**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 22**

**Episodes 2659–2775**

# **Episode 2659**

I watched the person disappear into the tree line and bit my lip. *I could go after them—find out what’s going on. Where they’re going.*

But for possibly the first time ever, I hesitated and thought twice before leaping in. It was late. It was dark outside. And the Vanguards were probably still lurking around out there. The last thing I wanted or needed was to be snatched up by them again. I didn’t know if Seluna was still floating around somewhere, or if that was even what she did, strictly speaking. But I did know one thing—I never wanted to see Lucian or Aysel or that stupid palace ever again.

Xavier and Greyson would probably be relieved to hear this. To know that I’d been appropriately scared away from the Vanguard residence. I knew for a fact they’d be upset with me if I just ran off into the woods. They’d worked so hard to bring me home. I could see how it would be a slap in the face if I ran off and got myself captured again.

Still, though. It felt wrong to not do something about this. Whoever was walking off into the woods, they could be putting themselves in danger.

*Greyson’s the Alpha. I’ll tell him, and he can decide what to do from there. Greyson will protect us, just like he said he would.*

Just like he always had.

I grabbed a couple Christmas cookies off the counter and munched on them as I climbed back up the stairs. Mysterious person outside or not, it was so nice to be back home and away from Lucian. To no longer be possessed by a demon, putting everyone around me in danger.

It was strange to think of how terrifying the last few days had been when, before I’d gotten sick from Seluna’s spell, I hadn’t even known any of this was even possible. My world had changed since the last time I’d been here at the house, and I was more than ready to feel normal again.

But right now, I felt even better than normal. Greyson had made me feel so special.

I smiled as I returned to my bedroom. Greyson was just coming out of the bathroom, drying his hair with a towel.

He smiled when he saw me. “You’re right on time.”

Lightning fast, he wrapped the towel around me and used it to pull me in for a kiss.

I pressed my hand against his chest, stopping him just short of the mark. “Hold on.”

He leaned back so he could look at my face. “What is it? Are you okay? Did something happen?”

The concern in his voice melted my heart. It wasn’t always the most convenient thing that he could read me so easily, but in this moment I appreciated it. I appreciated him.

“It’s probably nothing, but I saw someone leaving the pack house and going into the woods. I couldn’t tell who it was. Isn’t that strange?”

He frowned slightly, then shook his head. “I don’t think so. Rishika’s organized patrols to keep the pack house secure, remember? For those involved, that can mean leaving or returning to the house at any time of the day or night. It was probably just a pack member leaving for their shift.” His lips curved up in a smile. “But I appreciate your concern. It doesn’t hurt to be cautious.”

He captured my lips in a deep kiss, and I melted against him with a little sigh. This was exactly where I belonged. Here. With Greyson, drinking him in, feeling the ridges of his muscles. He started walking me backward toward my bed, his intention obvious.

I broke away from his mouth, pressing firmly against his chest. “Wait. I want to shower too.”

I had a feeling it’d take more than a shower to wash away the lingering disgust from my possession, but freshening up sounded divine regardless.

Greyson released me with a twinkle in his eye. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

My face heated, and I rushed to the shower. I didn’t want to keep him waiting for long.

The hot water felt amazing on my skin. It was nice to feel heat that hadn’t come from a demon. I washed and conditioned my hair and scrubbed myself all over—twice for good measure.

And despite the fact that I had tried to hurry, when I stepped back into my room, Greyson was already asleep.

I smiled softly and slid into bed beside him. I rested my head on his chest, breathing in the scent of his soap and his warm skin, closed my eyes, and fell asleep.

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I woke up to find Greyson getting dressed.

“Where are you going?” I mumbled, still half-asleep.

He pulled his shirt over his head before coming to my bedside and dropping a kiss on my forehead. “I have to make plans for the Vanguards.”

That woke me right up.

I wished I could stay in bed forever, or at least for another couple of hours, but I forced myself to sit up. “Whatever plan you come up with, I want to be a part of it.”

My words seemed to pain him. “I appreciate that, but right now, all I want is for you to be safe.”

“I know, but I want to do something. I know you said what happened with the Vanguards isn’t my fault, but I still feel responsible.”

His eyes flashed. “The only responsibility lies with Seluna and that piece of shit, Lucian.”

“I know,” I said quickly. “And you’re right. But I still want to help. What they did to me… I can’t just sit back and watch everyone fight when this is my fight too. There must be something I can do.”

“Cali, you’ve been through so much already. You were essentially kidnapped and possessed. You’ve more than earned the right to sit this one out.”

