationship with the item that makes it an anchor.” Her eyes narrowed. “Why do you need anchors anyway?”

“Oh, you know!” I laughed—too loud. “Just as, like, protection. In case we run into vampires?”

Her brows rose. “Are you *planning* to run into vampires?”

“You never know, right?” Lola shrugged. “I have one more question: can you do a spell that makes me look like someone else?”

*Oh, not this again.*

“We don’t need—” I tried to put a stop to it, but it was like trying to stop a runaway train.

“Let her answer the question!” Lola snapped.

Big Mac sighed. “Who do you want to look like?”

Lola pointed to Jacs.

“Okay, what is this all about?” the witch demanded. “What are you all up to now?”

“Well, there’s this old vampire named Rafe—” Lola began.

Big Mac held up a hand. “On second thought, I don’t want to know. But it sounds like a truly horrible idea, much worse than the more egregious ones I’ve heard lately.”

Lola looked like she wanted to fire off some clever retort, but Big Mac had already begun walking away.

I sighed as the rest of the group turned to Lola. “We told you.”

She glared at us in turn. “It was worth asking.”

“Maybe next time,” I said gently.

“Okay, everyone!” Torin shouted. “It’s time for the bonus round!”

I smiled as Greyson stepped into the room. I could tell from the tension in his frame that he would probably rather be anywhere else, but it was good of him to share this experience with the pack.

Greyson and his mother hugged, and my smile widened even more. I found a spot with a good view as Torin quickly explained the rules, but then something blocked my view.

No… Not my view. My *vision.*

At first, it was just a shadowy, hazy form. Then it solidified, and Seluna materialized right in front of me, looming over me like some kind of phantom. Her eyes were cold, dark, and unforgiving. “I said it was time!”

I gasped.

“You should never make me wait,” Seluna hissed as her hand plunged into my chest.

**Episode 2586**

Seluna’s hand tightened around my heart, squeezing it until it stopped beating. The entire room seemed to freeze in time, and everything went silent.

Seluna moved in close to me, her lips nearly brushing against my ear. “Don’t try my patience, child.” Her grip tightened on my shoulder, pinning me to the spot.

*How can this be happening?* I was gasping for air, and my panic was growing by the second. I reached up to try to pry Seluna’s grip off me, but my hand went right through her. Then, just as quickly as she’d appeared, Seluna vanished into thin air and everything came back to life around me. I stumbled a bit, trying to catch my breath. I looked around frantically, trying to see if I could catch a glimpse of her.

“Whoa, are you okay?” Lola asked, her eyebrows arched in concern. “You were acting weird for a minute there.”

“Did you see her?” I spluttered. “She was holding me, and she was standing right there! Did you see her?”

“Mrs. Smith?” Lola asked, turning around and pointing over her shoulder. “There she is!”

“Oh, yes, that’s who I meant,” I said, forcing a smile. I didn’t think it was at all convincing.

My heart was still pumping like crazy, and my breathing hadn’t slowed down much, either, but I didn’t want to freak Lola out, so I calmed down as best I could.

“Excuse me,” I said, moving past her. “I think I just need a glass of water.”

I moved through the pack on shaky legs, still trying to come to terms with what had just happened to me. I could still hear Seluna’s words echoing in my head, though she was nowhere to be found. *Did that really just happen? Or…*

Greyson glanced at me and raised an eyebrow as I passed by him.

“Good luck!” I said, giving him a quick wave, hoping that my face didn’t betray any of the panic from earlier.

“Okay, everyone take their places! The bonus showdown is starting.” Torin yelled, ushering everyone into place.

I stopped in the doorway and took a deep breath.

*That was freaky as hell, but it was all just in my head, right? Seluna threatened me, but she didn’t actually do anything, right?* I ran my hands all over my body, checking to make sure everything felt normal. *Maybe the heart squeeze was all in my head, too.*

I checked my pulse. Still there.I was fine. I wasn’t going to let some moon goddess ruin my day.

I tuned back in to the festivities. Greyson and his mother were facing off, and I could tell that they were both trying to hold back laughter as they gave each other faux intense stares. I was so glad this was happening. It was a perfect distraction from the craziness of the last few days, and it was nice to see everyone coming together to have fun.

*Of course, it would be a hell of a lot better if Ava weren’t here.* She was lurking along the fringes as usual, watching it all with a blank expression on her face. I just wished she’d go back to the Vanguard palace where she’d come from. She was literally like a bad cold that I couldn’t shake.

I noticed that Greyson was no longer looking at his mother, but straight at me. I hoped that he hadn’t noticed what happened. I smiled at him and blew him a kiss.

*Rooting for you!* I mind linked. I loved Mrs. Smith, but Greyson was my mate, so of course I had to be on his side.

Greyson smiled and winked at me, and the good ol’ butterflies fluttered to life in my stomach, knocking away the rest of the anxiety from the whole Seluna episode. It was so nice to see him in a light mood. It wasn’t very often that he got to just have a little fun and enjoy himself—though I felt like it would probably be good for him to win. He was the Alpha, after all. It wasn’t that he needed to prove himself—he’d done that more times than I could count—but it wouldn’t hurt for him to look like the best shifter in the pack. That sort of thing inspired confidence in everyone.

Torin blew hard on his whistle, eliciting winces and complaints from the pack.

Rishika was standing nearby and had her hands pressed over her ears. “If he blows that thing one more time, I’m going to take that whistle and shove it up his—”

“Okay everyone, let’s get ready and start the countdown. Ten, nine, eight…” Oblivious to the annoyance his whistle had caused, Torin was all business as he kicked things off.

Greyson and Mrs. Smith started stripping off their clothes, and I couldn’t help but think about how weird all of this would’ve been in any other situation.

*But not in a house full of werewolves. Here, it’s all as normal as could be.*

It had taken me a while to get used to this sort of stuff, but I was starting to appreciate all the unique little things that made a werewolf pack what it was.

Greyson was out of his clothes in a flash, but Mrs. Smith was only a button behind. The crack of their bones filled the air as they both started to shift—and seconds later, Greyson’s beautiful, powerful wolf took shape before my eyes. Mrs. Smith’s wolf took shape only a hair behind Greyson’s, and I realized that I’d never noticed how intimidating her wolf was. Mrs. Smith might have been the sweet maker of mocha, but her wolf suggested that she might not be as harmless as she always came across in human form.

Greyson started to shift back, and within seconds I was treated to the amazing sight of Greyson’s very naked—and very muscular—body. I wished that we were alone so that I could have my own private viewing. I imagined running my hands across the ripples of his abs and kissing the taut rise of his pecs. I shook my head, dashing all those thoughts away as heat started to course through my body. *Not the time or the place, Cali.*

Mrs. Smith shifted back too, and they both scrambled to get dressed.

“Come on! Leave him in the dust!” Big Mac cheered, pumping her fists in the air.

“Shit!” Greyson hissed as he tripped a bit while trying to maneuver into one of his pant legs. He recovered quickly, though he’d nearly fallen on his ass—giving Mrs. Smith just enough time to finish buttoning up her shirt.

Torin blew the whistle. “And that’s time! Mrs. Smith is the winner!”

The entire pack house erupted into cheers as Greyson pulled his mother into a big hug and then held her hand in the air like she was the champion.

I approached Greyson with a smile on my lips. “You did that on purpose.”

“What?” Greyson said innocently. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Sure you do,” I whispered. “I know you let your mom win.”

“That’s nice of you to think that, but I was trying my best.”

“Oh, were you?”

“Yes, my absolute best. Guess it wasn’t good enough.”

I smirked at him. “You told me you’d always be honest with me.”

Greyson laughed. “Okay, okay, I *might* have engineered a little trouble with my pants. Hope I wasn’t too obvious.”

“No, I don’t think anyone but me noticed, but you’d better play your cards right, or I might expose you for cheating.” I laughed and put my arms around him. “I’m proud of you,” I whispered in his ear.

The pack house was still loud and rowdy, and it was clear that some of the others wanted to keep the fun going.

“Let’s do a relay!” someone shouted.

“Yeah—shift, jump over the sofa and back again, then tag your teammate,” Torin said. “Then your teammate has to shift, jump over the *other* sofa, do a lap around the living room, and then come back to tap out!”

Within minutes, the entire pack had jumped into the game. There was lots of howling and clothes shredding and nail-biting action as people sailed over the sofas and slid across the floors. I didn’t think I’d seen the pack have so much fun in a long while.

Watching them made me feel so much better—almost good enough to forget what had happened—or not happened—a few minutes ago with the moon goddess. I glanced at Xavier, who looked a little subdued. I suspected he might be a little down because he couldn’t shift at the risk of him getting stuck in wolf form again. I knew that he probably wanted to participate, but I didn’t want him to go through that again, either. Not only would it stress us both out, but it would be the perfect excuse for Ava to put her paws all over him again, and I didn’t think I could handle that twice in one day. I smiled and waved at him, and Xavier waved back just as the doorbell rang.

“Who could that be?” I asked Greyson, who shrugged—though I could already tell that he was on high alert.

Rishika made her way through the wolves running about everywhere and peered through the peephole. She turned back to look at us, her expression panicked. “Everybody stop! It’s LIPS!”

**Episode 2587**

GREYSON

“Be quiet and get down, everyone!” I hissed.

The last thing we needed was for LIPS to see a house full of roughhousing werewolves. I only hoped that they hadn’t caught a peek through the window before they’d knocked on the door. The scene was as damning as it could get—some of the pack members were in wolf form, and some were human, and naked. There would be no way to explain what was going on here, and I only hoped that I wouldn’t have to.

I waited for the pack to settle down before I ushered Rishika aside and opened the door to reveal a young woman in a LIPS jacket. I didn’t recognize her as one of the members of the field team. She had a small package in her hands and looked a little nervous as she stood there with a friendly smile on her face. I leaned forward and looked behind her. Her LIPS truck was parked in the driveway.

I met her eyes and smiled. “Hi. Can we do something for you?” I asked, trying to keep my tone light.

“Rhonda asked me to bring this to Mr. Evers. Are you Mr. Evers?”

I nodded, and she handed me the package.

“Here you go. Have a great day—and remember to be careful; there are lots of wolves around.” She gave a small smile and then walked back to her truck.

“You too,” I called after her, thinking that she had no idea that she’d just visited a house full of werewolves. Lucky for her, we were the friendly type.

I didn’t close the door until she was gone, having watched her car disappear around the bend. I turned to Rishika. “I don’t like that they just drop by without warning like that.Maybe we should install some sort of video system—and a gate, maybe? I can’t even imagine what would have happened if that woman had seen all the wolves in here.”

If she hadn’t died from shock, she probably would have run off and called her LIPS buddies as soon as possible. I shuddered at the thought of how that would’ve turned out—for her, LIPS, the authorities, and our pack. No one would’ve won in that scenario.

“We can look into it,” Rishika said. “It’s a good thing you told the pack not to shift outdoors for a while. That was too close for comfort.”

“Hell yeah it was.”

Rishika went to rejoin the others, and I turned my back to everyone and ripped the package open. Inside was a USB drive. *Why did Rhonda give this to me?* I slipped it into my pocket. I would have to see what was on it, but not in front of everyone else. I didn’t want to put anyone any more on edge than they already were.

“I think we can all relax,” I said. “LIPS is gone, but this was an important lesson. I hope that now you understand why it’s imperative that we don’t shift outdoors. I don’t think I need to explain what would’ve happened if that woman had seen even one of you outside.” I locked eyes with Xavier. I hoped that he could keep his wolf under control. If not, I would have no choice but to lock him up again. I knew that Cali would have a fit if I had to do that, but I had to keep the safety of the pack in mind, even if it made Xavier and Cali a little uncomfortable for a while. “Until we have some sort of warning system in place, keep the shifting inside. Keep an eye out for drones or any other suspicious activity if you do go out into the woods. We all need to be on high alert until the LIPS team moves on.”

“Got it. But can we continue the relays?” Zainab asked.

“Yeah, can we?” Torin added.

“Sure, but just be careful and aware, like I said.”

I couldn’t help but notice that some of the enthusiasm had drained from the room, but I’d rather that than they not realize the seriousness of our situation. At least now they all understood that I wasn’t overreacting, and that LIPS was a real threat that had to be handled carefully. I hated that LIPS had us over a barrel right now, but we had to be vigilant, even if it trampled on our freedoms for a while.

*Truth is, we got lucky this time, and I know better than anyone that luck has a way of running out.*

As I started toward the study, I noticed Cali and Xavier talking quietly in a corner. It seemed like they’d settled their differences. I couldn’t help but feel a little disappointed that they were back on good terms. It was no secret that when one of us was in a bad place with Cali, the other benefitted. It was the sad reality of our arrangement. I wanted so badly to have Cali to myself, and seeing her with Xavier was, again, a reminder of how far away that reality was. *Oh well, better to not dwell on it.*

I slipped into the study and closed the door behind me. I took the USB drive out of my pocket and sat it on the desk. *It’s weird that there’s no note with the drive*, I thought.Why would someone send a USB drive without any sort of explanation? *Maybe because the USB says all that needs to be said.*

Suddenly, my phone started ringing. I picked it up and answered. “Hello?”

“Greyson Evers?” the voice said.

“Speaking…”

“Greyson, hi. It’s Rhonda from LIPS.” *Damn, can this woman read my mind?* “I heard that the package was dropped off. I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry about what?” I asked, confused.

“It’s just that my drones haven’t been working quite right, and we’ve been having some trouble keeping them from going off course. We’re working on getting them back in tip-top shape so this sort of thing stops happening.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Oh—did you watch the video I had my technician bring by? One of my drones captured trespassers on your property, and I thought we’d be good temporary neighbors and give you the heads-up.”

Just like that, my entire body tensed. What had the drone seen? My mind was already racing to every possible outcome.

*Did one of the pack slip out against my orders and get spotted by one of their drones? But if so, why would Rhonda share it with me? Is she trying to extort me, or something?*

“What exactly is on the video?” I asked calmly.

Rhonda hesitated. “… I think you should see it for yourself. If you have any questions, please feel free to call back. Again, I’m so sorry that one of our drones came your way. They’ve been acting sort of glitchy since yesterday. I promise we’re taking care of it!”

*Thank you for that, Big Mac.* I gave Big Mac shit—all of us did from time to time—but there was no question that we’d have been in a much worse place without her.

“So sorry again!” Rhonda said just before we hung up.

I sat down and inserted the USB into the laptop, and within a few keystrokes, I was looking at an aerial view of the woods.

*What’s so interesting about this? Just lots of trees, some birds…*

I let the video play, and before long, I started to recognize some of the landscape. The view wobbled a bit before gliding over to hover above a small clearing where I could see some movement. I still wasn’t sure what I was looking at until two people came into view. They were very close, but the footage was quite blurry, and I couldn’t make out what they were doing. I squinted and leaned closer.

*Is that… What the?*

It was two people having sex, and not just two random people. Cali and Xavier. My blood ran cold, and I paused the video. There was nothing in the world that I wanted to see less than that. I might even have preferred seeing footage of one of us caught shifting over the image of my brother having sex with my mate. I didn’t think I’d ever be able to unsee it.

*Is this some sort of sick joke?*

I banged my fist on the desk, accidentally causing the video to start again.

“Fuck this,” I said under my breath as I reached over to stop it again, but then I noticed something really strange in the footage—a blur moving past Cali and Xavier’s entangled bodies. Holding back a gag, I rewound the footage and played it back, then scrambled to pause it at the exact moment when the blur appeared.

After a few tries, I managed to pause the footage at the right spot. I leaned in close to get a better look. I could see the faint outline of a person in the blur, and it wasn’t Xavier’s ass—it was a vampire.

**Episode 2588**

XAVIER

I knew that this was going to be a difficult conversation, and I’d tried to keep things light until Cali finally hit me with the question that I knew had been on her mind all evening.

“How long *is* Ava going to be sticking around?” Cali’s eyes bored into mine, serious and waiting for an answer that I wasn’t sure she was going to like. She shot a glance over her shoulder at Ava, who was laughing and talking with Ravi and looking generally unbothered.

I sighed. *This sucks. What a time for my wolf to get all out of whack.* Ava had asked me the very same question, and I hadn’t really had a good answer for her, either.

“Cali, it’s complicated,” I said. I thought she understood this. We’d talked about it earlier. “Until the LIPS threat goes away and I’m no longer having shifting problems… I think I’ll need to have her around. I wish I had a more solid answer—like, two days or something—but I just don’t know right now.” I was still kicking myself—and probably would be forever—for kissing Ava right in front of Cali’s face. But we’d talked about this. We’d gotten through it. We’d fucked in the forest for god’s sake.

A look of obvious displeasure flashed across Cali’s face. “I understand,” she said tightly.

“I really hope you do, Cali. You have to know that I wouldn’t have her here if it weren’t absolutely necessary.”

She nodded but didn’t say anything. I cracked my knuckles. “Are you more upset that Ava’s here or that my wolf needs her?”

Cali frowned. “Both, if I’m being honest. I don’t get why your wolf isn’t satisfied with just being with me. I’m just trying to be honest, not start something.”

I wanted to hug her and let her know that my wolf did want her, but thanks to Big Mac, I couldn’t exactly do that right now.

“I know, baby, and I’m sorry about it. It’s just… complicated.” I hated that I’d said that again, but I really had no idea what else to say.

“It’s not fair—I’m the one who helped you reclaim your wolf, not Ava. If it weren’t for me, your wolf wouldn’t even be around to lust after her! Why doesn’t your wolf see that? Can’t you tell it that? Can’t I?”

“My wolf already knows that, but the old mate bond that I have with Ava… It’s confusing everything.”

She frowned but nodded. “I just wish there was a way to get rid of your mate bond with her once and for all.”

“Me too.” She was telling me. There was nothing more I wanted than to shake whatever this was with Ava. Though in reality I thought it might be easier to just get rid of her all together. “Listen, you have my word that I’ll do everything in my power to fix my wolf problem and send Ava on her way.”

“I know you will. But just promise me, Xavier, that you won’t let Ava come between us. I don’t want us to argue because of her anymore.”

“I feel the same way, baby.” I leaned in close, feeling a distant ache in my chest. “I want to kiss you so badly right now.”

I was just about to suggest that we step outside to escape Big Mac’s spell and explore each other in peace when I saw Greyson heading right for us.

“Hey, could you two come with me? I need you to see something,” he said.

“What now?” I was already annoyed. I just wanted a moment alone with Cali, and as usual, Greyson was getting in the way of that.

“You’ll see when I show you,” Greyson said.

We followed him into the study and Greyson pointed to laptop.

“Yes, it’s a laptop, cool. What about it?” I asked, noticing that Greyson had been avoiding eye contact with both me and Cali as we walked over to the study.

“Don’t be a dick, Xavier. It’s what’s *on* the laptop that I want to show you—though I’m not quite sure *how* to show you this.”

“What is it, Greyson?” Cali asked.

Greyson blanched. “Actually, maybe you should step out, Cali.”

“What? No,” she said. “Whatever it is, I can handle it.”

Greyson grimaced again, and my interest was thoroughly piqued. *Why is he acting like this?* “Just play the damn thing already.”

Greyson sighed. “Fine.” He pressed play and stepped away from the laptop, all but turning his back to it as the footage started to play.

Cali sat down at the desk to watch, and I stood behind her.

“What is this?” I asked as I finally started to recognize the area being shown on the screen.

“Keep watching,” Greyson said.

Cali gasped and blushed as the view panned to show her and me having sex against a tree. I slammed the laptop shut.

“What the *fuck*, Greyson?!” I said, whirling on Greyson. “You’re *spying* on us now? Are you really that insecure? This is a new low, even for you.”

“Give me a break. You really think I recorded this? That is the last fucking thing I want to see,” he said. “This is from LIPS. One of their drones caught you two… Yeah.”

“What? Why?” Cali asked, horrified. “Oh my god. What if my parents see this?!”

“No, they won’t see it—Rhonda didn’t even know that was you. She called you both trespassers.”

I was getting madder by the second. “You brought us here to show us a sex tape of ourselves? Why?”

Greyson shook his head and opened the laptop. “Again, it’s not you I care about. Take another look.”

“I’m not looking at that shit! I’ve seen enough already. Just destroy it, or I’ll be happy to.”

Cali’s cheeks were bright red. I hated that I hadn’t known we were being recorded like this. I never would’ve put her in that position if I’d known.

“I will, gladly, but not until you take a closer look.” He pressed play on the video again.

I clenched my teeth. “Really, Greyson? Are you just doing this on purpose?”

Greyson flashed me a sharp look and punched the pause button just as a blurry image dashed across the frame. He pointed at the screen. “*Look.*”

“What exactly am I supposed to be looking at? I already know how my ass looks, thanks.”

Cali leaned forward for a closer look, still blushing furiously. “This part here, the blur. It looks like… I don’t really know. A ghost?”

“See, there’s a face right there,” Greyson said, pointing at the image.

I squinted at the screen, and finally I could see it. “What is that? A vampire?”

Greyson nodded. “I think so.”

Cali gasped. “Do you think it could be Rafe?”

“I don’t know,” Greyson said.

“Why would you think it’s Rafe, Cali?” I asked.

“Jacs described Rafe, and it sort of looks like him,” she said. “If I squint, that is. And, I mean, since he’s stalking her right now it would make sense…”

I glanced at Greyson, wondering if Cali was holding something back.

Greyson shoved his hands into his pockets and frowned. “We should let the others know that a vampire’s been seen on the grounds. It could have just been passing by and gotten caught by the drone, but—”

“What about the video?” I asked. If it were up to me, we’d burn it, now.

“I’ll hold onto it until further notice,” Greyson said.

I looked him in the eye. “Why? We know it’s Rafe, so just destroy it,” I said. “Knowing your dumb ass, you’re going to get it accidentally leaked.”

“Leaked?” Cali squeaked.

Greyson glared at me. “Are you fucking serious, Xavier? Why would I do that?”

Cali didn’t say anything as she got up and walked out, clearly upset.

“Nice move,” I told him. “Really nice move.”

“Nice move?” Greyson shook his head. “I’m not the one who got my bare ass captured by a drone. Maybe you should be more careful.”

“There’s no reason Cali had to see that.”

“I asked her to leave, and she wouldn’t. Besides,” he said, “I don’t keep secrets from her.”

“No, you’d rather just humiliate her,” I shot back.

I left Greyson without saying anything else. I had to find Cali. I hoped she was okay. That had been a lot, and I knew she was even more embarrassed than I was. I was just happy that Colton wasn’t around to see this. If he’d gotten his hands on that footage, we’d probably already be trending on Pornhub.

I found Cali on the porch, sniffing.

“Hey,” she said softly when she saw me.

“Hey. You good?”

“Yeah. I mean no. I don’t know. I can’t believe we got filmed like that.”

“Don’t worry. I doubt that Greyson will do anything stupid with it. Come with me.” I walked off the porch and out into the yard. Once we were a safe distance away, I pulled her into a hug. “I’m really sorry that you had to see that. Obviously if I’d known that there was a drone…”

“I’m not blaming you, and I’m not ashamed that I was with you. I just don’t want a sex tape of it going around the internet.” She laughed bitterly. “Is that too much to ask?”

“Don’t worry—that’s not going to happen, I promise.” I kissed her, wishing that I could just take all of her pain and worry away. Cali was so sweet and innocent; she didn’t deserve this. *Fucking LIPS. We have to do something about them, and fast.*

I was about to propose that we go back inside for something warm to drink when I heard the back door open. It slammed hard against the side of the house. I looked up to see Kira heading straight for us.

**Episode 2589**

I pushed away from Xavier as Kira stalked over to us. She looked pissed off. Did she still think that Xavier was Geoff? Shit. The last thing I needed right now after seeing Xavier’s butt via drone footage of us hooking up was fighting a witch.

I gulped, waving my hands in front of me. “Kira, it’s not what you think—”

*Am I going to have to get into a girl fight with Kira over my own mate?!*

Kira gave me a perplexed look. “What do I think? About what?”

I looked at Xavier for help, but he looked as thrown as I was.

“Shouldn’t you be resting?” Xavier said, going up to Kira. “I thought I told you to take it easy for a bit.”

Kira smiled at him. “Thanks for worrying about me, Xavier—that’s sweet of you. I just thought that you should know that I’m feeling better.”

*Whoa. She just called him Xavier.*

“Uh,” I started, not sure how exactly to breach this subject. The last time Kira had seen me and Xavier together she’d thought Xavier was her now-dead husband and I was a homewrecker. “What about Geoff?”

“Geoff?” Kira looked at me like I’d just said something in fluent Italian. “Why are you asking about him?”

“It’s nothing—it’s just that you’ve been talking about him a lot,” Xavier interrupted, giving me an exasperated look.

*Does she not remember?* he asked.

*Maybe the effects of Charon’s magic blast have worn off?* I said.

“Oh, really? I hadn’t realized,” Kira said. “I guess I was feeling a bit off. That warlock’s magic really hit me hard and shook my head up.” Kira sighed and looked off into the distance, and her eyes got sad for a moment.

I felt bad for bringing her husband up, but still, I wasn’t sure I was ready to believe that Kira was back to normal. She’d tried to skewer me! “So, you recognize Xavier? My *mate*, Xavier?”

She gave me a look .“Yeah, why wouldn’t I? Why are you asking me all these questions? Is something wrong?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, you’ve just been a little confused since your accident.”

“I definitely had some *really* weird dreams, but I’m feeling much better now. Big Mac told me that you’d been worrying about me, Xavier, so I wanted you to see for yourself that I’m back on my feet, good as new.” Kira flashed us both a smile. “I was just coming to tell you both that Torin’s trying to do a poll for dinner. Something about lasagna or baked ziti. At some point they’re kind of the same. Sorry if I was interrupting anything.”

“No need to apologize. Thanks for letting us know,” I said. “And I’m so happy you’re feeling better!”

She smiled. “Thanks.”

As soon as Kira had gone back inside, Xavier picked me up and spun me around in his arms. “You know what this means, right?”

“What?”

Xavier put me down and took my hands. “It means that Big Mac can finally break this stupid spell. We don’t have to pretend I’m Geoff anymore.” Xavier pumped a fist in the air. “Which is great, because I was really getting fucking annoyed at having to get you out of the house whenever I wanted some quality time alone with you.”

“And that means we won’t get spied on by a drone,” I said bitterly.

I was still pretty shaken up about all of that, and the fact that Greyson had seen it made it even worse. I could only imagine how hard that must have been, even though he’d done his best to put on a good face about it. But Kira was better now, so at least one good thing had happened today.

Xavier took my hand, and we walked back toward the house.

“I want to find Big Mac right away,” he said. As soon as we mounted the first step to the porch, our hands were pushed apart violently. “And not a moment too soon,” Xavier added, stomping angrily the rest of the way up the stairs.

I followed him into the kitchen, where Mrs. Smith was sitting with my parents at the kitchen table. Mrs. Smith was showing them both something on her phone, most likely wedding-related.

“Where’s Big Mac?” Xavier asked impatiently.

Mrs. Smith smiled. “MacKenzie is off getting fitted for the wedding! Isn’t that exciting?”

“Totally,” I said, shooting Xavier a look so he didn’t say anything impolite, given the fact that he had a one-track mind right now. “Did she go alone?”

“Yes. Torin offered to go with her, but MacKenzie insisted on going by herself—you know how she is.”

I wasn’t surprised in the least. I couldn’t believe that Big Mac had even agreed to go get fitted in the first place.

“When will she be back?” Xavier asked. “I want her to break the spell she put on me and Cali—the sooner, the better.”

“Uh…” Mrs. Smith looked at her watch. “Could be a few hours at least. You know how difficult MacKenzie can be.”

Xavier heaved a loud sigh, clearly not happy.

“It’s okay. We’ve waited this long; what’s a few more hours?” I looked at Xavier. “Absence makes the heart grow fonder, right, Xavier?”

I was just as excited as he was to get rid of the spell, but I felt bad that we were being so selfish when Mrs. Smith was obviously so excited about yet another milestone in her wedding preparations.

“I guess so,” Xavier finally grumbled.

“Besides, it gives us something to look forward to.” I blew him a kiss.

Xavier made a gesture like he was catching my kiss. “You’re right, as always,” he said.

“See you all later,” I said to Mrs. Smith and my parents as I followed Xavier out of the kitchen.

“So, I was wondering,” Xavier began.

“What?” Uh-oh, this could go any number of ways. I hoped he wasn’t about to ask to go find a quiet spot in the woods to make out again because he was just that impatient. That was now out of the question after our little impromptu video shoot.

“What makes you think that vampire in the video was Rafe? You seemed so sure of it.”

I hesitated, trying to think fast. I didn’t want to tell him about our plan—I was happy to just keep it between the girls and Charlie. If Xavier—or Greyson—got wind of it, they would definitely try to stop us.

“I already told you, Jacs described him pretty well and even drew a really good portrait of him. Besides, I was just guessing that it was him. You saw how blurry the image was, so I can’t be sure.”

Xavier nodded at me slowly, seeming satisfied with that explanation. “Okay, that makes sense.”

“So creepy,” I said absently. I needed to go tell the others about the video. “Well, I’ll see you later. I need to go find Lola—she needed to borrow some of my… nail polish.”

I hurried off.

I found Lola, Jacs, and Artemis in the living room huddled together, talking and giggling about the shifting contest and relay race from earlier. They all looked up and beckoned me over when I came in.

“What’s going on? You look a little shaken up,” Artemis said.

“I am. I think Rafe might be scouting the pack house.”

What little color there was drained from Jacs’s face.

“What? I don’t get it. How do you know that?” Lola asked.

“I saw him in a video.”

“What video?” Artemis asked.

I blushed. “Um, just some security video.”

“What? We have a video security system? Since when?” Lola asked.

“Um… It was actually just some drone footage that LIPS sent over,” I said, not wanting to explain.

“Oh. But why would LIPS send us a video in the first place?”

“Oh my god, Lola, I don’t know! It doesn’t matter—just know that they did, and that I think Rafe was on it, and that must mean that he already knows Jacs is here.”

Jacs got up from the couch and started pacing again. “I knew it. I knew I shouldn’t have come back. He’s going to get me! We’re all in danger!”

Lola rolled her eyes. “Now, Jacqueline, I know you’re scared, but we’ve been through this. As long as you stay inside with us, Rafe can’t get to you. He needs to be invited in, and I truly doubt that anyone here is just going to invite some strange vampire inside. Well, not another one, anyway.”

Jacs stuck her tongue out at Lola and kept pacing.

Charlie and Violet came walking in.

“What’s all the excitement?” Violet asked. “Everything okay in here?”

“We saw Rafe—the vampire that’s stalking Jacs. He was on some drone security footage that LIPS sent over,” I said.

“Ugh, what a creep!” Charlie said angrily. “Why don’t I go take a look around the area, see if I can pick up any sign of him?”

“Yeah, and I’ll come with,” Violet said.

“Right now, Rafe doesn’t know that we know he’s skulking around out there,” Artemis said. “We need to use that to our advantage.”

“Also, the image was really blurry, and whoever it was moved really fast—I’m not even one hundred percent sure that it was Rafe. I could be wrong.”

“Let’s see for ourselves. Where’s the video? Show us,” Lola said, already getting up.

My cheeks started to burn. “No.”

Artemis gave me a confused look. “No? Why not?”

“Because it was deleted!” I said a little too loudly. “By accident.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “You should really be kept away from all things technology.”

“Ugh, then what do we do now?” Jacs asked.

Artemis got to her feet, pulling a stake from her boot. “We go vampire hunting.”

**Episode 2590**

GREYSON

I locked the USB in one of the desk drawers, then slid the key into my pocket. I’d considered deleting the footage—especially since a video of Cali and Xavier having sex didn’t deserve to exist in the same world I lived in—but the image of the vampire was too concerning for me to do that. I didn’t want to even think about some weird vampire getting so close to the pack house, especially one that was stalking Jacqueline. Who knew what else he was capable of?

And if he was after Jacqueline, Cali could get caught in the crossfire, and I wasn’t going to let happen. It was always bad news to have vampires sniffing around, but it was worse now with LIPS in the mix. I pushed my hair back with one hand, sighing.

*Never a dull moment…*

Xavier came walking in, seeming even more agitated than before. “What now? If it were up to me, you’d delete that video, immediately.”

“Believe me, I will.”

“Just do it already. Do you even have the slightest idea how stressed out she is about the video? I mean, I’m embarrassed of course, but it’s different for Cali,” Xavier said. “If you really cared about her, you’d think about how having that video around is affecting her.”

“I don’t need you to lecture me about Cali’s feelings. I’m well aware of how Cali feels about it, and I’ll make sure that the video goes nowhere.” It wasn’t like I wanted anyone else in the world to see Cali in that position—she was my mate, and I wanted to protect her just as much as Xavier did.

“Well, it better not, because if even one more person lays their eyes on it because you couldn’t—”

“Stop it, Xavier. I get it, you’re worried about the video. I’m even more upset, but I didn’t show it to you just so we could get into another fight over Cali. I wanted to show you the vampire. That’s it,” I said, grinding my teeth. “And why weren’t you more careful? This was an accident, but you know we’re being watched. You know LIPS has us tight on their leash.”

“Are you sure that’s why you wanted to show it to me?”

I snorted and shook my head. “What other reason would there be for me to *want* to see a video of you and Cali going at it? You think you and Cali want it destroyed? Trust me, so do I. You don’t have to worry. It’ll stay between the three of us… and Rhonda, I guess. But like I said, at least she doesn’t know that it’s you two.”

Xavier shook his head, looking thoughtful. “Okay, then what about LIPS? Do you think it’s possible they saw the vampire?”

“I doubt it. Rhonda didn’t mention it, and why would she? They don’t even know we exist, so I doubt they believe in vampires or would even know one if they saw one.”

“You’re probably right about that. This is just so fucked. I can’t believe our privacy is on the line like this.”

I nodded, hesitating for a moment as I shifted gears internally. “So… Is Cali okay?”

Xavier shrugged. “I talked to her, and she’s dealing with it. But did you notice her reaction when I asked her about Rafe?”

I thought about it and remembered the look Xavier had given me. “Yeah, I do remember her being a little evasive about it. You know why?”

“No, I just have a feeling that she’s up to something.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Isn’t she always?”

“Yeah, but what is it this time, I wonder?”

“I don’t know; why don’t we just ask her?”

“Sounds good to me.”

Xavier and I left the study and searched the pack house for Cali. We found her in the living room, huddled with Artemis, Lola, Jacqueline, Charlie, and Violet. They all looked up at us when we came in, giving each other what looked like conspiratorial glances, though I might have been imagining it. I gestured to Cali, and she came over to us.

“What’s going on?” She lowered her voice. “There isn’t more video, is there?”

*Wow, she really is freaked out about this.*

“No, and I’m sorry again about all that,” I said. “I don’t want you to worry about it. It’s locked up safe. We just wanted to talk.”

Xavier and I led her away from the others and into the hallway.

“So, *is* something wrong?” She looked back and forth between us, waiting.

I looked to Xavier, then back at her. “Is there something you’re not telling us?”

“About what?”

“Vampires?” Xavier said.

“Oh… No. I’m just trying to help Lola deal with Jacs. She’s a little on edge and is acting out a little. She’s just really freaked out, though I can’t blame her.”

I nodded. “Okay. That was all we wanted.”

“Okay then.” She gave us a small wave before leaving us and returning to the living room.

Xavier looked skeptical. “You believe her?”

“Not at all. But before we get all bent out of shape, maybe we should give her a little space. If she’s up to something, I’m convinced that she’ll let us know before she gets in over her head.”

I left Xavier and went into the kitchen, where my mom was sitting at the table staring at her phone. She looked up and smiled when I came in. “Hey, you—I’ve got a bone to pick with you.”

“What?” I asked.

“I can’t believe that you let me win!” she said. “Just tell me the truth, and I won’t get mad—you threw the shifting competition for me, right?”

“You won fair and square. Honest,” I said, holding up my hands. “So, how are things with you and Big Mac?” Was that enough to deflect?

She gave me a lingering look but let it drop.

“Good.” She sighed. “MacKenzie was so resistant to going to get fitted, but after days and days of protests and buttering her up, she gave in.”

“Good. You can definitely be convincing when you want to be,” I said as I sat down across from her.

“Thanks—but I’m worried. I’ve been sitting here with my phone since she left, just waiting for her to send a picture, a text update—something.”

“And let me guess, radio silence?”

“Radio silence. What if she picks a black suit?”

“Um, I assumed that she would.”

She laughed. “Well, she does like to go for the darker looks, that’s true… I’m just a little worried… And maybe a little miffed at not being allowed to come along. But I wanted her to do it on her own so that she could feel comfortable with whatever she picked out without feeling any pressure from me.”

“Don’t worry about it. Give Big Mac a little credit in the fashion department,” I said. Big Mac always had some witchy outfit on. “I’m sure whatever she picks out will be fine. “

“Fine? I don’t want my wedding to be *fine*. I’ve dreamed about this day with her for a long time. I want it to be perfect—spectacular, even—in every way.”

“It will be. Don’t worry so much.” I pictured marrying Cali, and how I’d want that day to be perfect, too. *If it ever happens…*

The door opened, and Big Mac came stomping in.

My mother looked surprised, but she tried to hide it. “Back so soon?”

Big Mac glared. “I’m never going back there again. Horrible people, all of them,” she said. “And why do I need to get a wedding outfit, anyway? I have plenty of clothes already. I have plenty of black to choose from.”

My mother’s eyes went wide. “What? But don’t you want something special to wear when we stand up at the wedding arch?”

“Isn’t being up there special enough?” she countered.

“My cue to leave,” I said under my breath. “See you two later.”

I stepped outside, not wanting to get caught in the crossfire.

*Wow*. *I hope that if Cali’s and my day ever does come, we’ll be a little more chill than they’re being right now.*

I heard the sound of someone chopping wood, and I turned to see Artemis going at a log with a hatchet. I started toward her, but as I got closer, I couldn’t help but notice that she was fashioning the log into a stake. I thought back to seeing her huddled with Cali and the others.

*This can’t be a coincidence. A vampire on our property, followed by Artemis making stakes in the back yard?*

I stood behind Artemis for a while, watching her. She was going to town with the hatchet, focusing on getting the sharp shard of wood just right.

I cleared my throat a few times before she finally stopped and faced me.

“Oh hey, Greyson.” She shot a glance at the stake in her hands.

I looked down at the stake, then back up at her. “Artemis, what’s really going on?”

**Episode 2591**

ARTEMIS

I’d seen Greyson coming out of the corner of my eye, and I wasn’t at all surprised by the question. He was the Alpha, so it was no surprise that he wanted to know what was going on under his roof—especially if it might involve Cali. I remembered Cali’s insistence that we could handle Rafe on our own, and I totally agreed with her. We didn’t even need to use anchors—our numbers alone would overwhelm the vamp, and the stake would finish him off, no problem. Still, I didn’t want to lie to Greyson.

*But Cali’s my sister, so…*

I held up the stake, not bothering to hide my pride. “What does it look like?”

I smiled and hoped that Greyson would lighten up a little and not press me too much about what, specifically, I planned to do with it. I wasn’t prepared to lie. Besides, I didn’t need to report to him or anything. I wasn’t a wolf, despite dating one.

Greyson whistled through his teeth. “That’s a big stake. You going vampire hunting or something?”

I shrugged. “You can never be too prepared. Charlie and I are going to test out my crossbow using this as ammunition. I think it would stop a vampire—or really anything—in their tracks. What do you think?”

Greyson cocked his head to the side and looked at me closely. “But why now? Is there something going on that I should know about?”

I looked at him warily. “Well, we’re all aware that Jacs is being stalked—why not be prepared, just in case he’s stupid enough to actually come to a werewolf pack house after her?”

I wasn’t exactly lying.

Greyson nodded. “Can’t argue that. Good luck.”

Then he turned and left.

*That was easy. Maybe a little too easy.*

Still, I was relieved that he’d left it at that. Hopefully I’d satisfied his suspicions, and I figured that maybe I had. Greyson would have had no trouble calling me on my shit if he really thought I was hiding anything.

I was about to return to my work when I saw Greyson stop Charlie—who was armed to the teeth with all manner of hunting weapons.

*Don’t break under pressure, Charlie. Keep your cool.*

I watched them until Greyson left Charlie and went inside.

Charlie came rushing over. “Man oh man, he was asking a lot of questions. Greyson’s intense. Do you know how hard it was not to spill the beans?”

“I know. He definitely thinks something’s up, but doesn’t know exactly what yet.”

Charlie sighed and looked back at the house, as if checking to see if Greyson was coming back. “I really wish we could just tell him what we’re up to. Maybe he could help?”

I shook my head. “See, that’s where you’re wrong. We don’t need help. We’ve got this under control. All we need to do is make sure that we’re ready for Rafe, and I really think we are.”

I felt oddly connected to this whole Rafe thing. I knew exactly how Jacs was feeling. Something about Rafe and how he’d been on her heels for years, never letting her breathe and following her everywhere she went, made me think of the Kollector. He was dead, and yet he was still following me everywhere.

I slammed my hatchet down, putting the final touches on the point of the stake, and then I held it up to the light, admiring my handiwork. “So, should we try this out?”

“Yeah, for sure. What should we use as a target?” Charlie said, staring at the stake with appreciation.

“Hmm, good question.” We both looked around the yard. “There’s always the target that I use for archery, but the stake might break it in two.” I kept scanning the yard. “Oh, how about that tree over there?”

“Let’s try it.”

I led the way toward the tree until we were about twenty yards away from it.

“You sure you can handle that thing?” Charlie asked me.

“Of course.” I scoffed. “Watch and learn.”

It took the both of us working together to load the stake into the crossbow, then Charlie stepped back as I lifted it up. It was heavy but manageable.

“Stay clear,” I said to Charlie, already narrowing my gaze at the tree.

I aimed the crossbow right at the middle of the tree, but in my mind, I pictured Rafe. I lowered the crossbow a bit more until it was level with his “chest,” and then I slowly pulled the trigger. There was a loud snap, and the crossbow recoiled into my shoulder, throwing me back a step. The stake whipped through the air and shattered the bark inches from where I’d aimed.

Charlie whistled. “Rafe won’t stand a chance. I almost feel sorry for the guy. Almost.”

“I don’t. He’s got this coming, sounds like.” I examined the spot where the stake had hit the tree. It was definitely effective. “Okay, that was good, but let’s try it again from farther away.”

We were backing up and getting into place again when Rishika came out and joined us.

“I saw that, and I’m impressed,” Rishika said as Charlie went to pull the stake out of the tree. “You should make a few more of those to add to our arsenal.”

I realized then that I hadn’t told Rishika about our plan to go after Rafe. I might have been on the fence about telling Greyson, but I wasn’t about to keep something like this from Rishika. We were in a relationship, she was my girlfriend, and I had no desire to keep any secrets from her.

“I’ll definitely make more of these, but it’ll have to wait,” I said. “I’m going to use this one to kill the vampire that’s stalking Jacs.”

Rishika looked at me but said nothing.

“Are you okay with that?” I asked.

“I am, but I’m not crazy about you risking your neck and not letting the pack know.”

“I get that, but we have our reasons. Are you going to tell? We really wanted to keep this hush hush and not get Xavier and Greyson involved if we could help it.”

Rishika thought it over. “I guess I’ll just take the ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ approach. But if anyone asks me about it, I’m not going to lie.”

“That’s fair.”

“Can I help? I’ve had my share of run-ins with vampires—and I have to admit that there’s something uniquely satisfying about staking one through the heart.”

“Of course I’d love for you to have my back in this, but it might draw too much attention, given all the stuff still happening around here. Those Vanguard jerks were already enough to deal with, but now we have these happy-go-lucky LIPS folks sniffing around. It’s probably better that you stay close to the pack.”

“Don’t you think LIPS might find it a little alarming if they see a group of people running through the woods with weapons?”

She had a point. We’d have to be extra vigilant and make sure that we didn’t run into any field members or drones. The last thing I wanted was for something to happen with Rishika and those humans again.

“Just be as careful as possible, okay?” Rishika pressed.

“Me?” I asked.

Rishika rolled her eyes. “Yes, *you*. I’m not sure if you know this, but my girlfriend used to be a bounty hunter.”

I grinned, pulling her close. I loved the feel of her body against mine. “Is that so? Then I think she can probably take care of herself.”

“Yeah?” Rishika asked, her breath catching as I dipped my head toward her lips. “Think she can promise that?”

“Promise.”

I closed the distance between us, kissing her. Every time I kissed her it was like I was being shot with a blast of magic. She cupped my face, deepening the kiss. When she bit my lip, I was ready to forget all about this stupid vampire. Going upstairs with her sounded much better than running around in the woods.

Rishika broke off the kiss, and I cursed the gods. “Please be careful, Artemis. I mean it. I’m trusting you to be able to handle this, but don’t make me regret not getting the Alpha involved.”

For the first time since we’d started this whole thing, I was feeling a little nervous. In all the bounty hunting jobs I’d taken on, no one had ever asked me to be careful. “Don’t worry about me. I promise I’ll be careful.”

Charlie came walking up with the stake. “I think we need to resharpen the tip. It got thrashed by the tree.”

I gave Rishika one last squeeze before walking back to the chopping block with Charlie.

“She okay with all this?” Charlie asked, picking up the hatchet. He put the stake down and held it steady while he chopped the tip back into a point.

“As okay as she can be,” I said.

Lola, Cali, Violet, and Jacs came out to join us.

Cali’s eyes went wide as she took in the stake. “Whoa, can I try?”

“NO!” everyone said in unison.

Cali frowned. “Wow, okay, don’t all shoot me down at once or anything.”

“I’ll let you try it another time when it’s not life-or-death,” I said to Cali, clapping her on the back. Then I turned to Jacs. “So, are you ready for this?”

“I am,” Jacs said, but she looked rattled.

“I know this is all a lot, but remember, Rafe brought all of this on himself. He’s terrorized you for long enough, and we’re not going to let him do it any longer.” I turned to the others. “Charlie and I are going to lead the way. Follow our lead, and don’t do anything stupid. We need to be smart about this. Vampires are not to be played with, though I’m sure I don’t have to remind any of you of that. We know that Rafe was here, so we’re going to track him. Just stay close and remember to do as I say.”

I took a deep breath and slung the crossbow over my shoulder, then led them into the woods.

*Duty calls.*

**Episode 2592**

Artemis led the way, and I was right behind her. I was so proud of my sister. She was carrying her crossbow with such authority that it filled me with all the confidence I needed to see this whole Rafe thing through.

*I knew we’d be able to do this without the guys’ help! Artemis was born to kick ass and take names.*

While we walked, I worked on sharpening my focus so that I would be ready to use my Fae magic—namely my shield—the moment it was needed. I felt good about our odds, and I felt like I would be able to hold my own. It might have been wrong not to tell Xavier and Greyson about our plans, but seeing Artemis all strong and powerful and capable and knowing that Charlie, Violet, and Lola were by my side erased any doubts that we would come out of this whole thing safely.

Also the guys couldn’t have bought my excuse earlier, right?

We moved quickly and made our way deeper into the woods, not talking much and keeping an eye out for any signs of LIPS, or anyone else who might try to catch us by surprise. We were walking for a while before I realized that we were headed straight for the very spot where the drone had filmed Xavier and me having sex. The thought of it made my cheeks go hot.

*I can never tell them about that video. How would I ever explain something like that? Lola would never let me live it down.*

Charlie stopped suddenly and turned to Violet. “Can you smell that?”

He had his eyebrows cocked as he took in huge breaths of air.

My heart started hammering in my chest. *Oh my god. Can they smell Xavier and me out here? What am I going to do? What am I going to tell them?*

“Yes, I smell it,” Violet said, lifting her nose and sniffing the air. “Death.”

I shuddered. “I know what that means. Vampires.”

I wasn’t excited about potentially facing off with Rafe, but at least they hadn’t caught a whiff of our tryst in the air. I didn’t even know if it was possible for them to pick up a scent like that, but I wasn’t interested in finding out.

“It’s not very strong,” Charlie said, still sniffing the air. “But there was definitely a vampire here not that long ago.”

Artemis nodded and took a cautious survey of the area around us. “That means we’re on the right track. Everyone, make sure to stick together and watch each other’s backs. Werewolves, do not shift—no matter how tempting it is. Greyson told you not to, and we don’t want to give LIPS an excuse to butt in any more than they already have. It could be a matter of life and death.”

“We hear you loud and clear. No shifting,” Lola said.

“This way,” Charlie said, taking the lead.

“You okay?” I whispered to Jacs, who was walking right beside me.

She’d been quiet ever since we’d set off, and I could sense how tense she was. I knew that she had to be more afraid than any of us, since she was the one being targeted by Rafe. The stakes were much higher for her than they were for the rest of us, though once Rafe saw the stakes and other weapons we’d brought with us, I was sure he’d waste no time trying to take all of us out.

Jacs simply nodded—and not very convincingly. She must have been totally out of sorts, as she wasn’t being her usual snappy, sarcastic self. Her eyes were darting around the forest nonstop, as if she thought Rafe might jump out and attack at any moment. It was weird to see her acting so vulnerable for a change.

“Don’t worry, it’s gonna be okay,” I said, squeezing her hand. *She must really not be herself if she’s not snatching her hand away.* “We’ve got this all under control. Artemis knows what she’s doing, and she has the rest of us for support. Plus we’ve got some heavy artillery of our own.”

I looked around. We were now only a few feet away from the exact spot where Xavier and I had been. I hoped that we’d keep moving right past it. The fact that we’d been caught in the act by a LIPS drone was creepy, yes, but the idea that Rafe might have been watching the entire time, too? Ugh. It wouldn’t have surprised me in the least if he’d been spying on us—it was clear that Rafe was a certified creep.

Suddenly, someone grabbed my shoulders, and I gasped.

Jacs gave me a look. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I said as the feeling slipped away. “I’m fine, thanks.”

Now I was worried. It was the same feeling I’d had in my dreams—and the same exact sensation that I’d had in the living room earlier today.

*There’s no doubting it now. The handprints are acting up again. Is it a sign?*

I looked around. Everything seemed normal enough—well, as normal as a vampire hunting trip could be.

I took a few more steps, and there it was again, the same grip on my shoulders as before, only this time it was so tight that it hurt.

*I can’t move! What’s happening to me?*

A dark cloud passed across my vision, and all sound faded away, as if I were in a vacuum. The dark, misty cloud swirled around me a few times before drifting over to hover in front of me. It slowly began to take shape, and a second later, Seluna appeared before me. While she hadn’t been overtly pleasant before, her expression now was downright hostile.

Her eyes were dark, turbulent orbs, and there was clear menace in every single move she made. She started stretching a hand out toward me, and I tried to scream, but no sound escaped my lips. My feet were frozen to the ground so I couldn’t run, and I didn’t have enough strength to lift my hands and use my Fae magic.

Seluna’s grip on my shoulders grew tighter until I winced and cried out in pain.

“Don’t make so much noise, Caliana, I promise this won’t hurt. Badly.” Seluna’s hand entered my chest, and she closed her fingers around my heart again, squeezing it until it stopped beating. I felt like I was going to faint at any moment.

“I warned you!” Seluna hissed. “Don’t make me wait.”

“You’re hurting me!” I gasped, finally finding my voice, strained and hoarse as it was.

Seluna’s hand closed even tighter around my heart and shoulders.

I struggled to stay on my feet as the pain of her grip ripped through my body in searing waves.

“If you—if you hurt me, what good will I be? You need me!”

I thought about how much Lucian had seemed to need me even to initiate conversation with her, and I only hoped I was just as useful to her as I was to the prince. I’d never thought I’d want to be with Lucian, but right now I would gladly take another one of his kisses over being squeezed to death by Seluna.

Seluna flashed a chilling, joyless smile. “If I hurt you too badly for you to be useful, so be it. There will always be others.”

“But I thought you didn’t want to wait!” I was in excruciating pain, and I wondered how long I would last with Seluna’s hand around my heart, keeping it from beating.

“I will get what I want! I always do.” Seluna’s voice echoed around me as if it were coming from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

“Why are you doing this?” I shrieked. “I thought you were supposed to help me!”

Seluna’s expression softened. “We can help each other, but only if you cooperate. Go to Lucian. Do not delay.”

Finally, her grip on my heart loosened, and I could feel it beating again. Seluna’s form started to dissolve, and the only thing keeping me on my feet was Seluna’s hands, still clasping my shoulders. As the last of Seluna’s image faded away, she finally released her hold, and I fell to my knees, gasping for air. I planted my hands on the ground, bracing myself, trying to keep from collapsing in a heap in the dirt, even though that was exactly what I wanted to do.

I felt a cool breeze on my skin, and the forest came back to life with all the sounds and light that had been there before.

“I’m okay,” I whispered to myself. “I’m okay.”

I sat down and covered my face with my hands, trying to calm the tremors of fear that were still racing through my body. Taking a deep breath, I tried to slow down my heartbeat. What had all of that been? A vision? Or had I really been talking to Seluna?

When I’d finally calmed down enough, I looked around.

“Artemis?” I called out. “Hello? Anyone?”

Fear crept down my spine. I was completely alone.

**Episode 2593**

Anxiety spiked like fire in my chest.

*Where did everyone go? How long was I with Seluna? It can’t have been that long, right?*

Had Seluna done something to them? I slowly got to my feet and looked around, but there was nothing but trees and brush as far as the eye could see. I wished that I had werewolf senses—then I’d be able to smell or hear my friends if they were anywhere nearby. As it was, I couldn’t smell anything but damp earth and tree bark. I concentrated and closed my eyes, but my ears picked up nothing of note, just the rustle of the trees and the sounds of birds chirping. I felt like I was the only person around for miles, though I knew that couldn’t be true.

*Don’t panic, Cali. You’re not far from the pack house. If nothing else, you can always turn around and head back.*

But where was everyone, and why would they leave me out here all alone? There was no way Artemis would have abandoned me. Lola either. Something was up.

Another anxiety inducing thought occurred to me and made my blood run cold. Maybe Rafe had caught on and surprise attacked the others while I was caught up with Seluna.

I took a quick look around, hoping to see something, anything, that would alert me to where they might be, but there was nothing. I decided to explore a little further in the direction we’d been heading. If they were still out there, I hoped I’d run into them eventually.

I started off again, and for the first time I really began to question my decision to keep my mates out of this. I’d wanted to prove to them—and everyone else—that I was capable of taking care of myself without having to rely on my mates at every turn, but there was no question that I would’ve felt so much more secure if Xavier or Greyson had been here with me. They never would’ve left me alone in the middle of the woods with a crazy vampire on the loose, for one thing.

My run-in with Seluna was still heavy on my mind, and for a moment that was all I could think about. I rubbed my shoulders, remembering how tightly Seluna had gripped them, almost as if she’d wanted to snap my bones. I wondered how much more time Seluna was going to allow me. Her threat had rung loud and clear, and I wondered how much worse things would get the longer I delayed getting to Lucian. As soon as the whole Rafe thing was over, I was going to tell Xavier and Greyson about my recent run-ins with Seluna and see what they thought I should do. I knew neither one of them would be keen on the idea of me going back to Lucian, but I was beginning to think that I didn’t have a choice in the matter.

I heard a sound in the breeze and paused to listen. Was that Violet? Or maybe Lola?

I was about to call out for them, but as soon as I cupped my hands to my mouth, I paused. Yelling out to my friends while hunting a vampire seemed like a bad idea.

*I just need to get to them. Once we’re reunited, we’ll be able to figure everything out and I’ll feel safer.* I decided to quicken my pace. They had to be around somewhere, and the quicker I moved, the faster I’d find them.

As soon as I took a step forward, I heard a twig snap behind me. I turned around.

*Nothing there.* *Did I imagine that?*

I’d thought I’d imagined Seluna earlier, at the pack house, but now I knew that her visits were very, very real. I didn’t want to assume I was safe if I wasn’t—especially since plenty of messed-up things had happened in these woods before.

*Is someone following me?*

I stopped to listen again, my heart pounding, my nerves on edge. It was one thing to hear sounds in the woods while taking a casual walk to enjoy nature, but it was entirely another—and much scarier—thing when hunting a vampire… alone?

I was completely over this Seluna nonsense. She was making life harder for me in ways I did not need at the moment. Things were always difficult enough in a pack house full of werewolves, not to mention the never-ending struggle against the *due destini*. Not only was she one of the main reasons why we couldn’t disentangle ourselves from the Vanguard pack, but now she’d gotten in the way of our mission and caused me to be left alone in the woods with a stalker vampire on the loose. Her timing couldn’t have been worse.

I took another step, and I heard it again, the distinct sound of a twig snapping underfoot.

*Stay calm. Relax. There’s nothing there, so maybe you’re imagining it.*

As I stood stock-still and listening hard, trying to see if I heard the sound again, all the arguments I’d had with Xavier about how I was perfectly capable of taking care of myself flooded my thoughts. I still believed it, even if I was scared as hell right now. I had my Fae powers at the ready, and I wouldn’t hesitate to use them if I needed to. I took a deep breath and tried to slow my breathing.

*Maybe this is just another of Seluna’s tricks. A way to scare me into giving in. If it is, I’m sure as hell not going to fall for it.*

I’d meant what I’d told the goddess earlier—she needed me. It made no sense for her to hurt me, and I wasn’t going to let her push me around.

I made it a couple more feet before I heard yet another sound behind me. I clenched my fists and spun around. Nothing. Just the trees. I was tempted to yell out and challenge whoever it was, but if there really wasn’t anything there, I didn’t want to call attention to myself. I replayed the sound in my head. It had really sounded like a twig breaking under someone’s feet; I was quite sure of that. I was pretty sure I’d heard something similar when I’d been out in the woods with Xavier. I’d brushed it off at the time, but maybe it had been Rafe then, and maybe it was Rafe now.

*Is he watching me? Waiting for just the right moment to strike?* I raised my hands, preparing to blast him with everything I had. I revolved in place, my eyes searching all the shadowy places between the trees. *Nothing. What I wouldn’t give to see a squirrel or rabbit or anything innocent that could be responsible for all those noises.*

No such luck. It seemed like even the birds had gone elsewhere.

I stood there like that for an eternity, waiting, watching, holding my breath so that I’d be able to hear anything that didn’t sound quite right. I knew that the longer I waited, the farther away I would get from the others. I still couldn’t believe that we’d gotten split up.

*Why haven’t they come back for me?*

I plowed ahead again, determined to find them. I’d only taken a few steps when I heard a loud crack overhead followed by voices. Was that Artemis?I quickened my pace, my mind racing with possibilities. Was that cracking sound the crossbow? Had they staked Rafe? If they’d already caught up to him, that would most certainly be best-case scenario. Then once we were all reunited, we could all go right back to the pack house and pretend like none of this had ever happened.

“Whoa!”

The world spun around me as I tripped over a root. I reached out to break my fall and scraped my hands up pretty badly in the process. I scrambled quickly to my feet, my hands hurting like hell.

“Artemis!” I whisper-yelled. “Artemis, is that you?”

No response. I continued toward the voices, and relief flooded my stomach at the sound of Lola arguing with someone—surprise, surprise. I caught a glimpse of Charlie through the trees.

*I’m getting closer. Thank god. I was starting to think they’d really left me out here and gone back to the pack house or something.*

Then I heard it again. The snap of a twig, followed by the crunch of leaves. There was no way that was my imagination. There was no mistaking it, the sound of footsteps getting closer and closer. I swung around with my arms up and ready to blast. I felt a cold breeze tickle my neck. I turned back around, only to come face-to-face with Rafe.

“Shit!” I breathed, my stomach twisting itself into knots. I scrambled backward and butted right up against a tree. I knew that I should run, blast him, anything, but I was too scared to move.

Rafe smiled, revealing the sharp tips of his fangs. His red eyes were focused right on me, and they shone in the light filtering down through the trees. “Hello there, my little Fae.”

**Episode 2594**

LOLA

I was getting more annoyed by the second.

“I told you that I didn’t mean to fire the crossbow. I just wanted to hold it so I could feel like a badass—like Artemis. I didn’t touch anything. I have no idea why it went off. Why are you all being so judgy?”

I’d never held a crossbow in my life, so honestly, I kind of felt like it was their fault for allowing me to hold it in the first place. It had gone off without warning, and I’d nearly dropped it, which I was sure would’ve pissed Artemis off even worse.

Artemis yanked the crossbow out of my hands. “Nobody else but me is touching this from now on.”

“I second that,” Charlie grumbled as he worked to dislodge the stake from a tree.

“Fine, you don’t have to tell me twice,” I said. “It’s not like I did it on purpose.”

“I fail to see how that matters,” Violet said.

I was just glad that I’d only hit a tree. If I’d hit Jacs by mistake, it would have killed her on the spot, and I never would’ve forgiven myself.

“Let’s make sure we treat Lola with Cali gloves from now on—no heavy artillery allowed in her hands at any time,” Artemis said.

Violet and the others laughed.

“Y’all are being so mean right now.” I turned to defend myself to Cali, knowing that she would understand my pain, but she wasn’t there. I looked around. “Hey… Has anyone seen Cali?”

Jacs arched her eyebrows in surprise as she took a quick glance around. “We were together just a short while ago. Weird. I didn’t even notice that she was gone.”

I was getting worried. “Did she wander off and get lost or something? I mean, that *would* be so like her, but I thought we were all together.”

I lifted my nose into the air, trying to pick up Cali’s scent, but I wasn’t getting anything.

“Terrific. First Lola almost friendly fires one of us with *my* crossbow, and now Cali’s gone.” Artemis sighed and started backtracking, the crossbow propped on her shoulder. “Guess no one listened when I said to stay close,” she grumbled. “But why would anyone listen to me? I’m only one of the more experienced people in this group.”

I knew that Cali could be impulsive sometimes, but I doubted, given the circumstances, that she would’ve just up and left on her own. But if she hadn’t decided to go on a side hunt for Rafe on her own, then that could only mean…

“Got it!” Charlie said as he finally managed to pull the stake out of the tree. He handed it to Artemis and then joined the search for Cali. “Let’s retrace our steps. I’m sure we’ll find her in no time,” he said brightly.

“I swear, she was just right beside me,” Jacs said, looking shaken. She was still looking around the woods like she expected Rafe to jump out and grab her at any moment, and she was even looking a little paler than usual.

*She isn’t handling this whole thing well. Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to bring her along. We definitely could’ve dealt with Rafe without her.*

Charlie looked puzzled as his eyes combed the ground. “Weird, I don’t see any of her footprints. It’s as if she just vanished into thin air.”

He put his hands on his hips and looked around.

“She has to be around here somewhere,” Violet said.

“What if Rafe took her?” Jacs asked quietly. “He’s probably toying with us, trying to see which one of us breaks first. Then he’ll close in for the kill!”

My blood ran cold at the thought. “If that bastard has laid a finger on my friend, I’ll stake him myself.”

“Not if he tears your throat out first,” Jacs said.

“Wow, way to be positive, Jacs,” I said.

“What? I’m just being realistic. I told you all that Rafe is dangerous. Maybe now you’ll believe me.” Jacs wrapped her arms tighter around herself and looked at the ground.

“Jacs, calm down. We don’t even know if Rafe is behind this.” Artemis sighed and looked off into the distance, a thoughtful look on her face. “I think we should head back. We’ll search for my sister along the way.”

Artemis paused long enough to reload her crossbow before leading the way back in the direction we’d come.

I’d just started to follow her when I heard something. I spun around.

*Is there someone there? Behind that big tree?*

I squinted, trying to figure out whether or not I was seeing things. The woods had a way of playing tricks on you, especially when you were on edge. I was about to shift so that I could close in and get a better look, but then I remembered Greyson’s orders about shifting outside the pack house.

*Fine, then I guess I’ll have to rely on my vampire skills.*

I gestured to Violet and then to the tree.

“I think there’s something there,” I mouthed to her.

We walked toward it slowly, cautiously, and in a flash, someone jumped out from behind it.

“Oh no you don’t!” I leapt onto the attacker, linking my arms around their throat, then I reared back, preparing to bite.

Violet grabbed me and yanked me off. “Stop it, Lola! It’s Greyson.”

“What?” I said, confused.

“What the hell? Were you about to fang me?” Greyson said, staring at me with wide eyes.

“How was I supposed to know it was you? What the hell were you doing, creeping around out here?” I should’ve known that he wouldn’t let Cali out of his sight. Cali was his mate, which meant it was kind of his job to know where she was at all times.

Greyson straightened his shirt. “I’m not creeping around. I was just following you all, trying to figure out what the hell you were up to.” He looked around. “Wait, where’s Cali?”

I swallowed hard. “We… Um… We kind of lost her?”

Those were not words that anyone ever wanted to utter to Greyson—or Xavier, for that matter. I prepared for the worst.

Greyson’s expression darkened. “Lost her? What do you mean lost her? Where?”

“Somewhere?” I said with a nervous laugh. *So far, he’s being a little calmer than I expected.*

Greyson pushed past me, preparing to bellow Cali’s name. Artemis grabbed his arm and shushed him. Greyson turned to face her, his face twisted with anger.

“You wanted to know what we’re up to? We’re hunting a fucking vampire. Don’t give us away. They have really great hearing,” Artemis said.

Greyson glared at her. “I know that. Where’s Cali?”

“We’re looking for her,” Artemis said. “We were walking, and then she just vanished. None of us saw her go anywhere. It was really strange.”

Greyson was about to say something when we heard another sound. We all whipped around to see where it was coming from. I was just about to charge, but Greyson beat me to it. In a flash, he tackled someone who’d emerged from behind a boulder. They both crashed into the hard rock and then tumbled to the ground in a heap. I was about to go pile on when I heard a familiar voice.

“Get the fuck off me!” It was Xavier. Was the entire pack house going to appear from behind the trees at this rate?

“What the hell are you doing out here, Xavier?” Greyson asked, getting up and dusting himself off.

Xavier hopped to his feet and shoved Greyson. “I might ask you the same exact thing.”

“Will you both shut up!” Artemis hissed. “What are *both* of you doing here?”

“I came to look for Cali. Where is she?” Xavier said.

Greyson gestured at us. “They lost her.”

“What? Then why are you wasting your time fighting me? You should be trying to pick up her scent.”

“We’ve been trying,” I said to Xavier.

I couldn’t believe how wrong things had gone, and so quickly, too. I’d expected that we would encounter a bit of trouble against Rafe if we managed to track him down, but I’d never thought we’d lose Cali on the way. Now the main thing that we’d tried to avoid had happened: Xavier and Greyson were involved.

“God, everything’s gone to shit,” I muttered. “Is Jay going to pop out from behind a bush next?”

Greyson glared at us. “I can’t believe you all went out on your own. As Alpha, I’m responsible for all of you!”

I just looked at Greyson, knowing that right now wasn’t the time to say anything. He was right, after all. We should have at least told him what we were heading out to do, especially with the issues we were having with the Vanguards and LIPS. Still, I knew that if Cali hadn’t been involved and if she hadn’t been missing, Greyson’s—and Xavier’s, for that matter—reaction would have been way less angry.

“Whose idea was this, anyway?” Greyson asked, looking every one of us in the eye.

“That doesn’t matter,” Xavier said. “We can place blame later. Right now, we need to focus on finding Cali.”

Before Xavier could even finish his sentence, Cali’s scream echoed through the woods.

**Episode 2595**

I screamed, giving it my best damsel-in-distress-meets-scream-queen. Right now was as good a time as any to be as loud as I possibly could, and it was fully authentic. Rafe was scarier than any vampire I’d faced off with to date, and that was saying a lot.

I slid away from the tree and stumbled away from him. He didn’t move a muscle. He just stood there with his unnerving eyes fixed right on me, his sharp fangs glistening between his lips.

Finally getting my nerves in check, I raised my hands and sent a magic blast careening toward him, but he disappeared in a blur of movement before it made contact. I looked around for him wildly as the trees around me shook with the force of my magic.

*Where did he go?* There was a noise behind me, and I whipped around to face it, firing off another blast. All I managed to do was blast a few branches off an old pine. *Calm down. Think like Artemis. What would she do?*

I turned at the sound of low laughter coming from beside me. It was Rafe, just a few feet away. How’d he get over there so fast?

He took a deep breath. “Mmm, you smell so much better out here than you did by that diner! You’re not full Fae, are you? How exotic!” He threw his head back and bellowed a dramatic laugh. “I’ve only encountered one like you once before. It was years ago, in Sicily. He was as sweet as honey. I can only imagine that you’ll taste the same.”

If I shot him with magic at this range, I’d just end up knocking us both out with the reverberation, so I backed away, unable to pull my eyes away from his.

“Don’t bother resisting,” he said in a too soft, almost soothing voice.

*Jacs said he could use mind control! Shoot!* Now I really, really wished I had an anchor. Regret coursed through me. I realized now that we shouldn’t have rushed into this. *What if I can’t stop him from drinking my blood?*

I had to buy some time, and I hoped that someone had heard my scream.

“Why aren’t you going after Jacqueline? She’s who you want, right? She’s right over there, but she won’t be for long,” I said, pointing in the opposite direction from where I’d seen them only a few moments ago.

“Oh, I am going after her,” Rafe said matter-of-factly. “But far be it for me to pass up a snack, especially one as delicious and you’ll be. Besides, I’ve been going after Jackie for over forty years, so what’s another small delay in the scheme of things? My vengeance will be sweet either way.”

I tried to speak, but nothing came to mind. My thoughts were a jumbled, confused mess.

*Why am I fighting this vampire, anyway? He seems nice enough.*

Rafe reached out and stroked a deathly cold finger down my cheek. “Tease me with your neck.”

I wanted to hit him, I wanted to send a magic blast right into his chest, but instead I bent my head back to one side, exposing my neck. Rafe took a sharp breath and trailed an icy finger down my neck, his eyes still boring into mine. Then, he slowly wrapped his hand around the back of my neck and pulled me close.

“Stop,” I said, breathlessly and without conviction. I tried to push him way, but my arms were too heavy to lift. I could feel my willpower drifting away.

*Why not let him have a taste of my blood? He said he just wanted a snack. Is there really any harm in that?*

Rafe took a deep inhale of my scent and reared back, exposing the full length of his fangs.

“Cali!” My mind felt a little hazy, but I definitely recognized that voice. Greyson!

Rafe hesitated, his eyes finally leaving mine to search the woods for the source of the interruption.

For a split second, the fog in my brain lifted, just enough for me to realize that Rafe was too close for comfort.

“Cali!” Greyson shouted again.

I shoved Rafe away just as Greyson, Xavier, and the others came charging toward us. Rafe turned to face them just as Greyson and Xavier slammed into him, knocking him to the ground.

“Stake him! Stake him now!” Lola screamed.

Artemis planted her feet and aimed her crossbow, just as Rafe threw Greyson and Xavier off him like they weighed nothing at all. They tumbled into Artemis, throwing her off-balance. The crossbow fell from her hands and landed on the ground.

My head finally clear, I tried to blast Rafe, but he was too fast, and I didn’t shoot again, not wanting to blast the others. My magic tended to ricochet, and I needed to be careful not to catch anyone else in the crossfire.

Charlie pulled out one of his hunter weapons, a golden dagger, and charged toward Rafe, swinging the dagger in a wide arc. Rafe stepped out of the way of Charlie’s strike at the last second, and the momentum sent Charlie off-balance and crashing to the ground. Violet ran over to help Charlie back to his feet, then she turned to face Rafe.

“Eat this, bitch!” Violet yelled as she took Charlie’s dagger and hurled it at Rafe. It struck him in the arm, but, without missing a step, Rafe yanked the knife out of his arm then threw it so it stuck blade first in the ground.

“He’s too strong! I told you!” Jacs wailed. She was huddled against a tree with her hands over her eyes, watching the fight through her fingers, clearly too scared to move.

As if to prove Jacs’s point, Rafe grabbed Xavier and flung him against a tree, then grabbed Greyson and threw him at the exact same tree so that they tumbled in a heap together on the ground, grunting in pain. Then he rounded on Lola and smacked her hard in the face as she approached with her fangs out. She crumpled to the ground and didn’t move.

Charlie bolted toward Rafe with another of his hunter weapons—this time a silver-tipped stake. He launched himself off a tree stump and flew into the air with the stake poised to impale Rafe right through the chest. With a bored look on his face, Rafe grabbed the wooden end of the stake while Charlie was in mid-air and yanked it out of his hands, then he turned threw it at Artemis with amazing speed and accuracy.

“Artemis, watch out!” Charlie wailed as he crashed to the ground, landing awkwardly at Rafe’s feet.

Rafe kicked him swiftly in the stomach and then disappeared. By the time I spotted him again, he was right behind Violet. He grabbed her by the head and yanked her head back, preparing to dig his fangs into her neck.

Artemis, who’d been trying to pick up and reload her crossbow, was forced to abandon her attempt and dropped to the ground just in time. The stake sailed over her head and hit the tree behind her so hard that the entire trunk exploded in a spray of splintered wood.

Everyone shouted and ducked as splinters of wood pelted us.

“Look out!” Xavier called out as the tree fell toward us.

I watched as the tree fell right toward Violet and Rafe, just as his fangs were inches from Violet’s neck. He threw Violet to the side as he scampered out of the way of the falling tree, and Violet stumbled and fell to the ground.

I was spinning around, trying to see where Rafe was, but I couldn’t spot him.

“Artemis, here!” Greyson yelled, picking up her crossbow and tossing it to her.

Rafe reappeared then, running between Greyson and Artemis and intercepting the crossbow. He aimed it and shot it at Charlie. By luck alone, the stake missed and disappeared into the depths of the woods.

“Shit!” Artemis cursed, already pulling another stake from her boot.

Rafe dropped the crossbow, then snatched Lola up and threw her against a boulder.

I reached my hands up and tried to aim at Rafe, but again, there was no way I could hit him with my magic without hitting Lola, as well.

Artemis crawled her way toward her crossbow and picked it up. With Xavier’s help, she loaded the stake, then lifted it up quickly and aimed it at Rafe.

“Not that thing again,” Rafe said. He picked up Charlie’s dagger, the same one he’d thrown into the dirt, and threw it at Artemis. It caught Artemis in the arm, and once again, the crossbow dropped to the ground. Artemis fell down next to it, clutching her arm.

Rafe turned back to Lola and cornered her against the boulder, moving slowly toward her with a sadistic grin, his fangs bared.

“Don’t come near me!” Lola screeched. I could see the terror on her face and wished I could do something—*anything*—to stop it.

“It’s time to end this, Rafe!” It was Jacs. She was standing up straight and had a determined look on her face. “You’re never going to come near me or my friends again!”

Rafe spun around, just as Jacs raised the crossbow and shot him straight through the heart.

**Episode 2596**

XAVIER

The wind from the stake caused my hair to blow back as it whizzed by.

*Way too close for comfort, Jacs*, I thought, casting a quick look at her.

The stake plunged into Rafe’s chest with a sickening pop, and Rafe glanced down at the huge wooden stake protruding from his chest with a baffled look on his face. It was as if he didn’t even think that he was capable of being killed.

*Well, Jacqueline taught you a lesson today, didn’t she?*

Blood began to spread outward in a deep red circle across Rafe’s shirt.

Rafe dropped to his knees as Jacqueline stomped over to him. She held him upright so that she could look him in the eye. Her own eyes were brimming with tears, and after she’d looked at him for a few beats, she shoved him back hard, and he fell backward before disintegrating into ash. The stake clattered heavily to the ground.

“Jacs, you did it!” Cali breathed.

Jacqueline dropped the crossbow as if in shock and stood up, her entire body shaking. “It’s over. I can’t believe it’s over.”

She collapsed against Cali and Lola, who rushed to her side.

Greyson and I approached them, not wanting to encroach on their moment, but both wanting to know if Cali had sustained any injuries.

“You okay, Cali? Did he bite you?” Greyson asked.

“Did he hurt you?” I asked.

We both stooped down at her side and checked her over.

Cali, too shaken to speak, just shook her head.

Greyson went and helped Artemis to her feet. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, it’s just a cut, nothing to worry about.” Artemis kicked the stake, sending up a cloud of ash. “That was… epic.” She shot Jacqueline an awestruck look.

“That’s one way to put it. So, if everyone’s okay, let’s get out of here,” Greyson said. “I don’t want any of this captured on video.”

“Hey, you don’t have to tell me. I’ve had enough candid camera to last me a lifetime,” I said. Cali shot me a look.

No one seemed to be in the mood to talk as we all made our way back to the pack house. Even Lola, who usually always had something to say, was subdued. Maybe it was finally dawning on everyone how serious that whole thing had been. A shitshow of that caliber definitely warranted a bit of quiet reflection.

Rafe was hands down one of the most powerful vampires I’d gone up against in a long time—if ever. If Jacs hadn’t caught him off-guard, who knew what would have happened? I wasn’t too proud to admit that we hadn’t exactly been winning, and I, for one, was still processing it all.

I’d been terrified when I’d heard Cali’s scream, but now I was just furious—though I was trying hard not to show it. I’d trusted Cali, that she would be responsible, and that she wouldn’t get herself into that sort of situation.

*She could have died.* A chill ripped through my body at the thought. *This was so foolish! There’s no other way to put it.*

I glanced at Greyson. From the look on his face, I knew he had to be thinking the same thing that I was.

*We’re all going to have a long talk about this once we get back.*

Greyson and I walked on either side of Cali, as if to act as a shield. Too bad we hadn’t had the opportunity to be around when everything began, when it really would have mattered. All I could think about was what would have happened if Greyson hadn’t followed her, and if I hadn’t followed Greyson. I knew that Cali would be upset about that, but I didn’t really care. Not this time. She was lucky that we cared so much, that we were always so in tune whenever she got too far away from us and we didn’t know where she was.

Torin greeted us on the porch as we arrived. “Right on time! Fresh croissants, right out of the oven,” he said as he led the way inside. “Get ‘em while they’re hot.”

“Thanks, man, but I’m really not in the mood for croissants.” I looked at Greyson. “I need to talk to Cali.”

“Me too,” Greyson said.

Cali looked back and forth between us. “You can both talk to me. I’m standing right here.”

I looked around. Everyone was crowding us, asking questions about what had happened. We all looked wrecked, battered and beaten—and there was no doubt that we all felt worse than we looked. Rishika was already tending to the cut on Artemis’s arm with Torin’s help. Lola and Jay were huddled in a corner, and I could tell that Jay was chastising Lola for all the same reasons why Greyson and I were upset with Cali.

I felt like I’d been hit by a truck, and I knew I was going to be sore for a bit until I healed fully. I’d hit that tree hard, and I was lucky that I hadn’t broken any bones. They would’ve healed pretty quickly, but that didn’t mean it wouldn’t have hurt like hell.

The only thing I was sure of at the moment was that I didn’t want to have the conversation I needed to have with Cali right there in front of everyone.

“Let’s go to the study,” I said to Cali and Greyson.

I was doing my best not to explode. I’d learned that wasn’t the right way to have a conversation with Cali. I just needed to be reasonable, pretend that I was listening, nod at all the right places, and then point out how stupid and fucking dangerous her actions had been.

*No, I have to do better than that, or it’ll go south in no time.*

Greyson closed the door to the study behind us, and before either of us could speak, Cali started talking.

“I know that both of you are probably upset,” she said. Her voice had the smallest bit of a tremble to it.

Just like that, all of my anger evaporated. I could tell that she knew exactly how we felt about what had happened, and maybe that was enough.

“I have one question,” Greyson said. “Why didn’t you tell us? You know we would’ve been happy to be at your side to make sure that, well, what happened didn’t happen. You could have been killed—hell, we *all* could’ve been killed.”

“I know—I think part of it was pride, and part of it was that I was afraid that you’d both try to talk me out of it.”

“Well, you’ve got that right—we certainly would have,” I said.

“I know! You’re right. Everything just happened a little faster than I thought it would. One minute we were making plans about how we were going to handle the whole Rafe problem, and then, before I knew it, we were out in the woods hunting him down. It all kind of just happened. I felt really confident about it and like we could handle it. And it wasn’t like I was alone—I had Artemis, Jacs, Charlie, Violet, and Lola. We had a plan, too—but you know what they say about best laid plans.”

“I don’t get it—how did you get separated from everyone else in the first place? If you’d stayed with them, Rafe wouldn’t have been able to get to you so easily,” I asked.

“I—I’m not really sure.”

I raised a brow at her. “Don’t hold anything back, Cali. Not after what happened back there.”

I wished that Cali and I were alone. I wanted to hold her, to assure her that she could tell me anything, ask me for anything, and that I would always be by her side to protect her. I had no doubts that my brother was thinking the same thing.

Cali took a deep breath. “I don’t want to alarm you, but I think Seluna did some weird time-motion thing.”

“Time-motion? I don’t know what that means,” Greyson said.

“When I was watching the shifting contest earlier, Seluna came to me.”

“*What?*” I asked. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “Why didn’t you tell me that?”

“I don’t know—I wasn’t even sure that what happened actually happened. I thought I might’ve been imagining things—or that it was just a vision. After it was over, I felt normal. When it happened, it seemed like time just stopped. Then the same thing happened in the woods.”

“I don’t like any of this. This fucking moon goddess is really getting on my last fucking nerve!” I shouted as I started pacing back and forth.

“I know. But when it happened in the woods, it was different. That time, it was like time stopped for me, but not for anyone else.”

“Okay… Well, did Seluna say anything during this whole time-motion thing? What did she want?” I asked, still trying to wrap my head around the latest “gift” from our dealings with the Vanguard pack. Every single day I wished more and more that we’d never laid eyes on them in the first place.

*Talk about bad luck.*

Cali hesitated, as if trying to figure out how to say what she had to say without driving us even closer to the edge. “Seluna said… She said that I can’t wait any longer. She said that it’s time for me to go to Lucian.”

**Episode 2597**

I knew that I wasn’t explaining what happened with Seluna as best or as clearly as I could, but my mind was a little scrambled at the moment.

Between Seluna squeezing my heart like it was a stress ball and almost getting turned into a blood snack by Rafe, I was shaky, frightened, and unsure about everything. I’d seen Rafe destroyed with my very own eyes, but I still felt like he was there, watching me, running one of his deathly cold fingers over my skin. I knew I’d be having nightmares about Rafe for a long time.

Greyson and Xavier were circling me like sharks in the water. I’d been worried that they were going to scream at me for sneaking away to kill a vampire, but overall, they were both a little too calm. I wasn’t used to them taking this sort of thing in stride, and it was kind of making me uneasy. I was tired and shaken to the core, and I would have given anything in the world to have Xavier or Greyson hold me and help me regain my strength. It was funny how much I needed them after having engineered the whole Rafe plan specifically to keep them as far away from it as possible.

“I couldn’t give a flying fuck what Seluna wants,” Xavier said, sneering. “There’s no way you’re going to see Lucian. Over my dead body will you go see that creep again. How many times do we need to set foot in that place before we accept that it’s a really bad fucking idea to go there?”

Greyson hadn’t chimed in, but his silence told me that he was leaning the same way as Xavier.

I looked between both of them, trying to decide how best to convince them that we were going to have to put our misgivings about the Vanguard pack aside for the moment. “I know you two can’t stand Lucian, and you don’t want me to go see him, but Seluna… She threatened me. Made it hard for me to breathe.”

I held my breath after the words came out, waiting for one of them—or both of them—to explode.

Both Xavier and Greyson stood up straight, anger flashing in their eyes like an electric current.

“She tried to suffocate you?” Greyson asked.

I hesitated, not sure if I should explain the details. “Do you believe me?”

Greyson pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. “You have to understand where we’re coming from. We could have lost you today. We just want to be careful. Sending you back into Lucian’s clutches for him to do with you as he pleases doesn’t constitute ‘being careful.’”

“Exactly,” said Xavier. “We have to find a way around this. Remember, we talked before about bringing Lucian here, so I say we stick to that. I’m going to head to the Vanguard palace now and drag that bastard back here. I’ve had enough of their shit. If Seluna wants to do whatever, let’s get it over with—but it’s going to happen here on our turf, where we can protect Cali without Lucian calling all the shots.”

Greyson nodded slowly, as if processing Xavier’s plan. “What do you think about that, Cali?”

I shook my head. I knew why they wanted to bring Lucian to us, but I had the distinct feeling that Seluna wouldn’t go for that. “I’m not sure… Seluna said I was supposed to go to him. She didn’t say anything about him coming to me.”

Xavier started to say something else, but then he stopped. Everything stopped. I felt the familiar, vicelike grip on my shoulders again.

*I know what this means.*

I tried to tell Xavier and Greyson that it was happening again, but I couldn’t. Once again, my voice was gone. The dark cloud appeared again and materialized into Seluna’s elegant form. Without hesitation, she reached through my chest and grabbed my heart, squeezing it harder than she ever had before. I took quick, shallow breaths as my heart stopped beating once again and I was thrown back into the vacuum of complete stillness and silence.

“Why must you continue to disobey me, Caliana?” Seluna’s voice washed over me, through me. “I thought you and I had an agreement. We need each other—isn’t that what you said? I’m so very angry that you chose to risk your life in that way. It was very foolish, and very selfish of you, Caliana. If you want my forgiveness, if you want my help, you need to go to Lucian right now.”

Seluna’s grip on my heart constricted even more, and she lifted me up off the ground until my feet dangled in the air. Below me, Xavier and Greyson were frozen in time like wax statues.

*Can’t they help me? Can they hear me, or even see me?*

“Don’t make the same mistake again, Caliana,” Seluna whispered, just as darkness took over. “My patience is wearing thin. Don’t make me wait any longer.”

Everything went black, and I collapsed to the ground. Images of Lucian, Seluna, Aysel, the palace, and the moon ceremony swirled around in my head. I felt the sudden relief of pressure releasing in my chest, and I gasped for air as Greyson and Xavier’s voices came to me.

“Cali! Cali! Can you hear us? Cali! Answer us! Come back to us, Cali!”

The darkness slowly gave way to the light, and I blinked rapidly, trying to clear my head. I opened my eyes. Greyson and Xavier were hunched over me. Xavier was cradling my head in his lap and stroking my hair as Greyson rubbed my shoulders.

“Cali, what happened? Are you okay?” Greyson asked. “We thought we’d lost you. Talk to us. Tell us what happened.”

I could barely speak. My voice was a dry rasp in my throat as I whispered, “Seluna.”

I saw the tense look that passed between them.

Xavier picked me up. “I think you need to lie down.”

“No!” I said. “I can’t wait, don’t you see? We have to do what she wants.”

I coughed, still trying to catch my breath. It felt like I’d just had a ton of bricks piled on top of my chest.

“Cali, you can’t even stand up,” Xavier said. “How are you going to go anywhere if you can’t walk? Seluna should have thought about that before she attacked you.”

“Tell us exactly what happened,” Greyson commanded. He stroked my cheek, his gaze riveted to mine.

“It happened the same as before, except this time, she actually made me pass out.” The fuzziness in my head was beginning to lift, little by little. “Put me down,” I said to Xavier. He reluctantly did as I asked, and after a few seconds, my strength returned. “Seluna’s visits, or whatever they are, aren’t going to get any better. The longer we wait, the worse it’s going to be. I was really scared this time, more than the other times. She seemed agitated, angry… It felt like I was dying.”

Greyson looked alarmed. “I think Xavier might be right. Let’s get Lucian here, right now.”

*Why the hell aren’t they* listening *to me?*

“*No!* I wish that we could do it that way, I really do, but I truly don’t think Seluna would go for that. She was pretty specific. She told me to go to Lucian’s, now! Go *to* Lucian’s. Not the other way around. How many times do I have to tell you two that?”

Xavier rolled his eyes and started pacing again. “That’s bullshit. Complete bullshit! Every single time we go to that place, something strange happens. Every single time! It never fails! I’m tired of Lucian having the upper hand—we need to control this situation from here on out.”

“He’s right, Cali,” Greyson said. “The Vanguard palace isn’t the place for us to fix whatever’s going on with Seluna. If Seluna really wants you, then she’ll have to come for you here. I don’t see why it matters if you go there or if Lucian comes here. Either way, the both of you will be in the same room together—isn’t that what she wants?”

“You know what happens whenever you go there,” Xavier continued. “A bunch of hyper-sexual bullshit and innuendoes. After the day you’ve had, you don’t need to be subjected to that again!”

“Besides, *Lucian’s* the one who started this whole thing. He should be responsible for ending it,” Greyson added.

“Please, you’re not listening!” I choked back my words as I felt the tightness close in around my heart again.

Seluna’s voice sliced through my head, sounding angrier than ever. “*You need to go! Now!*”

I was starting to lose consciousness again, and my head swirled as I struggled to keep my balance. I fell forward and reached out just in time to grab onto Greyson.

“We don’t have a choice!” I gasped. “We have to go to the Vanguard palace, right now!”

**Episode 2598**

AVA

The Redwood pack house was weirdly quiet. Where the hell was everyone? It was usually something out of a Hallmark holiday movie these days.

Not that I cared, of course.

Still, it was strange. The Redwood pack ran around, getting into trouble and doing random stuff all the time. Sure it wasn’t with me, but that didn’t matter. I hadn’t felt upset or left out about it in a long time—I didn’t need to be. These people weren’t my friends. They had never wanted me around.

Nobody wanted me around. Ever.

It was what it was.

Ignoring the way my throat tightened at the thought, I decided to go downstairs and get some of that alcoholic eggnog that Torin had been raving about. It was late afternoon now, but it had to be cocktail hour somewhere, right?

As I climbed down the stairs toward the empty living room, I couldn’t help but look around for Xavier. It was an automatic reaction by now. Neither Xavier nor Cali were here, and the idea that the two of them were off together somewhere made my stomach twist.

I scoffed under my breath, heading to the kitchen. If someone told me a few years ago that I’d be pathetically pining after a guy who was in love with someone else, I would’ve laughed in their face.

I’d always thought Xavier was mine and nothing would change that.

I’d always thought of myself as confident, capable, but all that had flown out the window when my wolf made her choice despite Xavier’s rejection. I had believed many things about myself in the past, about Xavier too, but I’d never even considered that he and I would end.

We hadn’t *really* ended, though, had we?

We still had our bond. Our wolves needed each other, and Xavier needed me. It was obvious. In fact, now, more than ever, it had to be clear to Xavier that I was good for him.

*Right?*

I poked around the fridge and pulled out the eggnog, grabbing a mug while thinking that no matter what Xavier thought, his wolf wanted me. And either way, I knew I had to behave this time around. I was going to play by Xavier’s rules, make it harder for him to ignore me and the fact that a big part of him wanted to be with me. After all, Aysel, despite her many faults, had given me one good piece of advice.

*“Don’t look desperate. It makes them want to reject you.”*

I would just be good and stand still and let Xavier’s wolf lead him to me. I smiled at the thought while taking a sip of the eggnog. The moment it touched the back of my throat, it burned, and I choked, spitting it out in the kitchen sink.

This thing was like half alcohol—what the hell had that stupid Fae, Torin, put in it?

I’d *never* expected the chipper Fae to be so hardcore about the holidays. Did they even have that in the Fae world? People surprised you, didn’t they? My phone vibrated just as I’d finished the thought, and I fished it out of my pocket, hoping that it would be another surprise. That Xavier would’ve called me.

My heart throbbed when I saw that the call was from Aysel’s private number. That was actually no surprise. She was the one person who called me the most, and I didn’t even like her, so that said a lot about my social life or lack thereof. I wasn’t in the mood to deal with this woman, but the last time I’d let her go to voicemail, Aysel had gotten really mad.

She reminded me of my older brother that way.

“Aysel, hey!” I said when I picked up, trying to sound like I was happy instead of annoyed. “What’s up?”

Aysel’s voice was a bark. “Where the hell are you?”

“At the pack house,” I said, and Aysel’s dramatics only heightened from there.

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier?” she snapped. “Why aren’t you keeping me posted on your next moves? Are you still in on my plan to get Greyson and Xavier out of Cali’s life, or have you forgotten all about it?”

I sighed deeply, rolling my eyes as I poured the rest of Torin’s eggnog down the sink. “I can’t help you right now,” I said in the same tone someone would use with a bratty child. “I have to stay by Xavier’s side.”

Aysel scoffed. Her voice shifted from angry to sarcastic, much sharper now. It was definitely a departure from her pretending that we could ever be friends. “Dear god, you just keep tagging along with Xavier and Cali like a third wheel. Don’t you see how pathetic that is?”

My jaw clenched. “You’ve talked to me about this before, Aysel. Do you enjoy repeating yourself?”

“I don’t know—do you enjoy not listening?” she mocked. “If you don’t do anything to change, Xavier will never want you. I’m just trying to help you out here, and it seems like I’m talking to a wall. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“That’s not what—”

“Wake up, Ava,” Aysel said, cutting me off. Her voice was lower, and yet somehow ten times more aggressive. There was a sadistic edge to it when she said, “Everything you do is absolutely *degrading*. An Alpha would *never* want a Luna who has no self-respect.”

Aysel’s words were a hit under the belt. Acting like a horrible mean girl who pretends to give a shit about me was one thing, but bringing werewolf dynamics into the conversation took the cake. Telling someone that they didn’t deserve to be Luna—their *mate’s* Luna—was a line you didn’t cross.

Unless you wanted to make the other person explode.

Anger broke through the surface, and I couldn’t hold it back. It was always there, anyway, fueled by all the terrible things I had been through and all the terrible things I had ever done. Now, it found an escape upward. From deep within my chest, travelling up my throat and then out of my mouth as I spat at Aysel, “You have *no* idea how important I am to Xavier.”

“Listen, Ava—”

“No, you listen to me,” I snapped. “I’m not some lovelorn puppy following around a guy I like. I’m one of Xavier’s *mates* whether he acknowledges it right now or not—his first mate at that. I have a claim on him, a real one, not some bogus bullshit obsession.”

“Do you mean to insinuate that I—”

“I’m not insinuating anything,” I said, “I’m just saying that you should never underestimate the effect I have on Xavier, because for your information, Xavier needs *me* right now, not Cali. If not for me, his wolf would completely take over.”

The moment the words flew out of my lips, Aysel fell silent on the other end of the line.

My throat clammed up when I realized what I’d just said, and I quickly hung up.

*Shit, why did I have to lose my cool just now?* That was *not* information that I was supposed to reveal. I was supposed to behave, go along with Xavier’s rules, and yet I had just broken the biggest one—*don’t* let the Vanguards know about Xavier’s little shifting problem.

My hands were shaking.

But hey, maybe it would be okay? Aysel might not really pick up on what I meant.

“… Okay? Forget about it!”

My head snapped up when I heard male voices from outside. It seemed like some of the pack was back from wherever they’d gone. When I looked through the window, I saw Xavier with Greyson and Cali. I winced when I realized that if I was going to prove that I had “turned a new leaf,” I needed to tell Xavier about the phone call. It would be ten times worse if he found out from someone else like Aysel or Lucian.

*Here goes nothing.*

Taking a deep breath, I walked out to the porch to meet the three of them. I could immediately tell that Xavier, along with the other two, was tense. My eyes narrowed. What the hell were they doing out there? Cali looked frazzled and beat up. Greyson was holding her tight. I bet she stuck her nose into someone else’s business again, so I didn’t ask what was up.

I didn’t want to know what was going on with her.

I didn’t need to pity her.

“Can we talk?” I asked Xavier in lieu of a greeting.

“I’m dealing with something important here,” Xavier said sharply, looking at Cali.

Always, fucking always *Cali*.

“My thing is important too,” I said.

“For fuck’s sake.” Xavier huffed, pulling Cali from Greyson’s arms and leading her past me. “I don’t have the time for your drama right now, Ava. Drop it.”

I was left there, on the front porch, as both Xavier and Greyson led Cali inside. Of course she was more important to them. Even when *I* had really important information that could make or break them.

Typical.

The anger returned, and this time it felt even sharper.

I stormed off into the woods, my whole body vibrating with the feeling—I wanted to shift right now and work off some of this steam, but Greyson had that stupid no-shifting-outside rule right now. He wasn’t my Alpha, and I wanted to disobey him more than anything, and yet—

I had to admit that LIPS was a problem.

I needed to remind myself that I had to follow the rules from now on, anyway. That I needed to cool the hell off and not ask for Xavier’s attention or cause any scenes. So in the end, I just stomped my way through the woods, fighting to cool off.

I punched a bunch of branches and glared at a few squirrels, and it kind of worked.

Until I heard footsteps ahead.

I saw Andrei appear in my path.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

He sneered. “You’re coming with me. *Now*.”

**Episode 2599**

XAVIER

I had no time for Ava’s bullshit. We left her alone on the front porch, walking inside. I held Cali’s waist while Greyson grabbed the other side, and we led her to the living room. Artemis, Lola, Charlie, and Jacqueline were waiting for us there.

“Don’t be mad at Cali!” Lola blurted. “This is everyone’s fault!”

Before I could speak, Greyson said, “We’re not blaming anyone.”

“Everything’s fine, Lola,” Cali said in a low voice. Despite what she’d uttered, she was really not looking good.

Lola came up to her, stroking her arm. “And you’re okay?”

“I will be,” Cali told her friend, and my stomach clenched. We didn’t fucking know that for sure, or *when* she’d get better. “It’s not like this was a walk in the park for anyone.”

Lola looked over her shoulder at Jacqueline, who seemed worn as well, and nodded. She shot Cali a worried look, then took her hand in hers and squeezed.

“We had everything under control,” Artemis told Greyson severely. “You know that, right?”

“Yes,” Greyson said, “and I appreciate it.” He looked around. “Everyone should go upstairs and rest. It’s okay to be shaken, but it’s all over now.”

Lola nodded, gesturing at Jacqueline. “I’ll take Jacs upstairs to wash up and rest.”

“I’ll go find Violet,” Charlie said.

The three of them walked out of the living room after Lola gave Cali a kiss on the cheek. I watched, my stomach churning with worry as Cali took a seat on the couch, looking pale.

“Are you feeling any better?” I asked, sitting down next to her.

She nodded. “Just need to rest for a second.”

I looked up at Greyson. I mind linked, *We need to do something quickly. We’re losing her, Greyson.*

Greyson’s expression was dark. He nodded sharply and turned to a worried Artemis. “You better go and get Big Mac or Torin.”

Artemis rushed off, her steps heavy as she stomped up the staircase. I let Cali lean against my shoulder and ran my hand over her cheek. It was flushed and hot, as if she were running a fever.

*You’re going to be okay*, I mind linked.

*We have to go to Lucian*, she replied. Even in her mind link, her voice was slurred, and it just made everything inside me worse. *This is Seluna’s doing. This is about completing the ceremony.*

*It’s too risky without knowing what Lucian really wants with you or what the full ceremony is for*, I replied firmly.

Cali shook her head with effort, then spoke aloud. “We have no choice, Xavier. We need to go to Lucian. *Please.*”

“But this might be nothing,” I said. “Big Mac might diagnose you with something magical and solvable. And then we won’t have to talk to Lucian ever again.” I stared up at my brother. “Right?”

Greyson crossed his arms over his chest, looking between us. He opened his mouth to speak when Sage and Zainab ran into the room.

“Greyson!” they both bellowed, looking excited before they both stopped short, noticing Cali almost passed out on the couch.

“Shit, is she okay?” Sage asked, her face falling.

“She’s going to be fine. What do you two want?” Greyson’s tone was a bit brusque, matter-of-fact, but I couldn’t blame him here. Personally, I was barely holding my shit together.

“We jury-rigged an old HAM radio to pick up on one of the LIPS’s frequencies from off of that tracker that Lola brought back,” Sage explained.

“It’s not perfect, but we can listen in on some of the LIPS’s plans,” Zainab said.

Greyson took in the info, nodding. “You did good. Take the lead on monitoring the radio.”

They both looked happy at Greyson’s approval, but then they glanced at Cali again.

“She’s really gonna be okay, right?” Zainab asked.

“Didn’t Greyson tell you to go monitor the radio?” I snapped.

They both nodded and skedaddled, but not before looking at Cali worriedly one last time. I wished I could fix this. My way, not Lucian’s or some fake goddess’s way.

“What the hell is it this time?” Big Mac’s voice said, startling me out of my thoughts.

She and Artemis rushed into the room. Both of them kneeled beside Cali. Big Mac grabbed her arm, her fingertips on my mate’s pulse. “Cali? What happened?”

“It’s Seluna,” she whispered. If I never heard that name again, it’d be too soon.

Big Mac pressed at Cali’s throat with both her hands while Greyson asked, “Is Cali’s state really connected to Seluna, or is it another trick of Lucian’s?”

Big Mac shushed him. “I’m trying to concentrate here—less chatter.”

I desperately wanted to hold Cali’s hand, to try to comfort her at least, but the polarization spell was stopping me. I watched, helpless, as Big Mac traced Cali’s throat, her collarbones, then the handprints on her shoulders. The witch mumbled something under her breath, then flinched.

When she looked up at Greyson, she said, “Cali’s current state is tied to whatever the Vanguards did to her with those markings. I don’t know how to undo it or how to help it—”

“I told you it’s because of the ceremony,” Cali said in that same weak voice, and my fury fucking flared.

“Cali is right. It must be because of that Seluna ceremony,” Big Mac added, looking between Greyson and me. “What they did is affecting Cali because it’s unfinished. Cali needs to allow Lucian to finish the ceremony, if you want her to get better.”

“Or else what?” Greyson asked sharply.

“Or else she’ll keep being drained until she falls into a coma or something worse,” Big Mac said, grimacing.

“Sounds… bad,” Cali said, her voice cracking.

Greyson sat down next to Cali, holding her hand. “Hey. I promise we’ll fix this.”

I hated the way he could touch her when I wasn’t allowed.

“You need to remove this polarization spell right now,” I demanded. “Kira’s fine now.”

Big Mac didn’t say a word. She waved a hand, and I felt a warmth run through me. Finally, I took Cali’s hand in mine, and I could breathe. But she felt so weak, so cold.

“If we’re forced to let Lucian finish the ceremony,” I told my brother, “then I’m going to be in the room this time.”

“Me too,” Greyson muttered, staring at our mate. “I’ll *insist*.”

There was an undercurrent of threat in my brother’s words, and when our eyes met, I knew that we were on the same side on this. We were always on the same side when it came to Cali’s safety. We would not let anything bad happen to her.

Over my dead body.

“I can’t believe Lucian’s trapped us like this,” I said, my voice a low growl, the anger in me thrashing, making my skin grow hotter. But then I realized…

This wasn’t my fury.

This was instinct—my *wolf*. Why the hell was he trying to get out right now? Greyson was talking, but I wasn’t listening; I was holding my wolf back. What the hell was he doing? Was this about the rage I felt toward the Vanguards?

Or something else?

Where the fuck was Ava?

I looked around, hoping to see her, and that in itself was a surreal feeling. But the second I thought of her name, my wolf roared on the inside, pushing harder to be free. I gasped, my claws coming out. I instantly let go of Cali’s hand—I couldn’t hurt her, never, and never like this, this was—

“What is happening to you right now? Where are you going?” Greyson asked with a scowl. His eyes were full of questions: *Why the fuck can’t you control the shift again?*

To his credit, he didn’t say anything like that out loud for Cali to hear.

Her eyes were closed. At least she wasn’t seeing this madness.

“I’ll be right back,” I choked out, hiding my shifted hand behind my back.

The feeling of being trapped, of being lost, was one with the urge to shift. I ran through the house, calling, “Ava!”

No answer.

“Hey.” Zainab popped out of the study as I panted, leaning against the hallway wall. I could see Sage behind Zainab, fiddling with the old radio. She looked at me with wide eyes. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Where is Ava?” I asked between gritted teeth.

“I saw her walking into the woods earlier,” Sage spoke up.

I groaned. She must’ve stormed off when I wouldn’t talk to her earlier. Was this her revenge? Leaving so that my wolf freaked out? I started to become even more furious, but that served nothing—it just made me lose control over my wolf further, and now the shift had taken over my entire left arm.

“Whoa, careful,” Sage told me, but I turned away, growling.

I had to find Ava before my wolf came out completely. I ran outside, calling her name, fucking desperate over here, until—

I could no longer control it.

The shift was full and swift, and I raced through the woods, mind linking her.

*Ava!*

She didn’t reply, even though I could trace her scent, even though I knew she couldn’t be far. I stopped at a clearing, looking around, but she wasn’t anywhere. The despair I felt was so searing, I felt like tearing my flesh off.

“Well, well, well…” A familiar voice trailed off.

I froze.

Andrei appeared from behind a tree. Sneering. He held up a coat with Ava’s scent on it.

And then, he said, “Looking for her?”

Had he… had he goddamn *hurt* Ava?

I growled, ready to tear him apart. *Where is she?* I mind linked with a snarl.

Andrei stepped forward, a sinister grin on his mouth, before he shifted too.

And then he charged forward.

**Episode 2600**

I fought to stay awake.

I was certain that if I fell asleep, Seluna would appear in my dream and try to do—whatever creepy thing it was that she wanted to do to me. But then again, she DID appear when I was awake too…

*Is there any salvation anywhere? Hello?*

I felt weak, I felt sick, I felt so freaked out I wanted to burst out crying and screaming, but the thought of letting anyone know how bad things were had me reeling. The idea of making them feel as worried as I was forced all the negative emotions inside me to multiply, and I couldn’t let them win.

*I can’t let Lucian win.*

I heard a shuffle and forced my eyes open, watching as Xavier left the room. I opened my mouth to call out to him to stay, but I didn’t feel strong enough to do it. The realization was terrifying.

“Cali,” Greyson said, gripping my hand. “Look at me, love.”

I did, and he kissed me on the cheek. His lips were warm, his scent like comfort, and there was nothing better than his arms around me right now. “I promise it’s going to be okay. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

I looked up at him. He was so beautiful, always powerful, and even though I trusted he’d protect me, I still felt the urge to cry.

“I’m here for you too,” Artemis said, squeezing my knee. Her eyes were concerned, and then I heard our mom’s high-pitched voice.

“What’s going on here? What happened to Cali?”

I winced, and Greyson held me tighter, kissing my temple. “Easy,” he whispered, while Artemis told Mom, “She, uh, she was helping us hunt Rafe when suddenly she got lost and sick.”

Mom gasped, sitting on my other side. “Cali!”

“We think it’s the Seluna handprints’ influence making Cali disoriented,” Artemis explained while Mom rubbed my back soothingly.

She looked and sounded so sad as she said, “Don’t worry, sweetie. We’re going to help fix this!”

“I’ll take Cali to the Vanguard palace myself,” Greyson told her reassuringly. “I’ll stay with her the entire time.”

But it wasn’t just Greyson that was supposed to come with me.

“Where did Xavier go?” I asked Greyson.

He frowned, clearing his throat. “I’m not sure… He ran off, so—”

“With LIPS out there, that’s not good,” I breathed, my heart pounding.

Greyson shook his head, his eyes dark on mine. “We don’t have the time to babysit Xavier, Cali. We have to leave as soon as possible to get to the Vanguards’ before you get worse.”

“I agree,” Artemis said, but I wasn’t going to let this fly.

“No, I can hold off until he returns,” I assured them both. “I really want Xavier to come too.”

I fought to hide the fear in my voice—I knew that I was getting weaker by the moment, almost as if I was floating away from my own body, and it was one of the scariest things I’d ever dealt with.

*What could it mean?* I thought. *What kind of ceremony makes a person lose their own grip on their body?*

I was so fucking spooked that I wasn’t even in the mood to crack a joke right now. I had this irrational, or rational, fear that there was something really, really awful going on here. But what if I was exaggerating? I didn’t want to scare anyone unnecessarily.

Especially not my mom.

“Do you need anything, honey?” she asked, staring at me imploringly.

*I just want none of this to be happening and for Lucian and Aysel and Seluna to fucking vanish, thanks!*

I obviously couldn’t say that, though. I also couldn’t deny my mom the comfort of busying herself with something, anything, while worrying about me.

“I could use some tea,” I croaked out.

My mom nodded and stood up, sniffling a little as she said, “Great! I’ll be right back.”

She hurried over to the kitchen, and Artemis sighed. “I’ll go with her, try to calm her down.”

“Love?” Greyson’s voice was a whisper. “We have to get going, even if Xavier isn’t with us…”

“No,” I said, swallowing. “He’ll be back soon; I know he will.”

Greyson’s expression was thundery. “*Cali*—”

“I hate this too, Greyson,” I muttered. “I hate that I have to go back to the Vanguards’ to fix this in this weakened state. I despise being at Lucian’s whim. I don’t trust him.”

“You shouldn’t,” Big Mac said quietly. “But I’m very sorry to say that no one in this house can fix this. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen, and I don’t know how time works in this case.”

Greyson held me tightly, and Big Mac’s words echoed in my head, making every inch of me ache. I felt like blasting everything around me in frustration, I felt like crying or screaming again, but I knew that I couldn’t do any of that. Not if I wanted all the people around me to remain sane.

“You might need to leave without Xavier, Cali,” Big Mac told me softly.

I shook my head. “He’ll be back, I—”

Sage, Zainab, and Rishika ran into the room. Sage cut me off. “Greyson!”

“I can’t talk about your little radio right now,” he said sharply, wrapping his arms tighter around me. I felt so much warmer now that he was holding me. So much safer, despite everything. “Cali and I need to get going. I don’t have the time for—”

“You have to make the time for this, Alpha,” Rishika said, stepping forward. “The pack is in danger.”

Silence fell upon the room. Greyson gingerly let me go, then rose to his feet, his eyes fixed on Rishika. “What are you talking about?”

“Sage and Zainab picked up a communication from LIPS on the radio,” Rishika said, pointing at the other two. “They said that they got an anonymous tip that there’s a giant wolf in the woods, and the geographic tag is very close to the pack house.”

Greyson scoffed. “That’s impossible. The pack knows not to shift outside.”

Rishika’s face was severe. “They used the codename ‘Big Fluffy.’”

Greyson pressed his eyes closed, shaking his head as he cursed under his breath, “Goddammit, Xavier…” He looked outside, as if he could see his brother out there in wolf form.

*What are you doing, Xavier?* I thought, shaking. *What is happening?*

Fear rose inside me, adrenaline pushing me to sit up straighter.

“What is he thinking?” I asked Greyson. “Is he really that upset about Lucian? Is he going after Lucian without telling you?”

Sage stared at me with wide eyes. “I don’t think so, Cali…”

I looked at her. “Then what is it?”

She gulped. “I mean, I talked to Xavier earlier, and he asked where Ava was, and I told him that she was in the woods.”

The words were like a blow to the chest.

*Here we go again…*

“Fuck,” Greyson said under his breath. He turned to me. “Love, I—”

“I know,” I said, swallowing down tears. “You have to go find him.”

“I’ll come with you to find Xavier,” Rishika told Greyson.

He shook his head. “The fewer of us in the woods with LIPS in the area, the better. If they know about Xavier being out in wolf form, they might swarm the place soon just to spot Big Fluffy.”

The nickname was so fucking absurd, I’d laugh if I weren’t so terrified.

If I wasn’t hurting at the thought of Xavier running after Ava.

“What about Cali?” Big Mac asked.

Greyson looked between me and the witch. He told Rishika, “Change of plans. I’ll go with Cali to the Vanguard palace, and you will need to find my brother and bring him back. Okay?”

Rishika nodded. “Of course.”

“But, Greyson—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Greyson leaned down and kissed me softly, all his longing, all his worry in it. When our eyes met, I felt better. But I still couldn’t stop myself from saying, “I don’t want to go without Xavier, and you’ll be the fastest to find him, to control him if…” I swallowed. “If this is about Ava.”

Greyson’s eyes flashed with anger. “We can’t waste any more time, Cali. You’re getting weaker, and I need—”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I’ll be fine. I need you to make sure Xavier is okay. Bring him to me. I won’t be able to get through any of this without knowing that.”

My mate stared, his face twisting into a grimace. “Cali…”

“Greyson. *Please*.”

He took a deep breath, shaking his head. “Okay. For you.”

With one last kiss on the forehead, Greyson walked straight out of the house. My mother and sister returned just then, and when they asked about Greyson, Rishika caught Artemis up on the situation. I knew I had to go to the Vanguard palace, but what I said was true—Greyson was Xavier’s best hope. He needed his brother, and I needed—

I needed to sip on the tea to appease my mom.

But now, suddenly, all I could think about was my mates out there with LIPS hunting them.

*What if I was wrong to tell Greyson to follow Xavier? What if LIPS catches them both? What if everything becomes ten million times fucking worse? What if they get hit by those tranquilizers? What if they get hurt or captured?!*

My head was spinning. I put down the tea before I spilled it with my shaky hands. I had no damn idea how I could hold out.

“Cali?” Artemis whispered, squeezing my hand. “Are you okay?”

Before I could lie about being fine, there was a knock on the door.

A moment later, I heard two voices coming from the hallway.

Violet saying, “You can’t come in.”

A man saying, “I’m sure you are mistaken.”

I shivered when Violet shouted, “Hey, wait! Stop!”

But it was too late.

My blood ran cold when I saw Lucian step into the living room.

“I tried to stop him,” Violet told me, wide-eyed, angry.

Lucian held up a hand to silence her as if she were a child. He ignored everyone else in the room, just pinned me with his bi-colored eyes. And then, coldly, he said, “I’ve come to escort you back to the Vanguard, Caliana.”

**Episode 2601**

GREYSON

I was running through the forest in human form, like a fitness-happy millennial who took care of themselves because they didn’t want to drop dead like a cockroach any time soon.

It was an abomination.

Okay, perhaps I was exaggerating a little here, but I was furious over not being able to shift because LIPS was watching. This whole thing would’ve been ten times faster if I were a wolf—and I had to get back to Cali immediately. I was so irritated at my little brother for pulling this crap right now. How the hell could he let this happen?

I shook my head as I ran, pushing branches out of the way. I had to remind myself that even though Xavier could be reckless, he’d never put Cali’s life at risk. He’d obviously had a problem controlling his wolf again while we were at the pack house earlier. This had to be because of his little shifting problem… not to mention Ava.

Where could she have disappeared to?

I didn’t trust her. Never had, never would. But I’d assumed that her obsession with my brother would mean that she’d stick close to him. I couldn’t keep wondering what the hell was up with Ava, though—it would slow me down, and right now I had to focus on finding Xavier, bringing him back, and taking care of Cali.

The Vanguard ceremony situation was a whole other beast to deal with.

My pocket vibrated with a text from Sage—new coordinates on Big Fluffy’s location according to LIPS, and I tried to change my course to follow the guidance. I sniffed the air, and I finally picked up Xavier’s scent as I ran. It grew stronger by the second, and I knew I was drawing closer.

I sped up, sprinting through the underbrush to get to Xavier faster, until a moment later, when I heard the sounds of growling. I didn’t slow down, though—just charged forward, leaping over a fallen log to emerge into a small clearing…

Only to see my brother in the middle of a fight with another wolf.

I growled, the shift instinctive when danger was right before me. My fingertips burned with the urge to spring claws, my skin prickling, fur threatening to emerge. I reigned it all back, though—I reminded myself that I shouldn’t, *couldn’t* shift, not with LIPS so close.

Unless they weren’t close, and shifting was an option to help my annoying little brother?

I had to think first, then act.

Eyes on the fight before me, I texted Sage.

*Update on LIPS’s location?*

Meanwhile, I kept my mouth shut—I had no idea what would happen if this other wolf noticed me—and stared at Xavier, forcing a mind link through.

*Who the fuck is this, Xavier? Why are you fighting in the middle of the forest when we know LIPS is around? Get it together.*

Xavier didn’t stop, and he didn’t reply either. He slammed into the other wolf, shoving him closer, and I finally recognized the furry bastard. It was Andrei. What the hell was going on here? What was one of the Vanguards doing out here attacking Xavier?

I thought we had a tentative truce right now, but apparently that was out the window.

My frustration between LIPS and the Vanguards was making it hard to think straight.

“Hey, asshole!” I shouted at the wolf. “Get the hell out of our territory! Humans have eyes here—I bet Lucian wouldn’t like it if you got caught!”

Andrei looked up at me, recognition dawning, but he didn’t stop fighting with Xavier. As for Xavier, he literally didn’t even blink, no matter how many times I mind linked or shouted at him to get his attention, to stop this madness while LIPS could be watching any second.

This was… bad. Decidedly bad. But then, Sage’s responding text arrived.

*LIPS is about 10 minutes out from Xavier’s and your current location*.

I realized I had no choice. I couldn’t reason with Xavier, or Andrei, obviously, and I had to stop this fight now before LIPS found Big Fluffy and Big Scruffy. I took off my shorts and placed my phone on a rock, pissed off by everything.

Growling, I shifted fully and leapt into the fray just as Andrei clamped his teeth onto Xavier’s back leg, hard. I rammed into the son of a bitch, and he lost his grip, whimpering in pain.

*That’s right*, I mind linked. *Back off!*

Xavier and I stood shoulder to shoulder, growling at Andrei. I was ready for Andrei’s next attack—at this point I looked forward to drawing blood—when suddenly his eyes met mine, and they widened.

He turned and raced away into the woods.

I doubted he bolted just because he was outnumbered.

With the questions throbbing in my head, I forced myself not to follow after him. I turned to my brother. *What the hell is this all about, Xavier?* I snapped. *Where’s your control?*

Thankfully, this time Xavier did actually listen to me.

*Andrei*, Xavier mind linked back, panting*. He attacked me out of the blue. He had Ava’s scent, which lured me to him and made my wolf freak out.*

“Goddamn it,” I growled after shifting back to human. I pointed at my brother, loudly saying, “We have to get back to the pack house as humans. LIPS is out here, and nobody wants them finding ‘Big Fluffy’—do you understand?”

Xavier nodded, still panting. He mind linked, *How’s Cali?*

“She’s waiting for us to go to the Vanguards’,” I snapped. “We’ve gotta get going, Xavier!”

*I know*, he mind linked. *I know.*

But despite his *knowing* this, he continued to just stand there. Stock-still.

My eye twitched. Fighting not to fucking punch him, I deadpanned, “What’s the holdup this time?”

*I can’t shift back*, Xavier mind linked, sounding anguished.

I looked up at the sky, sighing deeply, because none of us could get a break. I told myself this wasn’t Xavier’s fault. He was in trouble, and I had to stand by him because I was his older brother, and I had no choice. Especially not in this tense situation.

In a lower tone, I asked, “Where is Ava, exactly?”

*I have no idea*, Xavier mind linked. *I came out here to find her when I realized my wolf was trying to take over, but all I found was Andrei.*

I scowled. Could this be a coincidence? What if this was some sort of a distraction on the Vanguards’ part? But how would they know that Xavier had trouble shifting? That Ava was his metaphorical Achilles heel? My theory made no sense, and I had no proof, but I couldn’t help the bad feeling that clawed its way inside me.

I didn’t have the time for it, though.

“We have to get back to Cali,” I told Xavier, who nodded. I was about to shift back to wolf to head to the house—worth it if it meant getting there faster—when my phone buzzed.

Sage’s message read:

*Get out of there now! LIPS found Xavier’s tracks, they’re almost on top of you!*

“*Shit*,” I said under my breath and hid my phone and shorts into the hollow of a marked tree. “They’re almost here,” I hissed at Xavier. “We need to leave now. *Move it!*”

I shifted in seconds, and both of us started racing through the woods, toward the pack house. We weren’t as fast as I would’ve liked, though, because Xavier was still healing from his injury on his hind leg from Andrei.

This was just great. Best day of my life.

I snapped at my brother, *Pick up your feet!*

*I’m doing my best, asshole!* Xavier snapped back.

I swallowed my retort—there was no point in fighting with Xavier. He literally had no control over himself, and bickering would only slow us down when we needed to get to Cali fucking yesterday. She had been so weak earlier that it made my heart hurt, and I couldn’t stall dealing with this any longer, no matter how much I despised Lucian.

I had to figure out how to help Cali first.

And *then* I’d deal with my brother and his constant existential mate crisis.

*You’re right*, Xavier mind linked in a gruff tone, and I realized I had accidentally mind linked that over. I shot him a look as we were running, and he seemed beat up. At least the annoying little dick had the self-awareness not to argue.

This was all beyond fucked up, and it got worse for me when I heard the crack of a twig.

*Stop!* I mind linked Xavier. *Slow down.*

We did, and then we concealed ourselves behind a row of large bushes.

Xavier was panting.

*Be quiet*, I said.

I hoped to god LIPS hadn’t spotted us. I hoped it was some sort of animal, a deer that freaked out when it saw us breezing by. I listened more intently to the sounds of the woods. We stood extremely still, scanning the area, the trees.

The scent of humans was thick in the air.

And then, things got worse.

“Here we go,” a low voice, barely a whisper, said. “I’ve got eyes on Big Fluffy.”

**Episode 2602**

I stared at Lucian, eyes narrowed. If I had the energy, I’d grab a magnifying glass just to examine his expression more carefully. This was beyond freaky—how did he know I was going to come back to the Vanguard palace? Did he have some kind of link to me?

*Could it all be just a harmless coincidence?* I wondered*. There’s no way.*

I did not fucking trust this man. I opened my mouth to speak, but Artemis beat me to it. She stood in front of me, her expression sharp. “Cali is not going anywhere. We are going to wait for the Alpha.”

“I find it odd that Greyson would abandon his mate when you are in this state,” Lucian said, his eyes scrutinizing me. I hated his tone, and I was irritated enough to reply with an attitude of my own.

“Well, Greyson has important pack matters to handle,” I said. “It’s not like he lounges around all day long and gets massages. He’s got an entire pack to run, and he’s always been someone to lead from the front. I can’t be the only thing on his mind, and I wouldn’t want to be.”

Lucian—either ignoring the massage comment or not even registering it—sighed. “It seems like you are in a bad state, though, Caliana. Perhaps I can be of help.”

It was Big Mac’s turn to speak up, and she didn’t sound happy. “What do you intend to do?”

Lucian’s eyes widened theatrically. “Well, I cannot do anything here,” he said, gesturing all around as if this were a germ-infested barn. “I need my tools, and those are all back at the palace.”

“The word ‘tools’ implies there’s some sort of surgery going on,” I said tightly.

He chuckled, pointing at me. “Oh, Caliana. I do enjoy your barbed wit. All I mean to say is that my home is the safest place for you right now, considering the state you’re in. Which has to do with Seluna, of course, does it not?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. Of course he’d want me on his turf so he could control everything. “How do you know that?”

“Oh, dear, I think it’s been obvious for a while now that this was where we’re headed. The goddess works in mysterious ways,” Lucian said, shaking his head. “You should come with—”

“Greyson and Xavier want to escort me,” I said. “I’m going to have to wait for them. I’m sure you understand.”

Lucian’s sigh was over-the-top sad. “But of course. Though I worry that the longer we wait, the worse you will get. We have no idea how rapidly your condition will deteriorate…” He stared at me. “If you get much worse, you won’t be able to be moved, and then there will be nothing I can do to help.”

I was scared, and Lucian wasn’t fucking helping. My irritation flared, and I stared at him, standing up as if to prove that I was not in as bad a state as he thought. “Seluna hasn’t explained why she’s doing this to me—either that or all her explanations are mumbo jumbo—so you can see why I don’t feel comfortable following you back to your home alone…”

*… Where you have a shrine of me, if I recall correctly*, I added in my head.

“I’ll be waiting for my mates,” I finished, taking a deep breath to control the pain shooting through my body as I stood on my feet.

“Whether they come or not won’t make a difference, Caliana,” Lucian said. “Only I can help you.”

“It will make a difference as far as how *I* feel,” I snapped, my voice getting louder. It was a mistake. I hissed in pain, rubbing my forehead. My mind was spinning from the effort to stay standing, and I was tired of the bullshit pleasantries, so I said, “I don’t feel safe around you, Lucian.”

He gasped theatrically, clutching at his chest. “Me? But, my dear, I only want what’s best for you.”

“I sincerely doubt that,” I scoffed. “I won’t let you have control over this situation.”

Lucian barked out a laugh that made me wince. “And you think that I should leave you to it? You can barely stand.”

I glared. “Listen here, you—” I made a move forward, but my legs buckled. I was seeing dark spots, and my stomach lurched as Artemis caught me before I fell.

*Way to go, Cali.* I couldn’t afford to show such weakness now.

This was horrible; my time was running out, and Lucian looked cold all of a sudden.

“If I leave right now, Caliana,” he said in a low voice, “my offer to help will be leaving with me.”

“I thought you said you cared about me,” I said, a biting edge to my tone. I was being sarcastic here—I did have the energy for that, but he didn’t seem to appreciate it.

He stared. “I cannot be playing your games when the goddess is breathing down my neck, Caliana. I can help you regain your energy, and you should accept that and follow me.”

I turned to Big Mac. She shook her head. “I’d prefer if the Alphas came with you—”

“We simply cannot wait,” Lucian declared. “Don’t you see?” He gestured at me as I held onto Artemis. My sister eyed me, her grip on me tightening as Lucian added, “She’s getting worse!”

*I don’t want to do this, I don’t want to do this, I don’t—I shouldn’t! Going with him isn’t right, I don’t trust him, but—*

But did I have another choice right now, when it felt like the ground was shaking under my feet?

“If you do not trust my intentions, then do trust that I respect werewolf law and value our traditions even more than most,” Lucian said. “So, you *can* trust that I’d never dare to disrespect the Alphas—it just wouldn’t make any sense. What kind of fool would I be to wish you any harm?”

Despite his many faults, Lucian was right about that. What kind of idiot would harm me while knowing that Greyson and Xavier—two werewolves who had a reputation of discarding any threat, including Letifer and Silas—would come after him?

“Okay,” I finally said. “I’ll come with you. And the Alphas will meet us there, I’m sure.”

There was an undercurrent of threat in my tone, but Lucian didn’t flinch. I knew that my mates would be furious to know that I just went with him, but right now, it felt like my only choice.

“I’m not letting you go alone,” Artemis said sharply.

“You are welcome to come along, but we must leave now,” Lucian told us. He gestured outside to a black SUV. He gave me a polite smile. “Please don’t keep me waiting. Time is of the essence, as you may imagine.”

With that, Lucian headed outside. Artemis wrapped her arm around mine without a word, Big Mac watching the both of us, when Rishika rushed over and whispered, “Should I come along as well?”

“Stay on standby,” Artemis said. “Let Lucian believe he has control over this situation, which won’t happen if everyone comes along. If it’s just me, perhaps he’ll let down his guard.”

“We need to try and beat him at his own game,” I whispered.

“I’m not so sure you even stand a chance,” Big Mac said mildly. I didn’t have the energy to tell her off. Both Rishika and Artemis glared at her before Rishika said, “Some of the pack and I will patrol along the border between our land and the Vanguards’. We’ll stay on call for you two—you should call me if anything happens, Artemis.”

My sister agreed, grasping Rishika’s hand.

“Please,” I told Rishika, my head pounding. I could feel myself fading, but I managed to say, “Let Greyson and Xavier know where I am the moment they come back…”

Rishika nodded, squeezing my shoulder. A drowsiness came over me just then, and it felt like I was about to fall asleep. A moment later, I felt Artemis’s arms around me, lifting me, and then…

A few moments later, I realized I was in the back seat of a car.

The leather seats felt good against my burning skin.

“I told you she is fading,” Lucian said to Artemis conversationally.

“Thank you for the obvious. I’m not here for a chat. Let’s get a move on,” Artemis barked, holding my hand tight, and I cheered her on internally.

The ride to the Vanguard palace was blissfully silent, and I felt myself feeling just a little better.

When we arrived, it looked as if the whole Vanguard pack was outside waiting on us. Like a procession for royalty. It looked like a formality, but also a show of force. Like Lucian wanted me to know I couldn’t escape. I could stand now after my little rest in the car, and Artemis squeezed my hand in reassurance.

*I’m right here*, her eyes said, and I appreciated it more than anything.

“Here we are,” Lucian said after opening the car door for me to slide out.

I was shocked to see a wheelchair waiting for me. It looked like Lucian had thought of everything… Did he know that I would be so weak by now? How much of this was he manipulating?

*Cali, no! Don’t be paranoid! Lucian just said he respected werewolf law, so hey, regardless of how he feels about me, he wouldn’t do anything to violate the unspoken rules between Alphas.*

That had to count for something… right?

“Isn’t this nice?” Lucian asked as he wheeled me inside the foyer, Artemis in tow.

“Not really,” I said wryly.

He gave me a look that I’d call fond if I didn’t know there had to be something seriously wrong with him. He smiled. “Whether your mates are here or not, the Seluna ceremony will commence tonight when the moon rises, Caliana.”

“I told you I won’t do anything without them,” I declared. “And you never said anything about *the* ceremony—you just said you can help me get better!”

Artemis scowled, looking between Lucian and me as Lucian rolled his eyes. “Oh, come on, let us not kid ourselves. I’m sure your witch informed you that completing the Seluna ceremony is the only way for you to get better. Did she not?”

I tried to remember what Big Mac had said. I looked up at Artemis, who offered a curt nod.

I hated this. All over.

“No matter what,” I said, “we will have to wait till my mates arrive. Am I clear about that?”

Lucian raised his eyebrows. “Well. I’m pretty sure they’re caught up in a little upset with LIPS, unfortunately.”

I took in Lucian’s satisfied expression and felt my stomach lurch. My voice cracked as I demanded, “What the *hell* did you do, Lucian?”

**Episode 2603**

XAVIER

“I’ve got eyes on Big Fluffy,” a low human voice said.

Oh, I had just about had it with that stupid codename.

“Looks like he’s accompanied by Marshmallow,” the person added.

*Wait… nevermind.* At least my brother had his own little nickname. I panted a little, letting out a wolf-laugh. I could already sense my brother’s annoyance.

*Don’t you dare say anything*, Greyson mind linked, his tone severe.

Despite everything being fucked, I smirked. *Wouldn’t dream of it.*

*We need to get out of here. Are you healed up enough to run?* Greyson asked.

I tested my back leg. It was still aching from that jackass Andrei’s bite, but I’d run and fought and pushed through much worse injuries in the past.

*I can handle it*, I replied.

*Follow my lead*, Greyson said.

*Whatever you say, Marshmallow.*

Greyson deadpanned, *You’re the reason we’re here in the first place, so shut up before I literally bite your head off.*

Greyson had a point about that, and the guilt that hit me was intense. Cali was at the house, all alone, and I was out here dealing with the Vanguards and LIPS, all because of fucking Ava. My anger returned, and I nodded curtly.

Greyson took off, and I followed. Instantly, there was a shout of voices behind us and the sounds of running feet as LIPS tried to chase us. I could hear the darts flying through the air—dipped in double the amount of whatever substance knocked wolves out, obviously—and I lurched forward to avoid them. One dug into a tree trunk right beside me, barely missing, so I swerved to become a harder target to hit.

I couldn’t believe this was happening while Cali was weak and waiting for us back at the house.

I was going to fucking kill Ava for disappearing on me and making me lose control like this after knowing how important it was for her to stay close. Fury and despair rattled my insides, and my ears were ringing. The sound of a drone overhead became louder and louder, which meant it was really fucking close.

This wasn’t good.

Right on cue, Greyson mind linked, *We’re not losing LIPS fast enough. We can’t go back to the pack house at this rate.*

That meant we couldn’t go back to Cali, and a sudden sense of desperation flooded my body at the realization of being deprived of seeing my mate.

*Would it be better if we split up?* I asked.

I knew it wasn’t a good idea in general, but desperate times, desperate measures.

Greyson agreed. *Sounds like the only way to lose them. I’ll go right*, he said.

*Left*, I replied, and we both veered in opposite directions.

Five minutes later, I was still running—still healing, though, so I couldn’t be fast enough. I fought to stay off the radar of the drone above, because as long as that thing hunted me, I wasn’t going to lose LIPS. I had no idea how to pull that off while still healing, though.

Human technology, the flying kind, could actually rival my speed.

The realization was jarring.

A howl in the distance interrupted my thoughts. Was it Greyson? Another howl—I realized it wasn’t anyone I recognized. Who could it be? One of the Vanguards? Because in the state I was in right now, I couldn’t guarantee I wouldn’t slice their throat, truce be damned.

But perhaps I could use this to my advantage.

Perhaps if the LIPS drone saw another werewolf, they’d go after them and leave me be. In theory, though, LIPS shouldn’t catch any werewolves, not even those from the Vanguard pack. That was the big-picture problem here, wasn’t it?

I considered avoiding the other wolf—and the temptation of destroying them if they were in any way related to Lucian—but I realized that the drone was somehow herding me toward the howl, the path I was running down too narrow.

I had gotten caught in their trap, and I fought to figure out a way to veer off my current trajectory, but to no avail. At the same time, the howling wolf was getting closer, as if it was coming toward me. I fought to send out a mind link, hoping to reach whoever the fuck this was.

*Don’t come closer… They could catch you too.*

There was no reply, and that made things even worse. Did they get the message? Was this werewolf about to fuck things up even further for me? The second I made another turn down the route, the air was bombarded with the scent of a dozen wolves, not just one.

And they were not any wolves from the local werewolf packs.

They were *real*, natural wolves.

I had never been more thrilled to see them.

A new plan instantly formed in my head. I mind linked, *Are you here to assist me, or should I steer clear?*

The response was instant this time. Their Alpha’s blood recognized mine, and we formed a communication bond, the wolf within me satisfied at the contact.

The wolf said, *Don’t trust these humans.*

*I know*, I replied. *Can I trust you to help lose them, though?*

The Alpha wolf replied, *Run with us. This way.*

I ran forward, pushing and pushing, till the drone was a few feet farther back. I caught up to the wolf pack, and they instantly gathered around me, running so close to me that their bodies bumped into me again and again.

They were trying to hide me.

*Thank you*, I mind linked to the Alpha.

*Don’t trust the humans*, he repeated. I hadn’t mind linked with real wolves in what felt like ages. I had forgotten how single-minded and instinct-driven their conversations could be.

But at least I knew where he stood.

*What am I supposed to do next?* I asked.

*Cave’s close. Keep running*, he replied.

I ran with the wolves, following their lead, their power surrounding me in a way that made me feel better about this horrible day. When we finally reached the opening of a cave, I had the thought that I wouldn’t fucking fit and it would all be for nothing, but I lowered myself and squeezed through the tunnels with the rest of them.

I finally slowed down once we were deep inside, underground.

It was one of their wolf dens, I realized, but it looked like it was abandoned a while ago.

*Thank you*, I told the Alpha again. It was always best to be hyper-polite with real wolves.

He stared, his eyes narrowed in the dark. *Humans ruin everything. The forest. They ruin it.*

I nodded. *These humans are not welcome in our territory*. I looked around. *Can I hide out here for a bit?*

*Yes*, he replied. *But I told your Alpha that we have no more help for you and your kind, half-human.* The wolf took a step closer, looking at me up and down. *No more.*

I had to respect the wolf’s sense of boundaries. I was half-human, after all, and he was right. Maybe LIPS wanted to help, but humans in general ruined the forest.

They ruined the wolves’ home. Did that include me?

*Thank you*, I told the Alpha, and this was probably the most I’d fucking thanked anyone in my life. The wolves retreated, heading deeper into the tunnel and through the exit that I could smell. The moment I was alone, I tried to mind link with my brother.

*Greyson! Can you hear me?*

Nothing. He had to be too far away. I had no idea how long I should wait before venturing out again—what if the drone was just goddamn hovering by the exit? I decided that I’d just wait until my leg felt fully healed, a few minutes till I could run in full speed. The longer I stayed away, the more Cali would worry.

She was hurt, and I had to get to her as soon as possible.

And then, just as my leg felt good, just as my patience was running thin, Greyson’s voice echoed in my head. *Xavier? Are you safe? I think I lost them.*

*Me too*, I mind linked back. *I’m coming to you.*

*We need to get back to Cali, Xavier.*

*You think I don’t know that?* I growled in my head. *I never meant for any of this to happen!*

Greyson sighed. *I know. But we gotta get going—you saw how weak she was!*

He was right. I had no idea what the fuck was going to happen if I got to the pack house with no Ava. Would my wolf behave? Would I just be stuck in full shift? I shook my head at the thoughts—one problem at a time.