I frowned. “Are you worried I’ll get hurt? Because I’ve got my magic, and—”

“Of course I’m worried. You’re my world.” He kissed my forehead again and sighed. “But if you insist on coming with me, you’d better get dressed fast, or we might not make it downstairs.”

My cheeks heated as he walked out of my room to allow me to dress and get ready in peace. I scrambled into my clothes and rushed into the bathroom to wash up. Greyson’s words still played in my mind as I brushed my teeth.

I completely understood why he wanted me to sit this one out. The last couple of days had to have been some of the scariest of his life, and that was saying something. I was sure it hadn’t been easy for him to see me like that—he loved me and wanted to protect me. But the fact that he was so scared for me and was still letting me join him in his plan? It meant the world to me. Greyson believed in me. He’d proven that by inviting me to join him with the pack.

I smiled at that thought. I wasn’t going to let him down.

I rushed out of my bedroom, and as I rounded the corner I saw Xavier coming out of… not his room? And he was shirtless? I stopped short. I knew the room assignments here in the pack house like the back of my hand.

*It’s an extra room. Who’s staying there?*

Xavier’s eyes met mine, and he smiled and started toward me.

“Hey.” He dropped a sweet kiss onto my lips, but something about it felt off.

*Is he acting kind of weird? Or am I acting weird? Does Xavier know I spent the night with Greyson? Should I tell him?*

But before my spinning mind was able to make sense of which part of why this didn’t feel quite right, Ava stepped out of the room Xavier had just exited.

She stopped when she saw Xavier and me in the hallway.

*Well, this is awkward. And… infuriating.*

I didn’t want to overreact, but I had just seen my shirtless mate leave a room that wasn’t his. A room that Ava had just come out of. There had to be a good explanation, right? I didn’t automatically have to assume the worst.

In fact, I wouldn’t. I refused to play the jealousy game anymore.

Xavier opened his mouth to speak, but I beat him to it. “Greyson’s having a meeting about the Vanguards. We should get going.”

I hurried down the stairs before he could get a word in.

I probably could have handled that better, but it wasn’t like it was easy to see him with Ava. And if there was a reasonable explanation for what I’d just seen, it hadn’t hit me yet.

But no, I couldn’t get upset. It wouldn’t be fair. Xavier was going through the same thing I was. He wasn’t a *due destini*, but the feelings were essentially the same. How could I blame him for that?

*I won’t. I can’t*. *But it still sucks to get a taste of my own* due destini *jealousy first thing in the morning.*

I tried to push it out of my mind as I walked into the kitchen and was met with the scent of Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mocha.

Torin was at the stove, flipping French toast.

Greyson was leaning against the kitchen island, speaking with Rishika as he sipped his tea. He smiled at me, and I felt my spirits rise a bit.

Kira and Big Mac came in just as Greyson announced, “If Lucian’s threat holds true, we have to plan for an attack from the Vanguards.”

Some quiet murmuring buzzed through the room when Marta and Okorie stepped into the kitchen. Marta looked upset.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Dani’s missing,” she said. “We can’t find her anywhere.”

# **Episode 2660**

**Greyson**

*Dani’s gone? What the hell?*

“We can’t find her anywhere,” Marta said again.

It wasn’t until I processed Marta’s words for the second time that I realized I’d actually spoken out loud.

I cleared my throat. “Are we sure she’s gone?”

Marta gave me a look that asked if I thought she was stupid, or maybe that she thought *I* was stupid. Either way, she nodded. “I’ve looked everywhere for her, and it’s not like her to just wander off, either.”

*Shit. This might be the worst possible time for something like this to happen.*

I needed to be focusing on the Vanguards right now, finding a way to avoid an all-out war with the princeling. Chasing down a powerful witch—or whatever she was—while juggling the Vanguards and the ever-present pain in my ass that was the LIPS organization was not how I wanted to be spending my time right now…

And something about the timing nagged at me, too. She must have left during the night if she’d gotten away without being spotted by someone in the pack house. It was more than a little concerning that nobody on the night time patrol had noticed her, either.

Cali sucked in a breath, and my gaze swiveled over to her.

“Could Dani have been the person I saw leaving the pack house last night?” she asked, her brows knitting together.

“I was wondering the same thing—but why would Dani do that?” I didn’t know her all that well. She was so quiet and shy all the time, it was kind of hard to get a read on her. I’d assumed, on the occasions that I thought about her, that she must have been content here if she’d chosen to stay. But beyond that? I didn’t generally think twice about her.

*Maybe I should have.*

I turned back to Marta. “Did you notice any changes in her behavior? Or anything that might have upset her, made her feel like she had to leave?”