I ran through the back exit of the den, scenting the air before picking up Greyson’s scent, following his mind link. I finally spotted him farther north after I jumped onto a rocky ledge. He was in a sparsely wooded clearing below, looking around.

*Where the hell are you?* he mind linked. *Your scent is all over the place!*

I was about to call out when suddenly, Greyson took a step to the right.

A trap snapped out of the foliage and onto Greyson’s leg. He let out a howl of pain that made the hairs on my nape stand, and a chill run through me. A second later, I heard another sound, mechanical, artificial, and then—

*Humans.*

Worse… LIPS agents. They leapt out from behind a copse of trees near Greyson, completely surrounding him.

**Episode 2604**

GREYSON

The pain was horrifying.

Who would’ve thought that these annoying little human traps could grind into my bones? What kind of titanium bullshit was this? At least it wasn’t made of silver—thank god. It seemed like a regular bear trap, perhaps something hidden by a regular, non-supernatural hunter a while ago. I could see the rust on it.

The real wolves were right. Humans were truly the worst.

“Marshmallow has been injured!” someone called.

And I took a moment to be offended.

Because honestly, *Marshmallow*? Did I *look* like a Marshmallow? What if I ate them alive just for fun, would I still be Marshmallow?

At this point, I was *this* close to going on a rampage.

Human voices kept on coming from every direction while I panted, thrashing around, fighting to release myself from the trap, and then—behold!—Rhonda came out into the clearing.

My favorite LIPS associate.

Not.

I growled at her, hopefully to alarm her to the fact that I was a wild animal and she should leave me the fuck alone, but did she step back? Of course not. At least she shouted, “Nobody approach!” to the other three LIPS members.

She then turned to me, holding out her hands and lowering her voice. “There, there. I’m here to help…”

Did this lady really think that a real wolf—like a massive real wolf—would just understand her? I had no patience for any of this, and I definitely couldn’t trust her. What if she used this opportunity to get some of my blood?

That would not be a good development.

Speaking of things that weren’t fucking good, my little brother decided to pipe up.

*I’m coming to help*, he said.

At this point, I was convinced that I was the only one left with any working brain cells around here.

*No!* I snapped. *Don’t come here; they’ll try to capture you if they see you. Just stay where you are.*

*And how is that gonna get you out here?* he asked stubbornly.

I insisted, *Just stay hidden. Trust me, LIPS will go nuts if they get both of us trapped. Stay. Back. For Cali’s sake.*

I could feel Xavier debating whether to listen to me or not. As if there was any real debate as to who had brought us into this whole mess in the first place. And yeah, the Ava thing wasn’t Xavier’s fault, but by following his Alpha’s orders now, he’d at least be trying to make things right.

*Fine*, he finally said.

I didn’t have the time to feel any kind of relief, though, because LIPS were back on their bullshit.

“Let me take a look at your leg,” Rhonda said in a low tone, coming even closer, and I let out another growl. She seemed undeterred. I recalled my promise to Cali—not to hurt the humans if I didn’t have to.

But what if I did have to?

What if they just wouldn’t leave us the hell alone?

Once Rhonda removed a tool from her belt, though, I realized that this had to be the only way for me to escape this hell-trap without raising any suspicion about my healing rate. I was literally and figuratively stuck, so as Rhonda kept on approaching, I kept my growl to a minimum.

“There we go,” she whispered, lowering her head as if to show she meant no harm. “It’s okay. I can help you.”

There was definitely room for debate there, but did I have another choice right now? *No*.

Thankfully Xavier had shut the fuck up. Small victories.

“Here we go,” Rhonda said, her voice cracking as she finally knelt beside my trapped foot. Her hands were shaking, so at least she had some sort of healthy fear of me. Good—she should be afraid. I was much less of a hothead in comparison to Xavier, but I’d been having quite the day, and my mate was back home, hurting.

Cali was back home, and I was here, dealing with this bullshit.

My fury felt white-hot, but I contained it.

Meanwhile, Rhonda said, “These hunters leaving these traps out don’t care about what animals they could hurt. They’re so selfish, just out here for sport. I’m so sorry that they’ve hurt you like this…” She looked up at me, meeting my gaze.

And then, she ran a hand up my leg.

“You’re gorgeous,” she muttered. “How did all of you get so big around here? Must be something in the water.”

Sure, whatever would make her happy. I wasn’t interested in whatever conservation crusade she was hell-bent on right now when I had a pack to get back to and a mate to check on. She might be helping me now, but I knew she had to be after my blood, and she might use this situation to get it.

“Let me just—” She did a sharp movement with the tool, and finally the mechanism was released, freeing my leg. I immediately reared back with a growl, limping away from Rhonda, who sprang up to her feet, holding her hands up again.

“Whoa, steady,” she said in a low voice. “We can help. You can’t go running off with an injury like that. We’ll bind that up, and then you can…”

I loved that she was talking to me like I could understand her—I mean, I could, but she didn’t know that. So, I bared my teeth to her, because now that I was free, I didn’t want to be captured again, even if it was by well-meaning do-gooders. *Thanks*.

I growled and snapped my teeth to show I meant business, and she flinched back. Finally. I glanced down at the trap and realized that it was soaked in my blood. *Dammit*, if they got their hands on it, they’d definitely analyze it and find—god knew what.

With another growl, I charged forward.

Rhonda let out a scream and fell back, obviously thinking I was lunging at her, but I just grabbed onto the chain at the end of the trap with my teeth, yanking it free from the ground. The rest of LIPS were yelling obscenities as I wheeled around and took off running, the trap clamped in my teeth.

I could feel Rhonda staring at me, wide-eyed and horrified, the entire time.

*I can see where LIPS is; if you veer right then you can lose them past the river!* Xavier mind linked.

I moved swiftly between the trees, ignoring the pain in my leg and following Xavier’s directions. I splashed into the river and crossed it. My leg was still aching, but it was healing quickly. The trap was heavy to carry, though, so I tossed it into the river. I reasoned that in the water, it’d be washed clean of my blood.

Once I got to the other side, I crouched by the thick foliage, listening intently to see if I could hear LIPS. A few moments later, I heard one of the men say, “Let’s fall back. Marshmallow is obviously agitated. We don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

Rhonda’s voice replied, “Affirmative. Can the drones pick him up?”

There was a pause. I waited for their reply, my heart pounding.

“No, the drones don’t see anything. Looks like they’re gone.”

“Dammit,” Rhonda grumbled. “We better head back to camp, then.”

I waited another five minutes to make sure they were all really gone. It felt like an eternity, but when I finally emerged, I caught sight of Xavier approaching. His leg was healed from Andrei’s bite, and now we could finally just return home.

Finally.

*Come on*, I mind linked grimly. *Cali has waited long enough.*

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“So what?” I asked Xavier after shifting back to human. “You’re just stuck like that because Ava’s not around? Is your wolf really that petulant?”

Xavier’s wolf looked up at me as he sat on the pack house’s porch. *Do I look like I’m having fun, jackass?*

“Unbelievable,” I said between gritted teeth. I was ready to shove the door open and usher my infuriating brother inside, keep him hidden, when Rishika did it for me. She looked disheveled, her arm freshly bandaged.

“Greyson!” she breathed. She looked relieved, which was a bad sign.

“What happened here?” I asked.

“Lucian came to get Cali, and when I and a few of the Redwoods tried to follow them covertly, we were met with the Vanguards in the forest,” she said.

My fists clenched. “*And?*”

“They attacked. There were too many, so we had to retreat,” she said, her face thunderous.

Xavier pushed forward, inside the house, still in wolf form. *Where the hell is Cali right now?*

Rishika explained to us what had happened, her sentences curt and sharp. With every new piece of information, fury formed inside me, just begging to burst through the surface. Lucian’s disrespect was so rampant that I had to actively keep my fingertips from growing claws.

“It was really bad, Greyson,” Rishika said, looking up at me. I knew she was shaken because Artemis had escorted Cali. “There were so many of them guarding the perimeter, and that means…”

“What?” I asked briskly.

“Something must be going down tonight for Lucian to have such a strong defense,” Rishika said, her voice cracking. “Something *big*.”

**Episode 2605**

“What did you do?” I demanded, glaring up at Lucian. “How do you know about Xavier and Greyson being delayed by LIPS?”

Lucian smiled, looking like some sort of evil mastermind. Which was not good. “Oh, Caliana. I knew that your mates would want to interrupt my ceremony, and I couldn’t have that happening. You see my predicament here, right?”

My throat closed up as Lucian lowered his face to mine. His bi-colored eyes were intense, and I held my breath. The anger I felt overwhelmed me to the point that I could hear my pulse throbbing in my ears.

*He’s lucky I can’t blast him! I’d burn his fucked-up little castle down and—*

I didn’t have the energy to attack, though, and Artemis hadn’t mastered her Fae powers yet. We were… trapped.

I was trapped in Lucian’s castle, wasn’t I?

“This is betrayal, Lucian,” I said, turning my hands into fists to stop them from shaking. “How do you expect me to trust you after this?”

He sighed. “I swear to you that Xavier and Greyson will be fine. I just coordinated a little distraction for them, might have called in a tip about some wolves in the area.”

Artemis gritted her teeth together, her hand resting on my shoulder as she stepped forward. “*Might?*”

“Might,” Lucian repeated, shrugging before he looked at me. “Oh, don’t make that face, dear—no need to worry! Your mates won’t be involved in anything too dangerous.”

“Why are you doing this?” I asked. My voice was trembling, and I couldn’t believe this was happening, and yet I could.

*Why the fuck did I follow him out here?*

“Darling Caliana,” Lucian said with a flourish. “I promise you, I mean no harm. It was just a way for them to be away, just so I could have some alone time with you.”

“But *I* never wanted that,” I snapped. “I never wanted to do any of this without my mates, Lucian.”

“It’ll be fine,” he said patronizingly.

Artemis’s grip on my shoulder got tighter as I asked, “How did you do all this? There’s no way you could force Xavier to shift without…”

My voice died in my throat when Aysel emerged from the main chamber, Ava on her heels.

*Ava. Of course. OF COURSE!*

“You betrayed Xavier,” I whispered, my anger so strong that my hands throbbed, magic fighting to emerge, even in my weakened state. “After all you’ve done—how *dare* you betray him?”

“It was a mistake,” Ava said right away, shifting from foot to foot, as if she truly did feel guilty. “It was a mistake. I tried to tell Xavier, and he brushed me off!”

A memory burst inside my head. Ava greeting us at the house. I had been too weak to tell Xavier to lay off Ava at the time. I hadn’t realized, not at all and in any universe, that she had been trying to warn us. If that was what Ava had even tried to do.

There had been no urgency in her tone.

There had been no truth, just yet another attempt to catch Xavier’s attention.

This treacherous, horrible *monster*.

If Ava was a monster, though, Lucian was one that was ten times bigger. I looked up at him, and I realized that I had no pull here, no strength. I had nothing, just the fleeting idea that Lucian might for some reason have a soft spot for me. That was all.

So, I fought to use it to my advantage.

“If anything happens to Xavier and Greyson,” I told Lucian, “I will never forgive you.”

Lucian gasped, looking hurt. “I’m only trying to help you, Caliana!”

“That’s what you say,” Artemis spoke up, “but everything you’ve done so far involves deceit. You should’ve known how worried Cali would be about her mates—what you’ve done is just making her condition worse.” My sister stared at him dead in the eye, her voice sharp. “What you’ve done today could even be considered an act of war, Lucian.”

Lucian laughed, shaking his head. “You Fae certainly are dramatic. This was just a fun game we’re playing.”

“This isn’t a game. You just do whatever you want, and you expect me to play along,” I said. “You’re *forcing* me to play along, Lucian.”

He frowned. “You’re upset with me.”

I scoffed. “Of course I’m upset with you! I’m fucking furious at you!”

He sighed, looking annoyed. “Well, you shouldn’t be. Xavier and Greyson will be fine. They’re Alphas after all, right? Alphas can take care of a few wayward humans.”

I had a very good idea of what “taking care” of humans entailed. I was about to tell this absolute maniac that the Redwoods would never do that, but I didn’t know if it would make them look weak in Lucian’s mind, so I made no further comments.

“Do you have any other questions for me, Caliana?” Lucian asked, then, his voice lowering as if he wanted to appease me.

My head was throbbing. I couldn’t take any more of this back and forth. I looked up at my sister, and she took the cue.

“A few, actually,” Artemis said. “What does the ‘ceremony’ entail? You do realize Cali won’t do anything until her mates are here, right? If this is a game we’re playing, it’s definitely a dangerous one, and I don’t know if you know anything about Silas or Letifer, but the Redwoods had no problems dealing with them, so I’m not sure what gives you the audacity to disrespect—”

“No more questions, then,” Lucian said, clapping his hands. He turned to Aysel. “Darling sister, you’d better guide our guest to her room to prepare for tonight.”

I wanted to scream. I wanted to tell him to let me leave, let me go, but I was too terrified to say it, because I didn’t know what the fuck would happen if I did leave. If I would keep getting worse. If I’d just die because I’d gotten involved with these insane royals.

“I’m right here,” Artemis whispered, and at least…

At least I knew that I had her, no matter what happened next.

“Let’s get going then.” Aysel, looking satisfied, stepped forward, about to take hold of the handles of my wheelchair. Artemis stepped between us.

“I think I can take care of my sister,” she said sharply.

Aysel rolled her eyes, waving a hand. “Just follow me, then.”

I could feel Lucian’s eyes on me until we turned out of the hallway. A shiver ran down my spine, and when I looked over my shoulder, I saw that Ava was following us as well.

*I hate her.*

Aysel left us at yet another guest room in this insane castle, which apparently had a million rooms. There was a bath already drawn in the attached bathroom, and part of me wanted to drown this horrifying narcissistic woman in it.

“What is this for?” I asked Aysel, glaring.

“You probably want to clean up before you change,” she told me, her nose wrinkled. “You have to look presentable.”

The only good thing I’d heard all day. I did feel gross after the Rafe situation, so yeah, a bath wouldn’t be that horrid. I nodded.

“Lovely,” Aysel said in that fake-pleasant tone of hers. “I’ll leave Ava and Artemis to attend to you.”

I scoffed, “Why Ava?”

Aysel gave me an innocent look. “I just assumed that you would want someone that you know and are comfortable with, since you’re so weak right now.”

Ava was obviously not in my close circle, but she was better than a Vanguard guard, so I was forced to go along. The second Aysel was gone, I turned to Ava.

“What the hell did you do?” I said. My tone was louder, and my head was throbbing, aching with the effort of dealing with all this. “What is happening here?”

“I have no idea,” Ava said. “I don’t care if you believe me, but I’m just as much a prisoner of the Vanguards as you are right now!”

I rubbed my forehead, trying to soothe it to no avail. “How did you even get here?”

“Andrei practically dragged me here against my will,” Ava scoffed. “I didn’t want to leave Xavier. But I knew that if I resisted, the Vanguards might do something horrible to me. To Xavier.”

I was so exhausted I didn’t even have the energy to internally or externally cuss this woman out. Like I was out of caps lock and exclamations over here. I couldn’t believe the clusterfuck this all was—I was scared, tired, and now I had to deal with Xavier’s first mate.

“You should have fought harder,” I said shakily. “You should have cared more about what the Vanguards were going to do to Xavier than what they would do to you. Because that’s what I, his real mate, would do.”

The words seemed to hit the target, because Ava winced. “Of course,” she spat, “I should always follow your example, right? You’re Xavier’s precious fucking angel, always perfect!”

“I’m just trapped, Ava,” I said, looking around. I wasn’t about to cry in front of her, but I said, “My mates are in danger, I’m trapped here with Lucian, and I had no choice but to leave the pack house, because not even Big Mac could help me. She said I’d only get worse.”

Ava had fallen silent. I laughed bitterly. “For fuck’s sake, I can barely walk,” I whispered, fighting to stand to get into that damned bath. Pain shot through me, and Artemis instantly grabbed me.

“I got you,” she said soothingly.

She helped me get undressed, but it was still a struggle, so Ava grumbled and just helped us too. I didn’t tell her to stop. We’d reached an impasse, and I was just so exhausted that I couldn’t even fight with her.

When I finally sank under the water, I closed my eyes and let out a breath of relief. It smelled amazing, felt like a warm cocoon…

That burst way too fast.

*Welcome back, Caliana*, a whispering voice said. *I am so glad to see you again.*

My eyes opened. I gasped out, “Seluna!”

**Episode 2606**

XAVIER

We raced toward the Vanguard estate.

I couldn’t believe this had happened. Cali had been taken while we were distracted, and if *Ava* was a part of this ploy, I would never trust her again. I couldn’t trust her already—I didn’t, but at the same time, I refused to believe that my wolf was so wrong. How could he not see through her? How could he still love her, still sickly need her, while I suspected that Ava might’ve been complicit in what had happened to Cali?

Lucian had taken Cali from right under our noses, and he would say that this entire process was normal. But we all knew that it was fucked up. That there was something seriously wrong here, and we needed to get to Cali right now.

I was still in wolf form, which was the only good thing, because I was ready to rip some Vanguard heads off. I also could move faster—I scouted ahead as Greyson, Rishika, Zainab, Jay, and more of the pack followed in the car. None of them couldn’t shift, due to LIPS. Too many wolves would be distracting.

Greyson’s voice was still loud in my head, though. *Remember, Xavier, you’re just going to scout out how many guards there are. Be careful. Don’t engage.*

I hated it when Greyson warned me about things, as if he knew better, but this was no time to be petty. I’d fucked up majorly—I’d been away while Cali was in danger, and now we were dealing with a clusterfuck of epic proportions. If I allowed myself to feel all the guilt and fury that roved inside me, I’d probably fucking combust. Or run up to Lucian and slit his throat, no questions asked.

Just like my father would have.

I pushed that thought away. *I’ll do my job*, I replied to Greyson, shoving down the rage. When I picked up the scent of the Vanguard wolves, I slowed down, stalking slowly through the woods. I remained concealed, making sure not to step on any branches, making no noise.

The fact that I was stuck as a wolf meant that my inner predator was in top form right now. I started counting the Vanguard werewolves as they came into sight; there had to be at least half a dozen. It was definitely clear that they didn’t want to let anyone in. And the fact that they were pacing the border between Vanguard land and Redwood land made it clear that they didn’t want us to come any closer.

When I mind linked the information to Greyson, he made a noise that resembled a growl.

*How are we going to get in, Xavier?* he asked, though it was more of an impatient statement—which was usually my style. *And why the fuck would Lucian risk having a dozen wolves out in the woods when he knows that LIPS has their drones out?*

My brother’s patience was running thin, and when that happened, I had to keep the level head. It couldn’t be both of us fuming.

*He doesn’t care about LIPS*, I replied. *It’s very clear that Lucian would go to extremes to take care of a problem.*

Greyson paused. *He probably doesn’t care because he’ll just kill the humans if they become a problem.*

I paused, internally scowling*. So what? Are we responsible for protecting LIPS from the Vanguards now?*

*We have no choice. They’re innocent, no matter what*, Greyson said.

*This isn’t what I signed up for*, I snapped.

Greyson’s tone was cold. *I didn’t sign up to chase after you because your wolf took over either, Xavier. But hey, we don’t always fucking get what we want, little brother.*

Greyson’s words were sharp. I felt so horrible I didn’t even have the heart to talk back. I needed to change the subject, right now. Just do something productive.

*I’ll go check out the border between the Vanguard land and the Blue Blood land, to see if it’s being guarded as strongly*, I said.

Greyson’s voice was calmer now. *Be careful.*

Ignoring the way my chest ached, I raced along the tree line, making sure to remain concealed. I could no longer mind link with Greyson now—I was too far away. But at least I did get some info—I could see that there weren’t any wolves guarding the land that ran adjacent to Mace’s pack.

Could I sneak in through here?

It could be a solution.

I was the one who was responsible for getting Cali into this mess. I had to help her get out of it without putting more of the pack in danger. Determined, I approached the fencing and used my teeth on the metal. It took a few minutes, but I managed to rip open a hole.

It was now or never.

As I squeezed myself through, the jagged edges scratched at my skin, but at this point I was too impatient to make the hole bigger. I pushed and pushed, and finally my paws landed on Vanguard land.

I was in the estate.

Making sure that nobody was around, I trotted toward the house. It was within sight now, and my heart was racing, but in a good way. I could do this. I could save the woman I loved—fix my fucked-up mistakes.

I needed to pull this off, otherwise I’d go nuts.

*Back for more?* a voice called into my head, and I recognized it a moment too late.

Andrei’s wolf slammed into me, growling, but I shoved him aside, my claws grazing his side. He hissed, and I snarled. *You better get out of my way unless you want your throat ripped out!*

Andrei scoffed. *Always so dramatic. I was really hoping LIPS would distract you for a little longer.*

I growled. *So that was your doing? You called in that anonymous tip…*

*We might have called their tip line*, Andrei said, his wolf’s eyes gleaming. *The Vanguard pack is a very big supporter of the sciences.*

*You’re standing between me and my mate, Andrei*, I hissed. *You better move if you know what’s good for you.*

Andrei’s wolf didn’t move a muscle. *Don’t you mean* mates*, plural?*

My wolf’s roar echoed inside me. *Where’s Ava?*

Andrei laughed, forcing the sinister sound to echo in my head. *She is a guest of Aysel and Lucian, of course. They’re becoming very good friends.*

I didn’t want to believe that Ava had come here willingly. That she’d betrayed me. But I knew better—I did, after she’d betrayed me so many times before. I couldn’t focus on that now anyway. I needed to get inside no matter what.

*I warned you*, I said simply.

And then, I lunged forward and slammed Andrei into a tree. His eyes rolled into the back of his head, and I went straight for his neck, but he spun around, making me miss my mark. He was a quick motherfucker, his teeth reaching my side, but I was quicker.

His teeth couldn’t latch, and I freed myself with just a graze, clawing through Andrei’s chest. He howled in pain as I spun to face him, ready to charge. A moment later, though, I heard steps. The feet of many, many wolves.

I had to get past Andrei before his backup arrived. I charged again, claws digging into his chest once more, deep enough to draw blood, and he gasped.

*This is what you get!* I pinned the son of a bitch to the ground, his whimpers of pain music to my ears. I snapped my teeth at his neck, my claws still lodged into his chest, deep enough that he couldn’t move. He was panting, bleeding, and I snarled, *Do you concede? I don’t want to have to kill you, but I will if you keep trying to stop me.*

Andrei’s eyes were glazed over. *I am willing to die for my prince and princess.*

I snarled, my claws slashing through Andrei, but then—

There were growls from all around me.

The other Vanguard wolves surrounded me, teeth bared, ready to attack.

If I killed Andrei now, then they’d all pounce on me at once. It would be suicide. How else could I escape this fucking mess? If I just ran toward the Vanguard mansion, would I make it before they caught me? My side was still burning from Andrei’s last bite.

Whatever. I’d heal. I was a wolf, after all.

I would just try to kill as many of the Vanguards as possible while Andrei watched, knowing all too well that his precious prince and princess would learn that Andrei was the reason why I spilled precious Vanguard blood. Howling, I leapt off the sick bastard and snarled toward the group, ready to attack.

Even if it meant dying today, it would be worth it knowing that it was for Cali.

The woman I loved.

The woman my wolf had betrayed.

The woman I’d choose over and over, no matter what.

*Do you concede?* Andrei called to me mockingly.

I laughed, shaking my head. *Never*.

The wolves growled all at once, ready to descend on me. My body was rigid, about to spring into action like every mercenary job I’d ever done, so many against one, when—

*BANG!*

A car was crashing through the front gate.

**Episode 2607**

*What do you want from me?* I asked Seluna, my heart pounding. *Why are you doing this to me?*

*Oh, Caliana*, Seluna said, sighing. *You and I are bonded. We are soon to be joined as one.*

I clenched my fists*. What’s that supposed to mean? What is this ceremony? Why do I feel so weak?*

*It’s to prepare your body and mind for the joining, of course*, Seluna said calmly.

I felt sick to my stomach. Fear lurched through me, and I shivered. *I don’t want to join with you in any way! I don’t want you to be haunting me forever—just leave me alone!*

Seluna laughed. *This is no mere haunting, Caliana. It is a* rebirth*.*

I choked; my whole body jerked upright. Oxygen invaded my lungs—shit, had I been underwater? For how long? What the hell was happening?!

“Cali!” Artemis was hitting my back. My sister was here, and she was helping me. She looked so worried, and I was so terrified, I was shivering, barely able to breathe. “What happened? Are you hurting?” Artemis implored, grabbing my shoulders to keep me from heaving.

“How…” My voice was hoarse. My lungs were burning. “How long was I underwater?”

Artemis opened her mouth, then closed it. Her lips were trembling, her eyes full of unshed tears. It looked like she couldn’t speak, but then…

“It was at least three minutes,” Ava said in a flat tone. “We thought you were drowning.”

I shuddered.

*Oh my god oh my god oh my god oh my god—*

“Get me—” I choked. “Get me out of this tub!” I struggled to get out, and Artemis helped me. Ava held up a robe for me, her face somber, not a trace of sarcasm in her expression. I wrapped myself in the garment, fighting to settle down my shivers. I felt so weak—I felt like passing out, and I wasn’t sure if it was because of whatever the hell Seluna was doing, or because I was scared.

I was terrified.

“I saw her,” I whispered, looking at my sister. “Seluna. She said something…” I swallowed down tears, but a couple escaped. “Something about a joining.”

Ava didn’t speak. Artemis’s face turned hard in an instant, her jaw clenched. “We need to get you the hell out of here.”

“But Big Mac said that this was the only place that could help me, and if I resist Seluna, if I… If I don’t go through with this, who knows what Seluna will do to me?”

Neither Artemis nor Ava spoke.

“I sound like a coward,” I said, my voice cracking. “I’m a terrified, useless, stupid coward that got robbed into—”

“Stop it, stop blaming yourself!” Artemis said, grabbing me tight. She pulled me into a hug, helping me to sit down before she turned to Ava with blazing eyes. “You!”

“What the hell did I do?” Ava asked, indignant.

“You better tell us everything you know about Lucian and Aysel’s plans, or I swear—” Artemis sneered. “I’m gonna gut you, and I don’t give a damn what Xavier’s wolf wants.”

I gasped at my sister’s words, and Ava raised her hands up in defense. “I promise I’ve already told you everything!”

Artemis glared. “If I find out that you’re lying—”

“No,” Ava said, walking up to us, shaking her head. “Aysel just came to me a while ago claiming she could help me get Xavier back for good. She said her only motivation was because she wanted to mate bond with Greyson, and I—”

“You didn’t think to question that?” Artemis demanded.

“How could I?” Ava said, letting out an incredulous laugh. She turned to me. “Cali, the woman’s obsessed with Greyson. He’s ‘super hot’”—she used air quotes—“he’s all charming when he wants to be—why wouldn’t someone like Aysel want to be with him?”

“But she wants to steal him like he’s a toy,” I said. “Like you want to steal—”

“It’s not the same,” Ava said, her voice getting sharper. “Aysel is a spoiled little psychotic bitch. I’m mated to Xavier. I’m *designed* to want him. It’s different.”

I scoffed. “Don’t remind me.”

“Is this all you know?” Artemis asked Ava.

“Aysel has been kind of creeping me out lately,” Ava said, “so I was thinking of trying to ghost her, but the girl is crazy. She scares me. I didn’t want to piss her off.”

Artemis laughed as if she couldn’t believe what was happening. “You’re one to talk about crazy.”

“I’m putting my ass on the line to get intel for the Redwood pack,” Ava snapped back. “What have you been doing to help, Artemis?”

Artemis got in Ava’s face, her whole body rigid, as if ready to attack. The menace in her face made me swallow my voice, and Ava didn’t seem to fare any better.

“If you’re lying to me,” Artemis said, looking into Ava’s eyes, “if you’re betraying us, then I’ll cut your throat myself. That’s what I’ll do to help the Redwoods. How about that?”

Ava gulped.

*Wow… Artemis is pretty terrifying when she’s angry, huh?*

I wondered if I could use this vibe against goddamn Lucian.

“Listen,” Ava told Artemis, taking a step back. “Let me just go and see if I can get more info from Aysel, okay?”

Artemis turned to me. This was my decision. I realized I could unleash my sister on Ava if I wanted to, but what good would that do? At least with Ava out there, we had a shot at finding out something, anything.

“Let her,” I whispered.

Artemis let Ava slip out of the room, still looking spooked.

“This isn’t right,” Artemis said, starting to pace in front of me. “We can’t trust anyone here, least of all Ava.”

“She’s the only one who can get us any kind of information right now, though,” I pointed out. “Even if it’s only half-truths, it’s more than we have at the moment.”

Artemis shook her head, letting out a pained laughed. “I can’t believe this is happening, I just—let me call Rishika. The others better be close by.” She pulled out her cell phone and dialed, but then she frowned.

“What?” I asked. My head was hurting more with every passing second, my limbs feeling numb and achy, as if I had a bad cold that was only getting worse.

“It went to voicemail,” Artemis told me.

I felt like screaming all over again. My eyes ached with the effort to keep in my tears. In the end, I just said, “I hope Xavier and Greyson got away from LIPS okay…”

“I’m sure they’re fine. They’re both strong and resilient, and—”

And I couldn’t hear another word about my mates without bursting out crying. I was a stupid fucking coward that had ended up trapped in this castle yet again, weak and useless, so easily tricked. My chest was aching, heaving from the sobs as questions twisted in my head, making it burn.

*Why is this happening to us? Why are we being targeted like this? Why won’t Lucian and Seluna and fucking Aysel just leave us all alone?*

“I’m so sorry,” Artemis said, hugging me tight. “I promise I’ll be right here with you—please, please don’t cry…”

Could Artemis save me from whatever Lucian had planned, though? Could her rage be enough when her magic wasn’t fully back?

The door cracked open, distracting me from my thoughts. Lucian’s eyes found me, pinned me like a butterfly, as he walked in. He was wearing a white silk robe with moon embroidery along the edges, long and wide sleeves, a collar trimmed in silver.

He looked regal, stunning in his cold beauty.

“Lucian…” I wiped my tears quickly.

He frowned. “Caliana, dear, you shouldn’t cry. You should be honored. Seluna has chosen you.”

Artemis glared at him, letting me go to put herself between us. “You better back off. This isn’t—”

“Artemis, no. Let me talk to him,” I whispered. I looked up at Lucian. “What do you mean by *chosen*?”

“I think you know, my dear,” Lucian said quietly.

I let out a broken sound. It couldn’t be a laugh. I couldn’t believe this was happening—this wasn’t happening, was it? “I don’t want to be chosen,” I rasped. “I want to go home to be with my mates!”

Lucian gave me a sympathetic look. “I understand what it’s like to yearn for a mate. I promise that your yearning will be sated soon.” He lowered his head to my eye level, smiling gently. “I promise I care for you deeply.”

In a strange, deranged way, it felt like Lucian actually… *meant* what he said right now. My tears had stopped, and Lucian snapped his fingers. A servant stepped into the room quickly, laying out a silver-white silk dress on the bed.

It was gorgeous.

Floor-length, a shape that reminded me of a mermaid with a delicate lace neckline that covered my collarbones elegantly, silver detailed stitching on it. The dress came with a cape, a luxurious piece that would drape like a dream.

Instead of loving it, though, I was petrified.

My outfit matched Lucian’s.

“Please change, Caliana,” Lucian said. “It is almost time for the ceremony to begin. And then this will all be over.”

“Over?” I asked, full of dread.

Lucian stared. He gave me a smile, a wide one that made me shiver as he whispered, “You trust me, don’t you?”

**Episode 2608**

I stared at Lucian in amazement. “Are you kidding me? Of course I don’t trust you. What have you ever done to earn my trust?”

Lucian raised an elegant eyebrow. “Pardon me, but what I have ever done to *not* earn your trust, Caliana? I’ve agreed to help you—in fact, I’ve gone out of my way to do so.”

“You’ve also tricked me, kissed me, unleashed Seluna on me, shrouded the ceremony in secrecy, trapped my mates to get me alone… Should I keep going?” I snapped. “Because I absolutely could go on.”

“Everything I’ve done has been to fulfill Seluna’s wishes,” Lucian argued. “And that includes helping you regain Seluna’s trust.”

I shook my head, anger surging through me. “That’s not how I see it, Lucian. Before I met you, I’d never even *heard* of Seluna, and I have to tell you, I was better for it.” I ignored Lucian’s shocked reaction to this. “All this moon lady’s done is haunt my dreams and put these freaky handprints on me. I never asked for any of this.”

Lucian took a deep breath, clearly trying to compose himself before he answered. “I can see that much of this has come as a shock to you, but you are looking at this all wrong. You should be honored to have been selected by the moon goddess. So few are. To be chosen by Seluna indicates that you must be a very special person, indeed.”

I shuddered at this, and I felt Artemis settle her hand on my shoulder. It felt strong and secure, and I appreciated her support. I needed it. I didn’t want to be a special person by Lucian’s standards.

“And anyway,” I went on, feeling better with Artemis behind me, “if this is all on the up and up, then why can’t my mates be here with me? Why’d you go out of your way to get rid of them?”

Lucian shrugged carelessly. “This is the way Seluna prefers it.”

I rolled my eyes, but it was a mistake. It made me feel even dizzier, and I stumbled, grasping onto Artemis’s arm for support. I closed my eyes as my head spun and felt a little more strength drain from me. Yet another gift I could thank the mighty Seluna for: making me feel like total crap.

Lucian shook his head. “If you would simply stop resisting, you would see that I am most sincere, Caliana. Now, you should put on the dress so that we can perform the ceremony.”

I eyed the silver-white dress, which shimmered in the light, then looked back at Lucian. I was weak, but not stupid, and I crossed my arms over my chest. “I’m not getting undressed in front of you,” I said firmly.

Lucian—who’d given no indication he planned on going anywhere while I changed—sighed with annoyance. “Very well. I will leave, but I must warn you not to dally. We are working with a limited window.”

When the door had shut behind him, Artemis rounded on me. “We have to get you out of here, Cali.”

“I know that, Artemis,” I started weakly, “but I think—”

“No, out of here *now*,” Artemis said firmly. She glanced around. “There’s something about all this that just doesn’t feel right.”

“Are you kidding me? *None* of this feels right,” I said.

“Hang on a second. You need to think about this,” said Ava, who had followed Lucian into the room, as she looked at Artemis.

“I need to think about *what*, exactly?” Artemis demanded, glaring at Ava.

“You need to think about all of it,” Ava said, not backing down under Artemis’s furious gaze. “What chance do you think you stand getting out of this place on your own? This palace is like a fortress. Ask Cali, she’s been here before. She knows what I’m talking about.”

Artemis glanced over at me, and—reluctantly—I nodded.

“Ava’s right,” I said quietly. It’s like a maze, and there’s an army of Vanguards.”

Artemis shook her head dismissively. “We can fight our way out.”

Taking a shaky breath, I could feel I didn’t have the energy to fight. Not now. I reached for the flowing dress and pulled it toward me. “I just want to get this thing over with.”

Artemis put a hand on the dress. “You don’t have to do this, Cali.”

“I know,” I sighed, “but I’m tired, Artemis. I’m so tired—of all of this. And if putting on this dress will placate Seluna and maybe put an end to all this, it seems like a small price to pay.”

Artemis didn’t look convinced. “What about the ceremony? Do you know what you have to do?”

I unzipped the back of the dress and stepped into it, pulling it up over my ribs. The fabric was soft and soothing against my skin. It made me want to close my eyes. “No,” I admitted, “I don’t. But I am afraid Lucian will need to kiss me again.”

I pulled up the zipper and smoothed the fabric at my hips. The white silk column of the dress hugged my body, and the cape that flowed from the lacy shoulders gave it a comforting weight. The dress somehow made me feel taller than usual, and much more elegant.

Artemis eyed me with some alarm. “Well, it looks like he’s planning on marrying you in that getup.”

I turned to look at myself in the mirror. My face was pale, though my cheeks were flushed above the white dress. What with the satin, lace, and the cape that felt like a train, there *was* a definite bridal feel to it. An alarm bell pinged in my head—should I be worried about this?

I remembered that after the milk ceremony, Lucian had announced that he and I were connected—bound together in the goddess’s eyes. He’d insisted we weren’t married, of course, but all I needed at the moment was a veil, some bridesmaids, an overbearing mother, and this would be a wedding.

Artemis and I looked over when there was a knock at the door.

“Who is it?” she called.

“The prince is growing impatient,” a voice came. “He says that it is time for Caliana to join him for the ceremony.”

I felt my stomach churn, and I clenched my hands together. Was I really going through with this? Were there any other options?

Artemis turned to me. “I know you think the odds are against us, but if you want to stop—if you don’t want to do this—I’ll back you up. Whatever it takes.”

My hands were ice-cold, but this made me smile. “Thank you, but I think I’m okay. We’ve come this far, anyway. And I don’t think I can handle another Seluna attack. They’re awful,” I said, rubbing my head. “They completely drain me.”

Artemis didn’t look happy, but she nodded. “Okay. I’ll stay with you.”

I opened the door to see a uniformed attendant standing in front of it, looking uneasy. “I’m ready,” I told him, and as he set off down the hall, Artemis, Ava, and I followed him.

I wished Ava would peel off—why was she still with me, anyway? There was clearly no love lost between us, and all she seemed to care about was stealing Xavier.

On the other hand, Ava did claim to be helping the Redwoods. It was a dubious claim at best, but I didn’t have the strength to challenge her on it at the moment. And if she was willing to support me, I needed all the help I could get.

We were led through the hallway to another passageway, this one even more grand than the first. The ceilings soared, and the walls were lined with gilt-framed paintings, and with every step my anxiety increased.

I looked around in confusion as we walked. I didn’t recognize any of this. This wasn’t the same hallway where the moon ceremony had been held. So where were we going?

A horrible thought occurred to me and almost stopped me in my tracks: was this the way to Lucian’s *bedroom*?!

Before I could spiral into a black hole of anxiety about that, the attendant stopped before a door. When he opened it, I saw that it led to a large rotunda. It didn’t look like a bedroom, so I was relieved. Ava stepped through the doorway, and I followed her, but just as Artemis moved to follow me, two uniformed attendants stepped in front of her to block her way.

“It’s okay,” I said quickly. “She’s with me. She’s my sister.”

“Sorry,” one of the attendants—a large woman with a beefy neck—muttered. “Can’t do it.”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded, and stepped toward Artemis. I reached for her with one hand and started pushing the attendants away with the other. But they were immovable. And instead of stepping aside to allow Artemis into the room, they stepped back, pushing Artemis back, and slammed the door shut. I stared at it, then at the one person I’d been left with—the one person I had to trust…

Ava.

**Episode 2609**

GREYSON

Gas pedal flat to the floor, I plowed through the gate at full speed, sending shards of twisted iron flying. The guards scattered, all diving for cover. Two other cars followed behind me as I roared up the drive toward the palace and screeched to a stop just in front of the wide front doors.

The doors flew open, and Vanguard pack members poured out, ready to defend the palace. I hopped out of the car and shifted. Behind me, I saw the others do the same.

Doing some quick calculations, I figured out how long it was going to take me to dispatch the Vanguard guards, but I wished I didn’t have to waste my time with this. All I wanted to do was get to Cali and get her the hell away from here—the hell away from Lucian.

I could see Xavier facing off with his own knot of guards. From the looks of things, this had the makings of an all-out war. I’d hoped to avoid this, but Lucian had orchestrated this, and he had left me no choice. The Vanguards had attacked my pack and practically stolen the Alpha’s mate. No Alpha worth his salt was going to ignore an act of aggression like that.

*Rishika, Jay, you two help Xavier. Ravi, Zainab, and the rest of you, stick with me. I’m heading inside the palace.*

I heard a general murmur of assent and moved forward. The reaction from the Vanguards was immediate. A tawny brown wolf lunged for me, but left his neck wide open, making it almost too easy to take him out.

A dark grey wolf came at me from the side but was intercepted by Ravi, and the two of them rolled away, snarling at each other. I turned my attention to a sleek sliver wolf who was slinking silently toward me, her eyes flashing lethally. Fast as lightening she swiped at me—right across the eyes—and threw herself against my ribcage as my eyes were streaming. I dragged in a breath as another brown wolf joined the attack, and I only just managed to hold him off with a brutal kick from my powerful back legs.

Judging from the pitched battle going on around me, Lucian had told his pack to hold the line at all costs. I had no idea what the stupid princeling was up to inside the palace, but it was clear that he was determined to not let anyone stop him from doing it.

And not knowing why Cali had to be involved freaked me the hell out.

I closed my jaws around the brown wolf’s back and pitched him toward the sleek sliver, taking them both out, then headed for the open front doors. I didn’t know what awaited me inside, but I was ready to kill the entire Vanguard pack to get to Cali, if I had to. And if Lucian caused Cali so much as a papercut, I wasn’t going to hesitate to rip his damn throat out—pack politics be damned.

Though I suspected I’d have some competition for that particular mission. I figured that Xavier was probably thinking along the same lines.

A black wolf jumped into my path, but I batted him away with one powerful swipe of my paw. A streaked brown came snarling at me, but I tore into his side with my teeth, leaving him whimpering on the steps.

Nothing could stop me, and chest heaving, I crashed through the palace doors. But before I could feel even an instant of relief for making it inside, a second wave of Vanguard reinforcements came sprinting toward me.

I gritted my teeth and dove in.

*I’m right here*, Ravi said, leaping into the fray at my side. An instant later he was gone, enveloped by the pack, but I could hear him putting up a good fight.

As I pushed into the riot around me, I could feel claws at my slide, tearing into my flesh. The pain stung like fire, and I pivoted and slashed back at my attacker, a spotted black and brown wolf. A pair of feet came from out of nowhere, kicking me hard in the side of the head, and I saw stars. The noise of the melee was dimmed for a moment, but I gave my head a shake and tried to keep moving forward.

Wolves pushed at me from all sides, and the sound of dozens of knife-sharp claws rasping against the marble of the entrance hall was loud in my ears.

*We have to find Cali’s scent! Can you hear me?! No one can stop until they find her! There’s no other option!*

A wolf appeared at my side, and an instant before I lunged at it, I realized it was Xavier and stopped myself.

*Thanks for coming, man, but did you need to crash through the gate in* my *car?* he asked.

I blew an angry breath out through my nose. *Is that really what’s on your mind right now?*

Xavier looked up suddenly. *I just caught her scent.*

*Recent?* I asked hopefully.

*I think so*. He paused for a moment. *Artemis is here too. There’s another scent I recognize too. Shit.*

*What?* I asked.

*It’s Ava*, he said flatly.

That didn’t bode well.

Xavier slashed at a blue-black wolf that was charging toward us and then ran forward, deeper into the palace.

Catching up to him, I saw that he was bleeding from a wound in his leg. It didn’t look great, but it wasn’t stopping him. It probably wasn’t any worse than the one in my side, and that wasn’t stopping me either.

Down a wide corridor, I caught Cali’s scent. *I’ve got it, too.*

*Let’s go then*, Xavier said, hurrying forward.

I looked around as we headed down the hallway and realized I was starting to recognize the passageways and rooms of the palace. This realization did not make me happy.

We were nearing the center courtyard of the palace, and as we passed the grand staircase, I heard a familiar voice.

“Greyson!”

I looked up to see Aysel standing at the top of the wide stairs. She was in human form, and her hand was resting lightly on the carved bannister. She was looking down at me, her expression mildly surprised.

“Greyson, what in the world are you doing?”

I snarled up at her, baring my teeth. Why the hell did she think I was here? It didn’t matter. I didn’t have to answer her.

Aysel raised a delicate eyebrow. “Are you *attacking* us?”

*Fuck her*, Xavier growled. *Let’s just find Cali*.

But, on second thought, I slowed to a stop.

*What are you doing*? Xavier demanded.

*Hang on. She might be able to lead us to Cali. Otherwise, we could be wandering around this damn place forever.*

Before Xavier could argue back, I shifted to my human form and looked up at the woman. “Aysel, where’s Cali?”

Aysel’s eyes darkened. “Did you come here for *her*? Or me?”

I hesitated. I wasn’t sure how to respond. I was here for Cali, obviously, but if I wanted Aysel’s help finding her, was I going to have to pretend otherwise?

I decided to split the difference. “I want to make sure Cali is safe, then you and I can talk.”

If I’d thought this was going to work, I’d been wrong.

Aysel’s expression hardened. “Contrary to what you seem to believe, I’m not stupid, Greyson.”

“What do you mean—”

“I know you took the tarot card.”

My stomach dropped.

“Why?” Aysel demanded.

My whole body tensed as I studied her face. She knew I took the card, but what else did she know? Did she know the spell was broken? There wasn’t a way she could know that, I didn’t think. I knew I was going to have to be careful with this. I didn’t know where Cali was or what was happening to her, and I didn’t want whatever I said to affect her—wherever she was.

“Greyson,” Aysel said, “I asked you a question. Why did you take it?”

“I’ll explain later,” I said quickly.

“When?”

“After we find Cali.”

But Aysel crossed her arms over her chest. “No.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Are you really foolish enough to think you can break the spell? What about our connection?” Aysel asked, a pleading note in her voice now. “Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

*No!* I wanted to yell, but I bit my tongue. I was anxious as hell to get to Cali, and I knew Aysel was my quickest way. “Of course our connection matters to me, Aysel,” I lied, “but you have to remember, curse or no curse, Cali is still my mate, and that matters.”

Aysel glared at me. “I *have* to remember?” she said savagely. “You won’t ever let me forget!”

There was a distant growl, and a Vanguard pack member raced around the corner. Seeing me, he lunged, razor-sharp teeth bared.

“*STOP!*” Aysel screamed at the guard. “Stop! Don’t hurt him!”

I was about to shoot her a grateful look when she added:

“He’s *mine*!”

And without another word, she shifted and leapt from the top of the stairs, straight at me.

**Episode 2610**

I stared in shock at the closed door. “What’s going on? Where’s Artemis? Why can’t she come in here?” I grabbed for the door, but I could barely get my hand around the doorknob—I just didn’t have the strength.

I felt myself swaying and a firm hand gripping me under the arm, holding me steady.

It was Ava. “Are you okay?”

I pulled away from her grip, but it was too much. I was feeling faint and stumbled back, almost falling on my ass.

Ava caught me and pulled me back to my feet.

“Let go of me,” I said, but it came out sounding weak.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m here to help you.”

“I don’t believe you,” I said breathlessly. “Why should I? How do I know you’re not here to help Aysel? Aren’t you two buddy-buddy now?”

Ava’s expression was stony. “I’m here for Xavier. And for the rest of the Redwoods. And if helping you right now is what Xavier would want, then that’s what I’m going to do.”

That tracked, but I was still skeptical. “I’m never going to trust you, you know.”

She blew an irritated breath out through her nose. “You have a choice here, Cali. You can face Lucian by yourself, or you can let me help you. It’s totally up to you. I really don’t care either way.”

Even as I considered this, I really wished I was feeling better. Then it wouldn’t even be a question. I didn’t know what Ava’s motivations were—other than helping herself—but she was right. As much as I wanted Ava to leave, I wasn’t strong enough to face Lucian alone. And now, without Artemis, Ava was all I had.

Somewhere, someone had a sense of humor.

Not that I thought Artemis was going to just accept having the door shut in her face. She wasn’t likely to just shrug her shoulders and wait patiently for me to come back. If I knew my sister, she was currently plotting a way in. And I had faith that she could do it. All I had to do was hold out until she fought her way in. I knew that’s what she would do, because that’s what I would do, if the situation were reversed.

But until Artemis made it back to me, Ava was going to have to do.

A horn sounded, and both Ava and I turned to face the rest of the room. I didn’t know what I’d expected to find, but it certainly wasn’t the sight before me. It was a huge space, and a group of robed, masked Vanguards stood watching us. Some were in human form, and some were wolves, and they moved to stand in a semi-circle, forming around a low chaise longue chair. The chair’s wooden base was ornately carved, and live moon flowers surrounded it. The lights in the room dimmed as the rotunda opened to the sky. The moon was high, and the shafts of moonlight cast dark blue shadows across the room.

I shivered as a cold wind whipped in. The wind lifted the cape on my gown and seemed to wind around my bones. I wrapped my arms around myself, hugging myself tight.

As one, the Vanguards all looked up at the sky and began to chant. The sound was low, like a murmur. I couldn’t understand the words, and the sound made me uneasy. It seemed to worm itself inside my brain.

Even Ava looked around, uncomfortable. “Do you have any idea what’s happening right now?” she whispered.

I shook my head. Where the hell was Lucian? It wasn’t that I was dying to see him, but why wasn’t he here? What was happening?

The Vanguards in their human forms began to toss rose petals—deep, blood-red in color—around the base of the chaise.

I closed my eyes and tried to breathe. I wished I’d never agreed to come… as though I’d ever really had a choice in the matter. I’d *had* to come. I’d felt it. Seluna had appeared to me. She had warned me not to delay, and even attempting to avoid this had drained me of my energy.

But seeing this, I was terrified.

I could feel the hands squeezing my shoulders, as if Seluna was reacting to the sights and sounds before me. I felt myself list to the side, going weak in the knees. Was Seluna going to materialize right in front of me? She had before.

My heart gave a frightened pulse, and I put a protective hand over it. I knew it was probably useless, but I wanted to protect it from Seluna squeezing it again.

“Cali?” Ava hissed. “Are you okay? You look… not okay.”

“I’m not sure,” I murmured, my lips numb. I was feeling a lot, but it was hard to untangle all of the sensations. Was I feeling so much at this moment because Seluna was present somehow, and reacting to the ceremony happening in front of me? Or was I just freaking out? It was possible. I was standing here, in this wedding dress, with Ava of all people, without my sister, and without my mates. There were *plenty* of perfectly good reasons for a general freak-out if you asked me.

What if Lucian’s plans weren’t what he claimed they were? That was certainly possible. What if he had other plans for me? What if I never saw my mates again?

I turned to Ava. “I need you to promise me something.”

She looked taken aback. “What?”

“If I don’t survive this—”

“What are you talking about?” she asked, interrupting me. She glanced around nervously. “You’re going to be fine. You always land on your feet. It’s kind of annoying. You have a one hundred percent survival rate. You’re like a damn cockroach.”

I found the energy to scowl at her. “Just promise me that if I don’t survive this, you’ll tell Xavier and Greyson that I love them. Promise me that, Ava.”

Ava rolled her eyes. “Ugh, are you always so dramatic?’

“*Ava*—”

“You’re going to be fine,” she said quickly, sounding a bit more sincere.

I took a deep breath. “I hope I will be, but you have to promise me,” I said, my voice pleading now. “Just in case. Promise me. Please?”

She heaved a sigh. “Fine. I’ll tell them you died with their name on your lips or whatever—”

I gripped her arm. “Swear to me you’ll tell them.”

“I promise,” she said irritably. “Now will you stop being such a drama queen?”

Another horn sounded. It was less like an instrument, and more like the sound made when someone blew through the horn of a ram. The chanting increased in volume and speed, and my heartbeat sped up to match it.

A chill shuddered down my spine as the doors on the far side of the room opened. Another group of masked Vanguard members entered, and on their shoulders, they carried a chair on which Lucian was seated. He sat sedately, as though being carried on a mobile throne was nothing out of the ordinary.

He wore a golden grown studded with opals and pearls and a shimmery, silvery robe.

“Oh my god,” Ava groaned, “would you look at him? He is *so* full of himself.”

The Vanguards lowered the platformed throne slowly to the floor and stepped respectfully away.

Lucian rose from the throne, and I saw he was holding a jeweled scepter in one hand. He looked over at me and gave me an intimate smile. “I’m so charmed you could come, Caliana.”

“Like I had a choice,” I snapped, bristling. I hated that he was treating this like it was a date.

Lucian strode smoothly toward me and held out a hand to me. On his hand he wore a silver ring set with a large moonstone. It shimmered in the moonlight. “Come, join me, Caliana. Seluna is coming.”

I glanced over my shoulder toward the door, wishing Artemis would take that moment to burst through the door and somehow help me escape, but it was too late for that now. I was here—I was in it. There was no turning back.

As I wasn’t offering it, Lucian took my hand and led me toward the center of the semi-circle and the chaise longue. My hand slipped from Ava’s arm, and I felt strangely alone without her.

The handprints on my back were starting to heat—they felt like a very isolated sunburn, and I was light-headed as Lucian guided me toward the chair and laid me down.

He stood over me and, through the open ceiling, the moon appeared behind him. “Do you feel her?”

He didn’t wait for my answer before he laid down next to me, sliding his body along mine. He reached for me, cupping my face in his hands, and turned me toward him.

Fear coursed through me. I was panicked, but I was so weak. I wanted to fight back, but my limbs felt heavy as concrete.

Lucian leaned in to kiss me, his eyes on my mouth. “Let us greet her once and for all, Caliana. Together.”

**Episode 2611**

Lying on the chaise longue in the weird Vanguard room, I shook with fear. Dread coursed through me as Lucian inched closer and closer. The handprints branded on my shoulders were tight and burning. I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t want to kiss Lucian, but more than anything else, I just wanted this to be over. I wanted to be rid of Seluna and the Vanguard pack. And if locking lips with the prince was the only way to accomplish that, then I was going to have to bear it.

My whole body stiffened as Lucian’s soft lips made contact with mine. I closed my eyes and tried to wish myself away. His hand went into my hair—the gesture soft and sensual—but I didn’t move. It felt supremely strange to lie so still and wooden beneath a kiss. Everything about the moment felt wrong. The guy, the situation, the Vanguard pack members surrounding us, watching.

I wished the lips on mine belonged to Greyson or to Xavier. I missed them so much my bones ached. Deep within me I could feel my mate bond stirring, like a feral hunger. I knew my mates would come for me. They would find me. Whenever they got back from dealing with Xavier’s shifting problem, they would come looking for me. I had no doubt of that. And that certainty made it possible for me to keep breathing through this excruciating moment.

The chanting of the Vanguards picked up again, and I felt my heartbeat increase in time to the strange music. Then, without warning, I felt the sudden warmth and familiarity of Greyson’s lips on mine. Could it be? *How?* Or was it Xavier?

But when I opened my eyes, it wasn’t either of my mates. It wasn’t even Lucian. It was Seluna looking back at me.

“What’s happening?” I breathed, putting my fingers to my lips.

Seluna sat up on the chaise and looked down at me. Lucian stood behind the moon goddess, stroking her hair, his gaze on me as well.

Looking past them, I saw that the room around us was gone, replaced with an ancient forest. The chanting Vanguards were gone. Ava was gone. It was only the three of us and the trees.

But… where were we? Last time I had tangoed with Seluna, I’d been transported to some kind of watery cave. The world around me now reminded me of the Fae world. It wasn’t though—that I could tell. I could feel it. It felt familiar and yet strange at the same time.

At the base of the chaise longue, a garden of moon flowers began to bloom. Moonlight cascaded in beans down through the mossy trees surrounding us, and the silvery light revealed dozens of massive flowers. Like, *massive*. They looked like lilies, maybe, but were the size of large men. And their stamens reached six feet into the air.

I squinted at them as a strange smell hit my nose. I had seen a photo of these flowers before. They were corpse flowers. Then, as though thinking the name made them real, the smell of rot hit me, nearly making me gag.

I looked up at Lucian. “What’s going on?” I asked again. “Where are we?”

“It’s doesn’t matter,” Lucian said with a gentle smile. “We are in Seluna’s presence, and that is all we need to know. Wherever she takes us is where we are supposed to be.”

Seluna got to her feet and reached for my hand. The touch of her skin was cold and lifeless. I pulled back in shock.

Seluna gave me a cool smile. “I didn’t mean to frighten you, Caliana.”

I narrowed my eyes. “*Didn’t you?* Then why did you threaten me before? It seems to me you enjoy scaring me.”

“Caliana!” Lucian gasped. “Watch your tongue! Do not say such things to the goddess!”

“No, no,” Seluna said, “let the *due destini* speak.”

I shifted uncomfortably as she turned the full force of her gaze back on me. “Why are you calling me that? *Due destini*?”

She tipped her head, looking at me closely. “You are very special. Don’t you realize that?”

“Special? I don’t know—”

“A *due destini* doesn’t come around very often. And to find one tied to a Fae…” Seluna took an excited breath. “No one could have predicted that. And I so badly wanted to meet such a rare creature.”

“You did?” I asked, surprised.

“Of course,” she said, her eyes flaming uncannily. “I’m sorry if I threatened you, Caliana, but I had no other choice. I needed to ensure you would go through with the ceremony. Human kind—which unfortunately makes up half of your being—is so… fickle.” She turned to Lucian. “And you—you did well. You shall be rewarded.”

Lucian’s eyes went wide, and his face flushed. I had never seen him look so boyishly pleased. “Anything for you, my goddess,” he said reverently, bowing his head.

He stepped forward to kiss her, but Seluna turned her face, offering him only her cheek.

“In time,” she said softly.

“But… my goddess?” Lucian said, looking crestfallen.

“Let us finish our business first,” Seluna said, turning back to me.

“Business?” I asked, thrown. “What business? What kind of ceremony is this?”

Seluna gave me an assessing look. “You came to my servant, Lucian, did you not?”

“Well, I—”

“You asked him to remove the handprints, did you not?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, the handprints *you* put on me! Why did you put them there in the first place? Let’s start there! I wouldn’t even have to be here if it wasn’t for those damn handprints—”

“They have clearly caused you consternation, Caliana, but they were placed there for a reason,” Seluna replied smoothly.

“What reason?”

“I wanted to remind you of your connection with me,” she said, her gaze locked onto mine.

My heart thumped, and I could feel my palms start to sweat under the intensity of her eyes.

“And I needed to get you here with us in time,” she added.

“For what?” I asked. Then I shook my head. “Whatever. Just get the handprints off my back. That’s what I came here for, so let’s get it done. My mates are probably already on their way to look for me, and I don’t want them to freak out any more than they already are.”

I was already freaked out myself, and at the mention of Greyson and Xavier, my heart started to ache. I felt like I was about to cry, I missed them so much. I loved them so much, and it suddenly felt almost overwhelming, though I couldn’t say why it was hitting me so hard.

Startled, I looked up when Seluna put her icy hands on my cheeks.

She stared at me with her curiously lifeless eyes. “Yes,” she murmured. “The *due destini* is strong. I can feel it with you.”

Her voice was low—a whisper—but it sounded loud to my ears. I wanted to step away, to cover my ears, to get free of her touch.

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, like she was trying to breathe me in, and I leaned back, trying to twist out of her grasp, but her grip on me was surprisingly strong.

Desperate, I looked to Lucian for help, but he didn’t even meet my gaze. He was motionless, as though he’d been frozen in place.

I struggled against Seluna’s hands on my face, pulling hard at them, but she didn’t even flinch. “What are you doing to me?” I demanded.

*Something* was happening; I could feel it. My knees felt weak. Then my head started to swim. I felt dizzy and weaker than I had before. It felt like I was being drained—like the life was being sucked from me.

My vision was starting to cloud, but when I looked at Seluna, I could see her clearly—and her eyes were fully black. The whites had disappeared completely, leaving only black pits. I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound came out.

Icy cold fear pumped through my veins. Who was Seluna? *What* was Seluna? My mind spun, generating no answers, only a whirring, deafening sound.

Seluna looked at me, and her face stretched into a smile as peaceful as it was deranged. She tightened her grip on my face, her hands bruising my skin. The handprints on my back scorched like fire.

“I’ve waited so long,” Seluna uttered, her breath hot on my face, “for a *due destini* to appear again.”

“Why?” I asked, trying to push the pain down. I had to get out of here. Whatever she was trying to do, I needed to stop. *Escape*. “Why do you care?”

Seluna’s chilling smile stretched. “Why, it’s the only way I will be able to emerge into the world again. You should be proud, Caliana,” she said, her fingers digging into my flesh. “It’s not every day that a mortal can be a goddess.”

**Episode 2612**

What the hell nonsense was Seluna spewing? I hadn’t come to this insane palace to be a goddess—I’d come here to get rid of one! Or, at least her handprints and the visions she was haunting me with. But now it seemed that Seluna had not shown up to help me, but to take possession of me.

Was Seluna going to try to *inhabit* my body?

She looked crazed enough to try, and I wasn’t going to stick around long enough to find out. I had to fight back.

I doubled down on my struggle to break her grip. I was going to have to get away from this place if I ever wanted to see my mates again, and that thought filled me with resolve and helped clear my head. I gave Seluna a good hard shove, and she stumbled back, surprised.

Her moment of shock was enough for me, and I pulled away from her, but I overbalanced as I tried to get up from the chaise, and I fell backward to the hard ground.

Seluna got her feet back under before I did. “We haven’t finished yet.”

“We have.”

I raised my hands and shot out a blast of Fae magic right at her. The blast missed Seluna and deflected to strike Lucian, who still stood motionless. The energy hurled him backward, slamming him hard into a tree. He let out a groan and crumpled to the ground in a heap.

I hadn’t meant to do that, but I’d take it. It wasn’t like Lucian was lifting a finger to help me. And he was the reason I’d ended up in this mess to begin with, so I was willing to call that a happy accident.

Seluna shot a glance at Lucian, then looked back at me. She shook her head. “Caliana, we are going to need to work together,” she said, a chiding tone to her voice. “We *need* each other. You don’t want to fight me.”

“The only thing I *need* is to get away from you,” I muttered, scrambling to my feet. I raised my hands again. “I’ll do it again, and I won’t miss this time. Stay where you are!”

Seluna gave me a pitying look. “I thought you were smarter than that.”

“Smarter than *what*?” I snapped.

“Haven’t you realized that your magic won’t help you?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. She was clearly trying to psych me out.

“Look at poor Lucian,” Seluna said, not bothering to look at poor Lucian. “Who else are you willing to harm?”

“What does that mean?!”

She smiled. “Your magic will serve its purpose once the transfer is complete.”

*Transfer?! Nope.*

My blood felt as though it had been turned to ice. My instinct had been right. Seluna wanted to possess me. But why? Why would a goddess want to inhabit someone like me, of all people?

I glanced around and—figuring there was no one else around who could get hurt—raised my hands again. Seluna must have just gotten lucky deflecting my magic last time.

I shot another blast at her, but it ricocheted again, blasting a path through the corpse flowers, sending a horrific smell of rotting flesh our way.

Seluna swelled with rage. “How *dare* you?! All you had to do was cooperate! It was the only thing you’ve ever had to do, and you couldn’t do even that! Humans can be so *stupid*! And here I was, thinking you being part Fae would make you smarter.”

She was apoplectic with fury, and I thought fast. I had no idea how I was going to get out of this. My magic was working fine, but that wasn’t going to matter if I wasn’t going to be able to land any blows on the goddess. Besides which, I was still weak from whatever the goddess had been doing to me. My magic drained me even further, and—doing some quick math—I wasn’t sure how much longer I was going to be able to hold off this mad deity.

I needed some backup. I wished I could get Greyson or Xavier here to help me. Artemis would be a huge help. Someone. *Anyone*. I would welcome the sight of Ava at this point, but I had no idea where she had gone. She had disappeared along with the rest of the room, and I didn’t know how to get back to her.

But I wasn’t sure if I was going to be able to do this alone.

I let out a cry of pain as my back started to burn. I twisted around to look and saw that the back of my dress was starting to smoke. The smoke was coming from just where the handprints were on my back, and as I watched, the fabric burned away, curling back to reveal my skin below. The handprints looked like banked coals, and I screamed out as the pain crashed over me.

Seluna’s eyes burned. “You wanted them off, Caliana. There you go.”

I fell to my knees, my whole body shaking as pain coursed through me like fire.

The goddess advanced toward me, but somewhere in my screaming brain, I knew I couldn’t let her get any closer to me. I took a shallow, shaking breath and tried to gather my magic. I needed to make a shield. I needed to protect myself.

I tried to concentrate and bring my magic in, toward myself, but my mind was too muddled. It didn’t work, and I lost my grip. The magic slipped away and shot forward. But Seluna must not have been expecting it this time, and the magic hit her, blasting her back.

Had I gotten her? My heart contracted as I looked at her still form. Had it worked? Even if I hadn’t killed her, if I had knocked her out long enough, I could figure out a way to get back home.

But an instant later, Seluna was back on her feet, and her eyes had turned coal-black once again.

*Shit.*

I stared at her, frozen to the spot with horror and pain.

Tendrils of smoke curled up from her shoulders, then her hair. They grew in size, until she was smoking like a campfire.

Baffled, I tried to wrap my mind around this. What the *hell* was going on? Why would a goddess begin to *smoke*?

“*What* are you?” I asked, terrified.

“I am Seluna,” she said, her voice low and filled with horror.

“You… You’re not a goddess.”

When she spoke again, her voice had changed. It sounded like two voices, speaking over each other, and it chilled me to the bone. “Like you would know a goddess if you saw one.”

She started moving toward me, smoke still wafting off her body. I scrambled backward and watched—horrified—as the goddess stretched out her hands toward me, only to have them engulfed in flames.

This was enough for me, and I turned my back and broke into a run.

My shoulders seared with white-hot pain as I moved. I didn’t know where I was or how to get out. The only thing I did know was that anything was better than letting this goddess—or demon—take control of me.

As I ran into the trees, I reached out through the mind link, searching for anyone who might be nearby.

*Greyson?! Xavier?! Anyone?! Can you hear me?!*

With my whole soul I willed to the universe that someone might hear me. I loved them, and I knew their love for me was stronger than anything in the world, but it was hard to keep the faith. Seluna was coming closer. I could feel her closing in.

What *was* she? And—whatever she was—did I really think I could outrun something like that? I was already so weak. I was fighting against her with everything I had, but I wasn’t sure how much longer I could hold on. The trees around me were a blur as I ran through them, trying to remember to pick up my feet so I didn’t go flying.

I screamed as Seluna appeared just in front of me, directly in a beam of moonlight. Her eyes were black as the night sky, and her face pale as the moon.

“Your mates cannot hear you, silly girl,” she spat, all traces of her smile gone now. “They cannot hear you now, and they never will again.”

“No,” I murmured, shaking my head. “*No*.”

“Don’t worry,” she said, her voice soothing now. “Once you’re mine, I’ll make the impossible choice for you, my *due destini*—”

“No!” I gasped. “*No!* You can’t! I can’t! I will never let that happen!”

But Seluna wasn’t listening to me. She stepped forward and reached for me, her hand passing through my skin, plunging deep into my chest, into my heart. This was just like in my dreams—in my nightmares.

I gasped, and then everything went black.

**Episode 2613**

XAVIER

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Aysel leaping down the stairs, gunning straight for Greyson. Greyson was fighting, but still in his human form and vulnerable, so I leapt too, slamming into Aysel, and together we crashed to the hard marble floor.

She was a fierce fighter, and it was only a moment before I felt the fire-hot sear of pain when her claws tore into me, but I kicked back, sending her flying. She came back at me in a heartbeat, but Greyson had shifted and tackled her before she could reach me.

A knot of Vanguard wolves raced around the corner to defend Aysel, but I had ripped into two of them before they’d even reached her. I was getting into the third when the other two scampered away, whimpering.

In the distance I could hear the mind link of Ravi and Zainab, who were tussling with even more Vanguards, but it sounded like they were holding their own, so I turned my attention back to Aysel, who was still putting up one hell of a fight.

I leapt forward and pinned down her front paws. *Where’s Cali?* I snarled.

Chest heaving, she finally stopped struggling and shifted back to her human form. Her eyes were wild as she looked at Greyson. “Cali’s with Lucian, but it’s probably too late now.”

I shot a look at Greyson. *What does she mean? Too late for what?*

Greyson shifted back to his human form and tightened his grip on Aysel, holding her fast. “I’m warning you, tell us where Cali is, Aysel.”

Aysel looked up at the high, lofted ceiling of the palace, and her eyes went distant. “Lucian took Caliana to the place where the palace meets the sky.”

Sorry, but what the fuck did that mean? Where did the palace meet the fucking sky? I was angry enough to rip her face off, and if I could have shifted back, I would have told her as much. But without Ava, I was stuck in my wolf form.

“What are you talking about?” Greyson demanded. “Just tell us where she is!”

But Aysel shook her head. “No, I can’t. I’ve already said too much.”

I’d had enough of this. *Enough*, I said to Greyson. *We don’t need her to tell us. We can follow Cali’s scent once we find it. Stop wasting your time with her.*

Greyson let go of Aysel and nodded. “Let’s go.”

He had just shifted back when Aysel sat up.

“I was only defending my family,” she said darkly, looking after us.

I turned my back. I couldn’t care less how Aysel justified herself. I only wanted to find Cali, and if the princess wasn’t going to help us, then to hell with her.

Greyson and I started down a hallway leading north, and almost immediately picked up traces of Cali’s scent.

*… The place where the palace meets the sky.*

What the hell did that mean?

*What was Aysel talking about? Where does this palace meet the sky?* I asked Greyson.

He shook his grey head. *No idea. A tower, maybe? I really don’t know, but I figure if we just stick close to her scent, we should be able to track her.*

I agreed with him, but I was worried. What the fuck was Lucian doing to her? What had Aysel meant when she said we were probably too late? *What* were we too late for? My stomach clenched as I thought about it. This situation seemed to be more than just getting rid of some magical handprints.

*Greyson, Xavier, we’re here*, Ravi’s voice came to me, and I heard his feet running behind us. *We’re all here.*

The rest of the Redwoods fell into line behind us as we roved through the palace.

*I want to keep the Vanguards away from us while we search for Cali*, Greyson said. *I don’t want to have to keep stopping every two seconds to fight them off. I don’t want to lose her scent.*

*Jay and I are on it*, Rishika said.

I took a deep breath, trying to concentrate on the scent. It was getting more faint, and I wasn’t convinced it was Cali’s. I had been pretty sure it was hers when we started, but now it smelled less like Cali and more like Artemis. What the hell happened to Cali?

And what about Ava? What had happened to her? I had scented her when I’d arrived. Well, my wolf had, but I’d tried to ignore it. I couldn’t let my wolf get distracted by Ava—not right now.

Anyway, following Artemis’s scent might not be the worst plan. If she was anywhere around here, she might know where Cali was.

Up ahead, a couple of Vanguard guards appeared, shifting into their wolf forms, ready to stop us. As planned, Rishika and Jay peeled off and ran ahead, leaping at the guards with a snarl and a flash of claws and teeth. They made short work of the guards, and the path was clear for Greyson and me to pass through.

Artemis’s scent was growing stronger and stronger. Up ahead there was a door that stood partially opened, and when we pushed through it, it was Artemis that whipped around, eyes flashing and hands up, ready for battle.

“Oh my god,” she breathed, recognizing us. She put her hand over her chest. “What are you doing here?”

“Do you know where Cali is?” Greyson asked, shifting to his human form.

Artemis shook her head. “I’m trying to get to her. She’s with Lucian—”

“We know,” Greyson said tersely.

“I came here with her, but they kept me out, and Vanguard guards have been blocking the door ever since. I’ve been trying to find another way in.”

Greyson shot me a lot. “We can take the guards.”

I nodded in agreement. I was raring to go—I was ready to take on an army for Cali.

“Take us to the door,” Greyson said, turning to Artemis.

“Okay,” she said, but she looked nervous. “I didn’t want to leave her! They shut the door on me! I hated leaving her with the prince. I didn’t even want her to come here in the first place. But”—she shook her head—“Lucian or Seluna or someone has some kind of hold on Cali. This place keeps drawing her back. It’s not good.”

I knew what Artemis was talking about, and I agreed that it wasn’t good. But whatever it was they had over Cali, it was going to end tonight. I’d had more than enough of the Vanguard pack and their precious little prince boy. And that moon goddess was on my shit list, too.

Artemis led us out of the room, and as we headed down the passageway, Rishika and Jay joined us again, breathing hard from their fight.

“There are at least five Vanguards keeping watch over the entrance,” Artemis said, turning to us as she walked. “I just want you to know what you’re walking into.”

I couldn’t have cared less what I was walking into. Those five Vanguards could be fifty. If they were in the way, they were going down.

We came to an intersecting hallway, and Artemis hugged the wall. She pointed, and when I looked around the corner, I could see the five guards stationed in front of an ornately carved wooden door.

I moved forward, and behind me, Rishika, Jay, Sage, Lola, and Ravi moved into formation. We attacked in an instant, moving swiftly toward the guards and taking them down before they had the chance to shift.

The guard I’d grabbed onto fought back, trying to wrap his arms around my neck and pull me down, but he fell back with a cry when I snarled and bit at his arm, tearing the flesh through his sleeve. Blood pooled beneath him as he curled onto his side. The rest of the guards fell like toy soldiers, leaving the door clear.

I backed up, then sprinted for it, slamming my shoulder against it. It shuddered, but the door must have been a foot thick, and it didn’t budge. I took a deep breath and was backing up, ready to try again when my wolf stirred within me. It was urging me to break through, but not for Cali. It wanted me to break through for Ava.

Ava must be inside that door. My wolf knew it. The mate bond that connected me to Ava knew it.

Maybe I could use that. Maybe I could reach Ava, get her to help us.

*I think Ava’s in there*, I told Greyson. *I’m going to try to get her to help out.*

Greyson looked surprised, but he nodded.

*Ava! Can you hear me?! Are you in there?!* I called, hoping—for once—that she would hear me and respond. I listened hard, and my heart leapt when her voice came into my mind.

*Xavier? I’m here.*

*We’re outside the door. Let us in.*

*I don’t know if I can. I’m really scared. I don’t know what will happen to me if I do that. Or to Cali.*

She sounded scared. Genuinely scared. I could hear it in her voice. And I understood why, but I didn’t want to risk leaving Cali with Lucian for even a second longer.

*You’re strong, Ava*, I reminded her. *You can do this. And if you get this door open, the Redwood pack is out here, ready to help you. We’ll protect you.*

*Xavier—*

*Ava, if I mean anything to you, you have to help me*, I said.

Silence rang in my ears.

What was Ava going to do? Was she going to let us in?

**Episode 2614**

GREYSON

I waited anxiously, one eye on Xavier, one eye on the door. I was looking for any sign that Ava was going to open the door—or even respond to Xavier. He was still looking expectantly at the carved oak door, but nothing was happening.

“Xavier?” I asked.

He didn’t respond.

“It’s Ava. She’s a longshot,” I said. “She’s worked with them before, and there’s no way to know that she’s not in there now, tipping off Lucian and the rest of the Vanguards that we’re all standing outside their door.”

Xavier still didn’t answer.

I looked around nervously. Maybe coming this way had been a mistake. Maybe we should have looked for another way in, the way Artemis had been trying to go when we’d found her. But Cali was right here—right on the other side of this door. And every second we delayed put her in even more danger.

Cali was all I could think about—she was the only thought in my head. I had to get to her. I *had* to. I’d never felt so much conviction about anything in my life. Well, maybe except for the knowledge that Cali was my true mate.

I just couldn’t wait to get in there and get to Lucian. I was going to tear his fucking head off. That little princeling wasn’t going to know what hit him when Xavier and I were done with him.

I looked at the door, willing it to open. It could happen. It was possible. Ava was in there, and she was obsessed with Xavier. He had asked her to help, so there was a chance—

Next to me, I heard Lola suck in a breath as the doorknob turned. That was all I needed. I shoved my body against the door before it could close on me and caught sight of Ava. Her eyes went wide with surprise, and then a masked person materialized and grabbed her from behind.

“*GO!*” I bellowed to the Redwoods. I shifted as I leapt in, and I locked my jaws around the figure who’d grabbed Ava. It was a man—solid as a brick wall—but when I tossed him against the curved wall of the room, he collapsed to the floor like a rag doll.

The Redwood pack swarmed in around me, taking down Vanguard after Vanguard. There was chaos behind me, but I only had eyes for one, and I searched the room until I saw her: *Cali.*

She was there, lying on some kind of couch in the middle of the room, surrounded by a bunch of flowers. Her eyes were closed, apparently asleep. Or was she? My heart leapt into my throat. Was she okay?

I sprinted toward her as the rest of the Redwoods did battle with the masked, robed Vanguards, who were putting up one hell of a fight. But I skidded to a stop as I drew close to the couch. Cali wasn’t asleep—I could see that now. I had seen my mate peacefully sleeping countless times, and that wasn’t what this was. She was so still she looked nearly lifeless. It was as if she’d been crystalized. Something was seriously wrong.

“Do not disturb her!”

I looked up to see Lucian nearby. He was on his knees and had his hand out as though to stop me, and he looked confused and dazed, like he’d just woken from a dream.

I shifted to my human form. “What the hell have you done to her?” I snarled.

Xavier slid across the polished floor next to me and—to my relief—shifted to his human form. Being near Ava apparently had its benefits.

“Answer us,” he growled, grabbing Lucian and yanking him roughly to his feet. “What did you do to her?!”

Lucian didn’t answer, and fury seethed through me. God knew I had tried to keep the peace, but I’d had enough of the princeling.

“You know, my pack doesn’t usually eat raw meat, but I think I could convince them to make an exception if you don’t start explaining what’s going on right this fucking minute,” I said, my voice laced with menace.

“Don’t hurt my brother.”

Surprised, I turned to see Aysel step into the room. She glanced around, taking a quick survey of the fallen Vanguards, then turned her even gaze back to me. “Put him down,” she said to Xavier.

“Look around, princess,” I said, feeling rage coursing through me as I addressed her. “I don’t think you’re in any position to bargain right now. It’s really easy. Either Lucian helps Cali right now, or he’s history.”

Aysel stared at me for a long moment, then she stepped toward us and turned her eyes to Lucian. “Brother, tell him.”

Lucian looked at her, his light eyes wild, and shook his head.

“For your own sake, Lucian,” Aysel said, her voice dropping low, “*tell him*.”

Lucian looked as though he were about to cry. “I—I can’t!” he sputtered. “I can’t! Seluna will never forgive me!”

Aysel looked grim. “It’s too late for that now, Lucian. You must see that.”

“What the hell is going on?” Xavier hissed. He tightened his grip on Lucian and gave him a shake that made his teeth rattle. “What the fuck did you do to Cali?”

“Nothing,” Lucian said, clawing at Xavier’s hands, trying to free himself. “I didn’t do anything. Nothing! It’s all Seluna!”

“Bullshit!” I spat.

“It’s true!” Lucian wailed. “It is. Seluna chose Caliana! Not me! I was only following the will of the goddess!”

That was it. I’d had more than enough of this moon worshiping bullshit. I reared back and punched Lucian in the face, feeling the bones of his nose shatter under my fists.

He cried out and covered his face, but blood sprayed through his fingers like a geyser. Aysel stepped in front of him, blocking his body with her own.

I took a threatening step toward both of them. “Let’s try this again,” I said. “What is happening to Cali?”

Lucian spit out a mouthful of blood onto the marble floor. “I don’t know! I honestly don’t!” he went on when I took another step toward him.

“That’s not what I want to hear right now,” I growled.

Lucian pointed one bloody hand down at Cali. “Look at her. Does it look like I have any control over what’s happening? She’s in Seluna’s hands now!”

“What does that mean?” I demanded.

“It means,” Lucian said, trying to stem the tide of blood with his sleeve, “that if you disturb her now, Caliana will never return.”

“*Return?* Where is she? Return from where?” Xavier demanded.

Lucian heaved a gusty sigh and managed to look irritated by our ignorance, in spite of being covered with blood. “Seluna does not exist in our mortal realm. She exists in a realm outside our world. I have been devoted to bridging the gap between these two worlds and bringing Seluna into our world.”

I had a feeling I wasn’t going to like the answer to this question, but I had to ask it anyway. “And how did you think that was going to happen?”

“Seluna wanted a corporeal form,” Lucian explained.

“A *body*?” I asked.

Lucian nodded. “But that takes great power. Power that a *due destini* has.”

Xavier and I exchanged a worried look. I could tell he was thinking the same thing I was.

“Is that why you and your pack came back to Oregon?” I asked. “You knew Cali was a *due destini*, and you came to claim her for your goddess?!”

My hand itched to punch Lucian again, but I held back. I needed to hear what he had to say—as horrifying as it was.

Lucian was nodding, a strange, uplifted look on his bloodied and mangled face. “Seluna has guided me to Caliana, and now they have coalesced.”

Xavier shot me a glance. *What if he’s bluffing? Maybe we should try to wake her.*

I hesitated. *But what if he’s telling the truth?*

I didn’t know for sure—and I didn’t trust Lucian—but I’d been around enough to know that when it came to other realms, there were things that were hard to understand, but were best left un-messed with. And, as fantastical as this all seemed, Cali did seem to be in some kind of altered state, and this bastard claimed to know why.

“Hang on,” I said, holding out a hand to stop Xavier, and he tightened his grip on Lucian.

“Greyson,” Xavier growled. “We’re wasting time here. Cali—”

“Just hang on a minute,” I snapped. “If Lucian’s right about this other realm and we wake her, we could lose Cali forever. Think about that. I’m not willing to risk that, Xavier. Are you?”

But before Xavier could answer my question, there was a murmur from behind me. We both whipped around to see Cali stirring.

My heart hammered in my chest—she was waking up.

**Episode 2615**

I couldn’t move. It felt like my body was being pressed down by hands heavy as concrete. I wanted to get up—I knew I *should* get up—but I just couldn’t. I could hear Greyson and Xavier’s voices, but they were so distant, they sounded like they were miles and miles away from me. But I could *feel* them. I could feel their presence near me, and the knowledge that they were here with me warmed the icy chill within me, just a little.

But then something gripped my heart, squeezing out even that measure of comfort. It was Seluna. Her voice was close, closer than my ear—it felt like it was inside my own head—and she was hissing.

*Let me in, Caliana. Stop fighting, and let me in.*

No, I shouldn’t. I couldn’t. I knew I should keep fighting—I knew I had to try to keep distancing myself from this being—but there didn’t seem to be anyone to fight. Seluna was speaking to me—I could feel her—but where was she?

I forced my eyes open and looked around. The ancient trees of the dark forest had disappeared. The corpse flowers were gone, though the faint smell of their decaying rot remained. But everything around me was just blackness. I could have been floating in outer space, but maybe it was just my own deep consciousness. I thought hard, trying to remember what had just happened. It felt like I was caught between two worlds—one that belonged to Seluna, and one that belonged to me.

*I’m sorry this is confusing you*, Seluna’s voice came to me again.

I didn’t understand what was happening, and the pulsing pain in my head made it hard to think it through. I could hear Seluna within my own thoughts. It was different than the mind linking I was able to do with Xavier and Greyson. It felt closer and more immediate… and more intrusive.

“Get out of my head,” I said, putting my hands to my ears, as though that would block her out. But I knew it wouldn’t. Telling the voice of Seluna to get out of my head felt as impossible as quieting the sound of my own thoughts. I couldn’t separate the two. There didn’t seem to be a line between them anymore.

The aching burn in my shoulders at the site of the handprints began to lessen, and the iron grip on my heart was slowly easing up. But as it did, I felt something else—a slow, hot burn emanating from my heart, spreading through my body, as though lava had been injected into my bloodstream.

What was that? What was happening?

Where did I end and Seluna begin? Where was I, and how did I get out of here?

The voices came to me again, but distantly. Xavier’s low rumble. Greyson’s comforting tones. Was that Artemis? Lola? I wanted to reach out to them. I wanted to be with them.

“I’m here!” I called. “I’m here! Come get me!”

*Thank you, Caliana*, Seluna said, her voice silky smooth. *We are one.*

The burning had moved through my whole body, leaving me feeling warm and foggy-brained. “What? We’re done?”

I opened my eyes slowly, then widened them with lightning speed. I sucked in a horrified breath as I realized I was looking down at the palace, as though I was looking at if from miles above the earth. I was plummeting helplessly though the air, hurtling toward the ground lethally fast. My body braced against impact, but as I neared the palace, my speed slowed, and the fog began to lift from my mind.

I blinked again and found myself hovering over the ceremony room. Xavier and Greyson were there, standing over the chaise chair in the center of the room. Their eyes were trained on someone lying still as a statue on the couch.

Wait… I knew that dress. That was *me* on the chaise. But how was that possible?! How could I be in two places at once?!

“Xavier! Greyson!” I called out, my heart hammering. “I’m up here! Look up!”

But they didn’t move. They didn’t hear me.

I tried to mind link with them, but there was something blocking that connection, like a heavy curtain pulled across my mind.

I wanted to touch them, to tell them I was here, so I tried to move through space. My arms reached, trying to swim down toward them, but I didn’t move.

My eyes moved to Lucian, who was standing nearby.

*What a fool he is.*

Wait. Why did I think that? That didn’t sound like something I would think.

“Artemis—” I started, but before I could finish, I felt a tremendous shove, and I was slammed into the chaise longue, all the breath knocked out of me.

I was gasping for air when Xavier and Greyson rushed to my side.

“Cali,” Xavier breathed, his face pale. “Are you okay?”

“Love, can you hear me?” Greyson said, his eyes wide and scared.

*I don’t know what just happened to me*, was what I thought, but I heard a voice say, “What happened to me?”

I was startled. Was that what I sounded like? The voice was coming from my own mouth, but it sounded strange.

“Where am I?” I asked.

“You’re in the Vanguard palace. Don’t you remember coming here?” Xavier asked, looking tense.

I *did* remember, so why couldn’t I tell them?

Instead, I heard this other voice—this voice I had no control over—speaking. “I don’t remember anything.” I turned to look at Greyson. “Who are you?”

Greyson stared back at me like I had just slapped him.

Internally I was screaming. I knew who Greyson was! We were mates! What the hell was happening to me?! Why couldn’t anyone hear me? Who was this voice speaking from my body?

*Shut up!* Seluna hissed into my head. *You’ve had your turn, Caliana. Now let me have mine.*

I squeezed my eyes shut. It felt like my mind was ripping itself in half. What the hell kind of madness was this? Was this the *due destini*? Had the curse of madness because I hadn’t chosen a mate finally begun?

No! The ceremony! Lucian! Seluna! Something had happened to me. Could it be that Seluna was sharing my body?

My hands curled into fists at my sides. Being a prisoner in my own mind and body wasn’t exactly how I thought this was going to go when I showed up at the Vanguard estate.

Lucian shoved past Greyson and fell to his knees at my side. “Seluna? Is that you? Is that really you, my precious goddess?”

He reached for my hand and tried to kiss it, but Xavier shoved him back.

“Get the fuck away from her,” he growled.

And I couldn’t agree more. I’d had enough of Lucian to last a lifetime.

“What are you talking about?” Greyson demanded, grabbing Lucian’s shoulder. “What have you done to Cali?”

I heard myself start to laugh, but the sound was cold and hard, without any warmth or humor in it.

Both Xavier and Greyson looked at me, their faces lined with worry.

“I’m sorry,” I heard myself say. “There’s been some kind of mistake. It really wasn’t supposed to happen this way.”

“What wasn’t?” Greyson and Xavier spoke at once.

Why did they look so confused? Why couldn’t they see what was happening?

“Oh,” Seluna said, using my voice, “well as her *due destini* mates this must be quite a shock to you both.”

Greyson and Xavier exchanged stricken looks. I could feel how scared and worried they were. I wanted to reach out to them, touch them, tell them I was here, but it was like I was frozen inside my own body. Even my voice wouldn’t respond. I tried harder, and I heard a hiss in response.

*Stop it!* Seluna rasped at me. *Shut up, and stop fighting!*

I felt myself sitting up and looking between my mates. “Yes, it’s true. I am Seluna, the moon goddess, and henceforth I will occupy Caliana’s mortal form.”

This was met with a beat of icy silence, and then Xavier reached for Lucian with a furious snarl. He jerked him to his feet and shook him so hard his head seemed to vibrated on his shoulders.   
 “*Fix her*,” he snarled.

“What have you done?” Greyson demanded. “Where is Cali?”

*I’m right here!* I tried to scream, but my mouth didn’t move, and no sound came out. I couldn’t mind link. I couldn’t make anyone hear me. My mates. I was disconnected from them, thanks to Seluna.

My aching head spun. What was I going to do? I was in here, but trapped, and I couldn’t even begin to think of a way out. I could feel the bitter taste of fear in the back of my throat.

How the hell was I going to get Seluna out of me?!

**Episode 2616**

XAVIER

The hand holding Lucian was shaking with rage. I gave the prince another violent rattle, hard enough that his head bobbled from side to side like a rag doll. He looked like hell, but I didn’t care. I’d keep shaking this guy until his eyes popped out if it would do any good.

“Where is Cali?!” I demanded.

It was a strange question, because Cali was lying on the chaise at my side. She was awake, looking around, and speaking, but clearly something was very, very wrong with her.

“What did you do?” I snarled. “Did you drug her?”

I was going to rip this guy apart.

“It’s not drugs,” Lucian gasped, trying to speak around my fist, which was pressed to his throat. “It’s not drugs, it’s Seluna. But I don’t think this is how it’s supposed to be—”

“You *don’t* *think*?!” I spat, fury racing through my veins. “You listen to me, Lucian. Whatever the fuck you did, just undo it. And I mean *now*.”

I hated this feeling—the complete helplessness. Something was wrong with Cali, and I didn’t know what, and I didn’t know how to help her. All I could do was threaten, when all I wanted was to get Cali back.

And if I couldn’t… The thought hit me like a sucker punch to the gut. It was excruciating, and the pain of it nearly overwhelmed me. I looked down at the figure on the chaise, the one wearing Cali’s face. She had to be in there. She *had* to be. I just couldn’t imagine the loss of her, and the absolute devastation I would feel if I truly lost her.

I remembered how I’d felt after Ava died and our mate bond had been severed. Even if I’d had justification to do what I’d done, I had lost my wolf in the aftermath, and nearly myself. But this was on a whole other level. I had recovered from losing Ava, but I knew that wouldn’t be possible after Cali. Deep down in my soul, I knew that if I lost Cali, I would never, ever recover from that. She was the one.

But this felt different than when I’d lost Ava. I was scared as hell, but I could still feel the mate connection between Cali and me. It was still strong.

At least… I thought it was. Or was that just what I wanted to feel?

I glanced over at Greyson. “Do you still feel the bond?”

Greyson nodded. “I do.”

My heart thumped with a sense of hope. If Greyson felt it too, it wasn’t just in my head. That meant that Cali was still in there. That meant that we hadn’t lost her.

*Cali? Cali? Can you hear me? Can you hear me at all? Where are you? Say something! Anything! Please.*

But I knew it was no use. Speaking through the mind link felt like shouting into a great void. I could sense that my voice wasn’t reaching her. There was something blocking that connection.

I let go of Lucian, and he slumped to the floor. I dropped down next to the chaise and looked into Cali’s familiar hazel eyes.

“Cali,” I said aloud, “I know you’re in there. And if you’re not, wherever you’re hidden, I will find you.”

I squeezed her hand, but she didn’t move in response to my touch, and the eyes that looked back at me were cold and remote. It wasn’t Cali who looked at me through them. This was so damn frustrating. If I could wrap my hands around Seluna and strangle her, I would in a heartbeat. But she’d somehow managed to take over Cali’s body, which meant that harming Seluna would be harming Cali, and if I ever did that, I would never forgive myself.

I looked up at my brother. We were going to have to talk. We disagreed about absolutely everything, except this one woman, and we *had* to get her back.

“Artemis,” I said, getting to my feet, “keep an eye on her for a second, will you?”

Artemis was pale with shock, but she nodded. “Of course.”

I strode toward a far corner of the room and gestured to Greyson to follow.

“I don’t know what the hell is going on here—whether this is some kind of drug-induced scheme by that deranged princeling, or if there’s actually a goddess who’s decided to camp out in Cali’s body—but the outcome needs to be the same.”

Greyson nodded, his face grave. “I agree.”

“We have to get Cali out of the palace—and specifically away from Lucian and the Vanguards. I don’t know what we can do to help her, but we have to get her back to the Redwood pack house to figure it out.”

Greyson nodded. “Yeah, agreed.”

I rubbed a hand across the sandpaper feel of my jawline. “None of this would have ever happened if the Vanguards hadn’t come back to Oregon.”

“We can’t get lost in the weeds here,” Greyson warned. “We have to stay focused.”

I nodded. “Fine. Let’s get her home. We have two witches, a medium, and an amplifier. Somebody’s got to know what the hell to do about all this.”

Greyson didn’t argue. “Lucian’s had more than enough access to Cali.” He glanced over his shoulder. “The sooner we’re out of here, the better.”

“That’s sure as hell true,” I muttered.

“Hang on,” Greyson said quietly, putting out a hand to stop me as I made to walk back. “We need to keep our eyes open, here.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, shaking my arm lose from his grip.

“Lucian,” Greyson said, even lower.

“What about him?”

Greyson gave me a level stare. “Think about it, man. Do you really think he’s going to just give Cali up?”

A jolt of fear forked through me. “I—he’s going to have to.”

“I’m just saying, he’s clearly obsessed with this Seluna figure, and if he believes Cali’s become her—or whatever the hell is going on—we just need to be extra cautious.”

“So what do you think we should do about that?” I asked impatiently.

“We should talk to Lucian,” Greyson said.

I shook my head. “I’m done talking.”

Greyson raised an eyebrow, and I knew what he was saying. He was right, and we weren’t going to be able to just fight our way out of this—as much as I wanted to.

“Fine,” I hissed, “we’ll try it your way.”

Greyson nodded and headed back toward the center of the room. “What are you planning to do about Cali?” he asked as he approached Lucian.

“What do you mean?” Lucian asked, still looking pale and shell-shocked.

“You can’t just leave her like this,” Greyson said, gesturing to Cali. “Seluna can’t just share her body—”

“Is Cali even in there?” I snapped. I had to know the answer to this. I could feel the bond, and I was sure she was still alive, but I’d feel a hell of a lot better if Cali would speak or show a sign that she was still inside her own body.

Lucian’s hair was mussed, and his normally regal bearing was slumped and round-shouldered, but he still managed to look offended. “I realize you two must be upset by the happenings of this evening, but you should be more respectful when you’re speaking about the moon goddess—”

“I don’t give a shit about giving this lunatic respect,” I snapped.

“I worked too hard to bring Seluna back,” Lucian retorted, color flaming back into his face and a touch of his old haughtiness returning to his voice, “and I’m not going to risk losing her again because you two are lovesick.”

“Why don’t you just shove it up your—”

“Do you have any idea how long I’ve been working for this moment?” Lucian asked, his eyes darting between Greyson and me. “Any idea how *hard* I’ve worked? What I don’t believe you realize is that all of this has been planned for years and years—”

“What plan?” Greyson asked. “What are you talking about? You just met Cali!”

“We have just been waiting for the right opportunity,” Lucian went on. “The right moon, the right place, and a *due destini*, of course.”

I stared at him as a realization settled into place. “This has been your plan all along,” I breathed, my head pounding. He had been planning all this from the start, and Greyson and I had just *let* him. We’d made a crucial mistake: we’d underestimated Lucian. We’d written him off as an eccentric nuisance, instead of what he was—a true threat.

This was not a mistake I intended to make ever again.

“You’re right and wrong,” Lucian conceded. “There were some plans in place—yes—but I couldn’t have foreseen this. I believed—and still believe—that Seluna will become her own being in time. But until that blessed day, she must remain in Cali’s body.”

“I’ve heard enough,” I said, and turned to Greyson. “We’re taking her home. She’s going to be looked at by our witches.”

Lucian stepped forward, his wide chest blocking my way. “No, I don’t think you are.”

“What was that?” I asked warningly.

He narrowed his eyes. “No. She stays here.”

**Episode 2617**

GREYSON

I stared at Lucian for a stunned moment, then took a step toward him, getting right up in his face. “You listen to me real closely,” I started, my voice low and menacing. “There is no way in hell I’m leaving Cali here. Whether it’s her body or her soul—whatever’s in there—she’s coming back to our pack house. With me.”

“I don’t think you understand—” Lucian started.

“No, I don’t think *you* understand,” I growled, cutting him off. “Cali is my mate. And what fucking world are you living in that you think a werewolf would allow some other Alpha to keep his mate?”

“You don’t understand,” Lucian started again, his pale face flushing with anger. “What Seluna and I are together is something that reaches far beyond mates.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked.

“The connection Seluna and I share dwarfs the mate bond. Seluna means more to me than Cali ever will to you—”

“*You son of a*—” Xavier spat. He lunged for Lucian, but I managed to catch him before he ripped the prince’s head off with his bare hands.

“Cool it,” I snarled at Xavier. I was furious at Lucian’s implication, too, but my instinct told me that we had to keep our heads. Cali hung in the balance, and we couldn’t risk antagonizing Lucian too much without risking losing her.

We were holding our own here, but we were on Vanguard turf, and our small contingent wouldn’t be able to take on the whole of the Vanguard pack—not with Cali in the state she was in. Something told me this situation was going to require some diplomacy. I needed to get Lucian to agree to let us take her—without a fight, if that was possible.

And if Lucian and Seluna were in love—or whatever twisted version of love they had between them—couldn’t Seluna in Cali’s body be a liability? Wouldn’t she try to protect Lucian? Would she turn on Cali?

My stomach clenched at the thought. I had no idea what a goddess would do once she’d found a body to occupy. It definitely didn’t *sound* good, and it seemed like it could mean bad things for Cali’s body and Cali’s spirit.

I just hoped to hell Cali’s spirit was still somewhere in her. Even if it was hidden, I just needed to know that it was still within her body. I couldn’t stand to think that she was anywhere else. And I hoped that she could somehow see Xavier and me and see that we were fighting for her. I hoped she knew that I was always going to fight for her, and when this was all behind us, I was going to make Lucian *pay*.

What the Vanguard Alpha had done was beyond reckless. I didn’t care that he had said this wasn’t the way it was supposed to go. That made it even worse, in my opinion. He had gone through with this ceremony without even knowing what was supposed to happen, and now we were stuck with this fucking mess.

It was bad enough Lucian had attacked my pack, but messing with my *mate*? That made things personal.

As an Alpha, I tried not to let the personal shit interfere with my judgment. I always tried to keep my decisions about the pack calm and rational while I considered the big picture, but Lucian had crossed a line. Hatred like I had never felt coursed through me as I looked at his face. He would suffer in the end. Lucian would suffer—not me, not Xavier, and certainly not Cali.

*Cali! Love? Can you hear me?*

It felt like shouting into a pitch-black cave. There was nothing in response to my mind link but an empty echo. I couldn’t feel any connection through our mind link, but I kept speaking anyway, just in case.

*I’m here, love. If you can hear me, know that I’ll find you. I’m going to help you. I’m going to get you out of this. I love you.*

I had no idea if she could hear me, but I just had to say it. As much for my own sake as for hers.

And I still felt the mate bond, as strong as it ever was. No matter what Lucian thought, Cali was my mate, and I would die trying to protect her.

I looked at Xavier, who was still glowering at Lucian. I was going to protect Cali, but part of that was making sure Xavier didn’t push things too hard, too fast.

“Maybe we should go get our witches and just come back,” I said to Xavier, thinking fast.

“What?” Xavier said, glaring at me now.

I took a steadying breath. “It’s clear Lucian wants to be with Seluna, and Seluna’s in Cali’s body. They’re kind of… aligned, as far as that goes.”

I was speaking to placate Lucian, and it seemed to be working, though the words left a bad taste on my tongue as I spoke. Xavier was staring at me like he couldn’t believe his ears.

I looked over at Lucian, who was looking at Cali—at Seluna—with a fevered look in his eyes. I suddenly remembered Big Mac’s warning against non-witches messing with spells. As a werewolf, I knew my limitations when it came to magic. This was the same principle. Lucian was obsessed with Seluna, and it had made him take chances he shouldn’t have taken.

He was a royal ass for embarking on it at all. And either he did it knowing it was something he shouldn’t do—or, worse—he did it not even understanding the possible outcomes. Which would make him an even bigger idiot.

Both were likely possibilities, but there was the fact that he had made sure that Xavier and I were occupied while the ceremony was going on. That didn’t sit well with me, and I knew that once Cali was safe, I was going to make Lucian pay. *That* I was sure of.

Xavier made another move to go after Lucian, but I pulled him away.

“Listen to me,” I hissed to him. “I’m leaving you here to stay with Cali.”

“What?” Xavier asked, floored. “We shouldn’t leave her here at all.”

“If Lucian isn’t willing to do anything for her, but he won’t let her go without a giant fight, we’re going to have think creatively and take matters into our own hands,” I said, keeping my voice low. “I’m going to go back to the pack house and get Big Mac and the others. I’ll bring them back here.”

“I’ll stay, too,” Artemis said, stepping over.

Xavier nodded grudgingly. “Fine. I’ll stay. And I won’t take my eyes off Cali—or Seluna—or Lucian. No one makes a move without me knowing.”

I felt a rush of gratitude. I knew I could trust him, and I was unspeakably grateful for that. As much as I wished I could be the one to stay with Cali, I knew the moment had come for me to be the Alpha. And I couldn’t risk having Xavier shift and then getting stuck in his wolf form. I didn’t need anything else to deal with tonight.

But I also knew—no matter how much I wanted to stay by Cali’s side—that I had to step up and take charge. The thought of leaving hurt like hell, but I knew I had to get Big Mac. I was *determined* to get Cali back.

I turned to Lucian. “Some of the Redwood pack is going to stay here. I’m leaving, but I’ll be back.” I gave him an icy stare. “And if you give any indication of leaving this place, or of taking Cali’s body anywhere, every single one of my guys will tear into you and not stop unless I tell them to. Am I making myself clear?”

Lucian crossed his arms over his chest. “Should I take that as a credible threat?”

Xavier took a step forward, his gaze hard as stone. “You can take it however you want. But either way, I’m not going anywhere without Cali.”

The prince didn’t seem to have a response for this, so I turned to Xavier.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.” I looked down at Cali. Her eyes were open, but they were unfamiliar. I hated to leave her. I wanted to stay and protect her, but I knew that I was leaving to do just that. I was leaving to save her.

And with that thought in my head, I strode quickly toward the door.

“Greyson! *Stop!*” Cali called out, just as I reached the doorway.

My heart thudded in my chest. I knew that that was my mate. That was the real Cali calling out for me. It was something I knew deep in my gut. Was she back?

I turned to her, and I saw that she was looking at me, her hands raised. My brain struggled to process what was happening, even as a blast of Fae magic shot from her hands—and straight toward me.

**Episode 2618**

*Greyson, watch out!* I wanted to scream. But of course, I had no control over my voice while Seluna was still running the show. Even with all of my focus and every ounce of power I possessed, the best I could do was exert just enough control for my body to throw off Seluna’s aim.

And *just* barely. The blast of Fae magic missed a stunned Greyson by no more than an inch, colliding with the wall behind him. The force of it blew out several windows, and horror washed over me.

*If that had actually hit him…*

Horror turned to fury. *Is Seluna using my body to try and kill my mates?! With* my *magic?!*

Hell no, bitch.

I knew better than to assume this was some kind of horrible accident. Seluna would have hit Greyson if I hadn’t interfered, and the blast could have really hurt him, or worse. That just wouldn’t do.

*Seluna, you’d better stop!*

Silence answered back, and even though I was speaking to the evil so-called “goddess” who was inhabiting my body, the mental dialogue felt very much like when I was talking to myself. *Focus, Cali. And* *Seluna, stop being a total raging bitch!*

The line between Seluna and me had become so blurred—I didn’t know where I ended and she began. It wasn’t a simple line drawn between us. It was… gradations of me and the goddess. Which was absolutely terrifying. I couldn’t let her master my magic. Couldn’t let her so much as play with it.

It had taken me a long, long time to gain control over it, but would Seluna face the same challenges in learning to use it? I kind of doubted it. I’d been a newly realized half-Fae who had never used magic before. Even if Seluna was truly a goddess, she was clearly a magical being. She was already wielding my Fae magic at a level of competency that had taken months of me practicing to achieve.

I didn’t want to ever find out how long it would take her to achieve full mastery, to eclipse what I’d spent so long trying to learn.

I had to purge her from my body and mind… but *how*?

Greyson glanced behind him at the blown-out windows. The smoldering hole in the drywall. It didn’t take a genius to do the math on how easily that could have been him.

He turned back to face me. “Cali, I know that wasn’t you. I promise you—I’m going to get you out of this. We’ll fix this.” He gave me a long lingering look before turning to Xavier. “Keep her safe.”

It wasn’t a request—not that I expected Xavier to do anything else, even if Greyson hadn’t commanded it. This situation might be the only one where Xavier didn’t object to Greyson trying to “Alpha” him.

I wished I could apologize to Greyson, but at least he knew I wasn’t the one who’d tried to toast him. It was Seluna—that asshole.

And all I could do was watch as he left with Lola, Jay, Rishika, and the others. Xavier, Ava, and Artemis were the only ones who stayed. I was relieved Xavier was still here, even if it pained me for him to see me like this. Ava, I had no doubt, was only staying because she felt the need to glue herself to Xavier’s side. It had nothing to do with any loyalty to me. And Artemis… well, my badass bounty hunter sister being here was almost as comforting as Xavier. She wouldn’t let anything happen to me.

Still, it was encouraging that Greyson hadn’t blamed me for Seluna’s actions, that even though I could barely tell our consciousnesses apart, Greyson seemed to have some sense for when she was acting against my will.

*Does he know because of our mate bond?* The thought filled me with much-needed hope. *Was our mate bond what helped me fight back against Seluna’s control? What allowed me to keep that blast from hitting Greyson? Will it help me get rid of Seluna?*

Then Seluna’s voice slipped through my mind, inky and slick like oil. *Don’t ever interfere with me again, Caliana. If you do, I’ll break your silly little mate bonds with half a thought. Do you dare to see how quickly either of your mates will come to your aid when you’re no longer bound? You’ll be just another stupid half-Fae.*

I wished I could blast Seluna into next week. If only she was *outside* my body. She wouldn’t be so cocky then.

*If you try to blast me*, she reasoned, *you’ll kill us both. Doesn’t exactly solve your problem, does it?*

If I were in control right now, my teeth would be grinding together with restrained fury. Hell, if I were in control right now, I’d be doing a lot of things differently. But I was still a passenger in my own body. I couldn’t even think my own thoughts without her sticking her nose where it didn’t belong.

Seluna could hear everything. She knew every thought that crossed my mind. How could I possibly beat someone with that kind of edge?

*You can’t*, she answered.

*Oh my god!* I cried. *Just shut up!*

Lucian clapped his hands. “We have much to do! The ceremony isn’t yet complete. Now that Seluna is here, we must celebrate her return.”

Xavier scowled. “There’s not going to be any celebration. I’m not letting Cali out of my sight.”

“I’m not sure you have any say in this matter, Xavier,” Lucian said with a shrug. “You’re not the Alpha, and this isn’t your pack. And it wouldn’t be wise for you to disrespect Seluna.”

Xavier turned to me. “I don’t know if you can hear me, Cali, but I’m going to get rid of Seluna.”

I wanted to throw my arms around him. I knew how much he loved me. How this had to be just as painful for him as it was for me.

Seluna laughed. “It’s a little late for that. We are one now. And I am in control.”

I wasn’t about to let that stand.

*You may have some control, but not all of it. I proved that when I made you misfire.*

Maybe there were other things I could control. I knew Lucian and Seluna had used me because I was a *due destini*. That had to mean Seluna’s control over me had something to do with mate bonds. If I could figure it out, there was a chance that I could use the very same mate bonds against Seluna and take back control of my body.

Seluna’s voice slipped through my mind again. *Nice try. Anything you do to use the mate bonds against me will only make things worse. You can’t surprise me because for everything you attempt, I’ll know about it the moment you think it. Face it, you cannot beat me.*

Just like that, my hope flickered out. Seluna was right, I realized. I had no hope of hiding my plans from her, of surprising her. How could I hide my thoughts from a being that shared not only my body, but my mind as well?

*You can’t.* Seluna’s voice was smug.

I hated this. I had no privacy, no hidden corner of my mind where I could go to conspire against this goddess. How was I supposed to form a plan?

*Once again, you can’t. Whatever you scheme, I’m more than capable of countering. You would serve yourself infinitely better by remaining silent and submissive. By turning yourself over to me. Your life as you knew it no longer exists, Caliana. There is no escaping this.*

*Never!* I fumed.

*Don’t you get it?* Seluna asked. *Even “never” has an expiration date. The Fae understand this, so that defiance must be your human side speaking. Humans always take such lofty stands, only to give them up as time ebbs away at their resolve. Trust me, Caliana. You will eventually see the futility of resistance.*

A new idea popped into my head. Maybe *I* didn’t have to be the one who gave up. If I continued to fight back, would Seluna eventually be the one who got tired of dealing with *me*? Maybe I could wear her down until she decided to move on and find a more willing host body. I definitely didn’t want to be like this forever, no matter how long or short that was.

*How long are you going to inhabit my body?* I asked.

*I think the real question is: how long are you?*

I had no response to that, just shock and horror. *Is… is that a threat?! What is that supposed to mean?! Are you going to force me out of my own body?!*

*Shut up!* she snapped. *You’re giving me another headache—not something I’m accustomed to.*

Well, in that case, I was gonna make it my personal responsibility to get Seluna more acquainted with them.

Lucian came over, clearly oblivious to the internal war we were waging, and gave Seluna, not me, a sweeping bow. When he rose, he reached out a hand to take our hand. “Let me show you our kingdom.”

**Episode 2619**

AVA

I watched as Xavier slapped Lucian’s hand away, purposely putting himself between Cali—or Seluna, or whoever the hell was running the show now—and Lucian. It was the least surprising thing that had happened since everyone had shown up to this hellhole. After all, Xavier had warned Lucian, and Lucian defied him anyway. The guy had it coming.

I knew Xavier. He wasn’t going to bow down to anyone—especially when it came to his precious mate, Cali. Assuming she was even still in there. I didn’t know much about having your body taken over by a goddess, but I had to assume it was no walk in the park. And if Seluna truly was a goddess, what hope did Cali have against that kind of power? I’d always suspected Lucian was a lowkey megalomaniac, but teaming up with a magical being and using Cali as the unwilling vessel for said being? That was some next level magical bullshit, even to me.

*This is beyond creepy.*

Even when I was put under Demeter’s spell to look like Cali, I was always me. But Demeter and Silas had manipulated me. I’d just returned from the spirit world and barely knew who I was. But still, the things I did under the guise of being Cali… I regretted them. All of them.

I wanted Xavier, but not if it meant lying to him. Sneaking around and making him think he was with the one he loved. Not only was it reprehensible—it was also pathetic. Why lie about my identity? If Xavier couldn’t love me as Ava, then that was my cross to bear. But at the end of the day, I’d learned the hard way that it was better to be rejected as Ava than adored as Cali.

It almost pained me to say it, but I actually felt kind of bad for Cali.

Sure, she was the pain in the ass who was compounding Xavier’s and my already existing tensions. And I liked to believe that if she weren’t in the picture, it’d be a hell of a lot easier for Xavier’s wolf to convince him to be with me. But being trapped in your own body without much control must absolutely suck. She definitely didn’t deserve this.

*But on the other hand… Is there a way to benefit from this terrible thing?*

Lucian smiled, and even from all the way across the room I could tell it was fake. “I just want to show Seluna what I have to offer her. That’s all.”

Artemis stepped forward, a determined glint in her blue eyes. “Give her the grand tour then, *if* we agree there will be no further ceremony or celebrating.”

Lucian eyed her coolly. “Perhaps we should take it one step at a time.”

It was a clear dismissal, and my eyes widened as I watched him lead Cali—or Cali’s body, at least—out of the room. Lucian was ballsy beyond belief. I’d met all kinds of scary people in my life— werewolves, vampires, Fae, and witches—and Artemis was consistently in the top three. I wouldn’t have been so quick to dismiss the Fae who could probably string him up and gut him faster than he could call for help.

The rest of us followed closely behind Lucian and Caliana. We were the unwilling entourage to one of the creepiest couplings I’d ever seen. I sidled up to Xavier.

I knew the only reason I hadn’t already been sent back to the pack house was because Xavier needed me now more than ever. He couldn’t control his shifting without me close, so in a way, he was kind of stuck with me.

It made my stomach flutter with joy and knot with dread at the same time. I wanted him close, wanted every opportunity I could get to show him just how good we could be together. But I didn’t want him to be shackled to my side against his will, which was kind of what was actually happening here.

It gave me a strange thrill to know how much power I held between us now. Surely that was one more bit of leverage I could use to my advantage?

He’d also asked me to help when we were locked out of the ceremony room. So even if part of him hated me, at least, in his eyes, I wasn’t good for nothing.

“This tapestry dates back to the Ottoman Empire,” Lucian said. “It’s one of my family’s finest acquisitions. Any museum in the world would pay millions to secure such a piece.”

I eyed the dark tapestry, which was also faded with time. It was kind of ugly.

“And here we have a bust of the goddess Diana,” he continued, leading us down a gallery hallway of sorts. “Known for her special connection with the moon.” He gave Cali a meaningful look, like they had some kind of private joke between them.

It didn’t take long for this little tour to get boring. I glanced around at our group. Aysel had peeled off at some point. Was that a good thing, or a bad thing?

*She probably got bored since Greyson’s no longer here.*

While Lucian pontificated, I moved next to Xavier. “How are you doing?” I asked, my voice low.

“I’ve been better.” He eyed Cali’s body.

Her face shifted as Lucian filled her in on the Vanguards’ collection of baroque oil paintings. Even though the expression was literally on Cali’s face, it was an expression I’d never seen Cali make. Perhaps it was just another reminder that it wasn’t Cali at all.

Then Xavier’s attention shifted back to me. “Thank you for helping me.”

I couldn’t help but preen at the acknowledgment, but I tried not to show it. “Did you mean what you said? When you told me I was strong and capable?”

He shrugged. “You shouldn’t need anyone to point that out to you,” he said. “There’s no point in lying. You’re a strong wolf. Always have been.”

I smiled. Was it possible I was *finally* making some inroads with my mate? When I first returned from the spirit world, Xavier was cold and dismissive, if he wasn’t outright trying to kill me. There were several times when I was ready to give up.

But all along, our mate bond persevered, keeping the two of us together even when he didn’t realize it. Was he finally starting to realize it now?

*Come on, Ava. Get a grip. You’re being childish, chasing after these romantic ideals. The only reason Xavier is here is to save his other mate.*

But still, he needed me, and he finally acknowledged it. If that wasn’t progress, I didn’t know what was, and if I’d learned anything, it was that patience was a super underrated virtue that I needed to cultivate when it came to Xavier.

“Whatever you need me to do,” I said. “I’ll gladly do it.”

His brows rose. “Seriously?”

“I mean it.” I nodded. “I know what you’re going through, and I don’t want you to suffer. It’s actually the last thing I would ever want.”

He studied my face for a moment before nodding. “I believe you. Maybe when all of this is done, things will be better.”

Hope fluttered through me, but I couldn’t help wondering—what the hell did that even mean. Better? For the two of us? Or was he just talking about Cali, like always? “Better,” as in he would finally be able to acknowledge our bond and would perhaps even be willing to explore it? Or “better,” as in he wouldn’t hate me anymore?

I didn’t know what to think about any of this, but I didn’t want to ruin this newfound truce between us, so I kept the question to myself.

“Even when you get Cali out of this mess,” I said carefully, “I won’t abandon you. I know you’re struggling and you need my help to control your wolf. I’ll help you for as long as you need.”

He smiled, but there was an edge to it. I chalked it up to a net-positive win. “It must be convenient for you to have to stick close to me.”

I didn’t know if he was kidding or not, or if there was some veiled criticism in his words. Usually he didn’t bother trying to hide them, so I hoped he was joking. That would definitely be progress. If being nice and helpful was the way to slowly win Xavier back, then I’d play along.

Of course, all of this would be a lot easier if he wasn’t still mated to Cali.

But what would happen if Cali never came back? What if Seluna kept her?

Again, my stomach did funny things. Good and bad. It would certainly open a door for me, but I didn’t want to see the pain that would cause Xavier. I’d stay neutral—I wouldn’t actively pursue it, but I wasn’t going to be so quick to prevent it either.

I’d help, but there might come a time when I would hit a limit on how far I’d go.

Lucian stopped in front of a life-sized sculpture of a wolf. “This pack had this commissioned in the nineteenth century…”

“You shouldn’t stand so close to me,” Xavier muttered.

I frowned and was about to ask him if I’d done or said something I shouldn’t when Aysel suddenly reappeared, grabbed me by the shoulder, and spun me around with a quiet snarl.

“You little betrayer.”

# Episode 2620

*“Our kingdom”?* I cackled, knowing full well that Seluna could hear it. That I was probably ruining a moment she’d been looking forward to for a long, long time.

*Too bad, so sad.*

*What is this?* The Lion King*? Is he going to tell me that everything the light touches is mine?* I laughed again, as loudly as I could within the chamber of my own mind. And I didn’t stop—even as it seemed like Lucian’s tour would never end.

*He’s trying so hard to impress you, it’s embarrassing for him. And you, really. Seriously, you might be the big bad goddess or whatever, but this has gotta be humiliating.*

Lucian came to stop in front yet another ancient statue, rambling on about its history. At this rate I was absolutely going to lose my mind. Well, more so than I already had. At the pace we were going, I bet we could have done a lap through the Met in the same amount of time it was taking Lucian to pontificate on the Vanguard pack’s private art collection.

“This statue is the crowning glory of the Vanguards—a recreation of the greatest Alpha ever to walk this earth.”

With a lead-up like that, I couldn’t resist.

*I bet he’s going to say it’s him. Lucian does take self-love into overdrive, doesn’t he?*

The Vanguard prince grinned proudly. “It’s my grandfather.”

Oh. Maybe I had to give Lucian *some* credit. Perhaps his narcissism hadn’t quite reached commissioning a statue of himself in wolf form.

Yet.

I had a feeling that day wasn’t far off.

*Are you into the whole statuary thing, Seluna? You seem the type to be into idols. Maybe commission some crazy statue of you both together. Let me guess: you’d put it just inside the front doors so anyone who came over would have to look at it and tell you how great you look?*

She didn’t answer. She’d been quiet through my whole running commentary. Funny how she could tell me all day long how futile resistance was, but she didn’t want to come out and play once I stopped being the scared captive.

“What do you think?” Lucian asked.

I knew he was speaking to Seluna, but I took stock of the statue all the same. It was fine as far as wolf statues went, I supposed. But I didn’t really care. I knew what Lucian was doing—he was flexing for Seluna. Trying to show off for her and put them on more equal footing all at once.

*You’re right*, Seluna finally responded. *Lucian is groveling in his own way—a very Lucian way, to be sure. But I do so enjoy it when a mortal debases themselves before me. I am a goddess, after all. Were this a different time in history, he might be making a human sacrifice to appease me.*

If I had control of my face, I would have grimaced. *That is the grossest thing I’ve ever heard. Do you seriously want him to kill someone in tribute to you? Actually, scratch that—I don’t want to know.*

*Are you truly that naive? I’m only asking for the respect to which I am due as a goddess of the moon.*

No, I wasn’t buying that. *What kind of insecure goddess needs a whole-ass human sacrifice? Or are you just that shallow—that you get off on people kissing your ass?*

Once again, Seluna went quiet. Maybe I’d hit a sore spot. Maybe this all-powerful, all-knowing alleged moon goddess had a weak point after all.

Seluna scoffed. *Unlike you, I have no weak points.*

Good god. Could I not even have an occasional private moment within my own mind?

*Not as long as we’re together*. Her voice was both cruel and triumphant—pretty much the perfect combination for the devil goddess who had trapped me inside my own body.

Now it was my turn to stay silent.

Lucian finally pried his attention away from the statue—or he’d run out of material, I wasn’t sure which—and eyed me/Seluna up and down. “Your dress was damaged during the ceremony,” he noted. “It’s no longer suitable for a goddess.”

He gestured for a nearby attendant to come forward. “Our goddess requires a new gown. Bring her one fitting both her station and her beauty, at once.”

The attendant nodded and raced off. I didn’t envy them the task of trying to dress the she-devil in my body. She didn’t seem the type to forgive fashion faux pas.

My head nodded. “A goddess must always shine,” Seluna said in agreement, “and this dress has become a rag.”

“Wherever you’re taking Cali, I’m coming with,” Artemis said.

“As am I.” Xavier nodded.

Lucian sighed, clearly a bit exasperated. “At some point we’re going to have to acknowledge that Seluna *is* Cali.”

“That had better not be the case for much longer,” Xavier growled. “For your sake.”

I was suddenly reminded of my question to Seluna. *You never answered my question—how long do you plan to camp out in my body? This isn’t a Holiday Inn. You can’t just extend your stay.*

*I will stay until I have no further use for this thing*, she answered.

Ignoring the jab at my body, I couldn’t help the growing dread in the back of my—our?—mind. Ugh, this was infuriating. And confusing.

We headed up the grand staircase—or was this just one of the many grand staircases in the palace? Could a staircase be considered “grand” if there was more than one like it? I wasn’t sure, and it wasn’t like I was able to ask.

*Your mind truly is a maddening place to live, isn’t it?* Seluna drawled.

*If you don’t like it, you can leave anytime!*

The attendant led us to a large dressing room and gestured to rack after rack of fine clothing. “You may choose whichever gown you desire.”

I didn’t want to play dress-up. I wanted to get Seluna the hell out of my body.

*Quiet*, she hissed.

Seluna carried my body over to one of the many walk-in closets flanking the back wall. I tried to resist, tried to drag my feet or pull her off-kilter, or even just slow her down, but nothing seemed to work.

*Is Seluna’s control gaining strength? Will I be able to resist at all?*

*I am in control, Cali. So stop fretting. Just accept it. It’ll make everything easier.*

*Yeah, for* you,I huffed.

Seluna grabbed a shimmering pearlescent dress off one of the racks and, despite my using every ounce of my strength to try to stop her, she stepped out of the singed dress. In the countless mirrors hanging in the dressing room, I noted that the handprints were finally gone from my shoulders.

*Ha. At least that was taken care of.* Not that I was sure it was worth it.

I watched Xavier try to keep his eyes on my face, but every so often his eyes strayed down my body. Normally, his appreciation for my body would make my heart flutter and my cheeks heat up. But none of this was my choice. I was standing naked in front of almost half a dozen people, and I felt too self-conscious to feel anything but embarrassment.

All I could do was go along with it, feeling like a marionette as Seluna pulled the strings and tried on the dress. Almost immediately, she tore it off and threw the dress on the floor. “This is hideous.”

She pulled on another, and that one met the same fate on the floor.

“This one’s even worse,” she growled. “Does nothing look good on this body?”

*Hey! If you don’t like my body, then go find another one!*

She ignored me, continuing to rifle through dress after dress while my body was exposed. I spotted one I knew would look good on me, but I wasn’t going to help Seluna out. Screw her. She could look frumpy for all I cared.

Suddenly, Seluna grabbed the dress. *Thank you, Cali, for your assistance.* She held up the dress and checked it out against my body in the mirror. *I think you’re right. Even this frame looks appealing now. It’s an exquisite dress.*

I was fuming. *Goddammit!*

Then she turned my body to face Xavier, still holding the dress up. “What do you think?”

I knew what she was doing—she was playing with Xavier. That bitch.

Xavier shrugged. “It’s a dress.”

“I find it interesting that you and Cali claim to be mates, yet you don’t seem to care how I appear in this gown?” she asked.

“I don’t give a shit what you wear,” he snapped. “I only care about Cali. I don’t know who I’m speaking to now, but it’s not my mate.”

That caught my attention. *He knows the difference.* I could feel my mate bond with Xavier pushing to try to bring us together. And if it weren’t for Seluna, I would tell him how I felt, hold him close, and everything would be all right.

Seluna chuckled and moved closer to Xavier.

I felt the pull of my mate bond growing more intense. I wanted to kiss him, but not if Seluna was the one who’d get to feel his lips.

“You desire this body, don’t you?” she asked. “And now it is the body of a goddess.”

Xavier kept his eyes fixed on my face. “Goddess? You’re nothing but a vain, self-absorbed leech. No better than the rest of us. Hell, you’re worse.”

I suddenly felt as if a cloud had lifted, and I knew, instinctively, that Seluna had retreated. I felt myself taking control of my body, becoming fully present.

I mind linked with Xavier. *Xavier. It’s me. I love you.*

His eyes flashed with recognition. “Cali? Are you in there?”

# Episode 2621

**Greyson**

I pulled up to the pack house in the SUV, skidding to a stop, the brakes screeching. I’d driven like a bat out of hell the whole way over here, but to my credit, the vehicle hadn’t sustained any further damage on my account. The front end was a little dented after it smashed through the Vanguard fence, but that was the least of my problems. Xavier should really be used to having damaged cars by now anyway. It seemed to be his schtick.

And honestly, as long as Cali was being possessed by that moon bitch, the SUV and everyone in it were lucky I’d driven as well as I had. Leaving Cali there, still in the clutches of the people who had done this unspeakable thing to her, was fucking unacceptable. Xavier and Artemis sticking around was only the slightest comfort. I wouldn’t rest until Cali was home safe, where she belonged, with that parasite of a goddess out of her body.

And after that, well, Lucian could consider himself lucky if I didn’t burn him and his whole damn palace to the ground. After what he’d done, I didn’t know how it would be possible to avoid a war with the Vanguards. And if I was being honest, I wasn’t sure I wanted to avoid it.

But that was a concern for later—after we’d freed Cali and brought her home.

I’d spent the whole ride back ignoring all the questions, worries, and chatter coming from the others. All I could think about was the mate I was leaving behind, how every additional mile between us felt like a knife shoved between my ribs. My mate—my kind, compassionate, brave mate—was trapped inside her own body with a being who was claiming to be some kind of goddess.

Seluna, the moon bitch herself, was sharing the body of my mate. Cali had to be terrified. Hell, I’d being lying if I said I wasn’t equally terrified.

But, of course I couldn’t dwell on that. My own fears weren’t going to help Cali. If I thought about the reality we’d stumbled into, that Cali had somehow gotten herself magically woven in with Seluna, that her body was being moved like some kind of creepy, horrific puppet, then I didn’t know how I’d ever dig myself out from under the terror.

So, I leaned into the fury. Fear froze, but anger burned hot enough to keep me moving. Fueled my determination and filled my mind with all sorts of ways to leverage against the Vanguards, to take from them what they’d tried to take from me until they backed the fuck off once and for all.

But first, Cali.

I had to free her before it was too late. I could only hope that her trust in me wasn’t misplaced. I wouldn’t—I *couldn’t*—allow Seluna to take Cali away from me. And if Big Mac couldn’t help me, then I’d scour the earth until I found someone who could.

I shoved the SUV into park and burst out of the vehicle, racing into the house and swinging the door open so hard it shook the wall upon impact. I looked around wildly as the pack members rushed in.

“Where’s Big Mac?” I barked.

“Where’s Cali?” Sage countered. “Is she feeling better?”

“What about Xavier?” Another pack member asked. “What happened?”

I didn’t have time to respond; I barely had time to register their questions at all. “Where’s. Big. Mac?” I snarled with enough intensity that the crowd went quiet.

I strode down the hallway in search of the witch, only dimly aware of my mother and Rishika trying to answer everyone’s questions. Of course, the witch was playing hide and seek when I needed her most.

I glanced in the den, found it empty, then turned to double back down the hallway and check the kitchen, when a hand landed on my shoulder. It was a credit to my rapidly deteriorating self-control that I didn’t rip it from the body it belonged to.

My frantic gaze followed the hand up to Ravi’s sympathetic face.

“I know this must be pretty stressful,” Ravi said. “Whatever you need, just ask.”

Jay popped up behind him. “I second that.”

“I appreciate that,” I said gruffly. “But right now, all I need is a witch.”

I looked into the kitchen and ran into the last person I wanted to talk to right now: Cali’s mother.

Orla’s eyes widened. “You’re back.” Her gaze shifted beyond my face, looking down the hallway behind me. “Where are my daughters?”

She got up, clearly about to go look for them when I held out a hand to stop her.

Having this conversation was the very last thing I wanted to do right now, but I knew there was no putting it off. Orla was Cali and Artemis’s mother; she had a right to know the truth.

“Artemis is fine,” I explained, “but Cali…”

*Shit. How the hell can I even explain this?*

Her brows knit together. “What is it? Is Cali hurt?”

I shook my head. “She’s not hurt, exactly, but she seems to be possessed.” I cringed at the word. It made the whole thing sound like a B-list TV show. But how else could I describe what had happened to her daughter?

Orla’s lips thinned. “Take me to her.”

I reached out to put a hand on her arm. “I know you’re upset and that you want to help Cali, but I need Big Mac. She’s the only one who—I hope—is capable of reversing this.”

“But—”

“I’m Cali’s mate,” I reminded her. “I won’t let anything happen to her.”

She caught the hand I’d placed on her arm and gave it a squeeze. “Promise me you’ll bring her back.”

“I promise.”

I headed upstairs, continuing my search for Big Mac. The distressed expression on Orla’s face was a burning reminder of what was at stake—as if I was capable of forgetting for even a second.

*I swear to god when this is all over, when I have Cali back in my arms, I’m going to end the Vanguards once and for all.*

I found Big Mac in her bedroom. She scowled as I burst in without knocking.

“You know, closed doors have a certain meaning,” she began.

I couldn’t care less about her privacy or respecting her personal space or whatever other bullshit she was about to lecture me about. Not right now. “What do you know about possessions?” I blurted out.

Her brows lifted. “Context would be nice.”

“I think Cali’s been possessed by a moon goddess.”

It might have been the most batshit crazy thing I’d ever said out loud, and it was a testament to how fucking *serious* I was that neither of us so much as cracked a smile.

“My knowledge is limited,” she said after a moment. “It’s not like this is a common occurrence.”

I shook my head slowly. “No, I can’t believe this hasn’t ever happened before. Lucian and Seluna, they had this whole plan, this ritual. They knew exactly what to do.”

“I’ve never been able to have any first-hand experience with possession, myself. You know I could have gone a whole lifetime without it. Even the other witches I know, including Kira and Nneka, wouldn’t have such experience.”

I was passively aware of my mother walking into the room as I asked, “But can you help her?”

The witch looked at me with something like pity, and my heart nearly cracked in two.

“I can try,” she said softly. “I need to talk to Kira first and gather some items.”

“We don’t have a lot of time.”

“I’ll be quick.” She hurried out of the room.

My mother put a hand on my shoulder. “How are you doing?”

I blew out a breath. “How would anyone be doing in this situation? But how I’m doing isn’t important. What’s important is saving Cali.”

“That’s not what I asked. I know you’ll do everything you can to help Cali, but you need to think clearly. You need to be aware of what you’re up against.” She rubbed my shoulder. “You need to take care of yourself if you’re going to try to take care of others.”

“I appreciate your concern, but I know exactly what I’m doing.”

Her brows rose. She was calling my bluff without having to say a word. *Typical mom.*

“I’m figuring it out as I go,” I amended. “I promise I’ll look out for myself while I help Cali.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Wish me luck.”

Big Mac found me a few minutes later. She held a packed bag.

“What’s in there?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Anything and everything I thought we might need.” As we headed downstairs she asked, “Are we driving, riding, or blipping?”

“Blipping, I assume. Isn’t that the fastest?”

“Yes, it is.”

Rishika, Lola, and Jay rushed up as we made it to the bottom of the stairs. “We can’t let you go alone,” Rishika said. “We’ll come with you. Show our support. Show them the Redwood pack won’t stand for this.”

The show of support meant the world to me, but I shook my head. “I don’t need you there. Yet. If you all show up now, the Vanguards might see it as some kind of hostile move, and I can’t afford to be in that kind of situation right now. You should all stay here. On standby. If I need you, I’ll let you know.”

Big Mac and I stepped outside.

“Let’s go,” I said.

“Hold on. Kira’s bringing one last thing, and… there’s a risk you should know about. If this goddess thing really has a hold on Cali, getting her to release Cali might be difficult.”

“Difficult,” I repeated.

“Yes.” Big Mac’s expression was grim. “It could kill Cali.”

# Episode 2622

My heart swelled. *I know Xavier heard me! He recognized our mind link!*

I didn’t know why or how I’d taken control over Seluna—if Xavier’s words had done it, or the increasing intensity of our mate bond had somehow pushed him through—but I wasn’t going to let this opportunity go to waste.

I started to reach out to take his hand, my fingers twitching as they inched toward him, and then Seluna dragged my arm back. The clouds moved back in, and I lost that glorious sense of control mere seconds after I’d gotten it back.

*No!* I cried.

*You and your mates are so easy to fool*, she said. *Do you really think I would allow you to regain control?*

*But you didn’t allow it*, I snapped. *I took it. I took control of my body—thanks to my connection with Xavier. And believe me, if I did it once, you can bet I’m going to do it again, you goddess-wannabe*.

Seluna scoffed. *It’s so fun to build up a mortal’s hopes, only to dash them later on. Enjoy this moment of false victory while you can—you won’t have another.*

She was lying. She had to be. I knew what I’d felt, and I believed it to be one hundred percent true. My mate bond to Xavier had freed me, or at a minimum, it had overpowered Seluna. She was bluffing now, trying to get me to lose faith in my mate bond so I didn’t try to overcome her again.

But I knew better. I believed it, deep in my bones. She wasn’t the only one in control here, not always. Not under the right circumstances.

And while I knew Seluna was acutely aware of my every thought, I had no problem letting her know I didn’t believe her. This was *my* body, and it always would be. Seluna was nothing more than an unwelcome guest—a blip on my radar. She wasn’t going to win this. She wasn’t going to keep my body forever, by any definition of the word.

I felt Seluna roll her eyes at my rebellious thoughts. *You can believe whatever you want. It won’t change your new reality.*

She narrowed her gaze on Xavier. “Leave us.”

He shook his head. “In your dreams, moon-whatever you call yourself. I’m not leaving Cali alone. Period.”

Seluna sighed. “Very well.”

I sensed something within her, something slipperier and deeper than the usual flash of emotion that accompanied her responses to me.

*Wait. If Seluna can hear my thoughts, can I do the same with her?*

I expected Seluna to respond, to shut me down in that way she seemed to enjoy so much. Instead, she put on the dress I chose and checked herself—myself—out in the mirror.

“We should return to Lucian,” she mused.

I checked out the reflection in the mirror and bit back a sigh. Or, at least, I would have if I had control. As it was, my dread only increased at the reflection—and the dress looked like it had been painted on. It hadn’t been what I’d expected it to be when I’d picked it. It was a bit more skimpy than my personal tastes.

Now that I thought about it, that seemed to be a preference with these crazy moon people anyway—less was more.

Xavier stood up, and Artemis, who had been standing silently in the corner, began to follow him. Seeing my sister like this, even knowing she was on my side, never failed to put me on edge. Everyone who knew Artemis knew that quiet Artemis was the scariest version of Artemis.

Seluna moved to follow Xavier and Artemis out. As they each crossed the threshold from the dressing room into the hallway, Seluna slammed the door shut, separating us from Xavier and Artemis.

*What are you doing?* I screamed.

Xavier pounded on the door so hard it rattled in its frame. “Cali!”

“Just forgot to accessorize!” Seluna called back through the door.

*Open the door, or Xavier’s going to break it down*, I said. *He’s not going to play these games with you. He won’t tolerate being separated from me.*

*I imagine he’ll just have to learn to deal with it*, she mused.

This was just getting better and better. My fingers itched to open the door, to call out Xavier and assure him that I was still here. To give Artemis permission to use her bounty hunting skills to tie Seluna up where she couldn’t wreak any more havoc.