Marta shook her head again. She looked absolutely devastated. “Not that I’m aware of. Dani and I… We’re friends now. She would have told me if she were upset. And either way, I can’t imagine her just leaving without saying anything. Plus, she’s in the middle of training.”

“Do you think she might have heard something about her sister?” Cali asked. “Maybe something’s happened, and she felt it was urgent enough that she had to leave right away?”

Marta seemed to consider this for a moment. “I guess it’s possible, but even if she did, she wouldn’t have just left without telling me. She didn’t even leave a note, or—”

“She’s not allowed to leave,” Okorie snapped, clearly agitated by this new development. “If she doesn’t get back soon, I’m going to have to report her to the witch council. That won’t be good for anyone.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I can’t believe she just ran away.”

“Yeah, that’s the point,” Marta said. “I don’t believe she did.”

“Then how are we supposed to explain this?” he demanded. “It’s not a good look for me to have one of my students go MIA in the middle of training.”

“Maybe you’re thinking about this the wrong way, Okorie,” Cali said gently, ever seeking to make peace and defuse tense situations. “What if Dani isn’t running from us, but running *to* something else? Maybe something or someone from her past? We don’t know much about her past.”

All eyes turned to me, clearly expecting me to weigh in.

I sighed and shrugged. “It’s possible, I guess? It’s an interesting theory, but it doesn’t change the fact that we have no clue where she went.” I turned to Big Mac. “Don’t you have some sort of tracking spell that would come in handy right about now?”

Big Mac gestured to the room. “Clear the table while I get my map.”

Then she ducked out of the kitchen as everyone scrambled to prepare the space for her use.

I really hoped this didn’t take too long. I didn’t—and I could not stress this enough—have time to chase a witch across Oregon *and* defuse a looming pack war *and* keep Rhonda from sniffing around.

The last thing I wanted was for something bad to happen to Dani, but I couldn’t put the pack at risk for one lone witch. Dani was an adult. She had the right to go wherever she wanted.

Cali sidled up to me. “If that was Dani I saw last night, where would she be going?”

A hundred different possibilities popped into my head. Portland wasn’t that far, though how she intended to get there on foot, I had no idea. Maybe she could blip like Big Mac and Kira. I glanced at the now-bare kitchen table. “I hope we’re about to find out.”

As if on cue, Big Mac hurried back into the kitchen, brandishing her map. “Stop crowding the table!” she barked as she laid out the faded old map and placed a smooth grey stone in the center. Then she reached into her satchel, pulled out a single strand of hair, and placed it on the stone.

Cali blanched. “Is that Dani’s hair?”

“Haven’t we discussed this?” Big Mac asked. I did remember her saying something about gathering everyone’s hair in the house for witchy reasons. I had to admit that right now it seemed to be coming in handy.

Big Mac began to mutter in a witchy language. The stone jolted, then moved across the map and came to a stop a mere foot away from where it had started. The witch’s brows furrowed, then she looked up at me.

“Dani’s at the Vanguard palace.”

I gaped at her. “She’s *where*? How can that be?”

I looked down at the faded map. Maybe Big Mac had made a mistake? Honestly, how could she even make sense of the damn thing, much less get information from it?

But I knew better than to ask. And hell, even if I didn’t understand how any of it worked, Big Mac was usually right about these kinds of things.

Marta frowned. “That doesn’t make any sense. Why would Dani seek out the Vanguard pack? She’s never been to their palace, and she has no reason to go there. She knows they’re dangerous.”

I wracked my brain, thinking back to everything that had happened yesterday. Looking, with 20/20 hindsight, for some kind of clue that could explain Dani’s sudden disappearance and reappearance at the Vanguard palace.

As far as I could recall, Dani hadn’t had any contact with any Vanguard pack members. She hadn’t been part of the rescue group to get Cali back. Then another, darker possibility slipped through my mind.

“What if it wasn’t Dani who went there?” I asked.

Cali cocked her head. “Do you think one of the Vanguards picked her up and captured her somehow? But then again, I did see her leaving last night. Alone.”

I shook my head. “No, I mean… What if *Seluna* took Dani?”

Murmurs and shock rippled through the group, and I held up a hand to stop the crosstalk.

“Let’s look at the facts,” I said. “Dani left the pack house under very unusual circumstances. It was after the exorcism, when Seluna was nowhere to be found. And Big Mac”—I turned to the witch—“You made it clear that Seluna would try to possess another body sooner rather than later.”

“But everyone was checked,” Cali said. “Even Dani. How could Seluna have gone undetected?”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Do I look like a demon whisperer to you?”