But, of course, Seluna wasn’t allowing me to do any of that. I couldn’t so much as move my eyebrows. Whatever lapse in control she’d experienced was clearly over, and she’d shoved me back into some faraway corner of my own mind where I couldn’t regain control.

*What the hell do you even want?* I demanded.

An eerie silence set in.

*Seluna?*

Nothing.

I was all alone. I didn’t know how I knew this, but I could sense it. It was just me in here. Which meant…

Seluna had left my body!

Control and clarity rushed in, and I felt whole. I touched my face, watching my wide-eyed reflection in the mirror. It was me. Just me. Just Caliana.

The pounding on the door pulled me back to the present.

“Cali!” Xavier called. “Let me in!”

My mate’s anguished cry was the anchor that kept me here, that pushed me to move toward the door and open it. I reached for the handle, his name on the tip of my tongue.

Suddenly, a fiery grip wrapped tight around my heart, squeezed it so tightly my vision flickered. I crumbled to my knees, unable to breathe, unable to speak. Unable to do anything but shudder and wheeze and writhe in the worst pain I’d ever felt.

*What’s happening to me?*

Images of burning slipped through my mind, flames soaring high into a dark, moonless sky as terrified screams echoed all around.

And then, amidst the horror and cacophony, I heard Seluna’s voice, smooth and smug as she whispered, *You want to believe, so I allowed you to. But know this: any control I give you is just that. What I give you. And whatever I do give you, I will always take back. Until there is no more control to give. And no you left to receive it.*

Her words would have chilled me to the bone if it were possible for me to feel anything other than blinding pain. My vision began to tunnel, blackness slipping in around the edges.

*Is Seluna going to kill me? Is that her goal? To kill me and then take control of my body?*

Even in the midst of my horror and agony, it occurred to me that this was a terribly roundabout way to do that, if killing me was her goal all along.

Then, just as quickly as it had clamped down, the fiery grip around my heart released, and I sucked in a huge breath of air. My body still throbbed, like it remembered the pain it no longer felt. I was dizzy, disoriented, and I felt more than a little sick. My eyes lost focus, and I felt myself being lifted up—was it Xavier? Was he here to rescue me?

“Cali!” his voice slipped through the door, a visceral reminder that he was no longer in the room with me.

Then I realized the thing lifting me up was Seluna. She was playing the puppet master with my body once more. Seluna smoothed the dress and checked her reflection in the mirror. My face looked pale, but the color was coming back into my cheeks now that Seluna had taken control.

*Are you going to stop these silly fantasies now?* She asked.

I was still smarting from the brutal way she ripped away my control. I couldn’t respond, not that I wanted to give her the satisfaction even if I could. I knew Seluna may have tricked me. She might have given me a sense of false hope just so she could enjoy the task of destroying it. But that moment when I’d connected with Xavier wasn’t false. It wasn’t part of Seluna’s bag of tricks.

It was real, and I had to figure out how to do it again.

*Don’t bother*, Seluna sneered. *I know your every move even before you make it. You’re never going to win this game of chess.*

She opened the door to reveal an intensely pissed-off Xavier and a worried Artemis. I tried to mind link, to tell Xavier what had happened, but I couldn’t. It was like a thick barrier had fallen between us.

A barrier called Seluna.

Artemis grabbed me and pulled me close, her eyes blazing. “I sincerely hope I’m speaking with Seluna right now, because if you pull that shit again, I will kill you.”

I appreciated Artemis’s loyalty more than she’d ever know, but I hoped Artemis realized that she couldn’t hurt Seluna without also hurting me.

*An excellent point*, Seluna agreed. *I’m glad to see you’re finally understanding the situation.*

Lucian pushed forward. “Let me see you, my beloved.”

I cringed—was I cringing, or was Seluna? I couldn’t tell anymore.

He walked around me, brazenly checking me out. “You look radiant—like a goddess should.”

He stopped in front of me and pulled me close. “I’ve waited so long for this.”

I wanted to slap him, or at least pull away, but Seluna leaned into it, wrapping my arms around Lucian.

Horror washed over me. *Is she going to kiss him while in my body?!*

# Episode 2623

**Xavier**

I lunged forward to separate Lucian from my mate. It didn’t matter that “Cali” was leaning in to his kiss—I knew, deep in my bones, that Cali wasn’t running the show right now. It was that moon bitch Seluna, which meant that Cali would be forced along for the ride. She’d be forced to feel Lucian kissing her again her will, and I was gonna let that happen over my dead body.

I planted myself between them and shoved Lucian back, both hands against his chest. “My brother already punched you once, and let me be clear: that will pale in comparison to what I’ll do to you if you try to kiss Cali again.”

Lucian grimaced, and a spark of hope flared to life inside me. Had I hurt the bastard? I really hoped so.

Then he brushed off his shirt and jacket like I’d just gotten him dirty, like my touch was diseased.

*This asshole.*

“You are gravely mistaken,” he said. “I wasn’t trying to kiss Cali. I was trying to kiss Seluna.”

I seriously didn’t know how he pulled off these mental gymnastics. How he could be so flippant about all of this, acting like I was the one who was somehow in the wrong, when *he* was the one who arranged this whole thing to give Cali’s body to Seluna.

When this was all over, when Cali was safe and this moon bitch was back where she belonged, I was gonna rip the princeling’s throat out, and I was gonna *like* it.

“I don’t give a shit who you think she is,” I growled. “As far as I can tell, that’s Cali. And nobody kisses her except me.”

I could have mentioned Greyson, of course, but I felt no need to. My brother was a big boy—he could defend his own connection with Cali. That was above my pay grade.

Lucian shook his head, clearly exasperated. “I wasn’t the only one in that coupling who wanted to kiss.”

“I did want to kiss him,” Seluna admitted, and even knowing that she was possessing Cali’s body, it still felt like a sucker punch to see Cali’s mouth admitting that she wanted to kiss someone else.

“But if it’s going to make this more difficult, I’ll refrain for now,” she added. She probably thought she was being reasonable, generous even.

*If you really wanted to be generous, you’d get the fuck out of my mate’s body.*

I could tell I’d lost Cali again, that despite hearing her voice in my head, she’d sunk beneath the surface again and Seluna was running the show. Seluna might sound and look like Cali, but the brief window I had, when Cali mind linked to tell me she loved me, and our mate bond was practically humming with intense energy, had closed once more.

I wanted nothing more than to open it up—permanently.

I just didn’t know how to do that yet. But the fact that we were able to connect at all, that Cali was still in there and could still occasionally pull the strings, gave me hope. But in the meantime, Cali was being held prisoner in her own body, and Lucian and Seluna both seemed ready to push forward with their plan, with the life they were ready to start together because of what they’d stolen from Cali.

*Greyson had better get back here with Big Mac soon. Who knows what other bullshit the princeling and the moon bitch have planned?*

I seriously doubted Lucian would tell me, or that he had any intention of giving Cali up. The way he treated her—Seluna—seemed like the beginning of some kind of twisted courtship.

Lucian gave me a tight smile that I could only assume meant he was good and pissed at me. “The moment has passed. I’ve waited far too long to kiss my goddess,” he said, “but I suppose I can wait a little longer—everything must be just right. Come now, we have plans elsewhere.”

He motioned for us to return to the ground floor, again maddeningly oblivious to the unspeakably evil thing he’d done to Cali. I pulled in a deep breath and tried to calm myself with the thought of ripping Lucian apart. It couldn’t be far off now. Once Greyson and Big Mac returned, and the witch pulled Seluna out of Cali’s body, there would be no holding back.

Artemis and I followed Lucian and Seluna back down the grand staircase. Cali’s sister hadn’t made a peep since she’d threatened Seluna after she’d locked us out of the dressing room. In general, she’d been quiet throughout this whole thing. It was unnerving, but it also wasn’t particularly helpful.

“Why were you so quiet in there?” I asked, my voice low. I knew it couldn’t be easy for her to see Cali like this, but I hadn’t expected her to just stand back and watch. I could barely keep myself from trying to rip Lucian apart, from stomping all over the perverse happily ever after he and Seluna were trying to create at my mate’s expense.

So why wasn’t Artemis doing the exact same thing?

Her expression was grave. “I’ve learned that sometimes it’s better to observe than to speak. I’m trying to figure out what Seluna’s game is, what it is she wants Cali for. Why Cali has to be her vessel and how we might be able to leverage the rules of that exchange against her.” Artemis shook her head. “Either way, it’s clear from the way she’s moving, the way she speaks—it’s not Cali. Not truly.”

I felt the same way, though I wished I had a better grasp on those subtle differences when I’d inadvertently hooked up with Ava, who was pretending to be Cali at the time. Too bad Artemis wasn’t around then. She could have warned me.

“I heard from Cali,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “She mind linked.”

Artemis’s brows lifted. “That’s good. That means she’s still in her body, awake and aware. Though… she must be really freaked out if that’s the case.” Her expression turned to a grimace. “It might have been kinder for her to be unconscious for all this.”

I wasn’t going to argue with any of that, though hearing her voice in my mind had given me the first dose of relief I’d felt in far too long. I just wished I’d been aware enough of the situation to say more to Cali, to ask her something—anything—that might prove useful. I was so shocked, so ripped apart with grief and anger and hope that all I’d managed to do was say her name. It happened so quickly, and the duration was so short.

Next time—and there would be a next time—I had to reassure her, to comfort her. To remind her she would be free of Seluna’s grasp. One way or another.

As we made our way down the grand staircase, I suddenly felt a restlessness itching beneath my skin, an urge to shift. I knew why: Ava. My wolf was sensing her again, and clawing for control over my faculties.

I pulled in a deep breath. *Not now. We have to focus on Cali, my mate that matters most.*

Lucian led us to yet another large room where a feast was laid out. And just as I suspected—as my wolf already knew—Ava was there waiting for us. I’d seen Aysel pull her aside when the attendants brought Cali upstairs to change. What did Aysel want with her?

Then I noticed the other people in attendance, and my molars ground together. “We told you: no celebrations. No more parties.”

Lucian shrugged helplessly and gestured to the food. “But it would be such a pity to let it go to waste. Besides, this is my home. My pack. You don’t have to join. In fact, you’re welcome to leave anytime you want.”

“I’m not leaving without Cali.”

Lucian glanced over at Seluna. “Who’s to say Cali’s still there?”

My fists clenched, and for the umpteenth time, I had to remind myself not to kill this motherfucker before we got Seluna out of Cali’s body. “I *know* she’s still in there. And it’s just a matter of time before Seluna finds herself without a host body.”

Seluna squeezed Lucian’s arm. “Oh, I haven’t tasted food in so long.”

Lucian gestured to the spread. “Shall I feed you then?”

They laughed together like a normal, non-psychopathic couple and continued on toward the banquet. I was about to follow when Ava sidled up to me and my senses were engulfed with her. My wolf’s desperation to take control increased.

“I need to talk to you,” she whispered, “but not here.”

I glanced at Artemis. “Keep a close watch on Cali.”

Then I followed Ava out into the hallway. “Be quick—I’m not going to leave Cali with Lucian for more than a few minutes.”

She nodded. “If we don’t separate Cali and Seluna in the next seven days, the goddess will latch onto the body, and Cali will be lost forever.”

# Episode 2624

**Ava**

Xavier narrowed his eyes, clearly suspicious of me. Would he ever *not* look at me like that? I had really hoped we were past this by now. I mean, he’d even thanked me for helping him! But clearly Xavier still didn’t view me as above suspicion.

“How do you know that?” he asked.

At least he wasn’t asking me why he should believe me. That was progress, right? And with Xavier, I had to take every possible positive sign I could get. One step forward, two steps back was still one step forward.

I thought of my conversation I’d just with Aysel.

*“You betrayed me,” she said, her eyes blazing. “You opened the door to let Xavier and Greyson into the ceremony. After* everything *I’ve done for you.”*

*I froze, unsure of how to answer without getting myself killed. Aysel was a more formidable foe than most people gave her credit for. She might play the part of a spoiled, vapid princess, but she could scheme every bit as effectively as her brother. If she had the ambition to do so, I had no doubt she could be even more dangerous than he was.*

*Then she sighed. “I guess I understand, though.”*

*“You do?” I asked. I didn’t even dare to hope that it was going to be this easy. I knew better. She had to be playing with me—like a cat played with its food before it tore it to pieces.*

*“You’re doing everything you can to earn your mate’s trust,” she continued, sounding bored by the whole thing. “You want to stay on his good side, and what better way to accomplish that than helping him find his precious mate? How can I blame you for that?”*

*I had a feeling she could blame me very easily if she wanted to—for much less than the offense I’d committed today.*

*“But,” she added, “I do have a limit. Do us both a favor, Ava, and don’t bite the hand that feeds you.”*

I came back to the present, resolve tightening in my gut.

Aysel could threaten me all she wanted. Because she wasn’t the only one here with a limit. I had one too—and I was willing to do just about anything for Xavier.

What I didn’t know was how much of my willingness to help him was a result of our mate bond and how much was wrapped up in my growing attachment to the pack, to finally having a sense of belonging.

Even on my best day, I doubted I’d developed any genuinely warm feelings for Cali, even if I did pity her current situation. But wanting to help the pack, that resonated. That was a genuine desire I had, to help the people who had opened their home to me—however begrudgingly—time and time again.

If I helped Xavier, I’d be helping Cali. There was no way around that. And even if it wasn’t necessarily the ideal situation, it was still becoming harder to separate all my feelings.

“Well?” Xavier pressed. “Are you gonna talk to me, or should I go back in there and ask Lucian to verify this himself?”

I cleared my throat. “Aysel told me. She said the longer Seluna remains in Cali’s body, the more difficult it will be to get Cali back.”

His brows lifted into that same expression of skepticism. “And Aysel just… told you this? Out of the kindness of her heart?”

“I asked her. She trusts me, more or less. Somehow.” At his dubious look, I added, “In any case, she doesn’t have a reason not to tell me. And she intimated that things would become even more difficult if Seluna remains inside Cali’s body for more than a week. I honestly don’t know if she was trying to scare me or not, but she said if that happened, Cali would be stuck in some kind of limbo.”

I had to assume Aysel was being honest, because she knew how I felt about Cali. She had to know I wouldn’t be scared. Hell, maybe she’d told me because that was exactly what she was hoping for.

Xavier seemed to ponder this for a moment before nodding. “Thank you for telling me.”

That was the second time he’d thanked me in one day. There was another step forward, tiny as it might be.

And because I was greedy for more progress, I tried to continue my supportive streak. “How are you handling all of this? I can imagine you must be pretty worried for Cali.”

He shook his head. “I’m not going to give Seluna a week to solidify her grip on Cali. Big Mac should be here soon and will be able to help put an end to this.”

He sounded so sure. As far as I knew, this was the first time any of us had encountered this kind of magic. I wouldn’t have been so certain if I were in his shoes.

I wanted to ask the obvious question: what if Big Mac couldn’t separate Seluna and Cali? What would Xavier do then?

But I kept those questions to myself. There was no use speculating at this point, and I didn’t want to make this any more difficult for him than it likely already was.

I put a hand on his shoulder. “I know you’re probably hurting right now, so if you want to talk—about anything—I’m here. You can even talk about this wolf situation if you want. Assuming it’s still a problem, that is.”

He looked at me blankly. “You know it is. I can feel it, and I assume you can too.”

As if triggered by his words, I felt my wolf stirring inside me, roused by the proximity to its mate.

Of course I felt it. I’d felt that connection ever since I’d stepped through the mirror. I wished I could talk to him about it, but I didn’t want to come on too strong. I didn’t want to risk casting suspicion on my motives—or getting a nasty, cutting remark in response. There was no telling when I’d cross whatever invisible boundary Xavier had built between us, and with things going so nicely, I didn’t want to ruin my streak.

Xavier could be loving—I’d certainly experienced my fair share of that—but he could also be cruel, especially when Cali was involved.

I pulled in a breath. “My wolf can feel our mate bond.”

He nodded, like this was what he’d expected. “For now, I need you to put those feelings on hold. I can’t deal with any of that when I’m trying to fix this Seluna bullshit.”

I hooked onto his words. *On hold.* Did that mean I actually had a chance with him? That after spending so much time alone in the darkness, there was finally a ray of light? Normally, Xavier would just shoot me down. But this was different. Something was changing between us. Something that gave me hope.

But when I looked up at Xavier, he was looking past me. I didn’t have to follow his gaze to know what he was looking at. To know he was watching Cali—or Cali’s body—through the doorway.

Normally, this kind of thing would piss me off. It’d infuriate me that he couldn’t keep his attention on me for longer than a minute at a time. But instead feeling of angry or frustrated, I clung to that sliver of hope I’d discovered.

I took a calming breath and turned to see Lucian feeding grapes to Cali inside the room. It looked like the two of them had been taken out of some historical Roman painting. Well, if the goddess in question was wearing a bandage dress that was too revealing even for my tastes.

Artemis stood nearby, her arms crossed. If looks could kill, Lucian would be dead a thousand times over by now.

This whole thing had to be driving Xavier crazy. He and Greyson both had to want to literally murder Lucian for what he’d done. It was a testament to Xavier’s character that he hadn’t let his rage win out when he still had so much to lose.

I cautiously took his hand. “Be patient. We’ll find a way to fix this—and then you can do what needs to be done.”

And another pack war would undoubtedly be on the horizon.

He let my hand linger for a moment, our fingers entwined, and my wolf stirred again, more intensely this time. Lust bubbled low in my belly, and I wanted nothing more than to grab Xavier by the arm and drag him into the closest room or closet and show him exactly how much he meant to me.

I pulled in another breath. I had to restrain myself. He asked me to put these feelings on hold. The least I could do was try.

A horn blew, echoing through the room and out into the hallway, and Xavier released my hand. We moved just inside the doorway so we could see what was happening.

Lucian rose to his feet. “Settle down, please, everyone. Settle down. I have a special announcement.”

“Lucian thinks everything he says is special,” Xavier grumbled to me. I fought the urge to smile.

After the guests had quieted down, Lucian gestured to an attendant, who presented Lucian with an ornate velvet box.

“We have all been blessed to see our beloved goddess, Seluna, return in the flesh, but nobody is as delighted as I am,” he said.

“He really is full of himself, isn’t he?” I murmured back.

Xavier snorted.

Lucian gestured to the attendant, who opened the box. I couldn’t quite tell what Lucian pulled out—it was small enough to fit in his hand.

Then he turned to face Cali and dropped onto one knee.

*Oh god.*

“Seluna, my moon goddess,” Lucian said, “will you marry me?”

# Episode 2625

**Greyson**

I took in Big Mac’s grim expression with a sense of horror. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. “What do you mean it would kill Cali?”

I’d known it wouldn’t be easy to free Cali from Seluna’s possession, for lack of a better word. But never had I imagined that the cure could be worse than the sickness. That itching urgency just beneath the surface of my skin returned. My mate was in mortal danger, and I was here, on the fucking front porch, miles away from being useful in any way.

*Where the hell is Kira with that stupid thing Big Mac needed? I need to get back to the palace. I need to save Cali.*

Big Mac stared. “I thought the statement was pretty clear.”

I shook my head. “You thought wrong. Now explain what the hell you mean. Are you saying that even if we manage to free Cali from Seluna, she could still die? Is that something you’ve seen in these case studies, or whatever? Is that what happens?”

She put a hand on my shoulder, and I had to physically restrain myself from slapping it off. I wanted answers, dammit, not comfort. There was no possible way to comfort me as long as my mate was in danger. Comfort wasn’t on the table. It wasn’t even in the same zip code.

“I’m not saying another thing until you take a breath.”

I glared at her, but she refused to be intimidated.

“I get that you’re scared and worried about Cali, but you’re going to be useless to me and Cali both if you don’t get a grip on yourself. So take. A. Breath.”

I continued glaring at her as I pulled in a very deep, very loud, and very petulant breath in through my nose and held it for a beat before blowing it out. Her hair ruffled with the intensity of it.

“Another.”

This witch. Right now I didn’t care that she was my mother’s fiancée. She was wasting my time talking about breathing when she should have been telling me about Cali.

Still, I’d known Big Mac long enough to understand that she wasn’t going to ease up. In a battle of wills, I wasn’t going to walk away the victor. It’d be easier—and faster—if I just did as she asked.

“Great,” she said flatly when I pushed out the second breath. “Now one more.”

My molars creaked as I pulled in another gulp of air, held it, and released it.

It did help, actually. My heartbeat had slowed, and my mind was no longer spinning into overdrive.

I pushed out the last breath with a sigh. “Please.”

“And there’s the magic word.” She didn’t gloat about her victory. If anything, she looked deadly serious. “It’s simple. If you put too much pressure on the body to try to get the imposter out, you risk damaging the body you’re trying to save. And there’s always the chance that the imposter could win out by refusing to relinquish control.”

Panic poured into my gut, and I instinctively pulled in another breath. “And then… what? Cali’s gone, and Seluna just gets to inhabit her body for the rest of her life?”

“I told you there were risks, didn’t I? The longer the imposter gets to leech in Cali’s body as the host, the more time it has to create a strong latching bond to it. I don’t know if she’s truly a goddess, or if there’s something else going on here, but the basic theory of breaking a magical possession is all the same, and it’s a goddamn tricky thing to pull off while leaving the host body intact. It’s because it’s supernatural; it’s like a snail getting a new home.”

My brow rose. “Did you really just compare Cali’s body to a snail shell?”

She held her hands up. “Look, all I’m saying is it’s good you found me, and we’ll figure this out, okay? I know she means a lot to you. I’ll do whatever I can.”

“Thank you,” I said after a beat. The odds were absolute shit, apparently, but I was glad to have her on our side. “And if you feel you need payment—”

“Don’t worry about it. This one’s on me.”

“Really?” This had to be one of the biggest magical asks we’d made thus far, and she didn’t want payment?

“Really. After all, you’ll be family soon.”

Before I could linger on that thought for too long, Kira came out, carrying a satchel of something that made my nose itch.

“I hope this is potent enough to do what you need it to do,” she said, passing the satchel over to Big Mac.

“It’s potent enough.” I could tell by the smell alone. “Thanks, Kira. Now, let’s go.”

Big Mac gripped the satchel in one hand and her bag in the other, and within seconds we were transported to the Vanguard palace.

For a moment, I teetered in place, disoriented and vaguely nauseous. Then my gaze settled on the white stone steps leading up to the palace entrance, and I knew exactly where we were. I glanced back toward the smashed gate, and I couldn’t help but smile. I hoped it would serve as a reminder to them of what would happen if they messed with the Redwood pack again.

Actually, scratch that. I wasn’t done driving that lesson home. Once Cali was safe—and she would be, because any other scenario just wasn’t fucking acceptable—the Vanguards would get what was coming to them. I’d personally make sure of it.

Big Mac let out a low whistle as she looked up at the palace. “Is this for real? Why would anyone want to live here?”

“It’s all Lucian.” I strode toward the entrance, and when a guard stepped out to stop me, I grabbed him by the nape of the neck and threw him face-first into the nearest rosebush.

Big Mac and I hurried inside, and I looked around. I didn’t know where Cali would be in this vast, maze-like place.

A group of attendants were setting up decorations nearby. One of them turned when they saw us.

“Are you here for the celebration?”

What celebration? I’d warned Lucian there wouldn’t be any. Xavier had stayed—why was he allowing this farce to go on? I ignored the attendant’s question and smelled for my brother’s scent.

“Where’s my brother?” I asked.

“They’re in the banquet room,” the attendant said.

*Well that sounds like a problem.* I scoffed. How many issues was Lucian planning to throw at us? I paused to listen. I could hear some kind of commotion coming from down the nearest hallway.

“This way,” I said to Big Mac, leading her toward the source, which turned out to be a large banquet room where guests were cheering and popping champagne.

It was a celebration indeed, and for a moment all I could see was red.

I was scanning the room for Cali when Xavier and Artemis rushed up to me.

“We have to get Cali out of here,” Artemis hissed.

“Obviously, but why the urgency?” I asked. “What happened?”

Xavier growled. “The moon boy just proposed to Cali—and she accepted.”

The bottom of my stomach dropped out.

Big Mac scoffed. “Why would Cali do that?”

“I assume because it wasn’t *actually* Cali,” I said.

Artemis nodded. “Yeah, Seluna did. Cali would never agree to that.”

“She’s still in there,” Xavier said. “She mind linked with me. I heard her voice. I’ve been trying like hell to connect with her again.”

“Is that a good sign?” I asked Big Mac. It had to be, right? It was proof that Cali was still in there.

“It gives us something to work with,” she said, “but I can’t very well perform my magic here. It’s going to take some time, and I doubt Lucian will be overjoyed to let me try and expel Seluna.”

That was a problem I could at least try to solve on my own. I marched up to Lucian, glancing at Cali as I approached. She didn’t even seem to notice I was there. I pinned Lucian with my gaze. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

He held out a bottle of champagne. “Care to celebrate with us?”

I slapped it out of his hand, and it crashed to the floor, shattering on impact and spilling bubbly everywhere. The party immediately died down, and all heads turned in our direction.

Lucian wrinkled his nose. “That is a terrible waste of champagne. If you prefer something less sparkly, all you have to do is ask.”

“You’re not going to marry Cali,” I snapped. “And if you continue to try—”

“Now don’t be so serious,” Lucian cut me off. “You’re welcome to leave the party, Greyson. I don’t care that you’re the Alpha of the Redwood pack. You will not stand between me and my destiny.”

Xavier appeared next to us, grabbing my shoulder and pulling me away. “If we start a fight here, it could jeopardize our chances of getting Cali out. We’re also seriously outnumbered. We need to focus.”

Like it was that easy with Lucian six feet away, undressing our mate with his eyes and celebrating a union that Cali sure as shit had never agreed to.

“Greyson,” Xavier said.

I pulled in yet another breath and turned back to him. “How are we going to get Cali away so that Big Mac can do something? Surely we’ll meet some resistance if we do it out in the open, and I don’t know how much space or time Big Mac needs. How the hell are we going to pull this off?”

Xavier seemed to consider this for a moment before meeting my gaze. “I think we need to kidnap our own mate.”

# Episode 2626

I couldn’t take my eyes off the ring on my finger. It was, in a word, hideous. The band was rose gold, and the diamond in the center was surrounded by moonstones. The diamond was so big it was hard for me to lift my hand. An actual Ring Pop would be less obtrusive than the one Lucian had just used to propose to Seluna.

I hoped she was listening to my thoughts right now.

*This is, hands down, the tackiest ring I’ve ever seen. You may be a goddess, but you have absolutely no taste.*

Seluna laughed. *Is that jealousy I hear?*

I scoffed. *What could I possibly be jealous of you about? You’re the one who’s hitching a ride in my body, the one who’s dressed up like some skanky bride to be. I mean, come on. You just accepted a wedding proposal from* Lucian*. The prince wrapped up in narcissistic wrapped up in delusional. What do you have that I could ever possibly want?*

*You’ve been unable to choose between your two mates for how long? And I’ve been here for less than a day, and I’m already engaged to a prince!*

The words struck me, but not quite the way she’d intended. I couldn’t care less about her choosing to be with Lucian, save for my preference that she find another body to be with him in. I’d rather be torn between my two mates for the rest of my life than spend even a single minute married to the Vanguard prince.

But she was right about one thing: She was engaged, which meant *I* was engaged. Against my will.

The thought killed any petty humor I felt. I’d always assumed I would be engaged to Xavier or Greyson at some point. But to Lucian? Was this some kind of cosmic joke? Was Seluna pranking me?

*This is no joke, Caliana*, Seluna assured me. She forced my head down so my eyes landed on the ring.

I tried not to look, if only to defy her, but then I saw the complete devastation on Greyson and Xavier’s faces. I would have rather looked at the ring than see all the hurt Seluna and Lucian were causing.

I wanted to mind link to both of them, to tell them this wasn’t my doing. That I had never consented to this. That I would never marry Lucian in a million years.

I had to believe that they knew that, even if the engagement was tough for them to swallow. Xavier, at least, knew I was still me, even if the Cali he loved was hidden behind a tacky goddess like Seluna.

We’d connected, and I had to believe that we would connect again.

But in the meantime, how the hell was I going to get out of this? It was comforting to see my mates and sister here—and Big Mac as well. I knew they were going to try everything in their power to free me from Seluna and Lucian. But what could they actually do? And could it be accomplished in time to keep me from marrying Lucian?

*And if I am forced to marry him, will I be able to get a divorce?* I’d heard stories of how difficult it was for royals to sever their marriages—and I could only imagine how much more complicated it would be when the whole moon goddess/werewolf thing was taken into account.

Another thought crossed my mind, leaving horror in its wake. Would a marriage to Lucian be like creating a mate bond with him?

Before I could linger on that terrifying thought for too long, the rim of a champagne glass pressed against my lips. Seluna was making me drink it. I tried to resist, to get my lips to seal shut, but soon the cold, bubbly liquid was tickling my tongue.

It wasn’t terrible, actually. Which, now that I thought about it, was kind of weird. I usually didn’t like champagne.

I suddenly became aware of the fingers of my free hand dragging against the fabric of my dress. Or, at least, what little fabric there was. I felt a slight simmer of pleasure, of contentment. With a gorgeous ring on my finger and delicious champagne slipping down my throat. With this beautiful dress that made me feel like the goddess I truly was—

*No… That’s not quite right.*

Seluna laughed at something Lucian said, a real laugh that originated low in my belly and came with a smile that stretched across my face. I felt… happy.

*No! Look at Greyson. Look at Xavier—they don’t look happy at all.*

I couldn’t tear my eyes away from Lucian, and the happy, bubbly feeling inside me didn’t dampen. Why was I feeling like this? I should be fighting to regain my body and mind. Like I’d been nonstop, ever since Seluna forced her way into my body.

She’d been happy and victorious and a number of other bright and hopeful things, and I’d still been terrified, desperate, and furious.

So, what had changed?

Why had I stopped fighting?

I knew I had to keep on, but somehow I couldn’t even bring myself to try. I had been fighting for so long, and this moment, here with my fiancé, felt so nice. There was a pleasant feeling that accompanied being in the spotlight. Everyone was celebrating this engagement. Celebrating *me*.

I tried to shake off the clouds wrapping around me. *But it’s not me! It’s Seluna! And* Lucian*!*

They had to know what they were doing. That it wasn’t right. That they’d essentially kidnapped me. That Seluna was using my body. In a way, Lucian was too.

A thrill of fear shuddered through me—just me, the real me. I couldn’t help the sense of relief that accompanied it. If I could still think of this unspeakable thing they were doing to me, if I could still view it as a violation, then I was still me.

*Just relax, Caliana*, Seluna’s voice slipped through my mind, soft and gentle. Almost soothing. *It won’t be long now before your thoughts drift away. It won’t hurt. You won’t even know when it happens. And nobody will miss you.*

I suddenly felt dizzy, almost light-headed. The champagne must be getting to me, but I couldn’t let myself get drunk. Not now, when I had never needed my mental faculties more. They were the only way I could do whatever I needed to do to help Xavier and Greyson get me out of this.

I glanced over at Greyson, who was speaking with Big Mac, Artemis, and Xavier. They were almost on the other side of the room, and I couldn’t hear them over the din of the party.

They all knew the truth. They were all here because of me, and they would definitely miss me when I was gone. So I’d keep fighting. Even if it was futile. I’d fight Seluna every step of the way so I could be reunited with all of the people who meant so much to me.

Seluna sighed. *I’m disappointed in you. You should be enjoying this special day.*

*How can you enjoy this? You’re possessing a kidnapped body, and you’re celebrating your engagement to a blowhard prince. Not one moment of today has been worthy of a celebration.*

Seluna was quiet, so I added, *Plus, I have no desire to marry Lucian. Me, some commoner half-Fae. So why would a goddess like you choose someone like Lucian to be your happily ever after? Are you really going to become his Luna? Wouldn’t that be a pretty big step down from being a moon goddess? Is that why you’ve stolen my body? Because I don’t think you thought this through. You act like you love attention, you love praise and worship. Well guess who’s the new face of your moon religion? Me. Not you.*

A tense silence settled between us, and for a moment I thought maybe she was going to continue ignoring me, or, worse, wrap that fiery grip around my heart again.

*You’re beginning to bore me*, she finally said. *Why so many questions, Caliana? Can’t you just enjoy this adulation? They’re celebrating you.*

*No, they’re celebrating Seluna the moon goddess. Not me. We’re not the same. We will never be the same.*

I must have finally pushed her too far because that fiery grip clamped down on my heart, and spots appeared in my vision. I wheezed and thrashed in her grip, all the while not a single ounce of agony showed on my face.

*It’s none of your business why a goddess chooses what she chooses*, Seluna said, releasing her grip on my heart. *Allow me to remind you that while we share the same body, I’m in charge.* *And it will remain that way until you don’t matter. I suggest you use that time wisely—enjoy the moment while you’re still capable of doing so.*

*What are you suggesting? That I’m disposable?*

*I thought I made that clear. You’re only temporary.*

A wave of despair washed over me. Seluna had threatened me before, but there was a finality to her words now. They didn’t even feel like a threat anymore. They were a promise.

Greyson and Xavier returned then, and Greyson stepped forward, glancing at Lucian briefly before turning to me. “Seluna, I’d like a moment to speak with you. Will you talk with us alone?”

# Episode 2627

*Wait. They want to talk to Seluna? Why don’t they want to talk to me?*

My despair turned to panic. *Greyson! Xaiver! I’m here! Right in front of you!*

Of course, Seluna didn’t allow a single syllable of my own words past my lips. Instead, I heard my own voice answer, “Yes, I would love to talk with you both.”

*What the hell are you doing?* I demanded. *Why do you want to talk to them?*

*I’m interested in learning more about not just the body, but also the mind I’m inhabiting*, she answered. *I find it endlessly fascinating that two powerful Alpha males have bonded with a simpleton like you. There must be more to the story, and I’m determined to find out.*

I bristled. *Simpleton?! My mates have bonded with me because they love me, and for your information, I’m not half as simple and helpless as you would like to believe! I’ve fought against skilled hunters, werewolves, vampires, revenants, and evil spirits. I’ve traveled through the Fae world. I’ve fought before, and I’ll fight you.*

*Oh, I don’t think it will come to that.* Her voice was mild. *Your body and mind aren’t strong enough to survive that battle for long. Maybe if you were a full-blooded Fae, things would be different, but you’re not. However, I needed a* due destini*, and beggars can’t be choosers. I will work with what I have, for as long as I have it.*

Again, that sense of dread pressed down on me. It was bad enough that Seluna seemed to think I’d just fade away one day, but the way she talked about my body like it was disposable, a temporary means to an end. It never failed to chill me to the bone.

And the way my consciousness had briefly and temporarily blended with hers, when I’d felt her happiness and thought it was my own, didn’t seem to help. I hadn’t even realized it was happening at first. One moment we were two people in the same body, and in the next moment everything just… blurred.

What if she was right? What if I was going to fade away?

Greyson and Xavier each took one of my hands and started to lead me away when Lucian pulled me back with a firm grip on my arm.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asked. “I didn’t give you permission to talk to my fiancée.”

I wanted to smack him—repeatedly. Until I drew blood.

And then I spun on my heel, and Seluna hissed, “I do not need your permission. I’m a goddess! Don’t you ever forget it!”

Shock rolled through me—and Lucian.

“I’m so sorry, Your Highness.” He bowed low. “Of course you will do whatever you see fit!”

If I had control over my face, I would have been smiling. I’d never seen Lucian squirm before, but I sure liked it.

*Please, please, please do that more often*, I told Seluna.

Xavier and Greyson led me out of the banquet room and into the hallway where Big Mac and Artemis were waiting for them.

No, wait. Not for them. For me.

A sense of unease slithered down my spine, which wasn’t all that unusual in Big Mac’s presence. She had a way of dominating the space, of making everyone around her uneasy. On edge. It was still a mystery to me how Mrs. Smith had managed to charm her way through the witch’s hard outer shell.

But then I remembered—I *wanted* to see Big Mac. And Artemis was here too, along with my mates. I had nothing to fear from these people. If Big Mac had bothered to show her face at the Vanguard palace, it was because she was here to help me. So why did I feel this way?

And then it hit me.

*I’m not feeling uneasy. Seluna is.*

My horror at the fact that I’d confused Seluna’s feelings for my own again was trumped by a sick sense of triumph. If Seluna, the allegedly all-powerful moon goddess, was afraid of Big Mac, then that had to mean Big Mac could help me, right?

*What’s the matter?* I taunted. *Don’t you like witches?*

*They can’t be trusted. I’ve never met a witch who wasn’t always acting on her own agenda.*

That was a pretty fair summation, and accurate, from what I’d observed in the time I’d known Big Mac. But she’d also helped us—saved us—more times than I could count. I had to believe she was here to save the day once more.

*That’s true. They’re not easy to trust*, I conceded. *And they do like to serve themselves when they can. But sometimes you have to trust them. Big Mac is someone I can trust.*

*I will never trust a witch*, Seluna said. *And don’t think for even a second that I don’t know why she’s here. Don’t bother getting your hopes up. Whatever she has planned, it’s not going to do any good.*

For once, I didn’t feel like taking Seluna’s words at face value. Big Mac was pretty much my only hope right now, and I wasn’t about to toss that to the side just because it would make things easier for Seluna.

*Why not?* I asked. *She’s powerful and knowledgeable. She’s dealt with stronger and meaner enemies than you. I think you have plenty of reasons to be wary.*

Seluna scoffed. *Oh, please. If your witch threatens me, I can always use you as a shield.*

That threat was truly chilling, but it begged the question: did an immortal become mortal when they possessed a mortal’s body?

*Seluna, what will happen to you if I die?*

Before she could answer, Xavier turned to Big Mac. “Do whatever you have to do. I doubt we have much more time.”

Apprehension and anxiety twisted in my belly. Seluna was getting nervous. Good. It was nothing less than she deserved.

*See how she likes being thrust into a situation she can’t control.*

“What is this all about?” she asked.

Big Mac held up her hand and blew across her palm. A cloud of sparkling dust exploded across my face, and I sneezed.

*What the hell?*

In an instant, Lucian appeared with a couple of his guards. The fact that they’d arrived so quickly told me he was watching the whole time, probably waiting just inside the banquet hall for something like this to happen.

“What are you doing to my beloved?!” he demanded.

I groaned. *I really wish he’d stop calling me that. I’m not his anything!*

But more importantly, why did Big Mac blow that dust across my face? Was it a spell? Or a test? What did it do? Did it tell her anything about my situation?

“Take it easy,” Greyson said. “We’re just talking to Seluna.”

Seluna wiped my face with a sniff. “I think I’m finished talking now.” She hooked my arm around Lucian’s. “We should rejoin our party.”

I tried to stop her. I really did. I threw every ounce of power I possessed into dragging my feet, into trying to turn my body back toward my mates and my sister. I screamed and fought and did everything I could to keep Seluna and Lucian from taking me away from my mates again.

But of course, it was useless. Seluna was in complete control. And I was exhausted—in every possible way.

How could I keep doing this?

I felt detached and defeated, watching from afar as Seluna downed more champagne and started toward the party.

Xavier suddenly appeared in front of Lucian and me. “We’re not done here.”

“You heard Seluna,” Lucian said. “And if you have any objections to her wishes, I believe you should think carefully before acting on them.” He nodded toward the guards stationed around the room. “Do you really want to ruin the party? Face it, you’re outnumbered and in my territory. An attack on my beloved, on my *future* would be considered an act of war, and it would be dealt with swiftly and brutally. But I do like to think you’re not quite that reckless.” He smiled stiffly. “You can talk to Seluna when and if she allows it.”

Xavier balled his fists, and I knew from the fiery look in his eyes that he wasn’t just going to stand there and take this. But I also knew that Lucian wasn’t bluffing. If my mates pushed things any further, there would be no going back. And as much as I wanted to be free of Seluna, as much as I’d promised to fight, I knew that seeing my mates and sister be ripped apart by the Vanguard pack was something I’d never recover from.

If I lost them, then I’d *want* to fade.

*Xavier, don’t…*

Greyson pulled him back. “Maybe some other time.”

I wanted to kiss him, to let him know how much I appreciated everything he was doing. But of course, I couldn’t. Lucian dragged me back toward the party. Then he stopped suddenly when we were a ways away from my mates. “I apologize for the interruption, my love. Not every pack is as civil as the Vanguard.”

Suddenly, he leaned in and kissed me. Confusion flashed in my mind, and I instinctively tried to recoil. Then I realized I was actually leaning into the kiss, actively participating and… enjoying it?

*What the fuck?! This must be Seluna. Ugh.*

I knew from the ring that Seluna had no taste, and Lucian’s kiss just proved that.

*I haven’t experienced these desires in a while*, Seluna said, almost offering it as an excuse.

*Desires?* Now I felt uneasy.

But as much as I objected, there was some part of me, a part that blurred with Seluna, that found the kiss to be kind of… nice. And there was a lovely aroma too. Perhaps Lucian’s aftershave?

He broke the kiss. “I don’t want to kiss these squeaky lips. I want your lips, Seluna, but Caliana will have to do. She’s not all that unappealing, really.”

I didn’t know whether to be offended or relieved that he felt that way about me.

Then he lowered his voice, heat in his eyes. “And tonight, once all our guests have gone, we will consummate our love.”

# Episode 2628

**Xavier**

The longer I was away from Cali, the more anxious I felt. I hadn’t thought that this day could get any worse, and now here we were, yet again, butting up against the psychotic princeling who just couldn’t keep his hands off my mate. I glanced over to Greyson, looking for somewhere, anywhere, to vent my frustration. “I can’t *believe* you just let Lucian take Cali away.” *He’s supposed to be the Alpha, and here he is letting Lucian run over him without even putting up a fight. Pitiful.*

Greyson gave me a hard look. “I didn’t just *let* him take her! I don’t know if you’ve been paying attention, but I didn’t have much of a choice. We can’t take on Lucian right now, no matter how much we want to—we’re vastly outnumbered. If we rush in and try to fight Lucian, his guards will cut us down in seconds. It would be suicide, and then where would Cali be? Who would protect her, then?”

I clenched my jaw and balled my fists, itching to argue with him some more, but there was no use. He was right. Too bad that didn’t make me feel any better. I wanted all this Vanguard shit to be over so that Cali and I could get back to what was important: strengthening our pack and building our lives together.

“The longer we allow Seluna to inhabit Cali’s body, the worse it will be for Cali—which means we may only have one chance to get Cali back, and so we have to make sure we succeed. We have absolutely no room for error,” Greyson added as he kept his eyes on where Lucian and Cali stood stalking around the banquet hall.

“All right, all right, I got it. You made your point. I still feel so shitty that she’s so tangled up with this creep. It’s driving me crazy.”

“You don’t think I feel the exact same way? But we have to be smart about this,” Greyson said.

I nodded and took a deep breath, trying to calm down and think clearly about how to fix this, fast. “You think we should send for the rest of the Redwood pack to help even the odds?”

Greyson considered it for a moment before shaking his head. “No, that’ll take more time than we have to lose, and it would still put Cali in harm’s way. We can’t have her in the middle of an all-out brawl right now.”

“Shit! You’re right. Damned if we do, damned if we don’t.” I turned to Big Mac. “Can’t you do anything? What was all that dust for? You trying to defeat him with an allergy attack or something?”

“Very funny. No, seriously, I think I almost laughed.” She was stone-faced. “No, it was a way to verify whether or not Cali was under a spell—and it appears that she isn’t. She’s full-on possessed.”

“By what?” I asked. I didn’t think we were dealing with demons here—though when it came to the Vanguards, there was no telling.

“Lucian and the Vanguards keep referring to Seluna as a goddess… So she must be the culprit. Is that possible?” Greyson asked. “Could Cali really be possessed by a goddess? I didn’t think gods and goddesses were in the business of body snatching.”

Big Mac shrugged. “I couldn’t determine what exactly has taken hold of Cali, but if you brought me along hoping for a blast of magic or a simple spell to fix things, I’m sorry to say that’s not going to happen.”

“Then what will?” I yelled. I was at the end of my rope. I couldn’t stop glancing over at Lucian and Cali. She was so close but still so far out of my grasp, which was more maddening than anything. I wished that she would just snap out of it and come bounding over to us that very second, good as new. “I’m tired of hearing about what won’t work! There has to be some way for us to fight this. I can’t accept that the Vanguards have us beat and we just have to roll over and let whatever this is happen. Stop with the excuses, and focus on what will free Cali of Seluna’s influence!”

Big Mac’s eyes flashed. “If I could just do that, Xavier, don’t you think that I would’ve already? You really are impossible, and ungrateful to boot.” Big Mac slapped her hands together as if ridding herself of the entire situation. “You know what? I want to help Cali out of this as much as anyone, but since what I offer isn’t enough, why don’t I just leave? You’re so smart—I’m sure you can come up with what to do next!”

“Yes, maybe you *should* leave! It’s not like you did anything anyway!” I snapped back.

“Cool it, you two. This isn’t helping,” Greyson said. “This isn’t the time to start arguing amongst ourselves.”

“Don’t tell me what to do!” I shot back at Greyson. That sounded childish even to my own ears, but there was literally nothing I hated more than when Greyson tried to tell me what to do, especially when it came to Cali. I looked back toward the banquet hall. Part of me wanted to just say fuck it and storm the doors and get Cali out of there, but if what Big Mac had said was true, I’d only be bringing Seluna along with us. *Who knows how that asshole goddess would react to that? It might put Cali at even greater risk.*

Greyson looked as pensive as I felt as he watched Lucian and Cali. “Do you think there’s anything to be gained by just pulling Lucian aside and talking to him?” he asked. “He has to know that if Seluna harms Cali in any way, the Redwoods will hold him accountable.”

“That’s a very sensible idea, but I doubt the princeling will listen to reason. He’s too busy drooling over his precious moon goddess.” I tensed as my wolf stirred within me. *Ava’s coming. Shit. I’m not in the mood or headspace to deal with her right now—hadn’t I told her that already?*

“Couldn’t help but hear some of that shouting. Sounds like you need all the help you can get. Is there anything I can do?” Ava asked.

“You’ve been talking to Aysel, right? Did you learn anything that we might be able to use?” Greyson asked her, not taking his eyes off Lucian and Cali for a second.

Ava shook her head. “Aysel’s being a little vague about exactly what’s happening to Cali, but I think I can get more info if I stick around.”

“We don’t have time to play games with Aysel,” I said. I was working overtime to control my wolf, which was in a frenzy now that Ava was so close. Despite how preoccupied I was with getting Cali back, my wolf still had only one thing on its mind.

Ava glanced toward the banquet hall just as Lucian, who was standing with his hands on Cali’s shoulders, looked over at us. “You’re exactly right,” Ava said. Then she reared back and slapped me hard across the face.

“Ow!” I said, rubbing my cheek. It hadn’t hurt—that bad—but it had certainly caught me off-guard. “What the hell, Ava?”

Ava smiled, winked, and stomped off into the banquet hall.

“You okay there?” Big Mac asked, a smirk on her lips as she stared at me. She looked like she wished she’d gotten the opportunity to nail me instead of Ava.

“Yeah, that looked like it hurt,” Greyson said. “What did you say to her?”

“Nothing,” I said quietly. “I’m pretty sure she did that on purpose to make the Vanguards think that she’s not loyal to us. But if that wasn’t the reason, she has some explaining to do.”

We watched as Ava said something to Lucian before walking off.

“I’m tired of this,” I said, shifting my jaw around to make sure Ava hadn’t knocked it out of alignment. “I’m not going to just stand around here a second longer.” I made a beeline toward Cali and Lucian.

“Wait,” Greyson called after me. “Hold on, Xavier, don’t do anything rash!”

I ignored him. I was tired of holding on, and I was over playing it safe. I needed Cali to know that we weren’t giving up on her. I knew with every fiber of my being that she was still in there somewhere, clawing to knock Seluna aside and take back control of her body. Seluna might have been hiding Cali away at the moment, but Cali was strong and defiant, and there was no way Seluna was going to get rid of her.

Cali stared at me with a strange look in her eyes as I approached. There was no doubt she’d seen Ava slap me, and she was probably trying to make sense of it.

“Seems like you met your match, Xavier,” Lucian said with a satisfied smile.

I didn’t even glance his way or dignify him with an answer. “Cali, are you okay?”

Cali just stared at me. It took everything in me not to grab her, throw her over my shoulder, and make a break for it.

*Xavier, I’m still here.*

Cali’s unexpected mind link startled me, but hearing the sound of her voice and knowing that she was still fighting was just the reassurance I’d been looking for. *We’re going to get you out of here!* I mind linked back, hoping that she could hear the determination in my voice.

*I know that you’re trying, but it’s not going to be safe. You have to get out. Lucian’s not going to allow you to stay here much longer*, Cali replied.

*No, there’s no way I’m leaving you, Cali. He’ll have to kill me first.*

*No, Xavier. You’re not listening to me. You have to get out now!*

# Episode 2629

I knew that telling Xavier to leave me at the Vanguard palace wasn’t at all what he wanted to hear, and I didn’t *want* my mates to abandon me, but they had to get out of the Vanguard palace as fast as they could before things spiraled out of control.

Lucian was in rare form, and I had a gut feeling that their luck was about to run out. The princeling wasn’t going to take any chances—not after his stunning revelation about wanting to consummate our love tonight. He wasn’t going to let anything get in the way of him making love to his precious Seluna, even if it wasn’t Seluna’s body he was using in the end. I winced at the thought of it, feeling slightly sick to my stomach. There was nothing I wanted less than to be with Lucian in that way, but I wasn’t at all sure how I was going to avoid it without putting myself, and my mates, in danger.

Strangely enough, as soon as Lucian had mentioned his plans for the night, I’d felt something shift inside of me. It was as if Seluna had been just as surprised by Lucian’s statement as I was. A gap had formed within me—a crack in Seluna’s hold over my body. It felt eerily the same as when I’d been able to mind link with Xavier before. As far as I could tell, nothing in particular had been said to trigger the separation, and I couldn’t even explain it. It was just a feeling, and I’d seized it before Seluna could stop me. I’d used the momentary sensation of freewill to mind link with Xavier and let him know that I was still there and to warn him that he and Greyson were in danger if they didn’t leave.

I could tell that Xavier was trying to mind link a reply, but I already sensed the creep of Seluna taking control again. The gap of freedom was narrowing. I could feel her presence like tendrils in the back of my mind, sealing up all the cracks where my own thoughts were able to have some measure of control.

I concentrated as hard as I could and tried again to speak to Xavier, but I failed. Seconds later, Seluna spoke for me. “You heard me, Xavier. You should go.”

Xavier narrowed his gaze and hesitated, looking deep into my eyes as if trying to find a shred of the real me lingering there. I wished that I could reassure him, but Seluna was in control again, and the gap was completely gone, now.

Greyson came running over with Big Mac and Artemis close behind. “Cali! Are you there? Can you hear us? Fight her off, break free if you can.” He skidded to a stop right in front of us, and Lucian wedged himself between us.

The prince heaved a loud sigh. “This won’t do. It’s obvious that my goddess is distracted by the presence of Caliana’s mates.” He turned to face Xavier and Greyson head-on with a bored expression. “I’m afraid that my gracious hospitality has come to an end.” He raised his hand, and an attendant came rushing over. “The Redwoods are no longer welcome here. See to it that they are escorted out immediately. Unharmed for now, but if they resist… well…” he let the unfinished statement hang in the air.

I braced myself. I’d warned Xavier that this would happen, and that was the best that I could do. I saw guards moving in out of the corner of my eye, their weapons at the ready. There was a look in Lucian’s eyes that I hadn’t seen before: an intense, savage triumph that seemed dangerous and more unpredictable than usual. I knew that now was not the time to get in his way. If Xavier and Greyson put up any resistance, they might be captured—or worse.

I made another desperate attempt to mind link with Xavier and Greyson to urge them to leave peacefully just as the guards flanked them, but the words died in my mind before they could reach Xavier. I cursed to myself, feeling hopeless. *What are they going to do?*

A tense moment passed, and then Greyson finally put his hand on Xavier’s shoulder. “Let’s go,” he said, tugging Xavier toward the door.

*Thank god.* I was both relieved and worried. I was happy that they weren’t going to risk their safety by putting up a fight, but I was afraid of what was going to happen to me once they were gone. Xavier and Greyson took a long look at me before allowing themselves to be escorted out with Big Mac and Artemis in tow, and despair rose within me like a tidal wave as I watched them go.

I didn’t understand. Why had Seluna allowed me the ability to mind link with Xavier again? Shouldn’t she have kept me locked up and silent so that I wouldn’t be able to communicate with them?

Seluna chuckled. *Because, Caliana, you did exactly what I wanted. You got rid of your mates. They were a nuisance, and now they’re not. It all worked out perfectly. Thank you for your help.*

Anger washed through me, and I wished, above all, that I could somehow turn my magic inward and blast Seluna to bits. *The last thing I want is to help you!* I spat.

*Oh, Caliana, how many times must I tell you that this isn’t about what you want?* Seluna chuckled again.

“So glad that Caliana’s mates decided to be reasonable—for once,” Lucian said breezily. “If they’d put up a fight, I would’ve had them locked up and thrown away the key.” He gazed into my eyes. “And now that they’re finally gone, we can have the rest of the night to ourselves.” He held out his hand. “Shall we continue our conversation in private, my goddess?”

I watched, repulsed, as Seluna accepted Lucian’s hand and followed him out of the banquet hall. I struggled and fought and tried to channel every bit of brain power I had to regain control so that I could rip my hand out of Lucian’s grasp, but it was no use. Seluna had too tight a hold on my body, and there was nothing I could do but sit back and watch. In one last-ditch effort, I tried to conjure up my magic so that I could blast Lucian, but again, nothing happened.

As we ascended the grand staircase, Lucian called out to one of his attendants. “We do not wish to be disturbed.”

“Yes, my lord,” the servant said before scrambling off into the shadows.

*How am I going to get out of this?* I was uneasy for sure, but surprisingly, I could sense a calmness building deep within me. I didn’t know exactly where the feeling was coming from, but somehow, I knew that everything was going to be okay and that I would find a way out of this. I just had no idea how.

We reached the second floor, and Seluna suddenly stopped Lucian as we made our way down one of the impossibly long hallways.

Lucian brought Seluna’s hand up to his lips and kissed it. “What is your wish, my goddess?” he said with a flourish.

The warmth I’d felt the last time he kissed Seluna was no longer present, and a feeling of revulsion had taken its place. *Is that coming from me or Seluna?* I couldn’t tell—none of it was making any sense to me, especially with how entwined I was with Seluna. *Isn’t this what you’ve been working toward, Seluna? Isn’t Lucian part of your big love story? The goddess returns to earth to be reunited with the love of her life?*

Seluna laughed. *Don’t tell me you really believe that, Caliana.*

I was confused. *I thought that was why you decided to hijack my body in the first place. You know… So you could be with your mortal love?*

*I want Lucian, that much is true*, Seluna said. *I love being the object of his desire, but some things take time to develop.*

“Dear Lucian,” Seluna said, her voice sugary sweet, “I wanted to tell you how pleased I am with how well you’ve followed my commands, and I wish to reward you for your fierce loyalty.”

Lucian smiled wolfishly as he opened the door to his bedroom, his eyes shining with expectation and desire. It was enough to make my stomach turn.

Despite how much I was dreading whatever Lucian had planned, I found that I was no longer anxious, even as I took in the sight of Lucian’s huge bed in the center of the room.

“Step back,” Seluna said to Lucian. “I want to admire you.”

Lucian bowed and then did as he was asked. He held out his arms and puffed out his chest, presenting himself fully for Seluna’s inspection. “Do you approve, my goddess?” he asked, his expression confident and calm.

“I do, Lucian, more than you will ever know,” Seluna said sweetly.

I could feel magic building up deep inside of me. I’d wanted to use it ever since Lucian had proposed, but now, somehow my magic felt different, strange. It was almost as if Seluna and I were working together, pooling our powers.

*Caliana, we will do ourselves a great favor—your magic, and my abilities.* Seluna’s voice was completely devoid of the sweet edge she’d used while speaking to Lucian.

I wasn’t at all sure what Seluna meant, but I did nothing to stop her as she sent a surge of magic right at Lucian.

# Episode 2630

**Greyson**

Xavier was fuming as we followed the guards out of the Vanguard palace. “I wish I could’ve just wiped that smug look right off Lucian’s face!” he said, pounding his fist into his palm.

“I promise that soon, we’ll both get to do just that,” I said.

“Yeah, well that moment can’t come soon enough. What’s your plan, anyway? Are we going to double back and sneak into the palace again?”

I hesitated, knowing that my brother wasn’t going to like what I was going to say next. “There were a lot of guards in there—you saw them coming at us from every direction. If we try to fight our way back in, we’ll lose.”

“So, what? We’re just going to leave Cali in that asshole’s hands?”

I knew exactly how he was feeling, but we had to be smart about our next move or we’d mess things up worse than they already were. “You know that’s not what I’m saying, but we aren’t going to be able to save her by storming the palace. It’s just the four of us right now. We wouldn’t have a chance in hell. If we march right in there and things go wrong—and believe me, they will—we’d end up putting Cali at risk. There’s a good chance that they’d get the better of us, capture us, and lock us up. Don’t you remember what we went through before? We could’ve been trapped in that palace for days, weeks, who knows? And in that time, there’s no question that we’d lose Cali to Seluna.”

Xavier looked off into the distance, his jaw pulsing, but he didn’t say anything. That usually meant he agreed with me, however much he hated to admit it.

“We need to get back to the pack house and regroup. We’ll assemble a team, then come right back for Cali.” I was trying to put on a confident and self-assured air for Artemis and Xavier’s sake, but on the inside, I was a mess. It pained me to even think of leaving Cali alone with Lucian, and it was worse saying it out loud, but I really couldn’t see any other option. I sighed and looked back toward the palace. *She must be absolutely terrified.* “At least she was able to reach out to you via mind link. We know she’s okay and alert somewhere in there, and she knows that we aren’t giving up. Maybe Ava will help keep her safe.” I knew that was a dubious wager at best, but I had to hold on to some hope that Cali would come out of this mess unscathed, even if the only person I could count on at the moment was Ava.

“Maybe,” Xavier said. “Don’t blame me if I don’t hold my breath on that.”

I cursed under my breath. “So many risks. Even bringing the pack back to face the Vanguards is risky, and LIPS is still on the prowl for Big Fluffy and Marshmallow.” LIPS really had a way of taking the fun out of everything. Now I couldn’t even tease Xavier about his new nickname since I’d been given one that was comparably bad if not worse. “If we run into Rhonda, things will only get stickier.”

“I’ll consult with Kira and Okorie when we get back,” Big Mac said thoughtfully. “Hell, I’ll even contact Nneka if necessary. There should be enough magic between us all to break the possession. We know it could be risky—deadly, even—but I don’t know what other choice we have.”

“I hope so,” I said. “I just can’t stop thinking about how much worse things are going to get for Cali the longer Seluna has her claws in her.”

“Let’s not even think about that,” Artemis said quickly. “Let’s just get back to the pack house and then return to my sister as soon as we can.”

We finally cleared the palace grounds, and Big Mac blipped us back to the pack house, where Tom and Orla greeted us. I couldn’t help but notice how anguished they looked once they realized that Cali wasn’t with us, but they embraced Artemis. Xavier didn’t say a word to anyone, just stomped off, clearly pissed at me. *I just hope he doesn’t go off and defy me because he doesn’t think I’m moving fast enough. Doesn’t he realize that I’m doing the best I can?*

Big Mac excused herself and went off to find Kira. I looked between Cali’s parents and Artemis, and I heard them start to question her as soon as they pulled out of their group hug. I walked up to them to help Artemis explain the unthinkable to them.

“Greyson?” Orla said, voice quivering. “What’s going on? Artemis said you had to leave Cali behind? Why?”

I took a deep breath. “Tom, Orla, I’m so sorry, but… We couldn’t separate Cali from the goddess who’s… *inhabiting* her.”

Orla immediately dissolved into tears, and Tom pulled her close, comforting her.

“We came back here to regroup and gather reinforcements,” I quickly added. “In the meantime, Big Mac’s going to talk to the witches and see if there’s a way to combine their magic to get Seluna out of Cali’s body.”

Orla was still sobbing, and Tom was having a time of it trying to calm her down. Artemis took me by the arm and pulled me out of their earshot. “Greyson, I know why we had to leave Cali with the Vanguards, but I hate this, and I’m sure you do just as much. We have to move quickly.”

“You’re right on both counts,” I told her. “I fucking hate this, and we’re definitely not just fucking around, here. You were there; that the place is stacked with guards, and now that Lucian has gotten his hands on a Seluna that he can see and touch, I don’t even want to imagine what he’s got planned.” A shiver of disgust worked its way down my spine as I pictured Lucian leering at Cali, speaking through her to Seluna, who was literally squatting in Cali’s body. “But you know as well as I do how risky it would be to pull Cali out of there under those circumstances. I think we have to take a subtler approach.”

“Fine, but when you go back, don’t you dare go without me.”

“I promise I won’t. I need you by my side if we have any hope of getting her out of there safely,” I said.

I left Artemis to go find Rishika. I found her out in the back yard jumping rope. I wondered if she ever took a moment to rest—then immediately I thought about how comforting it was to have someone like Rishika on the team. She always prepared and always thinking about the good of the pack. “Hey, looking strong,” I said as I approached.

“You guys are back? I have to go find Artemis.” She immediately stopped jumping and dropped her jump rope, ready to head off.

“Hold on a sec,” I said, putting up a hand. “Artemis is fine; she’s with Tom and Orla. But things got a little crazy at the Vanguards’. I’ll tell you all about it, but in the meantime, could you get the pack together? I want to speak to them.”

“Sure thing.” Without a moment of hesitation, Rishika rushed off to gather the pack.

“Greyson!” Big Mac said as soon as I returned to the house. “Good news.”

*Good news? Finally!* “Let me have it.”

“I caught up with Kira, and she’s more than willing to help, but we both agree that we’re going to need Okorie’s help.”

“Fine, get whatever and whoever you need. We might only get one shot at saving Cali, and I want it to be our best.”

“I should warn you that Okorie may not agree and might not be as cooperative as we would hope,” Big Mac said.

“I figured. I know that I can’t force a warlock to join our wolf pack to help—and from what little I’ve learned about the guy, he’s a little prickly.”

“That’s an understatement. If I have to, I’ll reach out to Nneka—whatever it takes,” she said.

“Thanks, Big Mac. I appreciate your help with this.”

“Don’t mention it,” Big Mac said before moving off to prepare.

I ran the plan through my mind, and despite the obstacles in front of us, I finally felt a little hopeful. If we could get the witches on board and rally the pack, we stood a real chance of getting Cali away from the Vanguards, but first, I needed to speak to my brother.

I found Xavier in his room pacing back and forth. It took him a while to notice me, and when he finally did, he didn’t seem the least bit happy to see me standing in his doorway. “Are we ready to go yet?” he asked.

“Not just yet. I’m going to go talk to the pack and fill them in so we can prepare—”

“Waste of time!” he shouted. “All the pack needs to know is that the Vanguards have kidnapped Cali and we need to go get her back.”

“Xavier, I know you’re frustrated—I am, too—but I need you on my side. I can’t do this alone, and I know that you wouldn’t let me if I tried. Cali’s our mate, and we stand a better chance of coming out victorious if we stick together.”

“So, is that why you’re here? To give me a pep talk?”

I nodded. “Yes, that’s exactly why I’m here. We can’t be rivals right now. We need to be allies all the way.”

The skeptical look on Xavier’s face drained away, and he gave a slight nod. “I get it. It’s what we agreed to earlier, after all. But mark my words, big brother, if this little plan of yours takes too much longer, I’ll do whatever it takes to protect Cali. With or without you.”

“Fair enough.” I could feel Xavier’s anguish because I felt exactly the same. We needed Cali. She was literally a part of us. Being an Alpha was already hard enough, and being an Alpha without Cali would be impossible. “I’ll see you at the meeting?” I said before moving toward the door.

Xavier grabbed my arm. “I’m following you on this. Don’t make me regret it.”

I nodded and headed out, feeling the full weight of the world on my shoulders. *If this fails, I’ll be the one to take the blame. Xavier would never let me live it down.* I realized then that if we did indeed fail, I wouldn’t really care who was to blame.

I ran into Big Mac on my way downstairs. She shook her head and heaved an exasperated breath. “Okorie refuses to help, and I haven’t been able to reach Nneka yet.”

“Isn’t there anything you can say to him to convince him?”

“Believe me, I tried. But he doesn’t want any part of it. He’s already had his share of trouble with the witch council, and his exact words were ‘I don’t need to get mixed up in werewolf politics.’”

I was disappointed but not the least bit surprised. Nothing had been going right lately, so why would it start now? “Can’t we figure out a way to do it without him?”

“I wish we could, but no. We need him. We won’t have enough firepower without him. So, what do you want to do?”

“I’m not sure yet,” I said. My mind was racing through so many different scenarios, but none of them felt quite right.

Marta, who I hadn’t even seen enter the room, came up to join us. “Let me talk to Okorie. Let me convince him.”

# Episode 2631

Lucian collapsed in a smoking heap at our feet.

*Oh my god, did Seluna just kill him??! Boom, just like that without even giving it a second thought?*

Oddly enough, I felt no remorse. More than that, I felt real pleasure at the sight of him lying on the ground, neutralized and helpless—and that disturbed me more than anything. *What’s happening to me? What have I become? Taking pleasure in someone dying?* I’d had so many arguments with my mates over even the prospect of them killing someone, and now here I was, damn near celebrating someone’s brutal murder?

*Relax*, Seluna said. *He’s only stunned. You should know that since it was your magic that struck him, after all.* Seluna sounded almost amused.

I remembered being subtly aware of the magic before Seluna leveled it at Lucian, and I’d done nothing to stop it. Not so deep down, I’d even wanted her to do just that. But what exactly did that mean? Had Seluna blasted Lucian, or had I? *Seluna, do you have control of my magic now, too?*

*It’s a work in progress*, Seluna said nonchalantly. *However, I’m very pleased that you didn’t resist—we have much to do with the prince, after all.*

*Much to do with the prince? What does that mean?* Things were getting stranger by the second—if that were even possible. Seluna wasn’t behaving at all how I’d thought she would, and I supposed that was a good thing for the moment since her unpredictability had gotten me out of sleeping with Lucian.

Seluna paused. *What, do you* want *to sleep with Lucian? I thought two mates was more than enough for you.* She paused. *Don’t bother answering that; I already know. You’re repulsed by him, and you have every right to be.*

Okay, now I was really confused. *I thought that Lucian was the reason you wanted my body. So that you* could *sleep with him?*

Seluna let out another of her dry chuckles. *Why are you so concerned about who I sleep with, Caliana? It’s quite amusing.*

*Um, hello? You’re in my body, so uh… yeah! I’m extremely invested in who you sleep with.*

*Fair enough*, Seluna said.

I couldn’t make sense of any of it, but I decided to sit back and see what happened next with the thought that it absolutely couldn’t get any worse.

Seluna dropped down beside Lucian and placed a palm against his forehead.

*Why are we doing this?* I asked Seluna. *You wanted to blast him, and now you want to comfort him?*

*I’m not comforting anyone. I’m just giving Lucian what he wants.*

*And what’s that, exactly? I’m sure that he didn’t want to be blasted in the chest by the goddess he’s worshipped his entire life, so I think you’re a little too late to give him what he wants.*

Seluna uttered an exasperated hiss. *You know, you ask a lot of questions, but what you really should be doing is thanking me.*

*Thanking you?* It was my turn to laugh. *For* what*? Stealing my body? Sending my mates away? Nearly stopping my heart more times than I want to even remember? And don’t get me started on those damn handprints. They looked like bad tattoos.*

Seluna didn’t answer right away. She leaned close to Lucian, and I could feel my temperature rise as heat spread through my body end to end, extending all the way out to my fingertips. I felt like I was about to be consumed by the heat, but it didn’t hurt, strangely enough, and I was only a little afraid.