“Um… Maybe?” Cali grimaced.

“Demons are tricky,” Kira said, coming to Big Mac’s defense. “There’s not an exact science to dealing with them—no one-size-fits-all approach. Seluna could have hidden herself deep within Dani, so deep that Dani herself might not have realized she’d slipped in until it was too late. And with how weakened Seluna was from the exorcism, her power signature might have gone undetected.”

“It took a big fancy ritual for Seluna to possess me,” Cali pressed. “Dani wouldn’t have had that.”

“When Lucian did that ritual, he pulled Seluna from her world—her separate plane of existence—to our own,” Big Mac said. “Now that she’s here, she can hypothetically body-hop to her heart’s content.”

*Now that’s a comforting thought.*

“It doesn’t matter how exactly it happened, or what we missed,” I said. “We know where Dani is, and we have a pretty damn good reason to believe that she didn’t end up there voluntarily. Now we have to deal with it. We have to bring her back.”

A second rescue mission at the Vanguard palace in as many days. Though this could offer some good news in one area.

*What will Lucian do now that his goddess has returned?* His reasons for going to war were motivated by getting Seluna back, and it seemed she’d just delivered herself to him. *Does this mean he’s going to back down on his demands?*

Cali’s eyes went wide. “Is Lucian going to make Dani his Luna? What if he already has?”

*Shit*. She was right. Lucian would be so glad to have his precious goddess back, he’d want to do all he could to keep her. Dani wasn’t a willing participant for that bullshit, was she?

“Seluna’s powers will be dangerously strong,” Okorie said. “More so than we saw when she possessed Cali. It makes sense that she went for Dani—her amplifying powers are still unstable, and Seluna will be able to use them to her advantage.”

*How much worse is this going to get? Dealing with a demon is bad enough—but one with enhanced powers? Fuck. We’re going to have to stop this before it’s too late.*

I glanced around the kitchen. *Where’s Xavier?*

Just then, my phone rang, and I grimaced at the name on the display.

Rhonda.

*Great. Now what?*

# **Episode 2661**

**Xavier**

I rubbed my towel over my freshly washed hair. I’d needed to shower to get the scent of Ava off me. It had seemed so strong that I was certain even Cali would be able to smell it at some point. The rest of the pack would certainly pick up on it, and I didn’t want to invite that kind of speculation, so I’d gone straight to my room to wash Ava away.

It had been awkward enough just seeing Cali in the hallway moments ago. I’d upset her. Again. I could see it in her face. Hear it in her voice.

*Why the hell did Ava have to pick that specific moment to walk out?*

I didn’t want to keep a secret from Cali, necessarily, but I didn’t want to keep having the same fight with her over and over again. My connection with Ava… It was a living, visceral thing. A primal instinct that tugged me away from the woman I *wanted* to be with. I was handling it as best I could, especially considering this new shifting problem that had popped up. I’d told Cali time and time again that I didn’t want to be with Ava. That I loved Cali, that she was the mate I was actively choosing time and time again—despite what my asshole wolf thought he wanted.

What else was there to say, really?

*Maybe Cali’s tired of fighting about this too, and that’s why she didn’t say anything.*

Or maybe she was so caught off-guard by the whole situation—me coming out of a room that wasn’t my own, and Ava following on my heels—that she’d just been overwhelmed?

I guessed it didn’t really matter. I was going to have to explain myself to her either way. It didn’t take a genius to understand just how bad the whole thing looked.

I just wished I knew *how* I was going to explain it. There was nothing simple about it. And in fact, there was a lot to it that I still didn’t understand. Why had I agreed to spend the night with Ava? I hadn’t really wanted to, but I hadn’t been able to bring myself to leave either. My answer, “yes,” had come with a bone-deep certainty. An understanding that I would stay because my mate wanted me to—and that was all there was to it.

But I couldn’t exactly tell Cali that. And that answer didn’t sit well with me, either.

I could easily blame the whole thing on my wolf, and it wouldn’t even be a lie, per se. My wolf had certainly wanted to stay with Ava. If he’d had his way, I never would have left her side this morning at all.

But blaming it on my wolf felt like an excuse. One that was quickly wearing thin.

*Maybe Ava’s right. Maybe I am lying to myself.*

There was a boatload of feelings wrapped up in my connection with Ava—all of which I was trying to avoid. Despite my every effort to resist her, my mate bond with Ava was only growing stronger. And now that I’d healed her, it was growing more intense, too. How much longer was I going to be able to hold myself back?