*You have nothing to worry about, Caliana.* Lucian’s body trembled under our touch, and then Seluna pulled her hand away. Just like that, the heat drained out of my body.

*What did you just do to him?* He was still lying there like before. I didn’t see anything different about him, but it was clear that Seluna had done something to cause my temperature to rise so quickly.

*I think you mean, what did* we *just do to him? You worry too much, Caliana. Everything is fine. We just made him believe that our relationship has never been better and we should wait until we’re married.* Seluna stood up, and we looked down on Lucian.

*You made him think… what? Did you brainwash him?*

*Brainwash? Oh no, not quite. That’s too coarse a description. Let’s just say we made a few suggestions and planted a few false memories in just the right places.* Seluna sounded pleased with herself.

We’d just messed with Lucian’s mind, and it creeped me out knowing that I was involved in something like that. Yet, it also seemed like a perfectly normal thing to do given the situation.

Lucian groaned, and his eyes fluttered open. We helped him to his feet. He could barely hold his own weight, and I struggled trying to keep him upright. He looked up at me and smiled, then opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. It was like he’d been drugged. *Or blasted with a couple tons of Fae magic.*

We guided him over to the bed. “Rest, my prince,” Seluna purred. She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead, and I shivered at the feel of his cool skin against my lips.

Lucian didn’t resist and flopped down heavily on the bed. Not wasting a second, Seluna undressed him—exposing nothing I hadn’t seen before unfortunately—and then she covered him with a sheet.

*What are we going to do now?* I asked Seluna, almost afraid to hear her answer.

*Lucky for us, we don’t have to do anything. Lucian will believe what he wants to believe, and more importantly, he’ll leave us alone.*

That was definitely best-case scenario, and I relaxed a bit more. If I were going to have my body snatched by a moon goddess with unclear motives, I was happy that she at least understood that I wanted absolutely nothing to do with the Vanguard prince.

There was a soft knock on the door as Seluna began to undress.

*What are you doing?* I hissed, thinking that I’d relaxed a bit too soon.

*What do you think I’m doing? I’m getting comfortable.* Seluna slipped into the bed beside Lucian. “Come in!” she sang.

The door opened, and Aysel walked in. “Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt,” she said quickly.

Lucian mumbled something incoherent and then turned over onto his side.

I felt very self-conscious lying there naked beneath the covers next to a man I absolutely loathed, but at least Seluna had the decency to keep far away from him so we weren’t touching.

Aysel peeked at Lucian with a concerned look on her face. “Is my brother okay? He looks a little… pale.”

Seluna smiled. “He’s just a little worn out. We got caught up in the spirit of the engagement and all—I’m sure you understand.”

Aysel’s cheeks reddened. “Oh, of course.”

“So, what do you want?” Seluna asked.

I kind of liked how she treated Aysel like the meaningless bother she was.

“Some of the guests are asking after Lucian—when is he coming back to the banquet?”

“I’ll send him down shortly,” Seluna said easily.

“Okay, sounds good.” Aysel hesitated uneasily in the doorway for a moment before she left, closing the door behind her.

I moved to get out of bed, wanting to get dressed as soon as possible. Surprisingly, Seluna didn’t stop me. I slid a robe over my shoulders just as Lucian stirred again.

“Where’s my goddess going?” he asked with a lazy smile on his lips.

“We’re going back to the banquet, darling,” Seluna said without missing a beat. “You should get presentable.”

“Yes, of course.” Lucian yawned and got up. He stumbled over to his closet. “Wow, what happened? I’m feeling a bit worse for wear,” Lucian said as he changed into one of his typical princely getups.

I was all too glad to be leaving Lucian’s bedroom, but I couldn’t help but wonder how much of what Seluna had told me was true. Would Lucian really believe that his and Seluna’s relationship was all hunky dory?

*He will*, Seluna answered. *I made sure of it.*

We made our way downstairs, Seluna hanging coyly on Lucian’s arm as we went. As soon as we entered the banquet hall, I looked around, hoping that somehow Greyson and Xavier had returned and were ready to pry Seluna out of me and whisk me away back to the pack house. I’d been the one to send them away, but it wasn’t like I’d had any a choice in the matter. I missed them so much and longed to see their faces, and I was holding onto hope that I would get my wish soon.

Lucian, who seemed to be regaining his strength by the minute, took Seluna’s hand and led her to the head of the table.

“Everyone!” He picked up a fork and clanged it against a wine glass. “May I have your attention please?” Lucian looked around the room, his nose in the air as he waited for everyone to quiet down. “I have an announcement to make.” He held up Seluna’s hand. “Vanguards, kneel before your Luna!”

# Episode 2632

**Marta**

I was in the yard waiting for Okorie and feeling very nervous about what I was going to say to him once he got here. I’d been going over possible scenarios in my mind since I called for him, and nothing I’d come up with so far seemed like the right approach. *This has to work. I have to come through this time.* I was feeling the pressure. Greyson and Big Mac were counting on me to convince Okorie to help Cali, but what if I failed?

All I’d wanted since I joined the Redwood pack was to fit in with the pack, to be useful to them—and since I hadn’t been able to get control of my magic so far, I was looking for any way to help. There was no question that convincing Okorie to lend his magical hand to helping Cali would go a long way… if I could do it. I needed to frame the request just right and make an offer that Okorie couldn’t refuse, so to speak.

With a whoosh and a pop, Okorie materialized in front of me—and he looked none too happy. “What’s the emergency?” he demanded. “I was right in the middle of something. Don’t ask.”

“Oh yes, none of my business,” I said with a nervous laugh. “Thanks for coming.” I hesitated for a moment before deciding to just come out with it. “By the way, why did you refuse to help when Big Mac asked?” I hoped my voice sounded as nonchalant as I’d intended. *I’m so nervous, ugh!*

Okorie glared daggers at me. “*That’s* your emergency? I should have known it was a trick. You just earned yourself a second strike, Marta.” Okorie turned to go.

“Wait! You can’t just leave—Cali needs your help, and we’re running out of time!”

“Might I remind you that you’re in no position to be using your magic to help anyone? Not until you satisfy the council—or have you forgotten about that?”

“I didn’t forget; how could I? But that’s exactly why I need your help—because I can’t do it myself! I need you to be my… magic proxy.”

Okorie shook his head. “I have no desire to get involved in a dispute between werewolf packs. I’m a warlock. We don’t do wolves. The whole thing sounds like a big mess, and I’m trying to keep my hands clean these days.”

“But you’ve been helping me, and I feel like I’m a member of the pack, so would it really be such a stretch to extend that help to Cali? She’s not even a wolf, so you wouldn’t really be breaking your ‘no werewolf’ rule or anything.”

“That’s different,” Okorie said simply. I waited for him to say more, but he just crossed his arms and shifted his stance, looking impatient as all get out.

*Okay, he’s being resistant as hell. Time to try a different approach.* “Remember when you were bragging about what a powerful warlock you are?” *That’s it, Marta, appeal to his ego.*

“I wouldn’t call it bragging, but yes, I remember relaying those hard facts to you.”

“Well, have you ever *proven* those facts to anyone?”

Okorie scoffed. “No, because I don’t have to prove anything to anyone.”

I laughed, trying not to overdo it. I had to play it just right, and I could already tell that Okorie was itching to pop off to wherever he’d been before I interrupted him. “That’s such an easy way out! All this talk about your greatness, and yet you’re still mentoring me and Dani. You’ve made it perfectly clear that teaching us is beneath you. Wouldn’t it be a shame if I didn’t improve? If you were, say, stuck mentoring me for a long, long, time? Not only would you hate it, but I bet the council wouldn’t be too pleased with you, either.” *I’m playing a dangerous game, but no guts, no glory, right?*

Okorie narrowed his gaze. “Are you trying to play me? Sounds like you’re trying to play me.”

I froze. *Oh no. What do I say?* “Trying to play you? Me? Marta? No, I wouldn’t dream of it. I’m only trying to point out what’s at stake. That’s all.”

Okorie said nothing, just looked at me.

*Shoot, did I just overplay my hand? But what choice do I have? He might be mad at me now, but how much worse could he be? I had to try, so it was worth it, even if he goes and rats me out to the witch council.*

Okorie suddenly burst out laughing. “You *are* playing me, aren’t you?” He started a slow clap. “Wow, that was impressive. I really didn’t think you had it in you, Marta.”

I looked at him, annoyed. “You don’t have to mock me, you know. If you really don’t want to help, just say that and we’ll go find some other warlock, one with a more generous spirit than you have.”

“Oh, you might find another warlock, but you’ll never find one as gifted as I am. It’s not like you can just Google us.”

I balled my hands into fists. “All right, I’ve had enough. I guess I can’t count on my mentor to help.” I should’ve known that I couldn’t convince him. He was selfish and stubborn—the epitome of immovable. I’d really wanted to come through for the pack, but it looked like I was going to have to find another way to prove my worth to them.

I turned to go, already thinking about how I was going to deliver the bad news to Greyson and Big Mac. It had been a long shot, anyway. Okorie had made it perfectly clear that he was here to do his job—train me and Dani—and that was it. It wasn’t like we could force him.

“Wait, not so fast,” Okorie said. “Why are you running off?”

*What, does he want me to stay here so he can torture me some more?* “Really? Why am I running off? Isn’t it obvious?”

“I’ve reconsidered. I’m willing to help.” Okorie had an amused look on his face.

*Oh, he’s just toying with me, like a tiger playing with its food.* “Now who’s playing who?” I said, turning again to leave. “You know, you may be a kickass warlock, but you’re not very funny,” I said over my shoulder.

“Wow, I beg to differ—wait, Marta. I’m not joking, I’m serious. I’m quite impressed with you, that’s what I meant. Besides, how would it look if a mentor refused to help his mentee?”

I was about to jump for joy, but I was still a little suspicious and more than a little overwhelmed. I almost wanted to hug him, but I stopped myself. *That would be too much.* “Thank you. I’m going to go tell the others.” I left Okorie, expecting him to yell out “just kidding!” at any moment, and I breathed a sigh of relief when he didn’t. I went back into the pack house and was looking for Big Mac when Lilac grabbed me.

“I was looking for you everywhere,” he said. “Where were you? Have you heard about Cali? Greyson just called a pack meeting to talk about it.”

“I know all about it.” I was beaming. I couldn’t wait to tell him that I was going to be part of the solution for Cali’s predicament. “That’s where I’ve been, talking to Okorie. I’ve convinced him to help us. To help Cali.”

“Really? That’s good. It’s kind of a wild situation, so we need all the help we can get…”

“True.” It was good that Okorie was going to help. He was a warlock, not a wolf, so he had no obligation. Although, I didn’t think many packs counted vampires, Fae, and mediums among their membership like the Redwoods did.

“So,” Lilac continued, “what’s Okorie going to do, exactly?”

“Um, I don’t know, really. I only know that Big Mac wanted his help.” I was starting to feel a little nervous despite my excitement. “I have a feeling that we’re going to need all the magic that we can get. That’s why I’m going to ask Okorie to remove my bracelets so I can use my magic.”

“What? Really?” Lilac asked, looking a little skeptical.

“Yes. Why not? They need me. And given the special circumstances, the witch council has no right to get upset about it… and even then I’m not sure that it’ll matter. Okorie will be right there, anyway.”

If the witch council wanted to get pissed off at me, they could. It wasn’t like they were here helping. They didn’t seem to do a lot of that, did they?

Lilac pulled back and shook his head, his brow knitted in confusion. “What? You’re going to the Vanguard palace?”

“Of course. How else would I be able to help Cali? I certainly can’t do it from here.”

“No,” Lilac said. “I don’t want you going there. In fact, I don’t want you involved in this at all.”

# Episode 2633

I tried to pull my hand from Lucian’s grip as all the guests dropped to one knee in deference to their new Luna. All eyes were on me, literally, and then it dawned on me. *Shit. Seluna’s supposed to be the Vanguard Luna. When the hell is that going to happen?*

I’d never agreed to be a Luna, and I definitely hadn’t heard Seluna agree to it. Besides, wasn’t there supposed to be a ceremony or something? He couldn’t just say it and make it so, could he?

“Yes, behold your new Luna. Bask in her light, my Vanguard followers. You will be the first pack in history to have a goddess as your Luna!” Lucian shouted. The guests burst into cheers and applause as Lucian regarded them with princely interest. I didn’t think he could be any more excited if he tried.

“Lucian,” Seluna said. “Don’t get ahead of yourself. I have not yet agreed to be the Vanguard Luna.”

Blindsided, Lucian gave Seluna a befuddled look. “What? Why not? We’re engaged, and our relationship has never been better. You becoming Vanguard Luna is the logical, traditional next step.” He turned away from Seluna and looked back out at the guests, his expression now as satisfied and excited as before, as if he were trying to save face.

“Yes, but you’ve forgotten one important thing, Lucian. Making someone a Luna requires willingness from both parties.”

Lucian laughed almost as if he thought Seluna were joking. “And? I don’t understand. You agreed to marry me. You taking your rightful place as our Luna will give you great power. Are you going to just turn that down?”

Now that, Seluna responded to. I could feel the longing for that power churning through her, and she was insatiable. Lucian knew his goddess well; power seemed to be the one thing that Seluna wanted above all else.

Once again, I realized how out of control everything was, and panic washed over me. *Seluna, you can’t become Luna!* I needed to snap her back to reality before she did something that she would regret—that I would regret—for that matter.

*Caliana, thank you for your input, but I happen to think otherwise. As Luna, I would have full reign over the Vanguard pack.*

*But Seluna, if you become Luna, I could die! And I’d take you with me! I’m half-Fae, half-human. We don’t know how that could react with the Luna mark.* I didn’t quite want it to sound like a threat—especially given our current circumstances—but I wanted her to understand what we were dealing with. Making a decision like that, in *my* body, could have dire consequences.

Seluna laughed. *Trying to scare me isn’t going to work. I don’t scare easily.*

*I’m not trying to scare anybody!* *I’m just trying to make you understand that if you choose to become Lucian’s Luna, you’re making a choice—a choice that defies the* due destini*. Lucian isn’t my mate, and choosing him will do who knows what to me, Xavier, and Greyson!*

Now I was panicking more than I ever had before. All the time and effort I’d spent making sure that I didn’t decide between Xavier and Greyson so I wouldn’t put our lives in danger, and now, after all of that, Lucian was forcing one upon me. *I can’t do this. We can’t do this! I can’t make a choice like this—especially when it doesn’t even include my mates! I can’t let this happen!*

“The pack is awaiting your response,” Lucian interrupted. “So, what is it going to be, my goddess? Do you accept your role as Luna of the Vanguard pack?”

*Seluna, you can’t accept this. You’ve been so fascinated by the* due destini*, and yet you haven’t taken the time to understand what’s at stake?* Everyone was watching us, waiting to see if Seluna was going to accept. Before long, murmurs of doubt began to percolate through the crowd.

Lucian’s hold on Seluna’s hand tightened. He was growing impatient, and he even looked a little embarrassed. He ducked his head and spoke out of this side of his mouth. “I need an answer. Now.”

Anxiety spike through me. I wanted to scream out, “No, I won’t be your Luna!” Unfortunately, I wasn’t the one in control, and so I couldn’t say anything at all. It was up to Seluna.

Seluna smiled at Lucian. “I’ve thought it over,” she began. She took a deep breath and looked out at the guests who were watching her with a strange intensity, as if they wouldn’t be able to breathe until she answered. “And it is with great honor that I accept. I will be the Vanguard Luna!” Seluna beamed out at them, and I expected her to give them all a pageant wave at any moment.

A pit formed in my stomach, and I wanted to scream, but of course the scream remained in my head, unheard and unnoticed.

“Thank you, thank you!” Lucian said, ever the gracious host. The guests cheered as Lucian beamed over at Seluna, his eyes shining. He was absolutely exultant. Aysel came over and hugged her brother, gushing about how excited she was to hear the news.

I was reeling as my entire world seemed to be crashing down around me. It was such a strange and unsettling feeling to have to sit back and just watch myself in all this. I was nothing more than a passive passenger in my own body, unable to stop any of it from happening, unable to even speak.

*Seluna, what the fuck?! Are you so vain and power hungry that you would give up your life to become Luna?*

*Oh, Caliana, wrong again. Stop being so dramatic. I have no plans to die.*

*Well, you have a funny way of showing it, being that you literally might’ve just signed our death certificate. Don’t you get that?*

*Caliana, please, don’t get so excited. I’m no mere mortal, after all. You should know that by now.*

*Yes, but* I *am! And now you’ve condemned me and the two men I love to an uncertain fate—possibly death!* I wanted to wail, I wanted to cry, but Seluna wouldn’t even allow that. She was just standing there with a self-satisfied smile plastered across *my* face.

Lucian sat back and let all the cheers and adulation wash over him before he spoke again. “Now we will set about making plans for our Luna ceremony.” There was another wave of cheers and yells of congratulations.

I just wanted to shove Lucian and run out of the banquet hall and out of this damned palace and back to my mates where I belonged. There was no way I could let this happen. If I were going to be anyone’s Luna, it was Greyson’s or Xavier’s, and even then, I wouldn’t make such a choice. I couldn’t even if I wanted to.

*For heaven’s sake, stop panicking*, Seluna said. *The ceremony still has to be planned, and anything could happen in the meantime.*

*What? What do you mean? I don’t understand. Why did you agree to be Luna when you don’t even seem excited for it to happen?* I could sense Seluna’s answer, but before she could respond, Lucian took Seluna by the hand and led us to our seat.

He sat down too, bursting with pleasure. “I’m so pleased, goddess. Everything that I’ve dreamed of is falling right into place.”

I could only sit back and watch as Seluna controlled every movement of my body, every word that came out of my lips. I didn’t know how much longer I would be able to take it.

“Oh, Lucian, the ceremony will be absolutely beautiful, I just know it,” Seluna said, stringing Lucian along. “Food and dancing and communing with the beloved Vanguards—it’s going to be so special—but I’m concerned.”

Lucian’s expression darkened. “Concerned? About what? I don’t want you to have any worries going forward, my goddess.”

“As you know, Cali is a *due destini* and has a strong bond to her two mates. Has it occurred to you that they may not be too amenable to Cali taking part in the Luna ceremony?”

Lucian waved it off. “I’ve sent them away before. I can do it again.” He relaxed back into his seat.

“Yes, but that was because there were only the two of them, a Fae, and a witch. What if they show up at the ceremony with their entire pack—or even with another pack as their allies?”

Lucian sighed. “You have a point.” He turned an adoring gaze on Seluna. “I can already see what a wise Luna you’re going to be.”

I was growing more and more anxious as Seluna worked her magic on a starstruck Lucian. Again, I was aware of how lucky I was that the goddess’s desires weren’t completely divergent with mine. If I had to have someone running things in my body, I supposed it was good that it was someone who understood the *due destini*—and my desire to keep Lucian from ever getting what he wanted.

“So, what are you going to do about it?” Seluna asked Lucian.

Lucian yawned and looked out over the banquet table at his guests. “There’s only one obvious solution, isn’t there? We’ll just kill her mates.”

# Episode 2634

**Greyson**

Finally, I was starting to feel more confident. Now that Marta had convinced Okorie to join us, I believed that we stood a good chance of rescuing Cali. The Vanguards were strong, but they didn’t have three witches on their side. They were still just another werewolf pack, and we’d beat them like any other. We were unstoppable with Cali as our motivation, and besides that, there was no way they would be prepared for the Redwoods and our arsenal of witches.

*Lucian’s going to regret the day he summoned Seluna.*

Xavier crossed his arms. “We’ve got everything we need, right? Why don’t we get going? I don’t want to waste another second if we don’t have to.”

“I feel your frustration and your urgency, Xavier, but we need to hold on just a little while longer. I still need to talk to the pack. This isn’t just about getting Cali, it’s about a conflict between two packs. We’re not going to be able to just waltz into the palace and simply request that Cali leave with us. It’s going to be like going into any other battle, and with that in mind, I need to prepare my troops.”

Rishika stuck her head in through the backdoor. “Everyone’s waiting for you in the yard, Greyson.”

“Thanks,” I said. I took a deep breath and then headed out, pausing on the porch to look out over my pack. I never thought I’d be in this position—not after I’d abandoned the pack to become a Rogue. *Never in a million years.* But then, I also never thought I’d form a mate bond with someone like Cali. She had changed everything.

“Hey, everyone, thanks for coming.” I glanced around the pack, taking care to look everyone in the eye. “I’m sure you all know by now what’s happened to Cali.”

There were a few nods.

“And while we’re heading to the Vanguard palace to get her back, to free her from the goddess that has commandeered her body, we’re also going there to send a clear message to Vanguards. Don’t fuck with the Redwood pack.”

The pack erupted into cheers and whoops.

“Stand by,” I said. “We’ll be leaving shortly.” I gestured to Xavier and Big Mac and took them out of earshot of everyone else. “Let’s discuss our plan.”

“The plan is simple. We attack, kill that fucker, and grab Cali,” Xavier said.

I knew that Xavier was only half kidding. “I wish it were that simple, little brother, but I’ve been thinking that it wouldn’t hurt to be a little more strategic in our approach.”

“Oh? What do you have in mind? As long as it doesn’t involve waiting any longer, I’m down.”

“Let the man talk,” Big Mac said.

Xavier looked like he was about to snap back at her but I spoke quickly, stopping him before things escalated. “I think we should create a diversion. The more Vanguards we can draw away from Lucian and Cali, the better. I want Rishika and Artemis to lead an attack at the palace gates. That’ll keep the majority of the Vanguards occupied while a small team including me and Xavier get inside and make our way to Cali.” I looked at Big Mac. “You and the other witches will be right behind us, running interference and taking the Vanguards by surprise.”

“Kira and I have an anti-magic net that will neutralize any magic Seluna might throw at us via Cali.” Big Mac paused as if trying to find the right words for what she was going to say next. “I want you both to know that this is going to be like an exorcism.” She took a deep breath. “And the last time we had one of those… Well, you remember what happened to Pip with Letifer. Seluna is not going to go easily, and we ultimately don’t want to hurt Cali in the process. While we’re working the spell, it’ll probably seem like we’re hurting her, but you have to remember that Seluna’s using Cali’s body, and so they’re one and the same. Don’t be fooled. She might call out to one of you, both of you, for help, and you will need to stay back and remember what I’m saying to you right now.”

I was uneasy. The last thing I wanted was for Cali to suffer, but what Big Mac said made perfect sense. “This is still dangerous for her, isn’t it?” I asked. “It could kill her?”

“*What?*” Xavier spat.

Big Mac sighed. “Yes, but it depends on how much Seluna is willing to fight. But if we don’t try, Seluna *will* take complete control of Cali’s mind and body. The Cali you both know will be gone; trapped inside of her own body, voiceless and helpless. Death would be a better outcome than that. I know it’s grim, but that’s the reality we’re dealing with here.”

“Thank you for being honest,” I told Big Mac, though I was still reeling from what she’d said. Big Mac was never one to beat around the bush, and she certainly hadn’t pulled any punches just now.

“I’m going to go get ready. Let me know when it’s go time,” Big Mac said.

“Should we tell Orla and Tom about the risk?” I asked Xavier once Big Mac had gone.

“I don’t think we have a choice. They need to know what’s at stake. She’s their daughter, after all.”

We went to find Cali’s parents, grabbing Artemis on our way and filling her in on our plan of attack.

“I’d really prefer to join you *in* the palace,” she said. “It’s my sister in there, and I’m familiar with the palace layout. I took a mental picture when we were at their pool party from hell.”

“Sure, that’s fine by me.” I knew that I had no choice but to agree; it wasn’t like Artemis was going to take no for an answer. She was just like her sister in that way.

We found Tom and Orla in the room they were staying in. I knocked on the open door, and the three of us went inside. Tom had Orla in his arms, consoling her. I wished that I wasn’t there to add more stress to the pile.

“Hey,” I said as my mind raced. I already knew that telling them about Cali’s situation was going to be one of the hardest things I’d ever done. *How does one even tell a parent that their child could die? There’s literally no easy way to do that.*

“Hey, Greyson. You don’t look like you’re doing so good,” Tom said. Orla looked up at me with a pleading look in her eyes.

“No. I have something to tell you. We’ve gathered the pack, and we’re about to hit the Vanguard palace to get Cali back. We’re bringing the witches with us, and they’re going to have to perform a sort of… exorcism on Cali.” I waited, not wanting to mention the worst part of it. I wished that I could just spare them, but like Xavier said, they were Cali’s parents, and they deserved to have the full picture.

“Exorcism?” Orla asked. “Like on Pip?”

I winced. “There’s more.”

“What more could there be?” Orla wailed.

“We talked to Big Mac about possible… complications… with the exorcism.”

“Complications? What kind of complications?” Tom asked.

“Seluna has a tight hold on her. Big Mac says there’s a chance that she won’t go quietly. If things get too dire during the exorcism and Seluna refuses to relinquish Cali… Cali could die.”

Artemis pulled Orla into a tight hug. “It’s okay. That’s the worst-case scenario, but we’re not going to let that happen.” Artemis had her eyes on me and Xavier as she spoke. “I’m going to bring Cali back to both of you, safe and sound.”

“Exactly,” Xavier added. “We’re going to protect her with our lives, and she’ll be right back here with you in no time.”

*I hope they’re right.* For all the Alpha energy I exuded, I didn’t think that I would be able to face telling them that Cali didn’t make it. *Then again, that’s not an option. We will bring Cali back safe. No matter what.*

Xavier and I left Artemis with Tom and Orla and found Sabine and Big Mac in the living room holding each other. My mother got up and pulled me to the side as soon as I walked in.

“How are you holding up, son? I know how difficult this has to be. I know you’re not big on emotional scenes, but I want you to know that I’m proud of you. You rallied the pack, and you’re fighting for the woman you love. You’re doing exactly what a leader must do.” She hugged me tightly.

“Thanks, Mom.” It still felt a little strange to call her that, but it seemed appropriate at the moment. “You just be careful out there.”

After I left my mother, I stepped outside into the cold, crisp air. The sky was dark and cloudless above, and I looked at it as I prepared to give the signal for everyone to shift. I knew it was a risk since LIPS would spot a pack of giant wolves in no time, but it was a risk we had to take.

Right now, I couldn’t worry about Rhonda. If there was LIPS-related fallout from all of this, I’d deal with it when the time came. Nobody else had even thought to bring it up. They all knew what was on the line, so nothing else mattered.

“The moment has come, Redwoods!” I yelled into the night. “Let’s bring Cali home!”

# Episode 2635

**Ava**

I’d been just sitting back observing the banquet and fighting off boredom when Lucian made his announcement. I’d gone from uninterested to absolutely stunned in seconds flat. Perhaps I should have expected it since it was an obvious next step for Lucian, especially with how obsessed he was with Seluna. There was no question that he was going to try to lock her down as soon as possible. Still, hearing him declare that Cali—or Seluna, rather—would be the Vanguard Luna was alarming to say the least.

I was no expert on the whole *due destini* thing, but I knew enough to realize that if Lucian really *did* take Cali to be his Luna—whether it was because Seluna was using her body or not—Xavier could get hurt. *What happens if Cali chooses between her mates, or in this case, chooses someone else altogether?*

I didn’t know for sure since I wasn’t exactly clear on how the whole thing worked, but I assumed that even if Cali wasn’t making a conscious choice, it was still a choice… And in my experience, spells and curses weren’t always so nuanced when it came to the finer details. *At the end of the day, a choice is a choice, and if Cali or Seluna or whoever goes through with that ceremony, it could put Xavier in grave danger.*

I was still frozen in my seat as the rest of the guests clapped and yelled out shouts of support to the couple. It was strange seeing Seluna smile and bask in all the adulation when I knew that couldn’t be how the real Cali felt. I had to stop this, but I had no clue how to do it. There was no way I could let Xavier die because Cali had managed to get herself caught up in yet another mess. Xavier and I still had so much unfinished business. I couldn’t lose him now. My wolf stirred, awaken by the strong pull that I felt toward Xavier at that moment, compelling me to come to his aid.

I almost expected Xavier and the rest to come bursting in at any minute since there was no way that Xavier was going to just sit there locked up at the pack house, twiddling his thumbs while Lucian drooled over his beloved Cali. I’d seen the look on his face as he, Greyson, Artemis, and Big Mac had been dragged out by the guards—he hadn’t wanted to go. Unfortunately, he’d had no choice since they’d been completely outnumbered.

*He’ll die trying to save Cali, and if Lucian moves ahead with the ceremony, that could kill him, too. I can’t let that happen.*

I was absolutely disgusted by Lucian. He’d literally forced Cali to host Seluna. If he could do something as dark as that, who knew what else he was capable of? It wasn’t that I cared that much about Cali. If it weren’t for the circumstances of the whole thing and the fact that Xavier was at risk, I might even have supported Lucian’s antics. But deep down, no matter how I felt about Cali, I knew that Lucian was wrong. It didn’t really matter that it was Cali, it was just a shitty thing to do to someone. Besides, if I helped Cali out of this bind, it would only elevate me in Xavier’s eyes, and I was all for that.

Lately, I’d been catching glimpses of what there could be between Xavier and me if we only had the time to explore each other. I was still holding out hope that there was a chance for us, but I had to help stop this Lucian-Seluna thing first. *But how? How can I help Cali?*

Seluna was occupying Cali’s body and mind, and I doubted that she was just going to bow down and let Cali go if I tried to intervene. Even if I managed to get to Cali, then what? It wasn’t like I was a witch and could oust Seluna. *But I know quite a few witches—Big Mac and Kira, and Marta’s got some kind of witch thing going on, too, right?* If I could somehow get Cali to them, then they could literally work their magic.

Lucian and Seluna were making the rounds and interacting with their guests like a proper power couple. I knew that if Xavier and Greyson were here to see this, they’d be having a fit. If I weren’t acutely aware of what was going on under the surface, I might have thought that Lucian and Cali made a striking couple. *But I know the truth, and this can’t happen for Xavier’s sake. Come on, Ava, how are you going to get Cali to those witches? That’s all that stands between you and saving your mate.* If I were going to have even the slimmest chance of this working, I needed to act fast. There was no question that Xavier was plotting to get back here, if he wasn’t already on his way.

“Ava! Are you enjoying the banquet? Such exciting news, right? Not only does Lucian have his soulmate in Seluna, but the Vanguards will finally have their Luna!” Aysel stepped close and lowered her voice. “And you must be thrilled. Cali’s out of the picture now, clearing your path to Xavier and my path to Greyson. What a picture-perfect ending!” She held up her glass.

“Such great news,” I said, playing along. I held up my glass and clinked it against Aysel’s. I glanced over at Cali and Lucian, wondering how much opportunity I would have to get Cali alone.

“I’m so happy for my brother. He’s been obsessed with this for so long, and now he can finally move on with his life. I wonder if he truly understands what he just achieved?” Aysel said with a faraway look in her eyes.

“Right,” I said, distracted by my need to get close to Cali’s body. “Why don’t we just *ask* Lucian how he feels?”

“What? Are you joking? It’s clear that my brother’s on cloud nine. Why would I need to ask him about it?”

I shrugged. “Well, it’s possible that he might wake up tomorrow and feel a strange sense of disappointment. Sometimes a void is left in us when we finally achieve our dreams, a void that’s hard to fill. As his sister, you should help prepare him for that.”

“Void? You don’t know Lucian very well at all. There will be no void, but it couldn’t hurt to talk to him about it.”

“Great,” I said, downing the rest of my champagne. I followed Aysel over to join Seluna and Lucian, who were finally on their own again.

“Ahh, my dearest Aysel,” Lucian said, pulling his sister into a hug. “So sorry about embarrassing you before.”

*Wonder what he means by that?*

Aysel threw back her head and let out light laugh. “Oh, no need to apologize, brother. I’m not surprised that you wasted no time bedding the goddess of your dreams.”

*What? Did Seluna—Cali—sleep with Lucian?!* That wasn’t something I had pictured happening. But maybe it hadn’t been what it seemed.

“How annoying!” Seluna said suddenly.

“Oh, my goddess, is everything okay? Is there anything I can do?” Lucian said, turning his full attention to Seluna.

“Nothing—I just don’t understand why humans have bodily fluids. So bothersome. Excuse me, I need to go to the bathroom.”

*Now, this is my chance!* “Oh, I need to go, too. Why don’t I accompany you?”

Lucian clapped his hands with pleasure. “Lovely. And it’ll give me some time to talk to my sister alone about a little… surprise for my beloved.”

“Great,” I said, taking Seluna’s arm and leading her away from the table.

*Cali’s in there somewhere, right?* I looked closely at Seluna. *It’s got to be so weird for her to be trapped in there like that, and then to see me right here… if she’s even aware of any of this at all.* If my plan worked out, all of that would be a witch’s problem soon.

We exited the banquet hall while Seluna bemoaned the limitations of the physical body.

“All this needing to empty yourself every few hours, not to mention the whole living to die thing. I suppose the human body has certain tactile advantages, but at the end of the day, it’s really nothing more than a decaying bag of flesh.”

“Yeah, I never thought of it that way,” I said. “It must be so freeing never having to pee or die… or anything.” I led Seluna farther away from the banquet hall. Soon we reached a quiet, remote part of the palace.

Seluna gasped in surprise. “And the bathroom is so far away from the banquet hall. What a massive inconvenience.”

“I know, annoying, right?” I gestured to a door. “It’s just in here.” I ushered Seluna inside and shut the door behind us.

Seluna turned in surprise. “What is this? Where’s the bathroom?”

“I hope you’ve learned how to hold it.” Then, without another word, I shifted.

# Episode 2636

**Xavier**

The pack clapped and cheered as Greyson finished his little pep talk and stepped out into the yard. I couldn’t help but feel a pang of jealousy. *This should be my moment. I should be the one leading the pack—that’s what Ava told me, and she was right. I should be Alpha. It’s what I always wanted. It’s what I was born to be.*

I looked around as everyone began to shift, bolstered into excitement by Greyson’s rallying cry. I prepared to do the same myself, knowing that right now wasn’t the time for me to get all riled up about who was leading the pack. *But when will it be time? When will I be able to make my stand?* It was always later, always whenever the crisis of the week was over, but there was going to come a time when I wasn’t willing to wait any longer. I’d been quiet and calm long enough, letting things ride for the good of the pack, but soon I was going to have to start thinking about what I wanted.

Greyson came walking over. He and I were now the only ones who hadn’t shifted yet. “You sure you want to shift?” he asked me. I could tell that he was uneasy about asking the question but probably felt that he was doing his duty as the Alpha and trying to make sure that he covered all bases.

“Of course. I know the risks, but Ava’s at the palace, so I should be able to shift back.” I tried to tamper down the rage bubbling in my gut at having to explain myself to Greyson. If for no other reason, I wanted to be Alpha so that I would never have to feel like I was answering to my brother ever again. It was enough to drive me crazy.

“And if she isn’t?” Greyson pressed, shifting his stance as if preparing for me to lunge at him.

*Don’t worry, brother. I’m saving all my fire for the wimp prince.* “Why are you getting on my back about this? I don’t care—if we can’t get Cali back, it won’t matter to me at all if I’m stuck as a wolf for the rest of my life. Hell, it might even be better that way.” I didn’t even want to think about what life would be like without Cali, and I was hoping that I would never have to find out.

“I get it,” Greyson said. “I feel the same way.”

“Well, then quit bellyaching and shift! We’re wasting time!”

Greyson looked like he was about to say something but clearly thought better of it. We both shifted and merged with the rest of the pack. The energy amongst the pack was electric, excited almost, and within seconds we were racing through the woods.

Just being in wolf form made me feel better, calmer, complete. Besides the obvious power and energy that I felt in this state, there was a clarity of purpose, too. I was a hunter, and I knew my prey. Fighting was unpleasant in many ways, but there was no doubt that it cleared my mind and brought me back to the basest part of myself. There was no confusion about what to do, what my mission was, or what the stakes were. We were going to get Cali back, and we would cut down any Vanguard who made the mistake of getting in our way.

Greyson fell into step beside me. *Remember, when we get to the palace, we have to play it smart. We won’t have a lot of time*, Greyson mind linked.

*I know that, believe me. You can tell the pack whatever, that’s fine, but I know what’s ahead. This is a smash and grab. Nothing more. Let’s not make more of it than it really is.* When Greyson didn’t reply, I continued. *If we come across Lucian—*

*We take him out*, Greyson finished for me.

*I’m looking forward to it.* This was a war that the Vanguards and the wannabe prince started, but it was one that the Redwoods were going to finish. I couldn’t wait to bound through those doors and get Cali back, and I wouldn’t mind seeing the look of defeat on Lucian’s annoying face, either.

We slowed to a stop as the palace rose into view before us. Greyson motioned to Rishika as Artemis slid off her back. Artemis secured her crossbow across her shoulders and patted the assortment of weapons at her hip, making sure they were well within her reach. We waited a beat while Rishika led the others toward the palace gates, which were under reconstruction and heavily guarded.

*You’ve got this*, I mind linked to Rishika.

*Thanks, Xavier. Give them hell*, Rishika replied.

Once the others were in place, Greyson, Artemis, and I regrouped and made our way around toward the back of the palace. There was a high fence surrounding the perimeter, and I was pretty sure that Greyson and I could jump it, but I wasn’t sure about Artemis. My concern was unfounded. Without missing a beat, Artemis pulled a grappling hook from her belt, threw it over the fence, yanked on it to make sure it was secure, and then started climbing.

*You’ve got to hand it to her—she always comes prepared*, I mind linked to Greyson.

*That’s an understatement.*

Greyson and I moved back and then took a running leap, soaring easily over the fancy fence and landing as softly as two giant wolves could on the other side. Artemis rappelled down and landed right beside us. With each second that passed, I felt better about our odds. The Vanguards weren’t expecting us, and we had that on our side. I only hoped that Cali wouldn’t somehow get caught in the crossfire—I would make sure that she was safe before, during, and after it was all over.

We were moving at a fast clip toward the closest entrance when I caught the scent of another unfamiliar wolf on the breeze. I paused and listened, and Greyson did the same. Someone was running right for us. I turned just as a large wolf lunged at us, snarling and baring its sharp teeth. Instinctively, I placed myself between Greyson and the wolf—giving in to my primitive instinct to always protect the Alpha at all costs. *Even if the Alpha happens to be my pain-in-the-ass brother.*

I was bracing myself for the wolf’s attack when I heard a zing followed by the flash of something in the air. The wolf jerked and gasped and then fell dead at my feet. Artemis came over and pulled her arrow from the wolf’s bleeding neck before returning it to her quiver.

She looked at us with a devious glint in her eye. “One down, an entire pack to go.”

*Did I mention that I’m glad she’s on our side?* I said to Greyson.

Without another word, we pressed forward, leaving the dead wolf behind us. I couldn’t help but wonder how many more would have to fall before we were done. As far as I was concerned, the entire Vanguard pack could perish in our wake. They deserved no less.

We finally arrived at the entrance, and Artemis helped open the door for us. It wasn’t locked. *Not surprising*, I mind linked to Greyson. *Would the Vanguards actually be expecting an attack?*

*Maybe, but let’s wait. We haven’t heard Rishika’s signal*, Greyson replied. *If we enter too early, we won’t stand a chance.*

My adrenaline was pumping like crazy. I wanted to get this show on the road. We’d waited long enough, but I knew we had to be patient. My heart was pounding hard in my chest. I wanted—needed—to get to Cali.

Then we all heard it: Rishika’s howl. The attack had begun.

Artemis, Greyson, and I rushed into the palace, ready for battle. Artemis had her crossbow primed at the ready. I sniffed the air, trying to pick up Cali’s scent, but it wasn’t easy. There were a lot of wolves around and a lot of scents intermingling in the air. As we moved toward the banquet hall, I could hear the distinct sound of the Vanguards rallying to fend off the attack. I only hoped that Rishika and the others could keep them occupied without sustaining any serious injuries. We didn’t need much time, just long enough to find Cali and get her the hell out.

A guard leaped in front of us, growling and pawing at the floor. Greyson jumped out in front of me and lunged, taking the guard down to the ground. *Keep looking for Cali!* he mind linked as he and the wolf tussled on the ground.

I left him, pressing onward until I reached the banquet hall. It was empty save for its sole occupant. Lucian. Greyson came up behind me just as I locked eyes with the prince. He had blood dripping from his muzzle.

Lucian was clearly surprised to see us. “What are you doing here?” he asked almost innocently.

Greyson and I closed in on the frightened-but-trying-his-damndest-not-to-appear-so princeling.

Greyson shifted. “Where is she?” he asked, menace dripping from his voice. “Where is my mate? Where’s Cali?”

Lucian puffed out his chest in a last-ditch show of bravado. “I’m not telling you. I guess you’re going to have to force it out of me.” He smiled. “Good luck.” Then, he shifted.

# Episode 2637

At that moment, I felt completely detached from reality—which was saying a lot since I hadn’t had a firm grip on it since the moment Seluna stepped into my body as if it were a new dress.

Ava had shifted and was moving toward me with naked aggression—only it wasn’t just me—it was Seluna she was heading for.

*What is Ava doing? Is this how she thinks she’s going to win Xavier’s heart? By killing me?* Ava had had plenty of opportunities to kill me, so it didn’t make much sense that she would do so now. *Maybe she’s actually trying to* help *me?* It was the only thing that made sense, but it seemed far-fetched since we literally hated each other.

*I agree with the last bit*, Seluna said. *You can’t trust this wolf. She wants your mate and is trying to capitalize on your precarious situation. If we don’t fight her, she will kill us both.* I could feel Seluna’s uneasiness churning inside of me, but I noticed that I didn’t feel as afraid of Ava as Seluna clearly was.

Ava had us cornered, and I could feel my magic starting to build again—just like when Seluna had used my magic against Lucian. If it was anything like last time, she was going to blast Ava, and I wasn’t going to have any control over it at all.

*Go ahead, Caliana. Use our magic. Kill Ava. This is your chance, and no one would blame you. Do you see the look in her eyes, Caliana? She wants to kill you. You’d better take her out first.*

I could feel the temptation inside of me, the sharp desire to kill her, but it wasn’t my desire. It was Seluna’s. I felt my hand rising, and I fought against it, trying to wrench it back down to my side, but Seluna’s will overpowered me easily.

Ava was staring us down and growling, and then Seluna summoned my magic, bringing it further up to the surface. *What are you waiting for, Caliana?! Blast her! She’s going to rip you apart; can’t you see that?* Without much warning, magic pulsed forth from my fingers, and I gained just enough control in time to make her misfire. The magic blast shot wildly from my hands and totaled the fireplace just as Ava lunged and slammed into me, pinning me to the ground beneath her large, heavy paws.

My head struck the ground hard, and I saw a spray of stars before my vision was consumed by a flash of white. Then there was nothing, only silence and darkness. All I could hear was my heartbeat. *But is that my heartbeat? Or is it Seluna’s? Does the goddess even have a heart? She sure doesn’t act like she has one.*

I slowly opened my eyes, wincing against the pain slicing through my head. It took me a moment to realize that I wasn’t in the same room as before. I was in a place I recognized, a place I’d definitely had a vision of before. Even the smell of it brought back memories. *Corpse flowers wilting all around me, and the moon flowers are smoldering. I can smell them so strongly in the air*. I could sense that Seluna knew the place, as well. I heard a muffled voice coming from far away.

“Be my Luna!” It was Lucian. “Be my Luna, my goddess, and together we shall rule!”

“Come back to me!” Xavier said. “You’re mine, Cali. I need you. Come back to me!”

“It’ll be okay, love. I’m here.” It was Greyson. “I’ll never leave you again. I’m here.”

I wanted to call out to my mates, and I tried to get up, but suddenly I was consumed by a sharp burn in my lungs, and I collapsed back down to the ground. My hands, my arms, my legs—my entire body was on fire. I screamed, and the burning stopped. I was back in the room.

Ava was hovering over me. I could see her lips moving, forming words I couldn’t fully hear. She wasn’t in wolf form anymore, which was a relief. She had an almost kind look on her face that I couldn’t ever remember having seen before. She had a soft cloth in her hand and was dabbing the blood from my head with a gentleness that I never would’ve thought she was capable of. “I’m sorry I hurt you, Cali, but we have to get out of here.”

I had a moment of clarity. *I’m myself. I’m Cali again. Is Seluna gone?* I almost breathed a sigh of relief, but then I felt it: the slow drip of Seluna’s return.

*Get away from Ava!* Seluna hissed. *She’s not on your side. She’s trying to trick you—surely you see that!*

Ava grabbed me under my arms and helped me to my feet.

*Stop her!* Seluna screamed. *Stop her now before she turns on you!*

I could feel the push and pull inside of me, and suddenly my hands shot up and wrapped tightly around Ava’s neck. I pulled and fought against Seluna’s hold, but she wouldn’t let go of Ava. My grip tightened around her neck even more until Ava was coughing and clawing at me, fighting against my hold as she scratched at my hands, trying to pry them free.

“I’m sorry, it’s not me!” I wailed. *Seluna, stop it! This isn’t what I want! Stop it, you’re hurting her!*

*That’s the idea, Caliana!* Seluna said.

Ava finally managed to shove me away, and I stumbled back against the wall. “Don’t do that,” she rasped, breathing hard and rubbing her neck where the red print of my hands had begun to form.

I hadn’t meant to attack her, but how could I explain that to her? Especially with our history. Not letting me rest for a moment, Seluna took control again and raised my hands.

*Blast her now, Caliana, while you have the chance!*

*No! I don’t want to!* I tried to resist, but Seluna’s strength was growing stronger by the second, and I was no match for her. I could feel the magic building and churning inside of me once again. I knew that at any moment, Seluna was going to send another blast right at Ava, and this time, I didn’t have the strength to throw off her aim.

Ava drew back and punched me hard in the face, and everything went black.

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When I came to, my head was throbbing in time with my heartbeat, and I was moving through space. *But how? Where am I?* My eyes shot open. I was staring at the floor as it moved past. It took me a few seconds to realize that I was slung over someone’s shoulder. *Is it Xavier?* “Xavier, is that you?” I muttered. We came to a sudden stop.

“Seriously?” Ava said.

“Ava? What’s happening? Are you kidnapping me?”

Ava sighed. “Something like that.” She started walking again, picking up her pace.

*No matter where Ava takes you, Caliana, I’m coming with you*, Seluna’s voice cut through the cloudiness in my mind. *I am you. You are me. Don’t forget that. Don’t let this continue any longer.*

I suddenly felt very tired, as if I could fall asleep and not wake up for hours. I was tired of fighting with Seluna, tired of carrying her around inside of me, tired of resisting her. I just wanted to rest. *If you’re me, Seluna, then why don’t you stop it? I don’t have the strength.* My head was pounding. “Ugh. Why the fuck did you punch me, Ava?”

“I had no choice, Cali. Did you see what your little goddess roommate was doing to me? She tried to choke me to death… unless that was you?” Ava said, stopping again.

“It wasn’t me,” I said quickly.

“Good. I thought so. Just keep quiet, and let’s get out of here in one piece, okay? I think we’re almost to the exit.”

“Why are you doing this, Ava?” I couldn’t wrap my head around her actually sticking her neck out to help me. There was no reason for her to do it, really, especially since with me out of the picture, she’d have Xavier all to herself.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Ava grumbled.

A harsh voice called out from behind us. “Stop!”

With much difficulty, I lifted my head and saw a fierce-looking Vanguard heading straight for us.

“Put the goddess down right now!” the Vanguard commanded.

Ava stopped and backed away. I wondered if she was going to shift. A new wave of panic rippled through me. What would happen to me if she did? Not only would I probably hit the ground—hard—but would Seluna gain the upper hand and take complete control again?

Without warning, the Vanguard shifted so fast that I was stunned. At the same moment, a rush of air whizzed by me. The Vanguard werewolf howled in pain and collapsed on the floor with an arrow sticking out of its side.

Ava spun around, and we came face-to-face with Artemis, who had her crossbow aimed right at Ava. “Release my sister. Now.”

# Episode 2638

“Release my sister. Now.” Artemis aimed her bow straight at Ava. Her voice was cool and sharp.

Where the hell did Ava think she was taking me, anyway? She’d given no explanation as to why she was kidnapping me, and I’d already had enough kidnapping for a lifetime, thanks. Still, anywhere was better than this palace.

The sounds of fighting were growing more and more intense in the distance. I was still too woozy to argue with Ava, mainly due to hanging upside down over her shoulder and being possessed by a (currently lurking) goddess, but I still managed a huff.

“You should probably do what my sister says.” I smacked Ava’s leg weakly, and she growled.

“You idiots,” Ava snapped. “We don’t have time for this—they’re getting closer! If we don’t get out now, we might not get another chance!”

Artemis narrowed her eyes at Ava. Honestly, she was terrifying. Good for her.

“Put my sister down, or I’ll shoot,” Artemis declared.

“I’d listen to her,” I said, yawning. Why was I yawning? Probably because all the blood was rushing down to my head? Regardless, I added, “Artemis will shoot you, and she’s got perfect aim, *so*—”

The guards were now coming down the hall toward us. That was probably not good.

“You’re both being stupid,” Ava hissed. “I’m trying to save you. I’m on your side.”

I snorted, still hanging upside down over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Why the hell would Ava want to help me? What was her angle? Ava only helped people when it was to her advantage—or if it involved her one and only obsession, a.k.a. Xavier.

*Do I really care about her motivations, though? If she’s trying to save me, why not let her? Hell, even if she’s planning on double-crossing me, I wouldn’t even care as long as it gets me out of this place.* My thoughts were swimming; I could barely keep a single idea in my head.

I felt confused. My thoughts were jumbled, and the wooziness was undercut by something sharper. My head was starting to throb, like I was getting a migraine. What was I just thinking about?

“I don’t have time for this bullshit,” Ava said, and started running. With me still hung over her shoulder. I groaned and choked at the impact of being carried around like a sack of flour.

But I, of course, still had the wherewithal to smack Ava on the ass and loudly ask the important question, “So, how are you so strong?”

“Stop before I shoot!” Artemis yelled, her voice echoing down the hallway. Someone had definitely heard us by now—

*ZING!*

Artemis has fired the crossbow, and the arrow was coming toward us. Artemis’s aim was perfect, so I was pretty sure she’d be hitting Ava’s other shoulder or something, but still, something about Ava getting shot by a probably silver-tipped arrow didn’t sit right with me for some reason.

I started to scream without even thinking.

“*No!*”

All of a sudden, my voice was muffled.

The arrow slowed, along with Ava’s running, and it felt like I was underwater. Every sound around me was murky, my vision blurry. The faraway noises of the fighting and shouting guards reverberated through my head. Everything dimmed around me—the overly ornate walls, the paintings, the hallway, every inch of the space…

Except for the arrow and Artemis.

I knew that my sister meant well, that she was trying to protect me, but I couldn’t just let Ava die while she was trying to help me. And there was another reason why I couldn’t let her die—I couldn’t remember what that reason was, but I felt it in my bones. I needed to divert the arrow, but just as I fought to summon my magic, my headache intensified.

My magic slipped away, and in the same instant, I heard Seluna’s voice in my head.

*I’m back. Did you miss me, my dear?*

She said that like it was a good thing when literally nobody had invited her, but anyway.

*Let the arrow hit its mark, Caliana*, Seluna said in that soothing tone that reminded me of a snake. *Imagine—wouldn’t it be better for you if Ava were dead? She wouldn’t be able to confuse Xavier anymore, and their annoying mate bond would be permanently severed…* Seluna laughed. *And Xavier would belong to you and only you.*

Seluna was making some good points. Alarmingly enough. I’d thought the same thing before. If Ava were gone, Xavier and I would finally be free of her nonsense and drama, with one less conflict to worry about.

*No more Ava is starting to sound very good, so maybe that arrow should—*

A howl in the distance interrupted my train of thought. And then I finally remembered the real reason why I’d wanted to stop the arrow. Without Ava, Xavier might not be able to control his wolf. Last time, when Ava had died, his wolf had left him.

*What would happen to him now? What if he gets stuck, unable to shift?*

I wasn’t going to let that happen. As much as I hated to admit it, Xavier needed Ava right now, and I couldn’t let her die.

*Caliana, don’t you dare—*

I managed to ignore Seluna, fighting her control. With a raised hand, and with just enough power to pull it off, I felt magic slip through my fingertips and charge toward the arrow. Purple fire engulfed it before it changed its course and slammed into a nearby wall.

*I did it!*

For someone who was possessed, I’d done pretty good, if I did say so myself. My magic seemed to agree, because time finally picked up, and I no longer felt like I was swimming underwater. My head cleared, only for my whole body to be jolted when Ava came to a sudden stop.

*Ouch!*

This was so uncomfortable, though.

“Did you just try and *shoot* me?” Ava spun around to face Artemis, glaring at the arrow that had hit the wall and dropped to the floor.

“Consider that a warning shot,” Artemis said coldly, loading up her crossbow again.

“Don’t you see?” Ava yelled. “If I put Cali down, the Vanguards will capture her! She’s too weak to run.”

Artemis’s crossbow was still pointed at Ava, and I was feeling a bit woozy again, so I couldn’t tell Artemis to just listen to Ava—who was very annoying, but probably also correct at this specific moment. Mercifully, Artemis finally seemed to reach that conclusion on her own.

She lowered her bow. “Then I’ll carry her.”

Ava scoffed. “I don’t care who carries her—you want her, take her.” In a swift movement that gave me whiplash, she swung me onto my feet. My stomach lurched, like it was ready to throw up, but I shoved that feeling down and wobbled, my head pounding.

“That was fucking…” I swallowed, blinking slowly. “*Unnecessary*.”

“Sorry for not being gentler when there’s a bunch of Vanguard guards literally around the corner,” Ava told me wryly.

She was right again—I could hear their shouts getting closer.

“Cali!” Artemis rushed toward me, just as Seluna’s voice invaded my head all over again.

*Don’t trust Artemis!*

*No. That line may have worked with me about Ava, but you are way off the mark here, goddess, or whatever the hell you are. Artemis is my sister!* I snapped in my head.

*Artemis won’t understand how we need each other*, Seluna said. *She’ll want to destroy us.*

*Maybe she’ll want to destroy* you*, but I think she’ll be fine with me. How about that?* I replied.

“Cali!” Artemis rasped, pulling my arm across her shoulder, dragging me away from Ava with a glare. “Are you okay?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but Seluna squeezed my heart, effectively shutting me up.

“No more chitchat,” Ava snapped, looking over her shoulder. “We have to go!”

The moment she finished her sentence, the Vanguard guards shot around the corner.

“Stop!” one of them shouted as they started to close in. “Prince Lucian only wants the goddess—nobody has to get hurt!”

*See?* Seluna said in my head. *Listen to them. They will protect us. Don’t be fooled by your sister and Ava.*

I felt sick. Seluna was using me as her puppet, trying to trick me into forgetting what Lucian had done to me against my will—the ceremony, the kisses…

*They won’t protect me*, I told Seluna. *This isn’t about me. Lucian doesn’t want me—he wants a moon goddess. He wants you while you’re taking over my body, and that’s just horrific!*

Seluna gasped, all offended, which was hilarious and also terrifying. But I didn’t have the time to scream or start sobbing over my predicament, because the guards were still approaching. Artemis wasn’t having it, though.

“Stay right where you are!” she declared, turning her bow on them. “These are silver-tipped arrows!”

One of the guards dared to scoff and move toward her.

*ZING!*

The arrow tore into his leg, and he howled. Artemis was distracted for a second, but it was enough for another guard to lunge forward. Suddenly, a pair of arms were wrapped around my waist, grabbing me as I fought weakly.

The guard who’d grabbed me laughed. “Gotcha!”

“Oh, for god’s sake!” I heard Ava’s voice, and Artemis’s arrows going *ZING!* And then Ava’s face twisted as she partially shifted, her arm morphing into a wolf’s as she slashed at the asshole who’d grabbed me.

He groaned and stumbled. A second later, I was slammed against a wall, pain shooting through me like lightning.

*Oh god, that hurts! Did I break something? Is my spine intact? Is my head okay? Is there blood anywhere?*

“Cali!” Artemis’s voice sliced through my consciousness as I fought to focus on her face. “Are you okay?”

I opened my mouth to speak, to tell her about my pain, but nothing came out. Instead, it was Seluna who answered for me.

“I’m fine,” she breathed.

She had taken over once more.

# Episode 2639

**Greyson**

I’d almost forgotten how massive Lucian’s wolf was.

I’d known that from the very beginning, since I’d seen him that one time in the forest in his wolf form. He hadn’t shifted in front of me again since then, so even though I’d never fucking admit it out loud, his size remained a shock.

That didn’t matter, though.

The bigger they were, the harder they fell, and I’d faced big opponents before—in battle, and in the ring too. The stakes were much higher right now, anyway. Cali was in danger, and there was no doubt in my mind that I would die before letting Lucian get away.

I was ready to die today for Cali’s sake, and if I had to take Lucian with me, then, in my opinion, that was a pretty fine way to go.

I’d kill him before I’d let him kiss Cali again.

This had gone on for far too long already. It had gone on for so long that there was part of me that felt ashamed for not saving Cali sooner. Before the ceremony.

Before things reached this point of madness.

“Go find Cali,” I told Xavier calmly as Lucian watched us. “I’ll take care of this.”

My brother’s wolf eyes widened. *Greyson, he’s huge. That’s—*

I turned to my brother. “Do as I say. *Find her*, brother.”

Whatever Xavier saw in my face made him pause. I was his Alpha, and even though he’d never admitted it out loud, we both knew it was the truth. He took off without another look at Lucian.

I, however, locked my gaze onto Lucian, shifting back into my wolf and feeling the power rush through my body, every muscle ready for battle.

*Bold of you to send your brother away, Greyson.* Lucian’s voice was loud in my head, his eyes gleaming with menace. *There goes any chance you had of winning this fight. Two against one would’ve been your only shot at getting out of here alive.*

We circled each other, our gazes locked as I imagined his blood splattered against the walls.

The image made me feel good.

*That’s rich coming from someone who always hides behind his guards like a weakling*, I replied. *You’re not the Vanguard pack’s Alpha. You’re the Vanguard pack’s coward, who brought my mate here against her will.*

The humiliation burned Lucian, and I smiled.

He growled and lunged first, straight for my leg. I just barely evaded him—he might have been a princeling in human form, but he was fast and powerful as a wolf. Lucian was enraged—my words had done that to him—and he went straight for my neck, my eyes, my stomach—all the sensitive, fleshy bits that would make incapacitating me or making me bleed to death a real possibility.

Lucian was a determined fighter, but the win had never been my priority.

I just had to stall him long enough for Xavier to get to Cali.

I let him tire himself out, which was the best strategy for an opponent his size. I let him rough me up, let him think he had the upper hand. He managed to bite my shoulder, my leg, and then—

My claws got so deep into his chest that he yelped and jumped back, his eyes wide with shock.

*I’ve killed plenty of fighters just like you, Lucian. You’re not special*, I said, snarling and spitting blood. The pain was sharp, throbbing through my body, but it was nothing in comparison to the agony of not having Cali with me. *If you give me Cali right now*, *I’ll let you live.*

I was bluffing. I didn’t know if I could kill him without dying too, but Lucian’s chest wound was gaping enough that I saw a flash of fear in his eyes. But then, he laughed.

*You don’t understand, do you?* Lucian sneered as we kept on circling each other. *Seluna has returned, and I will not allow her to be taken from me!*

*I don’t give a fuck about Seluna*, I said. *You can do whatever you want with your moon goddess—but not Cali. Leave her out of this!*

Lucian snapped his teeth at me, his pace picking up as we circled each other, as if to create the illusion of a chase. *It’s too late for that, Greyson. Seluna has chosen Caliana, so I have chosen her too. That is the way of fate—it is out of our control. It was always Cali’s destiny to become a vessel for something greater.*

*Cali hasn’t chosen Seluna*, I said. I sounded cold, even to my own ears, and I knew that the way my anger worked, the explosion was nearby. *You never gave her a choice, never explained what was going to happen.*

*But it did happen*, Lucian said, *and there’s nothing you or anyone else can do about it.*

I caught my breath, readying myself for my next attack.

*There is one thing I can do*, I said. *I can kill you.*

*I understand this is a matter of honor, Greyson*, Lucian said. His wolf was panting. We stared at each other, completely still as he spoke.

*The Vanguard pack has become as powerful as it is because I have won several fights with Alphas just like you. Each time, they met the same fate.* His wolf’s teeth showed, red with my blood. *The defeated Alphas’ packs swore their loyalty to me, you know. Just like the Redwood pack will when I kill you.*

*That’s a great story*, I said, *but this time it’s going to have a different ending. Even if I’m defeated, I know the Redwood pack will never submit to you. Xavier will come after you. And if Xavier is killed, Rishika will be next.*

Lucian wasn’t moving.

*The thing about the Redwood pack, Lucian, is that there are enough formidable fighters in it to challenge you for years to come. You’ll always have to deal with us. Always.* I took a step closer, looking at him directly—the kind of blatant invasion of space would enrage any Alpha.

His eyes flashed dangerously, and he snarled. *You may not want to submit to the Vanguard pack, but Cali, through Seluna, already has!*

I froze. My eyes narrowed. *Cali would never submit to you.*

Lucian laughed once more. *It wasn’t a problem to have Seluna in Caliana’s body, you see… an attractive package. We were still able to consummate our love and the future Luna bond.*

The breath left my lungs in one fierce gust, and I felt hollowed out inside.

The thought of Lucian putting one hand on Cali’s body against her will had hatred searing through me. The emotion was scorching enough that it turned into a sound—a pounding heartbeat that echoed through my ears and rushed through my body, waking up the kind of instinct that I’d always tried to avoid, to ignore, to suppress.

The kind of instinct that made me my father’s son.

It was a monster’s instinct, and right now, I welcomed it.

Xavier was supposed to be the angry one between the two of us, but nobody had seen *me* at my worst. Nobody wanted to see me at my worst, because they wouldn’t live to talk about it.

*I’m going to tear your head off and feed your lifeless body to your pack till there’s none of you left*, I told Lucian.

I said the words coldly, calmly, shockingly enough that Lucian froze, stunned—and that was my opportunity.

I leapt right over Lucian and attacked him from the rear, tearing into his nape as his wolf howled in pain.

*This is for Cali, you sick son of a bitch.* I slammed him down, and he made a sound that reminded me of the kind of horror I’d only seen at war.

He shoved backward, his force enough to make me stumble—he really was a strong motherfucker—and then I heard another howl.

From a different wolf.

His eyes flickered toward the source of the sound, and I was distracted by the roar too—distracted enough that Lucian snapped his teeth at me after hesitating for a second. His canines sank into the place where my neck met my shoulder, close enough to the artery that blood spurted everywhere.

My vision was blurred by my own blood, but I still didn’t stop. I banged my head against Lucian’s, fighting to push him off me—

A mass slammed right into the two of us.

I recognized Aysel’s wolf instantly.

I tasted blood, I saw blood just like I saw fucking *red*, but I could still think. Whose side was Aysel on? Maybe I could use her to get Lucian to back down and then go straight for his throat. Aysel stepped between us, and I realized that she was *defending* me.

*Aysel!* Lucian snarled. *Step away—do not interfere!*

She huffed. *Are you telling me this as my brother?*

*I’m your Alpha. Do not question me*, Lucian snapped.

I moved behind Aysel, ready to go through her just to give myself a clear path to nail Lucian, but she noticed. She adjusted her stance so that she remained between us, and she told her brother, *You can do whatever you want with whomever you want, but the Redwood Alpha is mine. We had an agreement, or did you forget?*

Lucian snapped his teeth at her. *That’s all over now!*

Aysel’s wolf howled, stepping fully in front of me before she lowered herself into a fighting stance. Glaring up at her brother, she growled, *Greyson is* mine*.*

# Episode 2640

So Seluna was currently not only sharing my body, but she was now actually pretending to BE me. Saying things that I was supposed to be saying. To my sister. I was literally a wolf goddess in sheep’s clothing. Or was I?

Not the sheep part—I definitely was a sheep in comparison to her, let’s not kid ourselves here—I meant the wolf moon goddess part. Seluna had used a strange fire-like magic during the ceremony, and her burning handprints had destroyed my dress. Was that normal for a moon goddess?

*Do not dare question who I am*, Seluna snapped in my head.

*I won’t allow you to harm my sister or anyone in my family!* I snapped back.

Seluna snorted. *But you can’t do anything about it, can you? You might have had a moment of control when you were hit in the head, but I’m back. And you will never wrest control from me again.*

I fought to overcome Seluna’s hold, trying to find my voice and warn Artemis. *You’re not talking to me!* I wanted to shout. *It’s Seluna!*

But the words never escaped my mouth. Seluna squeezed my heart, as if to punish me for even considering defying her and becoming something more than her puppet. The pain was sharp, and I stumbled.

“You’re not fine,” Artemis said, steadying me. Her eyes roamed my face, full of worry. “What’s wrong?”

Seluna was the one to answer. To lie. “I’m just a little dazed from hitting my head. I’ll be fine.”

“We need to leave before more of them gather,” Ava said as the last guard dropped to the floor. I jumped internally in shock to see the body fall, but Seluna didn’t even flinch. “We can get out this way.”

Ava marched off, and Artemis followed. I wanted to do the same fucking thing—mainly because I could hear voices and howling getting closer—but I froze.

Seluna forced me to stop. She forced me to tell Artemis, “You two should go. I’m staying.”

*Oh my god, let me go!* I screamed inside my head. My body wasn’t listening, though, and if we were captured, I’d be returned to Lucian like a lamb to the slaughter. And who the fuck knew what would happen to Artemis and Ava?

*You need to let me go—this can’t be what you want!* I said. *Why on earth would you want to be anywhere near Lucian? He’s an evil megalomaniac!*

Seluna was also an evil megalomaniac, but I was trying to turn her against Lucian here. It wasn’t working at all, though, because I could sense that Seluna wasn’t taking me seriously. It made sense, really—why the fuck would she listen to the puppet/flesh bag she’d acquired to do her horrible bidding?

She could hear every second of my thoughts, but I had no idea what she was thinking—why couldn’t it be the reverse? It just wasn’t fair.

*Oh, Caliana*, Seluna replied in my head. *You cannot listen to my thoughts because you’re a weak Fae halfling. It’s a shame the* due destini *was wasted on a sub-par creature like you.*

*I’m not inferior!*

*Don’t worry, dear*, Seluna said patronizingly. *I will use your body to its maximum potential. My presence will be a step up.*

*You’re delusional*, I snarked, *and I think there’s no greater evidence to support that than the fact that you’re indulging Lucian. Why would you go through any of this to be with such a monstrous—not to mention super fucking annoying—man?*

Seluna internally laughed, and her true reasons were clear in my head now*.*

*You want to become Luna*, I said. *That’s what all this is about.*

*Ding, ding, ding! You finally remembered!* Seluna laughed.

I scowled internally. *Being a Luna isn’t really all it’s cracked up to be. Not with the Vanguard pack. They’re pretty traditional, and for a traditional pack, being Luna just means having the Alpha’s kids. Lucian strikes me as someone who’s gonna want a bunch of them to carry his supposed royal bloodline… That can’t be what you want, right?*

Seluna snorted, and the idea of having kids with someone as horrible as Lucian made me gag.

“Cali?” Artemis asked, shaking my shoulders. “You sure you’re okay?”

I realized she and Ava had been hissing at each other the entire time I’d been debating with Seluna—what they were fighting about, I wasn’t sure.

Meanwhile, Seluna kept speaking in my head. *There are, indeed, some things to work out—but with the position of Luna comes great promise.*

*But you know all these drawbacks*, I pointed out. *You chose to return to human form after interacting with Lucian—you must know how his pack operates. Lucian’s only interest in having a Luna is likely so he can have a family. How can you just ignore all that? Do you think he’ll let you get away with it?*

Seluna stayed silent, and Artemis’s voice broke through my concentration.

“It doesn’t matter what she says, of course she’s coming with us! She’s not thinking clearly—she must be more affected than she’s letting on.”

Ava eyed me as the voices from around the corner got louder. She nodded curtly. “We need to get going right now—get her out of the palace before we’re spotted.”

“The farther away Cali is from Lucian, the better,” Artemis agreed.

“You should leave me here; it’s not—” Seluna started to argue, still fucking pretending to be me, but Artemis wasn’t having it. She dragged me down the hall despite Seluna’s protests, and I was kind of impressed with how strong and determined she was.

I was ready to bet Seluna hadn’t foreseen that Artemis would be suspicious of her bullshit. And if she tried to use any of my magic now, Artemis would realize that Seluna had taken over fully, and that would spell out trouble for her.

I laughed at her. *Take that! You’re trapped!*

*Shut up*, Seluna snarled.

We continued down the hall, Artemis herding my body and ignoring Seluna’s protests. But as we come to a downward stairwell, we heard a bunch of running steps coming in our direction.

And then Seluna was back at it with her bullshit.

“You have to save yourselves!” she told Artemis and Ava yet again.

“Cali—”

“No!” Seluna told Artemis urgently. “It’s the only way. Lucian doesn’t want you; he only wants me, and there are way too many guards for you two to take on! You have to protect yourselves!”

“There’s no way I’m leaving you,” Artemis said, her voice sharp. She pulled a blade out. “We’ll fight our way to the exit.”

Ava’s expression was thunderous. “Hate to break it to you, but Cali’s right. We won’t stand a chance—there are too many.”

Artemis glared at her. “I’m not leaving my sister here with that creepy, disgusting—”

“We’re not leaving her,” Ava snapped. She looked down at the stairwell, then over her shoulder. The ruckus of stumbling feet getting closer made the ground beneath me rattle. “You and Cali can keep going,” she told Artemis, “and I’ll hold the Vanguards off for as long as I can.”

I was stunned. Was Ava risking her life for me? What the fuck? But also, WOW.

Artemis didn’t even blink at Ava’s words. She just nodded and pulled me down the stairs. I fought to look back over my shoulder, where Ava had to be waiting for the Vanguards like a scapegoat, but Seluna didn’t let me.

“We’ll never make it,” she told Artemis as Artemis pulled me with her, step after step. She sounded forlorn, devastated. “I’m just putting you in danger! I’ll never forgive myself if something happens to you, Artemis!”

Oh my fucking god, this woman-goddess-asshole was such a great actress. She deserved an Oscar. And also some poison, because she had to die and leave me alone.

“Maybe we won’t make it outside,” Artemis told Seluna, still gripping her hand and dragging my body down the stairs. “But we can try.”

I wanted to yell at Artemis, *You’re right, and you’re doing great, sweetie! It isn’t me telling you all this bullshit!*

Seluna scoffed. *Oh, but it is you. You are whatever I say and do.*

The anger I felt was one with despair as we hit the ground floor. Artemis was basically dragging me by now, breathing hard. “Can you at least try to run? How much are you hurting?”

I shook my head, panting as well. Seluna was fighting me every inch of the way, and I was exhausted. But Artemis wasn’t going to give up—her jaw set, she pulled my arm over her shoulder and just kept on pushing me toward the exit by the corner.

Instantly, I felt a sense of anxiety. Why? I should’ve been relieved—I was with my sister, and we were almost out.

*It’s you, isn’t it?* I asked Seluna*. You’re afraid.*

*I’m afraid of nothing!* Seluna hissed in my head, and I felt her gathering power through my body. She was cornered now. She was about to use the last weapon in her arsenal—throwing all caution to the wind by blasting Artemis.

“Artemis…” I groaned, fighting against Seluna’s will as my sister pushed me toward the door. I wanted to scream, *Run! Seluna is going to force me to hurt you!*

The magic was gleaming around my fingertips, and Artemis noticed. She gasped. “Cali? What’s happening?”

I didn’t have time to answer.

“Stop right there!” said a loud voice. Artemis spun around—pulling me with her, as I was barely standing—and we came face-to-face with a group of guards. “By the order of His Highness, Prince Lucian, you are forbidden to leave this palace!”

*POP!*

The guards shrieked at the loud, echoing sound. It would’ve been hilarious if I hadn’t also been terrified by the fact that someone had literally fucking materialized out of thin air. But then I realized who it was.

Big Mac, Okorie, and Kira had appeared and were standing between us and the guards.

Big Mac twisted around to face Artemis and me, her face grave. “You two are coming with us.”

# Episode 2641

**Xavier**

I ran through the long corridors of the Vanguard palace, my mind still on Greyson. I didn’t like leaving him behind to fend off Lucian all by himself. Greyson was one hell of a fighter, but neither of us had ever gone head-to-head with the princeling while he was shifted. I knew that Greyson was strong, but Lucian’s wolf was massive.

Should I have stayed back to help?

Two Evers brothers against one princeling would’ve made for much better odds—that was certain. Especially when there was no doubt that Lucian would put up a fight, and we didn’t exactly know how good he’d be at it.

Greyson had told me to leave, though. Defying his direct orders wouldn’t simply have meant defying the Alpha—which should’ve been my role and not Greyson’s, but I wasn’t gonna ride that train of thought right now—it also would’ve meant that neither of us would’ve been looking for Cali.

Greyson had asked me to go find Cali, because she was my mate. His mate.

*Our* mate, the woman we both adored.

Getting Cali out of this fucking castle and then getting Seluna out of her had to be my top priority. Even if it cost Greyson his life. I didn’t want to think about what my brother dying would mean, though. What Cali would think of it—of me looking for her, and Greyson staying back like a noble sacrifice to Lucian.

I refused to ponder the possibility that Greyson would become a martyr in Cali’s and the pack’s eyes, or wonder how I would feel if anything happened to him on my watch. I couldn’t worry about Greyson, because the idea of Cali getting hurt even further had taken over my brain.

I kept running, sniffing the air, fighting to pick up Cali’s scent again. The palace was too damn big to do a room-to-room search. It would be like finding a needle in a haystack. She could be anywhere, on any floor, in any corner of this massive establishment.

I was gonna find her if it was the last thing—

“Stop! You!” A guard got in my way, pointing at me. “You don’t have permission to be here!”

Good lord, I was *not* in the mood for this bullshit.

I lunged at the guard, who didn’t even have time to shift before I went for his throat, claws digging in. He screamed in pain before I slammed him against the wall, tossing him to the side. He lay there, half-shifted and unconscious, probably dead. But the scent of his blood became secondary as I raced ahead.

I finally picked up Cali’s scent, and my wolf stirred in relief.

Was he worried about Cali, then? Was he as eager to see her as I was, to make sure that she was okay? Had he finally remembered the strength of our mate bond with Cali? Had the stubborn dickhead realized that she was the only reason why he’d come back in the first place?

I inhaled her scent, praying it would help my wolf refocus, until I turned a corner and halted. There were three guards there, all of them facing me, their eyes widening. My wolf growled.

*That’s it*, I thought. *They want to keep you away from Cali. But you won’t let them, will you?*

My wolf roared on the inside. The guards yelled at me, one after the other.

“You’re not allowed here!”

“It’s one of the Redwoods!”

“Prince Lucian forbids you from entering his castle!”

One of the guards shifted while the other two stayed human, and the odds weren’t in my favor. But nothing would get between me and my mate. If my wolf had had any questions before, he didn’t now. When I growled and charged at the shifted one of the trio, I did it with no hesitation.

It was like a mercenary mission—distract, evade, go for the bigger threat first and then deal with the rest. The guard who’d shifted was a good enough fighter, but he didn’t know when to slow down, and as I went on the defensive, he lost steam. The other two guards came at me at the same time, but I slammed the one into the other as if they were bowling pins.

The shifted guard charged at me, then, and when my teeth dug into his neck, he howled. I tore through his jugular before he fell back, eyes wide, blood spraying everywhere. I didn’t let his blood distract me, though—I sniffed the air, aching to trace Cali’s scent again.

I had to run down the hallway and jump over a staircase, head deeper into the castle, just to escape the scent of blood. When I got to the staircase, I inhaled and picked up her scent once more. A sense of relief burned through me—she was close. Could I mind link with her?

*Cali? Cali, can you hear me? It’s Xavier.*

There was no response. I didn’t give up, though. As I ran down the stairs, I picked up Artemis’s scent—so similar to Cali’s, but also different. Artemis’s presence was really encouraging, actually. She had to be helping Cali escape, and she’d have a great shot at it, too. She was ruthless, and she’d been in the castle before.

And then, right on cue, I heard Artemis’s scream.

“Get them!”

My heart started throbbing as I panted, my wolf howling on the inside the moment I looked up ahead. A group of guards were going after Big Mac, Okorie, and Kira. Behind them was Artemis.

And Cali.

*Cali.*

My wolf’s satisfaction went through the roof. My mate looked pale and worn, and I felt sick to my stomach.

*Baby, I’m right here! Are you okay?* I asked her, but there was nothing.

Nothing.

What the fuck was going on?

I needed to figure it out right now, so I growled and prepared to charge at the guards. Big Mac heard, turning to face me. In the split second it took me to lunge, she’d raised her hands and blasted the assholes.

I ducked to avoid getting hit by the debris and actual bodies that went flying. I was ready to run over when Big Mac nodded at me. She grabbed Cali’s arm, and before I could move another inch, everyone vanished.

For real.

Big Mac, Cali, Okorie, Artemis, Kira—they all vanished in the blink of an eye. I freaked out for a second before I realized that we’d gotten Cali out. We’d achieved what we’d come for, and she was safe for now. Big Mac would protect her until I got back to the pack house. The Seluna problem was something the witches had to deal with, anyway.

My brain started working again—I knew I needed to help Greyson and get the rest of the pack out of here. Duty called, and even though it pained me to stay away from Cali, I knew it was what she’d want me to do.

First, I retraced my steps to the banquet hall.

Hopefully Greyson was feasting on Lucian by now, but I had to make sure and help him if needed. As I ran, I searched for any traces Jay, Rishika, and the others in the hallways. We all had to get together—the sooner we got back to the pack house, the better. If Lucian was still alive and found out that we’d taken Cali, there was no doubt that he’d send the Vanguards to try and get her back.

His audacity was so fucking unbelievable that it made my fury roar. The urge to slice through his throat had always been there, but today it was front and center. There was part of me that wished that I could turn back time and fight him myself.

How fucking dared he do all this to Cali? To my mate?

As we approached the banquet hall, my wolf growled. I thought it was because of my thoughts regarding Lucian and Cali, but then I realized it was because he’d picked up a different scent.

*Ava.*

No. I had to go find the others, tell them that they could retreat and help Greyson. No, no, *no*. But my wolf pushed me to turn back, down the corridor where we’d scented Ava. I was about to ignore him when I heard her yelp.

A howl of distress, of urgency.

Ava was in real trouble.

My wolf was going nuts, pushing me to help her, to save her. She’d chosen to help the Redwood pack, and leaving her here would be dishonorable. I wished I could do it, though, just to free myself from the madness that had been going on for far too long. But my wolf—and my fucking conscience—got to me.

*Damn it.*

Growling under my breath, I changed direction, turning back to follow her scent down yet another overly ornate corridor.

The scene I discovered made me freeze.

Ava was bleeding, pinned down by a large wolf. He bared his teeth, ready to rip into her neck.

It was Andrei.

The bastard never knew when to quit.

Before I could take him by surprise, Andrei turned. *Good to see you, Xavier.*

He pressed down harder on Ava’s neck, and she yelped again. Her eyes were wide, panicked when she twisted to face me, and I felt a pang of alarm and worry for her. My wolf was restless, whining and furious as I realized that she was bleeding pretty badly from several wounds. Andrei had his share of wounds too, though, so she must’ve put up one hell of a fight.

She’d always been a fighter.

Andrei’s eyes met mine, his face full of threat. *You have a choice.*

# Episode 2642

I felt sick, somehow—was this nausea mine or Seluna’s? Or both? Oh my god, I hated not knowing if what I felt belonged to me!

“Let’s get out of here.” Big Mac grabbed my hand, pulling me closer, and the giant ring Lucian had given Seluna flew off her hand. Not a good fit, huh? What a tragedy to lose it.

*I’m glad to see that I can still be a sarcastic little shit, even while possessed.*

And then, I blinked.

In a second, we were back in the front yard of the pack house.

I almost tripped, and Big Mac steadied me, scowling. “Cali?”

“Yes, it’s me,” Seluna said, taking a deep breath. Big Mac narrowed her eyes at her. Meanwhile, I was screaming inside my head.

*Oh god… Where’s my sister? Is she stuck back at the Vanguard palace? Artemis!*

Right on cue, Artemis popped in with Okorie and Kira, and I breathed an internal sigh of relief. Artemis was okay, just casually dusting herself off. But what about…

*What about Xavier?*

I could’ve sworn I’d seen his wolf for a moment, just before Big Mac had blasted the guards and blipped me away. He was a big strong Alpha—he had to be okay, right? RIGHT?

“We need to go back,” Artemis said after checking me over. She stared at Big Mac and added, “Rishika and the others are still at the palace, I’m sure of it.”

Greyson had to be there, too. Of course he was. I could just imagine him roaming the halls, infuriated yet still doing what he thought was the right thing. Which in this case was probably to fight Lucian while Xavier looked for me. That would be so Greyson.

And I was fucking terrified for him.

The Vanguard pack was in full attack mode. Greyson had never fought Lucian before, and Lucian’s wolf was massive.

*Greyson is a super skilled fighter, though*, I reminded myself. *He used to get paid to fight—he’s incredible! Lucian is just a big evil monster.*

That… did not sound very encouraging.

I just hoped that wherever Greyson was, Xavier would find him, and then the two of them would get the hell out of there. I needed them both safe and sound, with me.

Even though I wasn’t even myself.

I could just feel Seluna scanning the yard and the pack house, her interest piqued.

“… don’t worry,” Big Mac was telling Artemis. “Once the pack know Cali is safe, they’ll come back to the house. Xavier will tell them we got her out.”

Artemis frowned. “But once the Vanguards know that Cali’s here, we’ll become a target. They’re going to come at us hard.” She eyed all three of the witches. “We need to prepare a defense—are you up for it?”

Okorie raised an eyebrow. “You mean, am I up for conjuring a bunch of protection spells for a werewolf pack?”

Kira smacked his arm. Big Mac glared at him. “Don’t make me go get Marta, Okorie.”

As if he hadn’t even heard Big Mac’s comment, Okorie deadpanned, “The answer is that yes—I *am* ready to help as much as I can. Who’d have thought? Not me!”

Oh my god, what a *dick*.

Kira rolled her eyes. “We’ll put some charms on the house, craft a few defensive spells.”

Big Mac looked off into the distance. “You better hurry up—we don’t know how much time we have to get this done.” Before anyone could speak—probably Okorie, since he just couldn’t read the vibes—Big Mac grabbed my arm, jerking it. Maybe she wasn’t totally buying Seluna’s act?

“You’re coming with me.”

Honestly—and I couldn’t believe I was thinking this—I was looking forward to being alone with Big Mac. If anyone would be able to sniff out Seluna, it was her. The weird part, though, was that Seluna wasn’t struggling as Big Mac led her—me—up to the house.

Either way, I couldn’t stop myself from feeling, like, all tingly and hopeful.

*The witches brought me home! They can help! Even Okorie agreed to help!*

I knew that this was the last thing Seluna wanted to hear, but I couldn’t help but feel much better after returning home. I was so grateful that the pack had come after me.

The distance from Lucian felt absolutely exhilarating.

*Is that me feeling that way, though? Or is it Seluna? Or both of us? Maybe we’re agreeing on something for once…*

“You!” Big Mac barked the moment we walked into the room, and Seluna jumped a little.

“What?” she sputtered.

“Don’t try anything,” Big Mac declared. And with a wave of her hands, my wrists were bound together.

*OMG, badass!* Big Mac had to know something was up with me. Would this be over sooner rather than later? Because I’d definitely prefer the “sooner” option. The thought of Seluna using my magic, and some of her own—whatever that had been, when she’d changed Lucian’s memories—against the Redwood pack and my friends and family terrified me.

The memory of almost blasting Artemis made my head ache, as if the guilt I felt was finally truly mine, and Seluna was allowing me to have a physical reaction to it. I expected her to scold me over it, though, like she always seemed to. But instead, what she did was focus on Big Mac, her voice loud.

“Oh my god, thank you! Please don’t let her hurt anyone!” she rasped.

Big Mac squinted. “Cali?”

“Yes, it’s me!” Seluna said extremely convincingly, because she was a fucking Academy Award-winning actress apparently.“I have control right now, but I don’t know when Seluna might take it back.”

*Oh, wow.* Wow*. Did Seluna just take my thoughts and use them to pretend to be me? Shit!*

Seluna laughed in my head. *That’s exactly what I did, Cali*, she said. *And there’s nothing you can do about it.*

I was beyond pissed off, but at least I was back in familiar territory. And if Big Mac was right—which she usually was—my mates should be back soon. Plus, she also had enough awareness to keep an eye on me.

And Seluna.

*I don’t like it when you feel optimistic*, Seluna informed me. *Rein it in.*

I internally bristled while Big Mac led me into the house, shooting me a glare or two, and then my mom came into my line of sight.

“Cali!”

*Mom!*

I felt like crying, but Seluna swallowed it all down.

“You’re okay, you—”

“Don’t do that,” Big Mac said, raising her hand in a “halt” motion in front of my mom before she could touch me. “Don’t touch her.”

My mom glared. “Don’t tell me I can’t hug my own daughter!”

“She might be pretending. We don’t know that she is your daughter,” Big Mac deadpanned.

“But I am!” Seluna cried out. “Mom, it’s me!”

There was not enough white chocolate mocha in the world to quench the rage in my heart.

“That’s ridiculous,” my mom said stubbornly, pointing at me. “Of course it’s my daughter.”

So my mom was great and all, but she was also a bit gullible. No wonder I’d turned out this way. Couldn’t I have had, like, ONE parent who was a devious mastermind? Why were we all so wholesome?

“It’s Cali’s body,” Big Mac said severely, “but we can’t be sure about her mind.”

*Go Big Mac!*

This was such great news—I could just imagine what would happen next: they were going to figure Seluna out! She wouldn’t be able to hide in here forever, pretending to be me.

*Watch me destroy all your hopes*, Seluna told me haughtily.

On the outside, she sniffled and said, “Mom, I’ve been through so much today—please don’t let the witch treat me this way! It’s me; I swear it’s me. What can I do to prove it?”

“Stop it with the crocodile tears,” Big Mac barked at Seluna, and sat her down in a chair.

My mom looked so sad and worried as she whispered, “But what can we do?”

Seluna looked at my mother and the witch as innocently as possible. The only thing missing was a halo. Where the fuck had this woman learned to pretend so well?

“Ask her something only Cali would know,” Big Mac said.

Seluna didn’t have a smartass comment about that. I could feel her get uneasy, and that made me hopeful, but also… worried. How would Seluna react if she was found out?

“What’s your middle name?” Mom asked seriously.

I gasped. *Don’t think it, don’t think it—*

A treacherous image of a rose popped into my head. Damn it.

“Rose,” Seluna said, sniffing pitifully. “Why wouldn’t I know my own name?”

Big Mac scoffed at my mom. “For god’s sake, Orla, try something harder.”

I was looking at my mom, but a swift internal movement made my head swivel toward the door just as Marta came in.

*Marta!* I screamed in my head. *Help me!*

Marta froze. She did a double-take after our eyes met, and now she was staring at me. Almost studying me. And suddenly, unease flooded me—or rather Seluna.

*Does Marta know this isn’t me?*

# Episode 2643

**Xavier**

I didn’t really want to know what Andrei’s “choice” bullshit involved, but it couldn’t have been anything good. He had Ava pinned down, his teeth at her neck, her whole body weak and shivering. Her expression was devastating. I knew that look too well. It was something I saw in dreams sometimes.

Memories.

My wolf was howling in despair at the mere idea of anything happening to her again.

But it could—Andrei had the upper hand, and she was at his mercy. If I made one wrong move, he could rip her throat out the way I had. I had killed her and killed part of myself in the process, losing my wolf after her loss. I still carried the weight of what I’d done to Ava, no matter the circumstances, no matter the reasons.

But right now I had every reason to save her.

And it wasn’t just my conscience talking—it was my wolf, and I knew that if I didn’t do my best to get Ava out of this, he’d never forgive me. I’d never forgive myself.

*I’m not here to make a choice about anything*, I told Andrei, snarling. *Just let Ava go.*

Andrei laughed in my head. *And what fun would that be?* He turned to Ava. *I know you’ve got a bit of an attachment to Ava here. Who wouldn’t? She’s quite easy on the eyes, but she can be a bit prickly, can’t she?*

My wolf wanted to tear Andrei apart. Despite our past, right now I needed Ava to control my shift, to control myself. She meant too much to my wolf to risk losing her.

I couldn’t lose her.

*What the fuck do you even want from me?* I snapped at Andrei.

The asshole sneered. *I don’t have all day, so I just need you to decide. Either I kill her first and let you watch before I kill you… Or I let her watch while I rip your throat out, and then kill her. Tough choice.*

My blood ran cold.

Andrei shrugged. *Frankly, I don’t care. You’re both going to die, regardless.*

I took a very, very slow step closer. No sudden movements. At the same time, I said, *I don’t think you laid it all out. There’s always a third option.*

He scoffed, *And what would that be?*

*I rip your throat out, and then we watch you bleed to death. That’s a better option.*

Andrei growled. I’d defeated him before, and I’d do it again. Ava whimpered and bled all over the floor, staring at me pleadingly. My wolf was thrashing on the inside.

I didn’t want Ava, but I needed her. I vowed to keep her around only for as long as she was useful, and after that she’d be on her own. I did want to get rid of her, but not like this.

I wasn’t going to be stuck shifted just because fucking Andrei had decided to play a game.

I wasn’t going to watch as Ava was murdered in cold blood. At least when I’d killed her there’d been a reason behind it. This? This was because Andrei wanted to get at me.

*I’m going to take him out*, I told Ava. *Be prepared.*

When our eyes met, I had to suppress a shiver.

*Kill him*, she replied. Certain. *I’ll create a distraction.*

The second I gave her the go-ahead, Ava howled.

Andrei—who’d been staring at me, waiting for a response as if he’d really asked a valid question—flinched for a beat too long. He pulled back from Ava just enough for me to make my move.

When I slammed into him, he yelped in shock, and I bit down on his neck, tearing into his skin, my teeth digging in deep enough that blood spurted everywhere. He howled in pain, and we tumbled to the floor. I pinned him down, his flesh and fur quivering as I drew more blood and he fought to retaliate.

I hoped this was enough to give Ava a chance to crawl away.

*Get the fuck off me!* Andrei screamed, as if that were an option. He was trying to throw me off him, but I wasn’t easing up. I was an Alpha, and the strength of my bite was relentless. I was about to deliver the fatal blow, rip out a chunk of his throat, when a voice echoed in my head.

*Xavier…* Ava choked out, distracting me.

I glanced over at Ava as Andrei struggled, forcing me to miss the mark. The amount of blood pooled around her was fucking outrageous. I’d never seen her bleed so much, and Andrei wasn’t dead yet—he’d healed a little already, which meant that getting him to that point again would take time.

I didn’t have the time right now.

If I took too long dealing with Andrei, Ava could die. This fight had to end now.

*If you survive this*, I said to Andrei, *you’d better not fucking touch her ever again.*

Andrei’s eyes widened with fear. Before he could do anything else, I tightened my grip, swung Andrei up, and threw him through a window, shattering the glass and the pane.

I didn’t waste any more time to see if he was still alive.

*Xavier…* Ava’s voice in my head made me shudder.

I rushed over to her. She’d barely moved from her spot. I fought to help her get up, saying, *We have to get out of here.*

She moaned and slowly got to her feet. She was weak, but as long as she could move, we had a chance. I had to get to Greyson—to run to him as fast as I could—but I knew that she wouldn’t be able to follow.

As we moved down the hallway, Ava limping and whimpering her way along, I gritted my teeth. I was trying to be patient, but Greyson was probably not having the time of his life right now—I had to go help him. Ava’s wounds would heal, but they were taking their sweet time about it. If anything, they looked even worse than I’d first thought, which was fucked up.

I didn’t say a word to Ava—I wasn’t that much of a dick—but it was like she could feel my apprehension. She paused, leaning against the wall, her wolf staring at me.

*Go on without me*, she said. *I can follow.*

I scowled. *That’s not going to happen—I need you. Besides, I can’t leave you. If Andrei survived that fall, he’ll eventually come looking for you, and also there are plenty of other Vanguard pack members around.*

She shook her head, panting. *I’ll be fine. I don’t need to be rescued.*

I scoffed.

*Are you nuts?* I huffed*. You won’t stand a chance on your own—this isn’t up for fucking debate. Let’s go, right now.*

I kept walking as Ava winced forward. I made sure to keep her close, always only a couple of feet in front of her. As we approached the banquet room, the ruckus was insane. Growling and snarling and howling, thuds of battle.

My brother had better be alive.

I peeked in to see Greyson—he really was alive, the fucker, thank god—facing off against Lucian and… Aysel? The princess was standing between the two men, and all of them were in wolf form. Greyson looked in bad shape, but who the fuck knew with him? I’d seen him in battle. He was even more stubborn than I was when he had his “I’m gonna commit murder now” hat on.

I wasn’t going to let him waste any more time, though. Ava was bleeding immensely.

*Cali’s safe. We have to go*, I told him.

Greyson’s wolf perked up.

*How do you know?* he asked as Aysel and Lucian growled at each other.

*Big Mac took her and Artemis. Leave Lucian—let’s just get the fuck out of here*, I said. *Cali needs us home.*

Greyson, looking pretty pissed, started to smoothly move away from Aysel and Lucian—but then Lucian noticed. And snarled.

This bastard had such a nerve that I got ready to wade in, help my brother, and tear Lucian a new one—Ava’s wounds and wasting time be damned. But then Aysel spoke, growling even louder and swinging her claws at Lucian.

*Leave him alone!*

Aysel’s swing had gone deliberately wide, but Lucian was enraged by her sign of disobedience. The two siblings started arguing, almost to the point of fighting physically, and Greyson finally managed to slip away.

He glanced at Ava. *She okay?*

*I’ll be fine*, she said.

*Let’s get the others and get out of here*, Greyson said grimly.

But as we rushed down the hallway, my wolf started feeling frantic. What the fuck was wrong with him this time? A second later, I heard a thud.

I turned to see Ava collapse to the floor.

My wolf was howling in agony.

*Go find the others*, I told Greyson. *I’ll take care of Ava.*

To his credit, Greyson didn’t comment on that last part. *Meet me by the north woods*, he told me.

As he hurried off, I moved to stand over Ava. Her eyes were closed. She was breathing hard, and her wounds weren’t fucking healing quickly enough, her blood still dripping everywhere.

I had no choice.

I knew what I had to do.

# Episode 2644

**Greyson**

I ran off to find my mother and the group who’d arrived at the palace to help us out. My brother needed to be the one to deal with Ava, and it was his choice to do so.

I, personally, didn’t have time to be hovering or fussing over Ava. I had a pack to consider, and now that Big Mac had gotten Cali out of this hellhole**,** they were my priority.

I forced myself not to think of anything else, focusing on the matter at hand—finding the pack. I could hear some fighting a floor down, and I hoped that nobody had gotten injured. If Lucian and Aysel didn’t kill each other, Lucian was going to come after us when he figured out that we had Cali.

That we had *Seluna*.

I had to get everyone back to the pack house, not only to prepare for the Vanguard attack, but to see Cali. To make sure she was okay, make sure the fucked-up things Lucian had said weren’t true. They couldn’t be true—I was certain of it.

I had to be, otherwise I’d forget everything other than my bloodlust. I’d reined in my rage earlier, just because Cali was out of here and the pack needed help, but I wasn’t sure how much longer Lucian would stay alive on my watch.

After all he’d done, he needed to die.

Xavier hadn’t said much about Cali earlier—only that the witches had taken her and Artemis back home. She was safe, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t injured or screwed up by Lucian’s moon goddess.

I picked up my mother’s scent and followed it through the chaos, passing plenty of wounded Vanguard pack members along the way. Served those sons of bitches right. As I got closer to the source of the ruckus, I heard more fighting and found most of the pack—Sabine, Jay, Lola, Sage, Zainab, and Ravi—in a full-on battle with Vanguard guards.

*Disengage!* I snapped, growling to get their attention. *It’s time to go back to the house!*

Where the hell was Rishika? I had to find her—I wasn’t going to leave anyone behind.

Sabine threw a wolf off her back. *What about Cali?*

*She’s back at the house*, I said. *She’s safe, but we have to go.*

After fighting our way out, we headed toward the door of the palace, the main exit. I was still scenting the air for Rishika, but the rest of the pack was good to go. I turned to everybody and shared the plan.

*I’ll look for Rishika*, I said. *Everyone else, continue to the north woods. I’ll join you shortly.*

Everyone nodded, and I ran back into the palace, fighting to pick up Rishika’s scent. The blood and sweat and debris made it much more difficult than usual. There were so many traces of scents in here, including the lingering scent of Cali.

I had to get back. To talk to her. To see her.

I had to do it before I lost my fucking mind.

Suddenly, I heard a familiar growl, then a yelp, and when I turned the corner, I found Rishika finishing off a Vanguard pack member. Her wolf panted, looking up at me.

*Where the hell have you been?* she demanded. *I’ve been looking all over for you.*

*Same here*, I replied. *Time to go—Cali’s back at the pack house.*

Rishika’s eyes widened. *And Artemis?*

*She’s back too, probably worried about you*, I said.

Rishika nodded, taking a deep breath. *Let’s get the hell out of here.*

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We were outside the palace, in the north woods, a few minutes later. Everybody was there, apart from my brother and Ava. We didn’t need this right now. Where the hell was he? I hadn’t stopped him from dealing with Ava earlier, because she was his problem—and also, she’d helped us. Staying back to help her had been Xavier’s decision, but if his decision endangered the pack, it became *my* problem.

As the Alpha, everything was my fucking problem, wasn’t it?

I needed to get back to Cali, to make sure she was okay, and yet I had this bullshit to deal with. I hadn’t even managed to kill Lucian today, so all in all, I was just despising everything at the moment.

*Where’s Xavier?* Jay asked, sniffing the air.

*We might need to form a small group to go back and search for him and Ava*, I replied, my head throbbing. *This is the last thing we goddamn need, but I just can’t leave the dumbass here with—*

A howl interrupted my thoughts. I turned and saw my brother trotting over to us. Ava followed, looking much better than she had before.

*What are we waiting for?* Xavier asked.

*We’re waiting for you, asshole*, Jay said. *You almost gave me a heart attack!*

Xavier scoffed. *Let’s go back home. I can hear the Vanguards coming.*

I looked into the distance. The taste of Lucian’s blood was still on my tongue. *It won’t be long until they pick up our scent and hunt us down.*

*What about LIPS?* Xavier asked.

*This is another time when we’ll just have to risk it. We have to get back to the pack house ASAP*, I said.

*Everyone, be careful*, I told everybody, looking around. *Don’t stop in the woods until we’re back home. Be aware of drones and traps.*

They all nodded.

And then I started running toward the pack house.

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*Are you sure Cali was okay?* I asked Xavier as we rushed through the forest.

*I only saw her for a moment*, he replied. *She looked fine, health-wise. I couldn’t mind link with her, but I was able to during the ceremony, right after Ava slapped me.*

I glanced at Ava. *She seems much better.*

*She’s fine*, Xavier answered brusquely.

I wasn’t going to comment on Xavier’s tone. Ava had been in really bad shape, so I suspected that my brother had had a greater hand in Ava’s healing than he was ready to admit.

*Hold on!* Rishika said, pausing. *I hear something.*

*Everyone, slow down*, I said. *Stay low!*

The pack obeyed.

*What did you hear?* I asked Rishika. *Was it LIPS?*

It was worse, though.

It was the Vanguard pack—they were coming after us. I’d known they would, but I’d been hoping we’d have a little more of a head start.

*Everyone, move*, I said. *Let’s get to the pack house as fast as possible.*

As I led the way as quickly as possible, my mind drifted back to Cali again. I hoped Xavier was right—that she was more than just safe. Xavier had been able to mind link with her at one point. That had to be a good sign.

It just had to be.

The woods around us were becoming more and more familiar. I was feeling hopeful, finally, because the pack house was just ahead, and we were going to make it before the Vanguard pack caught up with us. I knew it wouldn’t be Lucian leading them, but the pack was tired, and they deserved a break before they had to deal with those brainwashed assholes all over again.

Lucian had a whole army following him, and I really did wonder if brainwashing was to blame—he probably paid his guards, but the Vanguard pack also felt like a cult. And Lucian was like an evil dictator who had to be brought down. Preferably after being tortured.

The torture part wasn’t optional, actually. After what he’d done to Cali, he didn’t want to know what I’d do to him.

I could see the pack house in the distance, so I slowed down and allowed the others to get ahead. As the Alpha, this was standard procedure—I would take up the rear to make sure no one was left behind. Xavier and Ava were in the middle of the group, and Sabine and Ravi were in the front, right along with Jay and Rishika, who’d taken the lead.

We were approaching the yard, and my heart was pounding so hard I could feel it across every inch of my body.

*I’m coming, love. Please hold on for me.*

I had no idea if Cali could hear the mind link. I didn’t dare to hope for it, but at the same time, sending it out made me feel comforted in a way that I couldn’t describe.

*Home sweet home!* Jay said. There was just a few feet between us and the yard.

Then suddenly, Jay and Rishika ran smack into an invisible barrier.

Realization dawned on me. The witches must’ve cast a protective spell to keep the Vanguard pack out. Smart. But by doing that…

They were keeping us out too. Shit.

In the distance, I could hear Lucian’s army approaching. I looked over at the house, searching for someone, anyone to mind link with—we had to tell the witches to let us in. But I saw nobody, and everyone in the group was panting, tired, looking at each other with alarm.

I looked up at the barrier, gritting my teeth.

Fuck, were we stuck out here?

# Episode 2645

**Xavier**

The witches must’ve put up some kind of barrier, and we were fucked.

*The witches were only trying to help. They probably didn’t think we’d be back so soon. It was an honest mistake…* Mrs. Smith trailed off, no doubt thinking about Big Mac. But nobody else seemed ready to agree with her.

I could hear the Vanguard pack in the distance, and we were stuck out here, like lambs to the slaughter. I was good to go for another round of fighting, but Ava wouldn’t be. The witches had done good work protecting the house, obviously, but us being inside would’ve been even better. They could have at least used a spell that let Redwood pack members pass through the barrier. Didn’t those loopholes exist?

Why was witch magic always so damn sketchy?

This was some bullshit, and we needed to take a breather and rest. Or, really, Ava did. My wolf was worried for her. She was huddled by my side, into my fur, shaking, and I didn’t push her away. I couldn’t. This was such a mess, but at least my wolf seemed more under control.

He’d been going insane just a few minutes ago, back at the palace. Ava had been lying on the floor, looking up at me imploringly. She’d been so weak, losing blood rapidly. She’d been wounded so badly that I’d had no other choice but to do the only thing that could save her.

The only thing that would keep her alive.

And as Ava shivered right next to me, seeking the warmth of my body, the memory flooded my brain…

*My wolf was frantic, howling, pacing around as I stared down at Ava. She lay on the overly ornate palace floor, a pool of blood forming around her once more. How much blood had she lost today?*

*I lowered my head closer to hers—I could hear her ragged breathing. She’d closed her eyes, whimpering softly, and it looked like she hadn’t even realized that I hadn’t left her. I couldn’t leave her—I was blaming myself that I’d waited so long already to…*

*To help her.*

*I had to help her, the only way I knew how.*

*Even if it would be too much.*

*Ava moaned, her eyes fluttering open. When she saw me, she mind linked,* Wait… Why are you still here? Didn’t I tell you to leave?

*My wolf growled. This wasn’t the time for chitchat. He pressured me to get the fuck on with it, but Ava seemed to want to speak.*

Yeah, well. I’m still here. Apparently, you’re dying*, I deadpanned.*

*She laughed, but it turned into a cough.* What makes you think I want you to stare at me as I bleed out? I slapped you—didn’t you get the message?

I haven’t forgotten*, I replied.* I’ll figure a way to pay you back some other time.

*I lowered my face to the wound at her neck, the one that was oozing the most blood.*

*Her voice was soft, small in my head.* Xavier… What are you doing?

*The only thing that would save her.*

*The scent of her was overwhelming as I began to lick her wounds, the salty taste of her blood making my wolf roar. Ava took a sharp breath, whimpering at my touch, at the connection. She closed her eyes, and her whole body shuddered.*

*My own body felt warm, my wolf thrashing, but this time it was in contentment. The pull between us throbbed, a living thing that took an even sharper shape, a clearer one that had my wolf pleased. I knew that this had only encouraged him, that this would most probably serve to strengthen my mate bond with Ava…*

*But I couldn’t stop himself.*

*If he didn’t do this, she would die.*

*And my wolf would suffer.*

*I couldn’t let that happen, not if I wanted to be able to protect Cali.*

*After a few seconds that felt like fucking eternity, Ava’s breathing slowed down, her groans of pain trailing off. Her wounds, from the deepest to the shallowest, finally started to heal. For real.*

*She was going to survive this.*

The Vanguard pack would be upon us soon, and Ava was still huddled by my side like a pup. I couldn’t stop my heart from pounding, no more than I could stop the affection I felt, the worry that was making me sick.

Being with Ava when I loved Cali was sick, but my wolf didn’t understand how love worked.

Right now, though, what I needed to focus on was getting into the damn house. Would Ava be strong enough for another fight? I eyed her, and I knew that fighting right now wouldn’t be the best idea, since she was still recovering. But she would be okay.

She had to be.

I had some suspicions about what saving her life like that would mean for our mate bond. I didn’t want to think or obsess over it, though, because it wouldn’t do me any good. Not when we were stuck out here.

*How the hell are we going to get past the witches’ barrier?* I asked Greyson.

He growled, his eyes sharp. I could tell his patience was running thin, and that was never a good thing. But I got where he was coming from. It was maddening enough that we were being prevented from entering, but it was even fucking worse to know that this barrier was keeping us from Cali.

I felt like an asshole thinking that while Ava was literally nuzzling at me as I tried to keep her upright. But it wasn’t like I could avoid this.

*We’ll have to at least try and deal with the barrier*, Greyson said, gesturing at Jay and Rishika. All three of them started to ram themselves into the barrier, followed by Ravi and Mrs. Smith.

Nothing. Fucking. *Happened*.

And then Greyson said, *If we can’t get through, we will need to get ready to fight the Vanguard pack right here.*

This was great. Perfect, even.

*If it comes down to that*, I told Ava, *you need to go and hide. You’re not well enough to fight yet.*

She nodded softly, not meeting my gaze.

I swallowed, turning to Greyson. *You and I should try to lead the brunt of the pack away*.

He nodded. *We’ll distract the Vanguards, and then we can—*

“Hey!” a familiar voice shouted. “You’re back!”

Kira was marching toward us, her dark hair flapping over her shoulder like a cape.

“Come on in,” she said, raising her hands. She said something witchy, and then there was a low quaking sound.

The barrier fell away.

*Everyone move fast!* Greyson said.

We didn’t need to be told twice. After we all rushed into the yard and Kira did her witch thing to put the barrier back up, Greyson shifted back to human. He stared at the witch.

“The Vanguard pack is coming,” he said. “Everybody has to stay inside.”

As the two talked, I shifted too, and Ava promptly did the same. When we got into the house, she was still holding onto me, but she was walking fine.

“You good?” I asked.

“Better,” she said. She was searching for my gaze, I could feel it, but I didn’t have time for this. Whatever the fuck it was.

“Go to your room and rest,” I said gruffly. “I’ll check on you later.”

I didn’t wait for a reply. I had to find Cali.

Nevertheless, the moment I started toward the stairs, Greyson grabbed me by the arm.

“What?” I asked. “We have to check on Cali. It’s—”

“Kira and Big Mac talked to me about the barrier spell. It will only hold for so long. We need to regroup and prepare for a full-on battle,” he said.

“Lucian and his pack aren’t interested in fighting the Redwood pack,” Big Mac added, walking up to us. “This is all about Cali.”

“About Seluna,” I said, clarifying. “It’s all about his obsession with her.”

Greyson nodded, scowling. “If we can get rid of Seluna, we’ll get rid of the Vanguard pack too.”

“That sounds great,” I deadpanned. “I have no desire to kick Andrei’s ass for a third time unless I have to. Though I’d still like to shred the princeling for what he’s put Cali through.”

“We can do it together,” Greyson told me. The coolness in his expression was jarring. “I want his head.”

“That could start a full-on war, Greyson,” Big Mac told him. “Again.”

“And this doesn’t?” Greyson snapped.

“You can take that up with the werewolf council—I don’t know,” Big Mac said. “You can’t kill an Alpha without causing a huge fucking problem for everyone here.”

Greyson stared. “He didn’t think of that before he kidnapped Cali and allowed Seluna to possess her.”

“Yeah,” I said. “We have to kill him. It sounds like the only option, so—”

“Oh my god, both of you, shut up!” Big Mac snapped. “You have to focus on Cali right now, not revenge—I can try the exorcism spell, but if I do, it will stop the barrier spell.”

“Like I fucking care,” I said. “Just get rid of the goddess.”

“Are you ready to fight with me when the barrier falls?” Greyson asked me.

I scoffed. “Like you have to ask.”

Greyson turned to Big Mac, his expression grim. “It’s settled. We know the risks this might have for Cali, but it’s our only hope,” he said. “Start the exorcism. Now.”

# Episode 2646

“We’re doing the exorcism,” Big Mac declared after walking into the living room.

Seluna was suddenly even more on edge. I blinked. *We were?!*

“Is that what the Alpha said?” Marta asked Big Mac.

“Yes. Even though there is a possibility of it gravely harming Cali, I think it’s the best option,” Big Mac said. “And there’s no time to argue right now”

Seluna was freaking the hell out on the inside—I could feel it—and I wasn’t exactly calm either. Hadn’t Big Mac said at some point that this could possibly *kill me*? I’d been so relieved to see Greyson and Xavier walk through that door, but now…

What if something went horribly wrong? Like what happened to Pip?

Of course, this was a different set of circumstances, and Letifer had been inside Pip for a while, and after that he’d become… Well, whatever it was that he’d turned into. But this was Seluna, a maybe-goddess. How was an exorcism supposed to work on a goddess?

“I think everyone’s overreacting here,” Seluna-as-me said, making an appeasing gesture with her hands. Which were still bound together, thankfully. “There’s no need for an exorcism. I’m fine!”

Big Mac and Kira eyed Seluna with raised eyebrows. Big Mac sat down next to her, examining her face. “I think we both know you’re fucking with us right now.”

Seluna gasped, all offended and miserable. “How could you say that? How can you not realize that it’s me—I promise it’s me, Cali, and an exorcism…” She trailed off, burying her face in her hands in theatrical despair. “Things didn’t work out so well for Pip when you did the exorcism on her, and I…” She sniffled, tears streaming down her—my—cheeks. “I don’t want to die!”

Oh my god.

*OH MY GOD.*

This bitch was so beyond out of control! Begging for pity and using my own thoughts against me? The audacity made me fume. I was terrified of the exorcism, of course, but I’d absolutely go through with it if it would force Seluna out of my body.

“Cali’s really frightened, don’t you see?” my mom told Big Mac, full-on falling for Seluna’s bullshit.

*Oh, Mom. You’re too pure… But that’s not helping right now!*

Marta was staring at me, and I wondered again if she could tell that I wasn’t myself. Could she tell that Seluna had taken over? She was more than a witch—she was a medium, and mediums dealt with spirits and stuff. But did that mean she could deal with Seluna?

But if Marta had realized that something was wrong here, that Seluna had taken over, she would’ve said something. Right? *RIGHT?*

Fucking fuck, what the hell was I supposed to do?

I felt like I was trapped in darkness while still existing in this room—like an out-of-body experience while I watched Seluna chat up my mother as if she were me. I refocused on Marta again and tried to shout at her with my mind. I felt like I was flailing desperately in water with no life jacket.

*Marta!* I shouted. *Marta, can you hear me?*

“Cali…” Xavier’s voice broke through my consciousness, and Seluna turned toward the sound. There he was, standing by the doorway. He was bloodied and bruised, but he seemed strong as ever, his dark blue eyes intense on me.

*He is quite handsome*, Seluna said in my head.

I wanted to strangle her. I also wanted to run to Xavier, wrap my arms around him, feel him. But Seluna said, *No. Stay here.*

That was actually pretty dumb of her—like, *everyone* would expect me to go to him. Xavier was my mate. But Seluna wasn’t budging, and I couldn’t do anything about it. She just stared up at him pitifully, still sniffling.

“Xavier,” she whimpered. “They won’t take these off me…”

She gestured at the locks around her—my—wrists, as Xavier came over. He lowered himself to my eye level, his gaze piercing. “I can’t mind link with you, Cali. Why?”

I felt a sense of worry settling over Seluna. She hadn’t foreseen this, had she? I fought to mind link with Xavier. I fought to tell him that I wanted the exorcism, that I wanted Seluna out, that I was terrified and miserable.

But I couldn’t say a word.

Instead, a mournful, lying Seluna looked up at Xavier and said, “I’m so sorry.” Her voice was a whisper. “Seluna’s blocking the mind link. I don’t know how any of this works. It feels like she could take control again at any moment.” More tears dripped down her—my—cheeks. “I’m so scared, Xavier.”

If I could’ve banged my head against a wall, I would have. Seluna was the best actress of her generation, and her fucking generation was probably thousands of years old. I couldn’t *believe* how good she was at deceit. I’d be impressed if I didn’t want to squash her like a bug.

How the hell could I let Xavier know what was really going on? HOW?

“I get it,” Xavier said, kneeling down by Seluna’s—my—feet. He eyed the ties that held my wrists, his tone soothing in a way that made me feel like he definitely hadn’t realized that Seluna was pretending to be me. Fucking hell.

“I’m really sorry this is happening to you, baby,” Xavier said. “I hate to see you like this.”

“Please,” Seluna whimpered, sniffling some more. “Please tell the witch to take off these cuffs.”

Xavier tucked Seluna’s hair behind her ear, and my heart ached to see him be tender with her. I’d never detested anyone as much as this damn fake goddess.

“I know you’re frightened,” Xavier said, “but we need to make sure Seluna is removed and no longer a threat.”

Seluna shook her head. “But what if I die? What if I get hurt? I’m so scared, I—”

“Hey,” Xavier said, resting his hands on her shoulders. “I’ll be with you the whole time. I won’t let anything happen to you. Can you trust me?”

The question was a trap. Because the only answer I, the real Cali, could ever have to that request was *YES!* I wanted to scream it from the rooftops—I trusted Xavier with my whole being.

*Your beau is a problem*, Seluna hissed in my head.

But to Xavier, she said, “Of course.”

Xavier stroked her cheek and leaned in closer. My heart raced with anticipation, like always. Our lips touched, just a gentle caress, and I felt the warmth, the bond between us vibrate. It didn’t last long. Seluna shut it down gleefully.

*You don’t get to feel that, Caliana*, she said.

And my fury only grew.

On the outside, though, Seluna leaned into Xavier’s kiss, putting on a show. And, like always, she was convincing. I felt sick to my stomach. When would this goddamn nightmare end?

“Yeah, yeah,” Big Mac said, clapping her hands. “You can make out later. Right now, we have an exorcism to prepare.”

Xavier broke the kiss, and I could now see the troubled look on his face. Was he worried about the exorcism? Or was it something else? I wanted to question him, to feel hopeful that he’d realized Seluna was a lying liar, but of course the moon asshole had her own agenda.

“I’m really worried, Xavier,” she whispered. “Maybe we could do the exorcism a bit later? After I’ve rested for a brief moment? My whole body hurts.”

Xavier studied Seluna for a long moment before he said, “There’s nothing to worry about.” He got to his feet and turned to Big Mac. “What’s going to be different this time around?”

Big Mac huffed. “For one thing, we have more witch power. We have Kira, Okorie, Marta, and, of course, Dani.”

Having Dani around would help—their magic would be stronger than ever!

*Oh, that’s interesting*, Seluna piped up in my head. *Who is Dani?*

I stubbornly refused to think about Dani, but thinking about not thinking about her inevitably made me think about her.

*Caliana, stop resisting*, Seluna chided. *It’s only a matter of time before I learn everything there is to know about you. All your thoughts, your likes and dislikes, and even your memories will become mine.*

Right. This exorcism had better fucking work.

“It hurts,” Seluna whimpered, looking up at Xavier. “These things around my wrists hurt, Xavier.”

He scowled. “How strong are these ties?” Xavier asked Big Mac, pointing at the things around my wrists.

“They’re strong enough,” Big Mac said. “Don’t get sentimental on me now, Xavier. It’s not the time for that.”

“But they’re hurting me!” Seluna complained. “Can’t you remove them?”

“Goodness, I can’t take this anymore!” my mom piped up, glaring at Big Mac. “I can’t stand to see my daughter restrained like that—*please* take those off her!”

“No,” Xavier said. “I’m sorry, but the ties can’t be removed.”

Seluna gasped.

My mom gaped at Xavier. “What? Why not?”

Xavier turned to face Seluna, his expression dark. “Because that’s not Cali speaking. That’s Seluna.”

# Episode 2647

**Marta**

A shudder ran through me at Xavier’s words. He’d said that Cali was Seluna, and there was only one scenario where that was possible—a full-blown possession.

This was terrifying.

“Xavier!” Cali—Seluna?—exclaimed, surging to her feet in one swift motion. “How can you say such a terrible thing? I’ve just escaped Seluna’s hold, and instead of supporting me, you’re doubting me? How could you?”

“Are you sure?” Big Mac asked Xavier, ignoring her. “I’ve had my suspicions as well, but you seem certain.”

Xavier eyed Seluna. “I’m not going to be fooled by some so-called goddess. I know my mate, and that’s not Cali—it may look like her and talk like her, but it’s not her.”

Cali looked aghast, so devastated that I would’ve believed her if I hadn’t known there was something sinister going on.

“I can’t believe you, Xavier,” she whispered, clutching at her chest. “I can’t believe you’d do such a thing.”

Xavier remained stone-faced, sitting Cali, or Seluna, down on the couch as Big Mac turned to me. “Are you up for this?”

I swallowed roughly. I was honestly very scared. I’d never been crazy about using my magic, and last time, with Pip… It had been awful. I still had nightmares about it sometimes.

I still had nightmares about everything bad that had ever happened to me.

“Marta,” Big Mac pressed when I remained silent. “If what Xavier says is true, things are even worse than we expected. We can’t waste time. We need to do the exorcism now.”

“I’m… I just…” I swallowed thickly, fighting to gather my courage. Didn’t I owe it to Cali to at least try to help her? I was certain that she would do anything to help me if the situation were reversed.

I had my magic, and this was my chance to really put it to good use.

“Marta?” Big Mac asked quietly, resting a hand on my shoulder. “I need an answer.”

“I’ll do it,” I said. “For the real Cali, I will.”

Big Mac pressed her lips together, turning to Xavier, who was still trying to deal with an upset Cali—or Seluna. It did feel like something was off with Cali, actually. I’d noticed when I’d first seen her earlier, but I hadn’t fully grasped it.

Now, with Xavier being certain, it seemed like a huge possibility.

“You need to take these bracelets off,” I told Okorie. He’d been lurking in a corner, looking dark and tall and peevish as per usual.

He squinted at me, cringing visibly. “Yeah, I don’t know that it’s the smartest thing to do right now, with the one strike against you.”

“I’m willing to risk it,” I said seriously.

“You can do this, Marta.” Lilac’s voice came out of nowhere. A moment later, he was standing between me and Okorie. Looking between us. He placed his hand gently on my shoulder. “I know you can do it. You’re strong, and you’ve been working with Okorie for a while.”

As much as I loved the way Lilac looked at me, as much as I loved hearing those words come out of his mouth, I found his support a little odd.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” I said wryly, “but just hours ago, you didn’t think I was strong enough to go to the palace and fight the Vanguard pack. Now you want me to risk another council violation by using my magic?”

Lilac shook his head. “Werewolf fights are different. They don’t depend solely on magic—they’re physical, too.”

“This isn’t different,” I said, trying not to raise my voice. “It’s about whether you believe in me.”

Lilac crossed his arms. Then he shrugged exaggeratedly. “Well, Okorie doesn’t believe in you.”

Okorie huffed. “*What?* I’ve never even insinuated that.”

“That’s true,” I told Lilac. “Okorie wouldn’t hesitate to tell me directly if he didn’t believe in me.”

“Good thing I do believe in her,” Okorie said, nodding seriously.

Lilac gave Okorie a weird look.

“The point is,” I said, “it’s not whether he thinks I can’t do it—it’s whether I *should* do it right now, under these circumstances.”

Lilac scowled, opening his mouth to no doubt say something annoying—both these boys were being very annoying, actually—but then Big Mac walked up to me. “Can you three work this out later? This is Marta’s call to make.”

Still annoyed by Lilac, I turned back to Okorie, who remained the less annoying of the two—for the moment, at least.

“Take these off,” I said, holding up my bracelets.

“You’d better do this right,” Lilac grumbled as Okorie waved his hands over my wrists.

“I always do everything right,” Okorie deadpanned, and then my bracelets were off.

“Thanks,” I said. Before either of them could speak again, I spotted Dani by the staircase and made a beeline for her.

“Cali needs our help,” I said.

She nodded, sighing. “I know.”

“Nobody can make you do this, but you could definitely be useful…” I trailed off.

Dani swallowed, looking over my shoulder at everyone. “I want to help and all, but won’t I get in trouble?”

Okorie—who I now realized had followed me—turned to Dani. “That’s a risk you must take if you want to use your magic.” He raised an eyebrow. “On the plus side, Dani, unlike Marta, you don’t have any strikes against you. Yet.”

I glared at Okorie. “You’re not being very helpful right now.”

Okorie gasped sarcastically. “You wound me!”

“Ignore him,” I said, pulling Dani away from everyone and down the hallway.

When we were alone, I whispered, “I’m nervous too, you know. But I can’t just sit by while everyone else helps.” I swallowed, staring at Dani, holding both her hands. “Nobody’s going to force you to do this—it’s up to you. I just wanted to let you know what’s up.”

Dani pressed her lips together, nodding. “I appreciate your honesty. I… I do want to help, too. Everyone’s been great to me, taking me in when they didn’t have to. I feel like I owe it to them—to Cali in particular, who’s been so nice to me—to help.”

I squeezed her shoulder. “So you’re in?”

Dani offered a small smile. “I’m in.”

Okorie sighed heavily. He was being dramatic, as ever, but I was feeling optimistic. Even if the witch council did find out about this, it would only be my second strike. Wasn’t everybody allowed three? That’s how it worked in baseball…

“The barrier is working.” Greyson’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts and back to the present. He loomed in the entrance to the living room, his gaze lingering on Cali before it flickered up to Big Mac. “Nobody knows how much longer it will hold, though.”

“I’ll do my best,” Big Mac said, “but it takes a lot of energy. It takes everyone.” She looked around at the witches in the room. “Come gather around Cali.”

The rest of the pack watched on—Artemis, Lola, Jay, Ravi, Zainab, Mrs. Smith, and Sage. The only one I couldn’t see was Rishika.

Swallowing hard, I took Dani’s hand, and we joined Big Mac’s circle. I glanced over at Lilac, who was watching me with a frown and his arms crossed.

He seemed a little quiet and upset, actually. Which was entirely different from his usual demeanor. I had no idea what his problem was. Did he feel bad that he’d never be able to remove my bracelets, and it had been so easy for Okorie? Or had he been lying when he’d said he believed in me? I hated this feeling—either he supported me one hundred percent, or he didn’t.

I didn’t have the time to think about this, though.

“Please, please don’t do this,” Cali whimpered, sitting on the couch, her hands still bound. “This is a waste of time—you’re risking everyone’s lives! What about Pip? What if I die? And how will that witch council react when they find out what’s going on?”

Cali looked like herself. Her voice sounded the same, but the way she spoke, the way she seemed so frightened… It was like she was overselling this. She wasn’t acting like herself, for sure. And now that the bracelets were off, I was entirely attuned to all the differences that I’d felt when I’d first walked into the room and looked at her.

“I’ll get the candle,” Kira said, lighting it before Cali.

In the same second, the sight of Cali blurred, a flash of something bursting before my eyes. It was almost as if Cali had two faces. But that couldn’t be right—it had to be my nerves playing tricks.

*Calm down, Marta*, I told myself. *Just do what Big Mac wants you to do.*

“I need you to try to channel the real Cali and strengthen her hold on her own body,” Big Mac told me. “Do you understand?”

I nodded curtly while Big Mac forced Cali to lie down. I put my hands on either side of her head as every witch in the house held hands and chanted the spell. Cali closed her eyes, as if she didn’t want to look at me. She started sobbing, and it hurt to hear.

The skin of her temples felt hot under my fingertips, her hair smooth. I fought to focus on her energy, though, on what was going on in her mind. Through her mind, I’d see her soul. Things felt murky, though—oddly murky. And then—

I felt a strange warmth under my hands.

When Cali opened her eyes, they were fully black, without a spot of white left.

I gasped in terror and tried to pull my hands away, but I couldn’t. I was trapped by this… *thing*.

*What are you?*

I didn’t need an answer, though. My instincts were already screaming the truth.

This was no goddess. This was a demon.

# Episode 2648

Marta stared at me, pale and wide-eyed, completely terrified. Wait—was it possible that she’d seen past Seluna’s façade?

But I couldn’t know for sure, because I couldn’t ask her—Seluna wouldn’t let me speak.

Big Mac’s voice was low as she chanted, the sound ringing in my head. But even as the chanting continued—gaining in pitch and volume—I could feel Seluna tightening her grip on me. She knew an exorcism was happening, and she didn’t like it.

Truth be told, I didn’t love it either. I was scared as hell, and terrified this could end badly—like, with me dead—but I didn’t have a lot of options here. And anyway, dying while trying to get Seluna out of me would be a better option than living with Seluna taking over my body completely.

Seluna’s grip tightened around my heart, making it hard to breathe. The burning sensation started at my shoulders—on the handprint marks—then spread throughout my whole body, like an angry wildfire.

My mind was spinning, and a small voice in my head wondered if this was what Pip had gone through when she’d struggled with Letifer. Had she been scared too? Had the burning consumed her too? Had she been powerless to prevent it from happening?

What was going to happen to me?

*You will be irrelevant*, Seluna’s voice hissed in my brain. *They want to exorcise me from you, Caliana, but they are fools. For when this little experiment is all over, you will be the one removed from this body, and I will remain.*

*You can’t have my body!* I screamed.

Seluna laughed, the harsh sound echoing in my head like grating metal.

*I already have it, little one*, she said, and squeezed my heart so tightly I gasped with the pain of it.

I *had* to fight back. I knew I did, but how the hell was I supposed to do it? I wasn’t about to give up my body. Where would I end up without it? Would I be forced to take over someone else’s body? Or would I be left to wander the world formless, as a lost spirit? The thought was horrifying.

Big Mac tilted the candle in her hand so that a drop of melted wax dripped onto my forehead.

Seluna writhed as the hot wax seared my skin, and rippling waves of agony rolled through my body. I wanted to scream with the pain, but it wasn’t my scream that made everyone in the room jump—it was Seluna’s.

The sound made my whole body vibrate, but I was encouraged by it. The wax still burned, but I was willing to bear it if it meant that Seluna would lose this battle.

“Stop! Please! You have to stop!” my mom said, trying to get Big Mac’s attention.

But Big Mac didn’t stop, and she sent another drop of wax onto my forehead.

“Cali? Sweetheart? Are you all right?” my mom asked anxiously as another wave of pain crashed over me.

As Big Mac continued to chant, Kira looked over at my mom.

“I know this must be hard for you to watch, Orla, but it really is the only way,” she said.

My mom’s mouth was pressed into a thin, worried line, but she nodded. My dad wrapped an arm around her, pulling her close, his own face lined with worry.

I wanted to reach out to them and assure them that I was okay, even if I was in pain. I wanted to tell them that I was still here. Still alive.

*Please*, I begged. *Please, let me talk to my parents.*

But Seluna didn’t even bother to respond.

I could feel the struggle within my own mind—like it was trying to tear itself in half. The tension in my body was even worse, like an invading army had just arrived. Was it possible that Seluna was suffering even more than I was?

A third drop of wax hit my forehead, and—almost immediately—I could feel myself starting to float. I was leaving my body.

*No! NO! This can’t be happening!*

I flailed my arms, trying to return to my body, but I was hovering above myself, watching my physical form from afar like a spectator.

Seluna screamed again, and there was a fiery flash—like a fork of burning lightning. Almost immediately, the air was heavy with the sickly smell of rotting flesh, and my stomach recoiled. I had just put my hand over my mouth when something shifted, and I crashed to the floor.

Only it wasn’t the floor. It was the ground, and it was wet and sticky. I was no longer in the living room.

As I got to my feet and looked around at the garden of nastiness where I’d landed, I realized that I wasn’t alone. Seluna stood before me, only a few feet away.

I gasped with surprise, but on closer inspection, I realized something odd. She didn’t look like the moon goddess of my many visions. She wasn’t radiant now, like she had been in my dreams. She was pale, sweaty, and feverish. She was weakened—I could sense it. Maybe this was my opening. Maybe I could get kick her out and finally get free.

I tried to focus and summon my magic.

Sensing what I was about to do, Seluna hissed like an angry cat and lunged for me. She threw me off-balance, and we both fell to the ground. We rolled around on the decomposing forest floor, grappling for control.

“Get the hell out of my body,” I hissed, rolling on top of Seluna and pinning her down. Then I grasped her shoulders and slammed her head into the sticky wet mush of the ground.

I hadn’t expected an actual fist fight as part of the exorcism, but if this was how it was going to play out, then I wanted to be the last one standing.

This was *my* body, so I had the home field advantage. And *I* hadn’t been weakened by the exorcism. So I had that in my favor. But Seluna was still strong, still a real threat.

*You will not win this*, Seluna warned me, her voice a familiar hiss in my ear. *You will lose, and everyone will forget about you. You will lose, Caliana.*

*You’re strong, Cali*. Xavier’s voice came to me through the mind link. It sounded far away, but I’d have recognized the sound of it anywhere. *You can do this. Come back to me.*

*I love you, Cali*, said Greyson. *Keep fighting.* *You will make it through this. I know you will, love.*

Hearing their voices cheering me on filled me with fresh determination, and it reminded me what was at stake here. I had to keep fighting—I had to win this. My mates needed me, and I wasn’t going to let this two-bit moon goddess take them from me.

With a scream, I grabbed Seluna’s shoulders and shoved her away. I scrambled to my feet and gathered my magic, then sent a blast her way. The goddess had barely gotten to her knees when it hit her and sent her flying backward into a rotting corpse plant.

I charged forward with a growl and blasted the goddess again. The scent of decaying flesh coming from the plants was almost overwhelming, and my eyes started to stream from the stench.

Seluna screamed with fury. As she stared at me, her eyes flashed between total blackness and a fiery red, like the fires of hell.

But I didn’t let that stop me. I walked closer to her, getting right in her terrifying face.

“You are not welcome here,” I said. Then I blasted Seluna back again, reveling in the power of my Fae magic.

Seluna opened her mouth to scream, but then there was another fiery flash, and everything went perfectly silent.

I looked around, scared, as the ground started to rumble beneath my feet. The breath was knocked out of me as I was tossed into the air. The world around me disappeared as I did a freefall through a blackness that was punctuated by fiery forks of lightning that looked like hellfire.

Then, very suddenly, I tumbled back into my body, gasping for air. The burning sensation started to dissipate, and the pressure on my heart eased, too. Slowly, I was calming down.

For a moment, I felt a strange emptiness, like I was missing a limb, but then I opened my eyes. Xavier, Greyson, my parents, the witches, and Marta were all staring down at me, their faces scared. Was I really seeing them? Or was it me looking through Seluna’s eyes?

I reached up a hand—stunned to realize I could. I had control over my body again.

*Seluna?* I asked, shouting into the inner darkness of my soul.

There was no answer. And—I wasn’t sure why—but I just knew that she couldn’t answer.

“She’s gone,” I said out loud. “Seluna’s left my body.”

# Episode 2649

**Greyson**

It was excruciating to watch Cali go through the exorcism. It was like watching a horror movie unfold—one starring the person I loved the most, and there was nothing I could do but watch.

I couldn’t do *anything* to help. It was hell to watch her writhe and suffer. I wanted to step in—to stop Big Mac—but I knew better. This had to happen.

But I also knew Cali could do it. I knew she had fight still left in her. I’d had felt it when I was able to mind link with her. For so long, the mind link had felt closed off to me, but suddenly it felt like she could hear me.

And now here she was, smiling up at me.

Startled, I took her hand. Her skin felt warm as she gently squeezed my hand.

Marta let out a breath and, looking a bit dazed herself, started to sway a little on her feet. Lilac appeared at her side and helped her to the couch.

“So,” Lola said, from the back of the gathered crowd. “How do we know if Seluna is really gone?”

We all looked over at her, and there was a general sense that she’d just voiced the question we were all thinking.

I turned to Big Mac. “Can you sense anything—”

But I was cut off when Xavier pushed forward, shoving me aside, and pulled Cali into a kiss, bending her back over his arm.

“Oh, for god’s sake, man, is this really the time?” I growled.

When Xavier came up for air, he was smiling. “It’s her,” he said, grinning like an idiot. “It’s definitely Cali.”

The pack cheered, and Ravi whooped, and when the laughter died down, there was a collective sigh of relief.

I was relieved too, but also a little annoyed. Maybe I should kiss her, too, just to be sure.

“Oh, Cali,” Orla cried out, pushing me aside as she hurried forward. “Is it really you, sweetheart? Are you back?”

Cali smiled shakily. “I think so.”

Orla threw her arms around Cali, and, after a moment, Tom joined in. Artemis was next, and—seeing them together—I was flooded with a feeling of deep relief. I was just glad Cali was back with her family.

But Lola’s question echoed in my head. How *did* we know Seluna was really gone? Cali seemed to be back to herself, but how could we be sure Seluna wasn’t still in there somewhere, hiding? Lying in wait?

I took a step toward Kira and bent my head low. “Is there some kind of test we can do to make sure Seluna’s really gone?”

Kira nodded. “There’s a spell I can perform that will act as a kind of scan, but I think it’s best to wait a bit.”  
 “Why?” I asked.

Kira nodded toward Cali. “She’s been through a lot. We should give her a moment to recover.”

“Cali, how do you feel?” I asked as she pulled away from her family hug. “You seem… back to normal.”

She gave me a crooked smile. “Double checking it’s really me?”

“I was worried,” I admitted. How could I not be, after what had happened last exorcism? “Do you want to go upstairs to rest? Do you need some water? Something to eat? How do you feel?”

Cali’s face shone up at me as she stepped closer to me and took my hand. “I feel like myself,” she said, kissing the back of my hand.

I was glad to hear it, but I was still worried. I needed to *know* Cali was safe, so I looked over at Kira. “Just go ahead and do whatever you need to do; run that scan spell. We need to know now. It’ll give Cali and the rest of us peace of mind.”

Kira raised her eyebrows but nodded. “Okay. Everyone stand back. Especially the Fae, the witches, and Dani and Marta.”

“Why?” Xavier asked.

“I don’t want any of their magic to interfere with my spell,” Kira said, her face already set as she gathered herself to cast.

Her list hadn’t included me, so I stayed next to Cali, my hand clasping hers.

Xavier stood on the other side of her and took her other hand.

Kira took a deep breath and stretched her hands out in front of her, palms up. She lowered her head and began to speak, her voice low and musical. The air in the room seemed to fill with electricity as Kira raised her hands up above her head, then ran them, palms out, down the length of Cali’s body.

I felt a gentle breeze curl around us; it lifted Cali’s hair from her shoulders.

Kira opened her eyes and nodded. “Cali’s free. She’s no longer possessed.”

The room erupted into wild cheers. I grabbed Cali and pulled her into a tight hug. It felt amazing to hold her, and knowing that it was Cali in there—not Seluna—made it so much better.

I pressed a kiss to her temple. “Welcome back, love,” I whispered.

“Hey! HEY!” Rishika shouted from the doorway. “I hate to break up the fun, and to be the bearer of bad news, but we have a pack approaching that’s going to do its damnedest to kill us, remember?”

I hated to let Cali out of my arms, but Rishika was right—I had to get outside. I remembered what Lucian had said—that he’d slept with Seluna in Cali’s body. It had infuriated me at the time, and even with Cali back at the house, it still pissed me off.

“What about Lucian?” I asked, looking down at her.

“What about him?” Cali asked, scowling at the mention of his name.

“Did he… *do* anything when he was with you, or Seluna?” I asked anxiously.

Xavier let out a low, menacing growl. “If he did, I’m going to go out there right now and kill that asshole.”

“No, no,” Cali said quickly. “He didn’t do anything. He wanted to get with Seluna, but he never had a chance.” She gave a grim smile. “Seluna didn’t want him. She convinced him to wait until after they got married.”

I found that odd, but still reassuring, and I gave Cali’s hand a squeeze.

But Xavier didn’t appear to share the sentiment. “I’m still going to kill that fucker for all of this,” he snarled.

“Come on,” I said to my brother. “Come with me outside.”

Xavier nodded, and we followed Rishika out the front door into the cold winter air.

“When are we going to attack the Vanguard pack?” Xavier asked, looking around at the dark shadows of the trees.

“I’ve been wondering the same thing,” I said, “but I’m starting to reconsider—”

“*What?*” Xavier wheeled around to stare at me. “Are you kidding me? *Why?* After what Lucian and his crazy moon followers did to Cali? How can you possibly want to let that pack off the hook?”

“I understand why you’re pissed,” I said, “but we have to be rational. Revenge isn’t going to solve our problems.”

Xavier scowled. “We could at least give it a try.”

“Don’t you remember what it was like to be in a pack war?” I asked. “Have you forgotten what it was like when Silas was alive? How he pitted pack against pack?” I shook my head. “All that unnecessary bloodshed.”

Xavier snorted with disgust. “You seemed to enjoy it at the time.”

“I never enjoyed it,” I said quickly. “I did what I had to do, and you know that.”

Xavier took a deep breath and looked up at the dark sky. “We can agree that pack wars suck, but Lucian has brought this on himself. What kind of message will it send if we just ignore what he did to us? What’s that going to look like to the other packs? Like we’re fucking soft and easily pushed around.”

“It’s going to look a hell of a lot worse if we don’t ignore it,” I argued.

“No way—”

“Think about it, Xavier,” I said shortly. “The Vanguard pack has unlimited resources, and immense numbers. They easily outnumber us. We only managed to escape from that place because we slipped in and out as quickly as possible. Even then, we could have been really easily overtaken.”

“I know.” Xavier sighed, running a hand through his mussed hair. “We got lucky a few times. But I’m not happy about the idea of just letting Lucian off the hook after everything he did to us, and especially to Cali.”

“I’m not saying we let him off the hook,” I said. “Not yet. But maybe we can—I don’t know—find a compromise that suits us all.”

We’d caught up to Rishika, so Xavier didn’t answer.

“There,” Rishika was saying, pointing into the darkness of the woods. “You see them?”

I peered through the dense trees and saw what she was pointing at. It was the Vanguard pack, and they were getting closer.

I looked around. “What about the barrier? Has it fallen?”

# Episode 2650

**Marta**

The temperature in Bert’s house had always been weird. It was like he’d never wanted me to be comfortable, which—upon reflection—had probably been the case. One night, though, it had been swelteringly hot—hotter than I ever remembered being. Which was especially absurd because it had been the dead of winter. We’d been getting ready for yet another of Bert’s parties, and the house had been abuzz all day with preparations. He’d warned me to look my very best.  
 “I’m expecting some very special guests tonight,” he’d said with a menacing smile.

For the occasion, he’d picked out an old dress for me to wear. It had probably been made sometime around the Victorian era and had been sitting in a musty closet ever since. I was pretty sure it had been pink once, but it had faded until it was nearly white, and it weighed about a hundred pounds. There was just so much of it. A whale bone corset, heavy beading at the neckline, yards and yards of crinoline, and an enormous skirt that completely filled every doorway I walked through.

I didn’t know who the *very special guests* were, but I’d learned to take such announcements with a hefty pinch of salt. Bert was always overdramatic about everything. Especially his parties, which he loved.

As I walked carefully down the stairs, the weight and tightness of the gown—combined with the sweltering heat of the house—made me feel dizzy and light-headed, and I wondered if I was about to faint.

But there wasn’t time for that—the guests had already started to arrive. There was a slew of high society poltergeists that Bert like to run with, along with a few unwitting people that Bert would probably try to trap. When he saw me on the stairs, he gestured impatiently.

Great. I’d only just arrived, and he was already angry with me.

Bert was highly unpredictable, and his anger put me on edge—I just never knew what would set him off, but I knew I always had to tread lightly.

When I reached him, he pointed to an elegant woman with striking blue eyes who had just arrived.

“I want you to find out who that woman is,” he whispered into my ear.

Inwardly I groaned, but I also knew it would do no good to argue with Bert, so I walked over to the woman.

She turned as I neared her, and when she set her cold gaze on me, I felt my stomach knot. I peered curiously at the woman, trying to make sense of what I’d just seen. When she’d turned to look at me, she’d seemed to have two faces.

But that couldn’t be. And it had happened so quickly, I was sure I’d been mistaken. The temperature in the room seemed to still be climbing, and I was starting to feel weak in the knees.

The woman looked at me critically and then smiled, the expression like ice cracking. “You’re not like the others, are you?”

I was taken aback, but before I could even think of how to answer this, she nodded.

“You’ll do just fine.” And without another word, she grabbed my shoulders.

Immediately, an icy coldness shot through me, and the woman’s eyes turned coal black. I was terrified and opened my mouth to scream, but no sound came out.   
 “What are you?” I asked, my voice trembling. It felt like something was being pulled from me, and I fought against it.

The woman pulled me close and leaned in. Her breath was rotten as she whispered into my face, “Have you never met a demon before, girl?”

“Marta? *Marta!*”

Lilac’s voice snapped me back to the present, and I blinked.

He looked at me, his expression anxious. “Are you okay?”

I could feel my heart pounding. The fear I’d felt at Bert’s house began to fade as I looked around. I was in the living room of the pack house, and we’d just done Cali’s exorcism. The Christmas tree was in the corner. I was safe.

Lilac looked worried. “Are you okay? You look like you just saw a ghost. And believe me, I know what I’m talking about.”

I shook my head, trying to clear it. “You shouldn’t make stupid jokes like that. How’s Cali? Did they find anything?”

Lilac looked confused by the question. “We got rid of the goddess, like we were supposed to. She seems okay,” he confirmed. “What about you? Are you okay?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. I felt fine physically, but I was deeply shaken by what I’d seen—or *thought* I had seen—while I was touching Cali’s head.

“Listen, I hate to state the obvious,” Okorie said, stepping toward me, “but I’m going to need to put your bracelets back on.”

Lilac looked over at him, annoyed. “Can’t you give her a second?”

“I really can’t,” Okorie said. “I’ve already taken a chance by removing them, and that was probably a bad idea.”

“So why’d you do it then?” Lilac snapped.

“It’s okay,” I said, putting a hand on Lilac’s arm. “Lilac, listen, I want to talk to Okorie.”

He looked at me blankly. “Okay. So talk.”

I squirmed. “I want to talk to him alone,” I said, feeling deeply uncomfortable.

Lilac looked at me for a moment, his expression wounded, then he shrugged. “Whatever. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

I gave his hand a squeeze. “And I appreciate that. But I need to talk to Okorie about some witch stuff.”

“Fine,” Lilac said, getting to his feet and striding away.

Okorie sat down next to me on the couch and put the bracelets back on my wrists, one at a time.

“Witch stuff?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

I hesitated. “I’m not even sure if I should be bringing this up.”

He looked down at my bracelets. “Whatever you want to say to me, just say it. I’m your mentor—you can trust me.”

“Okay,” I said, lowering my voice. “I know this sounds crazy, but… Have you ever encountered a demon?”

Okorie looked up, clearly surprised, then his eyes narrowed. “Why are you asking me this, Marta?”

“Just answer me,” I insisted. “You told me I could trust you, so you need to tell me the truth. Have you ever seen a demon?”

I needed to talk to someone. I needed to explain what I’d just seen—or what I thought I’d just seen—and what had happened at Bert’s all those years ago. But I knew I needed to talk to someone who would understand. Lilac wouldn’t. How could he? But Okorie was an experienced warlock. He might be my best chance.

“Have you?” I asked again.

“I’ve met some demonic people, but as far as meeting a real demon goes? No, not yet. And I hope it stays that way.”

“Why?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I’ve heard they can be a real nightmare.”

I looked at him, disappointed.

“Now, you have to answer my question,” he said.

“What?”

“Why are you asking me about demons?” he asked.

I glanced quickly around, making sure no one was nearby to overhear. “I’ve met one before, and I swear I just saw another one.”

Okorie—who was hard to surprise—looked surprised. He looked quickly around the living room. “*Here?* Is it that Torin guy? I felt like there was something going on with all those cookies—”

“It’s not Torin,” I said irritably. “It was during the exorcism.”

He gave me a long look. “You’re not joking, are you?”

“I would never joke about demons,” I said, feeling myself growing cold.

He nodded. “Okay. Hang on a second.” He stood and walked over to Big Mac, and I watched as he spoke quietly to her, explaining what I’d just told him.

My head was starting to ache, and I was wishing I’d never taken part in this exorcism. They could have figured out a way to do it without me. But would it have worked?

It was too late now to second-guess anything. What was done was done.

Big Mac was across the room in two strides. “Are you sure?” she asked without preamble.

“No,” I said, taking a shaking breath, “but I think so, and this wouldn’t be the first time I’ve met a demon.”

“And it felt the same?” Big Mac asked.

“Yeah,” I confirmed. “It felt the same. Exactly the same.”

The witch’s expression hardened. “Well, that’s not great news.”

“Why?” I asked, though I wasn’t sure if I wanted to know the answer.

“Because if you’re right, Marta, then all we did during the exorcism was push the demon out,” Big Mac said grimly.

I frowned. “Yeah, I know. Isn’t that what we wanted to do, though? To help Cali free herself of it?’

Big Mac shook her head. “Yes and no,” she said shortly.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Big Mac raised an eyebrow. “Because now we have a demon on the loose.”

# Episode 2651

**Xavier**

I watched as Lucian strode purposefully toward where I knew the barrier lay. His usually haughty expression—that look of smug detachment he usually wore—was gone, replaced by something raw and angry. His muscled body was tense and intimidating, and he looked about five feet wide. I didn’t know how I’d never noticed just how big the dude really was.

Behind him walked dozens of Vanguard pack members, and I knew that was just the tip of their iceberg.

Seeing this, I really hoped the barrier was still in place and would remain that way. At least long enough for our pack to get ready.

Maybe Greyson was right—maybe it *would* be best if we could avoid a fight. If we could avoid something that would drag on for who knew how long, and kill countless pack members. I had a feeling that was probably the right answer, but I also knew that if the Vanguards made one wrong move, I was ready to take things to the next level.

“Should I get Big Mac?” Rishika asked quietly, leaning toward Greyson. “Ask her about the barrier? Maybe she can reinforce it.”

Greyson shook his head. “Forget the witch. Assemble the pack.” He looked over at me. “In the meantime, let’s go see what Lucian wants.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s obvious what he wants. He’s come for Cali—or Seluna. Whoever the fuck he thinks she is. The dude’s messed up.”

Lucian had reached the barrier, and he took a surprised step back when it stopped him. Infuriated, he slammed his fist against it, and there was a ripple of impact. Greyson and I watched silently as a crack formed where he’d hit the barrier.

Shit. That wasn’t good.

He looked at both of us, his eyes flashing. “So, I see the mighty Redwood pack was so threatened by the Vanguards that they had to have a witch help them defend themselves.”

I stepped toward the barrier, my eyes boring into Lucian’s. “Did you come here just to admire our witch’s power, or was there something else you needed?”

“Tell me where my Luna is!” Lucian said, an eerie calmness emanating off of him.

I bristled. The thought of Cali being anyone’s Luna but mine made me incensed.

Greyson shook his head casually. “We don’t know where your Luna is, man, but if you can’t find her, maybe there’s a reason.”

Lucian slammed his fist into the barrier again. “Perhaps you don’t understand the gravity of the situation.”

“I think we understand the gravity just fine,” I said. “You lost your Luna and want to put the blame on anyone but the person actually responsible for it—you.”

“You broke into my palace and stole my Luna,” Lucian said. “And I want her back.”

“I guess we see things a little differently,” Greyson said easily. “We went to your palace because you kidnapped Cali. All we did was retrieve her. *Rescue* and retrieve her. And if it cost you a few pack members?” He shrugged. “I guess that’s just the cost of doing business.”

“And she’s not your Luna, asshole,” I said. “She never was, and she’s never going to be.”

Lucian rolled his eyes. “Don’t be so ridiculous. I’m not interested in Caliana—I’m speaking of Seluna, of course—”

“She isn’t here,” Greyson said, cutting him off. “She was removed.”

Lucian’s face flushed, and his eyes flashed with anger. “*Removed?* What could you possibly mean by that? Removed *how*?”

“*We* know how to keep our mate safe,” I added.

Deep inside me, I felt my wolf stir. It had to be a reaction to Lucian and all his batshit talk about Cali being his Luna. She was going to be *my* Luna someday, and I hated to hear anyone else talking about her like that. It was driving me crazy, so it was probably having an effect on my wolf, too.

Lucian’s gaze drifted over my shoulder, and I turned to see what had distracted him.

Rishika had returned with backup. The whole pack was with her, and every one of them had their game faces on.

“The only thing keeping us apart right now is the barrier,” Greyson told Lucian. “I can keep it, or I can have it removed. Do you have a preference?”

Andrei stepped forward. His wounds had healed, but he seemed the type to hold a grudge, regardless. Which was fine—it still wouldn’t help him.

Lucian held up a hand to stop Andrei. “I would rather not escalate tensions. Not yet,” he added, his eyes glittering. “But I will not allow the Redwood pack—or any pack, for that matter—to deprive me of my Luna. My goddess. I have waited a long time for this moment—”

“I don’t care how long you’ve waited, you clown,” I snapped. “You can wait the rest of your life, because you’re never getting Cali. So just go back to your palace and have a few more goddess wet dreams and just leave us the hell alone.”

Lucian’s face flushed with fury. “Twenty-four hours. I will grant you twenty-four hours.”

“You will *grant* us?” I said, bursting into laughter. “That’s so good of you, my liege.” I looked over at Greyson, still laughing. “This guy really thinks he’s a prince! Fuck you, dude.”

“By this time tomorrow,” Lucian went on, unfazed by my laughter, “the Redwood pack had better return Seluna to me, or no barrier on earth will protect you.”

Greyson’s eyes narrowed. “I think we want to be very careful here,” he said, his voice low. “Are you threatening a war?”

Lucian’s eyes were cold. “I think I’ve made myself adequately clear.”

“We don’t have Seluna,” Greyson said. “There’s nothing to turn over to you.”

“I suppose it might be wise to use the twenty-four hours I am granting you to reconsider this very, very foolish position.”

And with that, he shifted. The rest of the pack followed suit, and they threw back their heads and howled up at the darkening sky. A moment later they were gone, sprinting away and disappearing into the darkness of the trees.

So much for all the precautions we’d taken for LIPS.

Greyson looked over at me. “We should go check on Cali, and then we should talk about what to do about Lucian.”

He’d just turned toward the house when I felt my wolf stir again.

What was going on? Lucian was gone.

Was my wolf jealous, seeing the Vanguard wolves shift so easily? Did it want to run through the woods, too? What was going on?

And then, as if in answer to my question, I turned to see Ava standing near the side of the house, waiting for me.

Great. What the hell did *she* want? And what was she doing? She needed to recover from the fight earlier.

I strode over to her. “What?” I asked.

“I saw what happened,” she said, tipping her chin toward the barrier.

“Yeah? So? You’re supposed to be resting.”

She gave me a searching look. “Are you worried about what Lucian’s going to do?’

“I’m not worried,” I growled. “I’m looking forward to it.”

She smiled. “I admire your confidence, Xavier, but the Vanguard pack is a lot bigger than this one. This might be a numbers game.”

I chuckled. “If you’re suggesting that I put my tail between my legs and run off, you can forget that.”

Ava smiled. “I would never suggest that, and even if I did, I know you’d never do it. You don’t have a quitting gene in your body.”

I turned and started toward the house, but my wolf was fighting me, urging me to stay.

“I don’t remember if I thanked you,” Ava said, calling my attention back to her. “I was in pretty bad shape when you healed me. So thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” I muttered, avoiding her eye.

“I feel like it’s worth mentioning,” she said. “I would have died if you hadn’t healed me. But I have a question for you.”

“What?” I sighed. I was staring to feel fed up.

“Why?”

“Why what?” I asked irritably.

“Why’d you heal me? Why’d you do it?” she asked, reaching for my hand.

My wolf reacted to her touch with a howl of approval, and I shook off her hand like it burned. “I don’t know.”

“You told me that you needed me,” she said. “What did you mean by that?”

“Nothing.”

“Is it just because you need me to shift, or is there something else that matters?”

“I think you’re reading too much into this,” I said shortly. But as she talked about it, I remembered the moment I’d decided to help her. And how our mate bond had seemed to react the moment I’d licked her wounds.

And now, standing here—alone with Ava—my wolf was stirring again. It felt stronger since I’d healed her, like it had been encouraged by that. Like the act of healing her had ignited something else.

Was *that* what was going on? But why? Was there a part of me that still *cared* about Ava?

# Episode 2652

Greyson stormed back into the house, his face tense, and I hurried over to him.

“Greyson? What’s wrong? Is everything okay? What happened out there?”

But before he could answer, Xavier came in, also looking unhappy.

“The Vanguards showed up, and it went about as well as I expected,” Greyson muttered.

I looked past him out the door, and into the darkness of the trees beyond the house. I couldn’t see any of the Vanguards, but I knew they’d been there, and it made me shudder with fear.

“It’s probably a miracle that didn’t turn into an all-out war. I saw Lucian after Seluna took over my body—he’s obsessed with her. It felt like he’d stop at nothing to get to Seluna before, and now it’s even worse. But he left, right? Why? Has he given up? Is he turning his back on her?”

Greyson shook his head, his expression grim. “Not exactly. He gave us an ultimatum.”

“*What?*”

“We have to return Seluna to him in twenty-four hours.”

I was surprised to hear this. “Wow. Giving another pack an ultimatum seems extreme. What are you going to do? Seluna’s not here. We don’t have anything to give him.”

“I know that,” Greyson said, rubbing a hand along his jaw. There was a day’s worth of stubble along it. “But I’m not quite sure how we’re going to convince Lucian of that.”

“I don’t know if it really matters,” Xavier said.

“What do you mean?” Greyson asked.

Xavier shrugged. “I think no matter what we do, it’s just going to end in a fight anyway. Even if we got Kira do that confirmation spell she did earlier, there’s no way to know if Lucian would believe that Seluna’s really gone. It’s the word of the Redwood witches versus everyone else.”

I thought about this for a moment. “Do you think Lucian would be willing to get a witch to figure it out himself? Someone he trusts? Doesn’t the Vanguard pack have its own witch? Or maybe Charon for the right price?”

“I don’t know, but I suppose we have twenty-four hours to figure something out. And so does Lucian,” Greyson said. “The last thing I want is for this to end in a fight. I don’t want any casualties.”

“Greyson, we have to be realistic—” Xavier started.

“This pack means more to me than anything else,” he snapped. He looked over at me. “And Cali. I know what the stakes are, and there’s no scenario where I’m going to be willing to compromise either of those things for Lucian’s stupid fantasy about a goddess being his Luna.”

Someone cleared their throat.

We turned and saw Big Mac standing nearby.

“Yeah, about that,” she started. Then she paused.

She looked a bit nervous, which was strange for her, and I didn’t like the look of it. Big Mac’s calm confidence had gotten me through a lot, and I wanted to see it now.

“About what?” Greyson asked.

She sighed. “Well, we have a situation. A minor problem.”

“What now?” Xavier groaned.

“Seluna’s not a goddess…”

Greyson nodded, unsurprised. “What is she, then?”

“She’s likely a demon of some kind,” Big Mac said.

I sucked in a breath, and a murmur of fear rolled through the rest of the gathered pack like a wave.

“A *demon*?” Sage asked. She’d come to stand behind Big Mac, and she looked scared.

“Is that true?” I asked, but even as I did, I realized that the idea made a kind of sense to me. Seluna had been inside my body, and nothing about her had ever seemed goddess-like. Not in the way I’d ever thought about the Greek or Roman goddesses. I had wondered about that. I’d started to think that maybe Seluna was Dark Fae, but a *demon*? The thought had occurred to me, but I hadn’t *seriously* thought it could be true.

A demon had been inside me? Trying to push me out of my own body?

I shuddered at the thought and shoved the idea away. I didn’t want to think about that any more than I had to.

“Are we sure about that?” Greyson asked. “How do we know?”

“Marta saw it,” Big Mac said. “And she’s had an interaction with a demon in the past. And if I think about the demonic patterns I’m aware of—possession, trickery, resistance to expulsion—it makes sense.” She turned to look at me. “She was inside you, so you’re probably our best witness. Did you see or experience anything that stands out as odd?”

I rolled my eyes. “The whole thing was odd—”

“Okay, anything especially dark,” Big Mac amended.

I thought about this for a moment. “Well, she did kind of burn off the handprints on my back.”

“*What?*” Xavier asked, looking stunned.

“There was a moment just before I was possessed when it seemed like Seluna was, like, smoldering. But it’s not like I had the time to think really hard about it, or connect any dots. I was kind of being *possessed.*”

“It’s okay,” Greyson said soothingly. “Don’t worry about it. What’s important is that you’re safe now.”

“Greyson’s right,” Xavier said. I could tell he forced himself to say the words. “Whatever Seluna is, she’s tricky as hell, and it’s clear she was trying to cover up whatever she is from everyone. Including you.”

I looked between my mates. “Do you think Lucian knows about what she is?”

Big Mac shook her head. “I don’t think so. From what you and Marta have said, it sounds like Seluna—or whatever her name really is—could be an elemental demon.”

“What does that mean?” Xavier asked.

“Basically that she’s a lesser demon,” Big Mac said. “But it can depend.”

I rubbed a hand across my eyes. “I thought all I had to worry about in the supernatural world was werewolves, vampires, witches, ghosts, revenants, and Fae. But now we’re talking about demons, too? When does it stop?”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Big Mac muttered.

“What do we do about all this?” I asked. “I mean, it’s not like we’ve had a lot of experience with this kind of thing. It sounds like Marta’s the only one who’s ever encountered a demon. Except maybe the one that came out of your mirror. Is that what Seluna is?”

“What do you mean?” Big Mac asked.

“You know, like just a spirit world shadowy-type thing? Because we could probably deal with that.”

Big Mac looked at me keenly. “She was inside you. Did she feel like a *spirit world shadowy-type thing*?”

“No,” I admitted.

“That’s because it’s not what she is,” Big Mac said. “As there are portals to the Fae world, there can be portals to the demon realm, too.”

“Well, that sounds great,” Xavier said sarcastically.

Big Mac went on like she hadn’t heard him. “Typically they stay in their realm and there’s no issue, but there have been instances of demons crossing over into our world. They like it here—there are humans to feed on and cities to destroy. And they like politics.”

“That doesn’t have some kind of catastrophic effect?” Greyson asked incredulously.

Big Mac shrugged. “It’s not necessarily a big deal unless they interrupt the supernatural balance. It’s like having witches everywhere, vampires, werewolves,” she added, raising an eyebrow. “Usually they’re smart enough to stay under the radar.”

“Wait a second,” I said, holding up a hand. “So what the hell was Seluna doing inside me? Was she *feeding* on me?” I asked with a convulsive shudder.

“The Chop Shop,” Xavier said.

“What?” Greyson asked.

“The Chop Shop. It’s run by a demon who was working with Fae. And Marta’s not the only one here who’s had demon encounters.”

“What do you mean?” Big Mac asked.

“I’m pretty sure I ran into some demons while I was working as a mercenary,” he said. “More or less.”

Greyson took a deep breath. “Look, this is all fascinating, and it might be important to know that Seluna’s not a goddess, but it’s not going to solve our problem with Lucian. I doubt telling the princeling his beloved is actually a demon is going to improve his mood at all. I doubt he’ll even believe us.”

Xavier looked over at Big Mac. “Wait, if she’s a demon, they don’t just take off. Where did she go if she’s not in Cali anymore?”

Big Mac looked nervous again. “That’s the other part of the problem…”

“Fuck,” Xavier said.

Big Mac nodded. “Yeah, fuck is right. We exorcised this thing without understanding the nature of what she really was. Which, in retrospect, might have been a mistake—”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Greyson muttered. “So, fine. Where is she now?”

Big Mac gave him an even stare. “The demon could be hiding anywhere.”

I felt a chill ripple down my spine. Anywhere? I didn’t like the sound of that. My whole body had gone cold, and I looked around the room anxiously. “Wait—does that mean Seluna has possessed someone else?”

# Episode 2653

**Greyson**

Everyone turned to Big Mac, waiting for the answer to Cali’s question. The air was thick with tension, and I just couldn’t believe we were going through this again. We’d just gone through all that shit to save Cali from Lucian, only to find out she’d been possessed by a demon because of that damned prince. A demon who might now have jumped ship and taken up residence in another unsuspecting pack member’s body.

Had this been Lucian’s plan all along? To introduce discord into the Redwood pack?

Then Big Mac spoke and confirmed what I’d already suspected.

“The demon could be anywhere—in any one of us.”

Everyone looked around nervously, and I could feel the tension growing. This had the makings of a total disaster. This was how packs turned on each other. Every little suspicion would grow to full-on conspiracy. Finger-pointing would follow, then a witch hunt, and pretty soon no one would trust anyone else.

I grabbed Big Mac’s elbow and pulled her aside, leading her into the small office off the front entryway. “We need to find that demon before all hell breaks loose in the pack house. What can we do?”

“Well, to start with, we can check everyone who was present for the exorcism. We can use that scan spell Kira used on Cali.”

“Great. Let’s start doing that immediately,” I said. “I’ll have everyone line up, and the witches will check. But wait…” I eyed Big Mac suspiciously. “Who checks you? I mean, I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but I’m not going to take any chances with my pack.”

“I’m not offended,” Big Mac said, surprising me. “We have to be sure about everyone. The witches can check each other. A demon can’t possess more than one body at a time, so we should be able to find her pretty easily.”

“Well, that’s something,” I said grimly.

“Here’s something else,” Big Mac said. “I suspect that this Seluna character—or whatever the demon really calls itself—had to be in a weakened state when she left Cali’s body, because of the possession and the exorcism.”

“Really?” I asked. “Why?”

She shrugged. “Body-hopping can’t be easy for her. It’ll probably drain her of power. So if we exorcise her again, she might be too weak to enter anyone else.”

“That does sound good,” I admitted. “But what happens after that?”

“What do you mean?” Big Mac asked.

“Like, where does she go? Does she just lie in wait, building up her strength until she’s strong enough to jump into someone again? How do I keep all this from happening again?” I demanded.

“Our best bet is to trap her in a vessel,” said Big Mac.

“Like we did to Letifer?” I shook my head. “That doesn’t inspire a lot of confidence, considering the fact that Letifer escaped. Multiple times.”

“I’m open to other suggestions, should you have any, Alpha,” Big Mac said waspishly. “No? Well then I guess we’ll have to do my idea, considering it’s the only one we’ve got. Now, excuse me, I need to go talk to Kira and Okorie. What we’re about to do isn’t small potatoes, and we need to get ready.”

She stormed out, and I watched her leave, then sighed and followed her out the door.

“Greyson,” Sabine said, putting a gentle hand on my arm. She had been standing outside the door, and from the look on her face, I suspected she’d heard the tense conversation Big Mac and I had just had. “I hope you’re not blaming MacKenzie for what happened with the demon. She couldn’t have known, and you were all so anxious to free Cali from whatever was possessing her—”

“I’m not blaming Big Mac,” I said quickly. “Not at all. I know this isn’t her fault. It’s Lucian’s fault. The blame starts and ends with him.” I put my hand over hers. “I need to go talk to the pack.”

My mother smiled at me, but as I walked back into the living room, a terrible thought occurred to me. How did I know that the demon wasn’t in my mother? Or even in myself?

I shook my head. *This* was how the madness started. Anyway, we’d find out soon enough where the thing was hiding.

When I walked into the living room, the first thing I saw was Xavier sitting next to Cali on the couch, his arm around her shoulders. A jolt of jealousy passed through me, but I couldn’t fault my brother for wanting to be near her. Our mate had been possessed by a demon, and for a moment there, we hadn’t been sure if we were going to get her back.

I’d speak to her later. I wanted to check in with her and make sure she was okay, but right now, I had other things to take care of.

“Hey! Heads up!” I called to the room. “I want everyone to assemble outside for a demon check.”

“*What?*” Zainab asked.

“That sounds painful,” Ravi said, looking a bit nervous.

“Can’t we just ask?” Jacqueline added. She stood and looked around at the room. “If the demon calling herself Seluna is here, can you please just speak up now? It would save us all a lot of time.”

I looked at her from the corner of my eye. I couldn’t tell if she was being serious, and maybe had some experience speaking with demons, or if she wanted to avoid the scanning spell for some reason. Like, maybe she was trying to avoid detection.

Torin must have been thinking the same thing, because he looked up at Jacqueline. “That sounds like something Seluna would say,” he said coldly.

Jacqueline looked deeply offended. “Why you little—”

This sort of reaction was exactly what I was afraid of, and I didn’t like it at all.

“Everyone stop!” I bellowed. “Outside. *Now!*”

As the pack filed out into the cold December air, I watched them walk by, looking into their faces, wondering if I’d be able to tell just by looking at them if they’d been possessed by this demon.

If Seluna was hiding in *my* body, would *I* know?

It seemed that the best person to discuss this with would be Cali, as she was the one with firsthand experience. I needed to talk to her to find out what she’d gone through. It must have been awful, and I wanted to hold her close, but I also wanted to know what to look for in others.

Outside, Rishika was moving everyone into a line. Everyone was complying with her orders, but I could see everyone watching each other grimly. There was suspicion on every face, and it made me nervous.

Big Mac, Kira, and Okorie stepped out of the house, and I walked over to them.

“We’re going to do that scan spell on everyone,” I said, “and we’ll start with me.”

Okorie raised an eyebrow. “With you?”

I nodded. “I want to assure the pack that their Alpha isn’t harboring a demon.”

I walked down the steps and stepped into line with the pack. Kira stood in front of me and took a deep breath. Just like she’d done with Cali, she raised her hands then moved them down, scanning my body from top to bottom.

I was just starting to wonder if I was meant to be feeling anything when I felt a warm breeze tickle my skin.

Kira opened her eyes. “He’s clear. Who’s next?”

“Me,” Xavier said, stepping up next to me.

Kira repeated the spell. “Clear. Who’s next?”

The rest of the pack followed silently. I noticed Cali had joined the line, and I walked over to her.

“You don’t have to do this,” I told her. “You already did this. We already know you’re not possessed anymore.”

“I know,” Cali said, biting her lip nervously. “But I just feel like I’m responsible for all of this.”

“Why?” I asked, startled. I took her hand.

Cali looked down at her hand in mine and shrugged. “It’s like I brought a disease into the pack, and now it’s spreading. I feel awful—”

“Stop,” I said firmly. “Don’t talk like that. You didn’t do this. You’re the victim here, Cali. I don’t want you to think that you’re somehow responsible for this. You’re not, and whatever happens, we’ll figure this out. We’ll get rid of her again if we have to, and we’ll make sure she never, ever returns.”

Taking a shuddering breath, Cali nodded. “Okay,” she said quietly.

I kept hold of her hand as we watched the rest of the demon screenings. I could feel Cali tense whenever someone stepped up to be scanned. She gripped my hand hard when her parents’ turn came, then Jay, then Lola, then Dani.

Everyone was clear.

“Okay, now us three,” Big Mac said to Kira and Okorie.

Letting go of Cali’s hand, I walked over. “Well?”

Big Mac shot a troubled look at Kira and Okorie. “Seluna’s not in anyone’s body from the Redwood pack.”

“Then where the hell is she?” I asked.

Big Mac shook her head. “She’s gone.”

# Episode 2654

“*Gone?* What do you mean, she’s gone? Where is she?” I asked Big Mac, looking around anxiously, like I was going to find Seluna hiding behind me. It was hard not to imagine Seluna lurking around somewhere, just waiting for some unsuspecting body to wander by. I wouldn’t put it past her.

It had been such a relief when I’d realized I was free of her, I hadn’t wanted to give it any more thought, but the more everyone spoke about the demon, the more the reality of what it had meant to be possessed really sank in. It had been horrifying, and I wouldn’t wish the experience on anyone. Not even Ava.

Well, maybe on Lucian.

Let that guy be possessed by his demonic moon goddess and see how *he* liked it. *That* would be justice.

“It’s likely she went somewhere,” Kira said reasonably.

“Yeah, but again, the main question is *where*?” Greyson asked.

Big Mac tipped her chin toward the barrier. “Maybe she hopped into one of the Vanguard pack members. They were around when she left Cali’s body, and close enough for a demon to detect them. She might have sought them out.”

“But what about the barrier?” I asked. “Wouldn’t that have stopped her?”

Big Mac shook her head. “It’s only keeps people from getting in. It doesn’t stop people—or demons, as the case may be—from getting out. She could have gone after a Vanguard wolf.”

“Is it possible she ended up in Lucian, or is that too much to hope for?” I asked.

Kira shrugged. “Anything is possible, I guess.”

Greyson looked around at the pack. “I wonder if we should screen everyone again, just to make sure. I’m not pointing fingers, but it would be good to know for sure. Just so we can head off any suspicion before it starts.”

While they talked about that possibility, I stopped listening. My thoughts were spinning. Was it really possible that Seluna had jumped into Lucian? Would she do that? I hated that I knew *anything* about their deeply messed-up relationship, but I wasn’t sure that she would. Despite Lucian’s *very* devoted feelings for Seluna, Seluna had been giving off some very hot-and-cold vibes when it came to him.

But, at the same time, going to a Vanguard body made the most sense for her. After all, they were the ones who worshipped her. Why *not* go be with one of them? They would probably think that being possessed by her was an honor, or something equally messed up. They’d probably line up for the privilege.

Then again, were they even aware that their precious goddess was actually a demon? I suspected that might come as quite a shock.

Greyson looked out at the barrier. “I think we can ease up on that for now. Lucian gave us twenty-four hours, and I doubt they’ll be back before then.”

“Cali?”

I looked over to see Xavier next to me. He slipped his hand into mine and pulled me a little ways away.

“How are you?” he asked, stroking a gentle hand down my hair.

“I’m okay,” I said automatically.

“I know you were worried about Seluna hanging around, but now that we’re thinking she might have moved on, are you feeling better?” he asked.

“I… I don’t know, I guess,” I admitted. “But I do have a question for you.”

“What?”

I pushed my hair behind my ears. “It’s about that kiss. Did you do that to find out if it was me, or did you kiss me just because?” I asked.

Xavier smiled, and the sight of it made my heart feel suddenly lighter than it had in a long time.

“I kissed you because I couldn’t help myself,” he said. “But also to make sure I was right. That you were you.”

“So you knew before, just by kissing me, that I wasn’t really myself? You could feel that there was something wrong?”

“What? Of course I could,” he said.

His answer felt like a warm blanket around my shoulders. It was good to know that my mate knew me by my kiss. That even though the demon had been walking around in my body, my connection with Xavier was strong enough for him to have seen past the physical, to have known that something wasn’t right.

If I had ever doubted the strength and depth of our mate bond, I never would again.

My eyes filled with tears as Xavier tipped my chin up to look at me.

“Remember, I was the one who knew that Seluna was taking over. I didn’t need Big Mac’s magic or Kira’s scanning spell. I knew just from that kiss, Cali.”

“But *how*?” I asked quietly. “How could you tell?”

He shrugged. “I’ve kissed you thousands of times, and that time it didn’t feel right. I just knew. But now”—he leaned in and pressed a kiss to my lips—“it feels perfect. My mate is back. I know that, too.”

I felt a surge of love flow through me. “Your mate never left,” I said, grasping onto his shirt and pulling him closer. “I was just temporarily blocked by a demon.”

Xavier laughed, but after a moment, his eyes lost their humor. “I will always find you,” he said seriously. “No matter where you are, or who—or what—tries to get in the way.”

“Okay!” Big Mac called, walking back toward the group. “It’s gone. I’ve dropped the barrier.”

“Great,” Greyson said. “Okay, I want Zainab, Jay, and Sage out on a perimeter check. I want you to scout the area and make sure we don’t have any additional company. But remember,” he added as the three stepped forward, “LIPS could still be around, so we need to be careful. Don’t shift unless it’s absolutely an emergency.”

Everyone groaned, but Zainab, Jay, and Sage all set off into the trees at a run.

“I’m going to join them,” Xavier said, turning to me. “I don’t trust Lucian, and I want to make sure he’s really gone.”

“Okay,” I said, squeezing his hand. “Be careful.”

He nodded and set off after the scout team.

Shivering, I headed back toward the house. I was cold, and all the possessing and exorcism stuff had made me hungry. Starving, actually. Maybe Torin and my dad were cooking up something tasty now that some of the stress was gone.

But before I got to the door, I saw Ava, standing by herself on the far side of the porch. We hadn’t had a chance to talk after the escape from the palace. I grasped the doorknob but didn’t turn it. I could just ignore Ava, but I couldn’t stop thinking about how she’d risked her life to save me.

So I turned to her. “I wanted to thank you, Ava. For helping me out.”

Ava looked surprised but shook her head. “I didn’t do it for you,” she said.

“I get that,” I said. “But you still saved my life, and I feel like I owe you.”

“You don’t,” she said curtly. “Anyway, you saved me from being skewered by your sister.”

I smiled, remembering. “Yeah, I guess I did. It was kind of chaotic, and Artemis didn’t understand what was happening.”

“It’s fine,” Ava said. “Anyway, we’re both out of there, and that’s what matters. And,” she added after a beat, “for what it’s worth, I’m glad you aren’t possessed anymore. That looked pretty bad.”

“Yeah…”

There was a moment of strained silence. We both looked out at the patrol group and Xavier, just as they disappeared into the trees.

I was worried about Xavier. He had a lot going on, and I didn’t want him getting trapped as a wolf—or as a human. He was *both* of those things, and having either one taken away would destroy him.

“Anyway,” I said, breaking the silence. “Have you thought about what you’re going to do now?”

Ava gave me a knowing look. “Are you asking me because you’re wondering when I’m going to leave?”

I sighed. “I know you saved me because of your love for Xavier. I know you two are linked because of your mate bond. I want to help Xavier deal with that. I absolutely wish that mate bond didn’t exist, but it does, and there’s nothing I can do about it. I’ve tried to ignore it, and it didn’t do me any good. It’s taken me a long time to understand. I’m still not sure if I totally do, but I know this—while the mate bond between you two exists, Xavier needs you, Ava.” It hurt to say this, but I pressed on. “You can help him in ways I can’t. And as painful as that is for me to admit, what I want most is what’s best for Xavier.”

Ava gave me a long look. “I guess we both want that.”

I took a deep breath. I couldn’t believe I was going to say what I was about to say. “Ava, I never thought I would be asking this, but would you ever consider joining the Redwood pack?”

# Episode 2655

**Greyson**

“I want you both to keep any eye out for Vanguard wolves, obviously, but also anything on the road that looks off to you—cars driving too slowly, large vans. I have no idea what these people have in mind, and I want to be prepared for all possibilities.”

“You got it,” Rishika said.

Next to her, Ravi nodded. “Anything suspicious, we’ll take it out.”

“Thanks…” I started, but trailed off, because out of the corner of my eye I saw something odd. Cali was on the porch, speaking to Ava. I would have thought they’d rather continue to go on avoiding one another, but to be fair, it was bound to happen at some point. They lived in the same place—they couldn’t ignore each other permanently.

I shook my head and turned back to Rishika and Ravi. “I know everyone would rather scout the perimeter in wolf form, but we can’t take that risk yet. Human forms only until I say otherwise.”

“Yeah,” Rishika said, looking grim, “I figured as much, even though it’s going to take three times as long.”

“I know, but it’s bad enough that the Vanguards shifted so close to our pack house.” They had completely ignored our warnings. But however angry I was about that, it was *nothing* compared to the anger I felt toward Lucian for putting Cali in danger.

Part of me would’ve loved to do what Xavier kept suggesting and just attack the Vanguards and kill the princeling.

But I knew better. I’d been through enough to know that escalation like that would only throw gasoline onto the already burning fire.

Xavier walked over. “I just got back with the first scout team, but I’m going to go out and take a deeper look in the woods. Can’t be too careful.”

“Forget it,” I said quickly. “You’ve already been out there. You ran the whole perimeter. You’ve done enough. And I don’t want you getting too far from Ava, just in case you have a problem shifting.”

“I just want to check again,” he insisted. “It won’t take long.”

“I doubt anything’s changed in the last several minutes,” I said. “You just got back. It’s okay to take a break. And I’m going to go take a quick look around, and then head back myself.”

He thought about it for a moment, then nodded. “Fine.”

As he turned to head into the house, Rishika looked at me with wide, startled eyes.

“What?” I asked.

“Who the hell was that, and who the hell are you, and what the hell have you done with Greyson and Xavier?” She had a thin smirk around the edges of her lips.

“What are you talking about?”

“You know damn well what I mean,” she said, smiling. “It’s just nice to see you and your brother *not* trying to kill each other.”

“Well, I wouldn’t get used to it if I were you,” I said with a wry smile. “We’ve got a common enemy for now, but I’m sure once all the drama with Lucian calms down, Xavier and I will be back at each other’s throats.”

Rishika chuckled and she, Ravi, and I headed off to trek around the property.

I knew why Rishika had been surprised, but I’d only been half-kidding. It was funny how the one thing that could bring Xavier and me together—Cali—was the very thing that would drive us apart.

The air was cold and damp, and the three of us ran the perimeter in silence. I didn’t see anything suspicious, but that didn’t surprise me. This moment felt like the calm before the storm.

“I think we’ve seen all we need to see,” I said when the pack house came back into view.

“I’m going to cut into the woods a bit,” Rishika said. “You two can go on in.”

“I’ll go with you, Rishika,” Ravi offered.

I nodded, and as I headed toward the house, I realized that I was *exhausted*. The last few days had been physically and emotionally demanding. My body was still a little sore from the Vanguard fight, and as I headed upstairs, all I could think about was a hot shower. And maybe a whiskey.

But as I walked down the hall, I noticed Cali’s light was on.

“Cali?” I said, knocking softly.

“Come in,” she called.

“Hey,” I said, closing the door behind me. “How are you doing?”

She patted the spot next to her on the edge of the bed, and I gladly sat down, putting my arm around her.

“I’m glad you’re back,” I said, pressing a kiss to her head. My body was still tired, but just holding her made me feel better.

She looked up at me. “Did you know that Ava saved me?”  
 “What?” I asked. Of all the things she could have said… that definitely caught me by surprise. “She did? When?”

“At the Vanguard palace, when I was being held by Lucian.”

“I had no idea.”

“But I think we both know why,” she added.

“Yeah, I guess we do. Ava seems willing to go to any lengths to prove to Xavier how important she is to him.”

I could feel Cali tense in my arms, so I hastily added, “But *you* shouldn’t have to prove that, should you?”

“No,” Cali sighed. “I suppose not.”

“I saw you talking to her on the porch. It’s none of my business, Cali, but what were you talking about?”

“I asked her if she’d want to join the Redwood pack,” Cali said.

I stared at her in shock. “You did *what*? What did she say?”

“She didn’t really give me an answer. What would you think about that, anyway?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, still feeling blindsided. “She’s a Samara pack member by birth, and pack loyalties run really deep.”

“But the Samara pack doesn’t even exist right now,” Cali pointed out.

“Still. I don’t know,” I said thoughtfully. “I don’t think Ava will want to join the pack, and once Xavier gets everything figured out with his wolf and his shifting, I think he’s going to want to send Ava on her way.” I looked at Cali, curious to see her reaction to this. “I know you care about Xavier. You don’t have to put on a brave face anymore. Not with me, love.”

Cali looked down at her hands, folded in her lap. “I guess I’m feeling pretty shaken up right now—about everything. It really creeps me out that I was possessed by a demon. A *demon*,” she repeated, looking up at me. “It’s not exactly something I’m planning on putting on my resume.”

“No, I can’t imagine you would,” I said, smiling. I pulled her into a close hug. “I’m so sorry you had to go through that. I can’t even imagine what that was like for you. And the thought of Lucian doing that to you just makes my blood boil—”

“I hope you were listening when I said that Lucian didn’t do anything to me,” she said, pulling away just far enough to look up into my face. “He really didn’t.”

“I believe you. Though the thought of him even trying…” I released my grip on Cali, which I realized had grown too tight. “I was very close to killing him at the palace.”

Cali looked surprised. “I didn’t know that.”

I looked into her dark eyes. “Sometimes I let my emotions win the fight. Especially when it comes to my mate.” I leaned down and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I try to tolerate it when you’re with Xavier —though it takes effort.”

“I’m sorry,” Cali said, flushing and looking down again. “I know that’s hard—”

“I’m not blaming you,” I interrupted. “That’s not what this is about. I’m always going to be jealous. It comes with the territory. I love you, and while I know I have to accept this whole *due destini* thing, I don’t have to when it comes to anyone *else* kissing or touching you. Unless that’s what you want.”

Cali looked horrified.

“Of course I didn’t want that. I *never* wanted Lucian. Ugh,” she said, with a revolted shudder.

I grinned. “I didn’t think you did.”

Cali looked up at me, shaking her hair back from her face. “How do I know you really love me?” she asked, her tone half-playful, half-serious.

I looked deep into her eyes. “You asking me to show you?”

“Maybe.”

She smiled, and I leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her smile. I slid my arms around her as she snaked her hands around my neck, burying her fingers in my hair. It felt amazing to hold her in my arms, to feel the satin softness of her lips, and the warmth of her mouth as she opened to the pressure of my tongue. I could feel her whole body trembling as I pulled her gently down to the bed. Our legs intertwined, and it almost felt like we were fusing together. She was my Cali. She took my breath away, and I knew I was never going to let her go.

# Episode 2656

**Xavier**

Stepping out of a hot shower into my steamy bathroom, I realized I felt completely exhausted. Wiping a clear spot onto the mirror, I could see that I looked it, too. It was pretty rare for me to be so spent, but I wasn’t surprised. Today had taken a lot out of me. Saving Cali had been no small feat, but we’d gotten her back, and that was all that mattered. It was a small miracle we were able to do it quickly, and while keeping the rest of the pack safe. I wasn’t taking that for granted anytime soon.

Walking back into my room, I tossed my towel onto my bed and pulled on a pair of sweats and a dark T-shirt. I wanted to say goodnight to Cali, so I stepped out of my room to find her. But the first person I ran into was Ava.

I stopped. She was at the end of the hallway, looking out the window at the dark night, her arms wrapped tightly around herself. I didn’t think she’d seen me. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to talk to her—but my wolf was *not* feeling the same way. It clawed at my spirit, trying to pull me toward her.

Gritting my teeth, I turned and headed for the stairs.

“Xavier?”

Shit.

I could always pretend I hadn’t heard her—or just straight-up ignore her—but my wolf had other ideas and slowed my forward progress down the hall.

So I gave in and turned to face her. “What do you want?”

Ava looked at me, her face shadowed. Even in the darkness, I could see that her dark hair was wet—she must have just showered, too.

“You never answered my question earlier,” she said softly.

“What question?” I snapped, knowing full well what question she was referring to.

“I want to know why you healed me,” she said calmly. “I promise not to read too much into it, but I have to know why. After… everything.”

I ran a hand through my wet hair, feeling annoyed. “Why is it so important that you know? Can’t you just be glad I didn’t let you die? Can’t you leave it at that?”

Ava tipped her head, looking at me closely. “No. And the longer you take to answer a simple question, the more I may have to rethink my previous statement of not reading into this.” She paused. “Are you afraid to tell me the truth, Xavier?”

“No,” I insisted.

“You can tell me the truth. I’m not going to fall apart—whatever the answer is. I’m not fragile.”

“I know that,” I muttered. But internally, my mind was reeling. Why couldn’t I answer her? I didn’t know, so I decided to deflect with a question of my own. “Did you really expect me to just leave you there to die?”

Ava’s eyes widened. “Given our history, Xavier, I didn’t count it out. You’ve made it perfectly clear in the past that you want me dead.”

My wolf reacted to this—howling for her, pushing me toward her.

I looked around anxiously. I didn’t want to have this discussion at all, but I definitely didn’t want to have it in the hallway, where anyone could hear us.

“Which room are you staying in?” I asked.

“Same as before,” she said, pointing down the hall.

I took her by the arm and led her down the hallway until she gestured at a room.

“This one.” She looked at me closely. “Are you coming in?” she asked, her voice thick with insinuation.

My wolf went wild, but I didn’t respond. I did follow her into the room.

With the door shut, I rounded on her. “I want to make something very clear to you, Ava—I meant what I said. You’re reading way too much into this. You got hurt trying to help the Redwood pack, and I had an obligation to help you in return. That’s it. That’s why I did it. End of story.”

Ava raised an eyebrow. “*Is* it the end?”

“I think it is,” I growled, and turned toward the door. But I’d only managed to wrap my hand around the knob when my wolf forced me to stop.

Ava must have seen my hesitation. “I think you’re lying to yourself, Xavier. Look at you. Your wolf is the only one being honest. I submitted to you because of our mate bond. How many more times do you need me to prove myself in order for you to accept this? Do you think I did that lightly?” she demanded, her voice thick with emotion. “Do you think that was just a ploy? I’ve done plenty of things I’m not proud of, Xavier, but I would never humiliate myself by submitting to someone unless I meant it.”

I tried to push the memory away, but the picture of Ava on the floor in front of me swam into my mind. It had shocked me. My wolf had relished the sight, though it had me feeling really uneasy. I knew Ava, and I knew she wasn’t lying and that she wouldn’t do something like that without really meaning it. But it was also a reminder of the mate bond I was desperate to break.

I stared at the door. “I didn’t ask you to do that.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“What does that mean?” I snapped, my hand tightening on the doorknob.

“You may not have come out and asked me to do it, but you wanted me to submit. You wanted me to give myself up to you completely. We both know it. Just ask your wolf.”

I rounded on her, ready to tell her that I didn’t need to ask my wolf a fucking thing. Ready to tell her that there was *nothing* between us anymore, and there never would be. But when I turned, all I could see was this beautiful woman with dark hair and dark eyes, practically drowning in a wrinkled button-down she must have snagged from the laundry room. She was slight, and the shirt was about four sizes too big. She’d cuffed the sleeves, but they still dropped down over her hands. She just looked so… vulnerable. She’d almost died today, and it showed.

She was beautiful as always, but—despite my Alpha healing—she looked ragged. She looked thin and cold, and there was a haunted look in her eyes. I’d been expecting to see her usual cold, calculating look, but that wasn’t what I saw. She looked almost helpless.

My wolf stirred at the sight of her. There was something fundamental about what he wanted. I couldn’t leave her like this. I had protected her before, and when you protected someone once, you didn’t have the option of walking away later. My wolf knew that. Hell, even *I* knew that.

I wanted to turn around, pull the door open, and walk away, but I just couldn’t seem to do it. The mate bond was telling me to stay where I was. My wolf was panting, begging me to stay.

Ava gave me a sad smile. “I’m sorry, Xavier.”

“For what?” I asked gruffly.

“I know that you’re struggling. I can see it in your eyes. And I’m not here to make you suffer. I know the answer, even if you think you don’t.” She stepped forward and wrapped her arms tightly around me. “I’m just grateful that you didn’t abandon me out there. You could have, but you didn’t. Thank you.”

The closeness of her body hit me all at once, and my whole being reacted to it. My wolf was gaining ground, and when I wrapped my arms around her, it gave a wild whoop of joy. I drew her close and buried my face in her hair, drinking in her scent.

I wanted to protect her. I *had* to protect her. She’d told me she wasn’t fragile, but she felt so small—so vulnerable—in my arms. What was happening between us was pure instinct. She’d submitted to me. She believed I was her Alpha.

Her satin-smooth skin was still warm from the shower, and the energy between us was becoming more charged. I could feel my body reacting as she pressed against me. This wasn’t what I’d intended.

Or was it?

Ava had been demanding to know why I’d saved her, but what she didn’t know was that I’d been asking myself that very same question from the moment I’d done it. Was there a part of me that still cared for Ava? Something beyond my wolf? Something in me?

I was confused by even asking the question. It couldn’t be true—not after everything that had happened between us. And yet, I wasn’t pushing Ava away. I was pulling her closer.

Ava spoke, her voice rumbling against my chest. “Xavier, will you stay with me tonight?”  
 I didn’t even think before I answered.

“Yes.”

# Episode 2657

As Greyson deepened the kiss, I leaned into it, holding onto him like he was a life preserver and I was drowning in the open sea. I hadn’t said anything because I didn’t want to scare him, but I’d been completely freaked out when I was possessed, and I’d been freaked out ever since. I’d been trapped with a demon who was trying to force me out of my own body. It had been the most terrifying experience I’d ever had, and I shuddered thinking about it.

There had been moments when I’d been sure I was about to disappear, and that I would never laugh, or run, or hold either of my mates, or take a free breath ever again.

But that hadn’t happened. Because as strong as Seluna was—and damn, that demon was *strong*—she wasn’t stronger than the love I had for Greyson and Xavier. Even with her demon strength, she hadn’t been able to overcome the mate bond I shared with them. Seluna had chosen me because I was a *due destini*. She’d thought the curse of it would make her stronger. She hadn’t realized that the double strength of the mate bond was too strong, too unbreakable.

But now I was back in my body—alone, this time—and I needed Greyson to remind me that I was really here. I needed to feel whole again.

Lucian’s kisses remained a horrible echo in my mind. He was physically perfect, but he never came close to doing for me what Greyson did. Whatever connection Lucian and Seluna had would never come *close* to what I had with my mates. Whatever weird symbiotic relationship they shared, it was nothing compared to the *real* mate bond I had with Greyson and Xavier.

I twined my fingers into Greyson’s light hair and pulled, kissing him with full abandon now. I needed this. I needed him. The comfort and safety I felt in his arms was otherworldly.

I could feel his body responding to mine. Heating and hardening against my touch. He needed this as much as I did—that much was clear. And I was so grateful to have him. In my life, and here, in my bed.

“I love you,” I murmured as he kissed his way down my neck. “I love you so much, Greyson.”

“I love you, too,” he said quietly, and pressed his lips to mine.

Wordlessly, we pulled off each other’s clothes and slid underneath the blankets on my bed.

“God, Greyson,” I said, arching against him as he moved his mouth down to my breasts. His finger slipped inside me, rubbing a spot within me so sweet that my eyes rolled back in my head.

“*Greyson*,” I moaned, dropping my head back onto the pillow.

“Love of mine,” he said softly, his breath tickling the spot on my breast that his tongue had left moist.

The strength of what was building inside me was staggering. I’d known I needed him, but I hadn’t known how much. This was *exactly* what I wanted. This is what I needed to feel like myself again—Greyson, and this feeling.

I reached down and took the velvet softness of his shaft in my hand, and I felt Greyson’s whole body quiver in response to my touch. It never ceased to amaze me that such a big, powerful man would tremble when I touched him, but I wasn’t here to tease. I stroked him slowly at first, then—when I heard his breath start to hitch—moved faster and faster.

“*Cali*,” he groaned, his body and cock tense and rigid.

“Take me, Greyson,” I murmured, leaning close and whispering in his ear. “I want you to take me *now*.”

This was all the invitation he needed, and he plunged deep inside me. The sensation made me gasp—half from pain, half from pleasure. I was wild with desire now, and I arched higher and higher as he drove himself into me over and over again.

“Yes!” I screamed. “Greyson! *Yes!* *Please!*” I was begging for him, and it felt like if he were to stop, I would cry. Scream, sob, plead. Anything to make him keep going.

But he wasn’t going to stop. He gripped my hips and pulled me on top of him, so I was riding him, then he guided me, moving me down the length of his shaft until I came with a scream, every muscle taut.

“Greyson! *Yes!*”

An instant later, he started to shake. “Fuck, Cali…”

His fingers dug into my hips as he released into me, his face so beautiful I couldn’t stop myself from curling down to kiss him.

He held my kiss until his breathing slowed.

“Cali,” he whispered, finally letting me go. I could hear my name repeated on his lips in a whisper.

With a smile, I rolled over and cuddled into his arm, letting my own heart rate return to normal. It was always amazing with Greyson, but that had been… something else entirely.

Greyson hummed quietly with pleasure, and his breathing slowed so much I thought for a moment he’d fallen asleep.

But when I slipped out of bed, his eyes were open, and he smiled at me.

“Going somewhere?” he asked, watching me closely.

I stepped back to the bed and pressed a kiss to his lips. “I won’t if you don’t want me to.”

He grabbed my waist and slung me easily back on top of him. “I never want you to go far,” he growled, kissing my neck. “But that’s beside the point. Where are you off to in such a hurry?”

Before I could answer, my stomach rumbled. Loudly.

I flushed, and Greyson laughed.

“So, I take it you’re hungry?”

“A bit,” I admitted. “I was thinking of grabbing a snack. I haven’t eaten much today. I didn’t have an appetite when I was at Lucian’s banquet—”

“I don’t blame you,” Greyson said, his face growing dark.

“Not that I’d trust any food from that place,” I added. “Anyway, I thought I might make a sandwich. Do you want one?”

He shook his head. “You go ahead. I actually came up here for a shower. And I was about to grab one when *someone* distracted me,” he said, grinning and tickling my sides.

I laughed and squirmed away. “It was a worthwhile cause, wasn’t it?”

He laughed, too, and lifted me effortlessly off him. “Absolutely,” he confirmed, placing my feet back on the bedroom floor. “Now, where are my clothes?”

Together we located his jeans and T-shirt, and he slipped them back on.

“Don’t be long,” he said.

“Are you timing me?” I asked, reaching for my own jeans, laughing. “Alright, how long do I have?”

Greyson pretended to think about this. “Five minutes?”

I laughed again. “That’s not very much time. I might need more than that for a sandwich.”

He pulled me into a tight hug. “Well, that’s all the time I need to take a shower. Don’t make me wait,” he growled, and kissed the top of my head.

I watched as he headed out of the room and pulled the door shut behind him. Then I threw on a T-shirt and headed out after him.

It was amazing how much more *myself* I felt. I still couldn’t believe I’d been sharing my body with a demon only a few hours ago. My body. Sharing it. With a demon. I still couldn’t get my mind around it. I was just glad it hadn’t lasted long, and I’d never had to share Greyson with Seluna.

As I stepped into the hallway, I put my finger to my lips, suddenly remembering how Xavier had been able to tell I was back to myself just by kissing me. *That* had been extraordinary.

Would Greyson have been able to tell?

I liked to think so, of course. My connection with Greyson was just as strong as my connection with Xavier. I was probably just being silly. How could Greyson *not* be able to tell?

I pushed the thought out of my head and headed downstairs to the kitchen.

My body was halfway into the massive fridge while I searched for a jar of pickles I was *sure* was in there when I heard a door open and shut behind me.

It was a little late to be taking a walk around the grounds, even by moonlight. Especially now, with Lucian and his Vanguard goons lurking around. Not to mention LIPS.

I shut the fridge door and walked to the window to peer out into the darkness. It was hard to see with the kitchen light on behind me, so I turned to shut it off, then returned to the window.

Even with the light off, at first I could only see my dark reflection in the glass. But as my eyes adjusted, I saw something moving out on the lawn. I squinted, trying to see more clearly. Someone was out there, walking toward the woods.

But who was it?

# Episode 2658

**Seluna**

My new body was going to take some getting used to.

I strode through the woods toward the Vanguard palace, acutely aware of my weight shifting with every step. My legs were shorter now, by an inch or so, and thus my strides weren’t quite as long as they’d been in the half-Fae’s body. My center of gravity set lower, and this new body moved with a grace Cali hadn’t possessed. Any grace or elegance I’d shown while wearing her meat suit had been a credit to me alone.

All things considered, this body wasn’t so different from the half-Fae, but there was something very intriguing about it. A very striking, very significant difference that set it apart from the one I’d just been kicked out of.

The exorcism had been one of the most miserable experiences of my long life, and the fury I felt at being expelled from my chosen form knew no bounds. Still, my second choice wasn’t so bad. This body was reinvigorating, in a way. A soothing relief after the exorcism and the constant fighting to keep Cali under control.

My lips—full and slightly cracked—curved up into a smile.

No, this one wasn’t putting up nearly as much of a fight. She was considerably easier to control than Caliana had been. And her innate power… It strengthened me, focused me.

*Maybe this is a fortuitous turn of events after all.*

My legs were beginning to ache from the long trek through the woods. If I’d jumped into a werewolf, I’d have been able to shift and run. I’d have reached the Vanguard palace in no time. But this body was still the best option.

It was stronger than the Fae, more malleable than a werewolf would have been, and I could already tell that things would go so much more smoothly in this body than they had in Caliana’s.

Still, I didn’t relish the idea of walking several more miles to reach the Vanguard palace. I reached for my magic, pleasantly surprised to feel it thrumming and present, ready to use. It had never been like this in the half-Fae’s body.

In an instant, I transported across the distance. I’d been aiming for Lucian’s bedroom, but the surge of power was so intense I couldn’t immediately control it, and instead I ended up in front of the palace, stumbling slightly as I regained my footing.

The teleportation was more taxing now than it had been in the past, when I’d been in my own body. With the surge of power, I’d been expecting more stamina, but it seemed my magic was already fizzling out and in need of recovery.

I cursed under my breath as I strode up to the palace. At least I was here—and had saved my new legs and feet some considerable stress.

I frowned when I saw a guard sleeping at his post near the front door. Hours after the Redwood pack had attacked Lucian and abducted me, a guard was already asleep at his post? I wished I could say I was surprised.

*This place is a mess. It’s amazing they’ve survived this long.*

On the plus side, they did worship me. They even believed I was a goddess. How much longer that ruse would continue was anyone’s guess, but for now it served my purposes. Lucian would do anything I wanted as long as he believed I was the goddess of his dreams. Despite everything, I still held him in the palm of my hand. And with control of Lucian came control of his pack.

It had taken a long time and a lot of work to gain that kind of loyalty, including being forced to endure the prince’s *many* annoying traits. But it would be well worth it in the end. I simply had to persevere a little longer.

I passed by the sleeping guard and walked right through the front doors. I made it into the foyer before an attendant stopped me. At least the security inside the palace was marginally better.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” the attendant asked.

I scowled. “Don’t you recognize your goddess?”

A crease appeared between his eyes. I could tell he didn’t quite believe me, the insolent fool. I briefly considered killing him on the spot as punishment for doubting his goddess.

*Mm. Perhaps that would be a bit rash.*

I pushed my shoulders back and stood as tall as I could, acutely aware of just how short this new body was. “Take me to Lucian.”

The attendant hesitated just long enough for me to seriously consider severing his head from the rest of his body. Fortunately, for his own sake, at least, he finally turned on his heel and led me up the grand staircase to Lucian’s bedroom.

The attendant knocked on the door. “My lord. You have a…” He glanced back at me. “A visitor.”

So he didn’t believe me, then. But he also wasn’t confident enough to cast me aside entirely.

“Your services are no longer required.” I reached for the doorknob and stepped into the room, ignoring the attendant’s whispered complaint.

In the light peeking in from the hallway, I could just make out Lucian’s form sitting up in his bed. “Who is disturbing me?”

I flicked on the bedroom lights, closed the door behind me, and stepped forward. “Don’t you recognize me?”

He looked me up and down. “Am I supposed to? I’ve never seen you before in my life.”

“How can you be so ignorant?” My tone was half-teasing, half-scolding. Did he truly not recognize the sheer power standing in front of him?

At the sharp edge of my tone, he squinted his eyes, as if trying to look harder. “You do look a little familiar, but I meet so many people, it’s hard to say for sure whether or not I know you.”

My considerable patience reached its end. “You’re a prince—a werewolf. How can you not recognize the goddess you’ve been searching for? Or perhaps our kiss meant nothing to you?”

Lucian’s eyes went wide with comprehension. “Seluna? My love? Is that really you?”

I shook my head, clicking my tongue in disappointment. “What other goddess have you kissed recently? Of course I’m Seluna.”

In an instant, Lucian leapt from his bed and prostrated himself at my feet. “Please forgive me, my love. I wasn’t expecting you to return in… another’s body. Where did you get it?”

“I was forced out of the half-Fae’s body and took this one. It’s easier to manage and a lot less annoying.” I shrugged. “It will suit my needs. For now.”

He stood, though still kept his head bowed slightly. “I am glad you’ve found a vessel better suited to your needs.” A crease appeared between his brows. “But I… I have a question. I feel something like a memory… That you and I promised to make love to one another once we were married. Did we decide that? It’s foggy.”

Internally, I let loose a stream of curses. The illusion I’d created in his mind must have broken. Stupid exorcism. Stupid weak mortal bodies.

Before I could muster up a response, the door opened and Aysel entered. She stopped short when she saw me standing with her brother.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Forgive my sister,” Lucian said quickly. “She does not see you for your true self.” He turned to Aysel. “Seluna has returned to us.”

Aysel’s brows rose. “Seluna? Really? You don’t look like a goddess. Is this some kind of trick?”

My eyes narrowed. “You doubt me as well?”

“I’d like to see some proof.”

She wanted proof. Fine.

I reached for my well of magic and raised a hand. I’d have to push this body to the limit, but so be it. Suddenly, all of the candles in the room ignited at once, burning so bright, so hot, that the temperature in the room rocketed up a handful of degrees. I tamped down the magic surging through me before I set the room on fire. It was astonishing how much power I had at my disposal, erratic though it was.

*Where is this power coming from?* It felt good to have such unfettered use of my abilities. It was like flexing muscles after a long rest, but it would take some getting used to. At times, it felt like trying to harness a comet.

Lucian and Aysel’s eyes widened as the room brightened and heated up, the candles flickering as if in supplication to me.

I moved closer to Lucian. “I told you who I am. Don’t ever doubt me again.”

I placed a hand against his bare chest and burned him just enough that he jumped back in shock as a handprint appeared on his skin. He looked down at the mark, then bowed his head. “My apologies, Seluna. I will not make that mistake again.”

I turned to Aysel. “And you?”

Aysel dropped to her knees in deference. “I’m sorry, too.”

I smiled.

With Lucian and Vanguards at my side again, I could continue with my plan—it would be like those filthy Redwoods had never interfered in the first place.

“Pay attention,” I said. “I have a task for you. If you succeed, it will bring you everything you’ve ever desired. But if you fail, I will show you no mercy.”

“I’ll do whatever you ask,” Lucian said.

“I’m not done with the half-Fae.”

“What do you need me to do?”

“Caliana must be forced to choose one of her mates so that I can harness the power of the *due destini*. Kill whoever you have to, but I’m getting my body back.”