I tossed my towel onto the bed and grabbed my shirt, holding it at arm’s length. I’d pulled it off just as I was leaving Ava’s room. It had smelled like her, and it had been driving my wolf fucking nuts. All I’d been planning to do when I got up this morning was go back to my room and change my shirt. But then Cali had caught me leaving Ava’s room, shirtless.

Nothing had happened between Ava and me. At least nothing physical, but did that even matter anymore, when there was no denying the strength of our mate bond? Of the emotional connection I still had with her, whether I liked it or not?

It was that connection that had made me stay the night with her. It had almost felt as if I had no choice but to stay with her. But that was a cop-out too. I did have a choice—and I’d chosen to protect Ava. It was an instinct buried deep within me, compelling me. I couldn’t shake it, even as I tried to resist.

What if it happened again? What if being close to Ava proved too overpowering? What if it overrode my rational reasons for keeping my distance from her? We’d come way too close already. Hell, I’d already more than crossed the line when I’d watched her in the shower.

What would happen if I let that instinct overpower me again? Even just one more time? Would we finally cross that line there would be no coming back from?

A knock sounded at my door before it opened, and Jay poked his head in. “Hey. Are you planning on coming downstairs? Greyson’s talking about the Vanguard situation.”

I was only half-listening, still mulling over this clusterfuck I’d gotten into with Ava. Jay must have picked up on my distraction, because he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

“What’s going on?” he asked. “Everything okay?”

“Oh, just the usual. Ava.”

Jay’s brows rose in understanding. “It’s not getting any better, huh?”

“I know the best thing would be just to get rid of her. Get her out of my house, out of my life.” Hopefully, out of my head. “But…”

“Let me guess: you can’t. Because of your shifting problem?”

I hesitated. My shifting problem was a fresh layer of hell on this nightmare sandwich, but it was far from the root of my problem with Ava. But I didn’t want to get into that right now, not even with Jay. Not until I’d had a chance to sort it out.

“I need Ava close because of the shifting problem,” I said, which wasn’t a lie. “But it sucks.”

“I can imagine. There must be a way to get your wolf under control again—without Ava.”

I shrugged. “I’m open to suggestions. I know Cali isn’t happy having Ava around.”

“I’m not sure anyone’s happy having Ava around.” Jay smiled wryly, and we both laughed.

My wolf, on the other hand, didn’t it find it amusing in the least. He growled at me to defend our mate, that it was my job to provide a physically and emotionally safe home for her.

I did my best to ignore him.

“Hang in there,” Jay said. “We’ll figure something out. Just don’t do anything stupid.”

He promised that he’d see me downstairs and headed out. The smile slipped off my face.

*It might be too late for that.*

I headed downstairs and found the kitchen in chaos. A map was spread out over the kitchen table with a rock sitting on it, and almost the entire pack plus the witches were all clustered together, speaking in urgent voices.

I sidled up to Ravi. “What’s going on?”

He quickly filled me in on Dani going missing and then showing up at the Vanguard palace. The working theory was that Seluna was possessing her. I wondered if that meant we no longer had to worry about going to war with the Vanguard pack.

I glanced around the kitchen. At least Ava wasn’t down here. Not yet. I wanted to avoid her for now. And as long as I didn’t need to shift, I didn’t need her around, no matter what my wolf thought.

“What do you want to do about this?” Ravi asked Greyson. “We could do a surprise attack, like we did to get Cali?”

“I’m down with that,” I said. “I’d love to stick my foot up Lucian’s royal ass.”

My brother shook his head. “I don’t want to antagonize Lucian any further. If he has Seluna back, then there’s no need for him to fight the Redwood pack.”

“Until we get Dani back,” Marta added. “Right?”

Greyson nodded. “Lucian has what he wants right now. The only problem is, we have to take her back. I won’t leave Dani with the Vanguards. That’s a promise.”

I looked over at Cali, and our eyes met just briefly before she looked away. She was avoiding me. I fucking hated it.

We should’ve been able to talk about anything with each other, to be open and honest. It was something I’d been trying to do since I’d met her. And sure, it had taken a shitload of practice, but I liked to think I was getting better at it.

Clearly, I needed to keep trying. I didn’t want Cali to worry herself into a frenzy. She might’ve been pretending that everything was good between us, but I knew the truth—she wouldn’t have been staring into her cup every time I looked her way if everything was fine.

I’d worked my way over to her and was about to ask if we could speak in private when Greyson called me back. I gritted my teeth and turned back to my brother. “What?”

Greyson jerked his head to the side, and we moved out into the hallway. I was getting my private conversation after all, just with the wrong person.

“I got an urgent call from Rhonda,” Greyson said. “She’s insisting that someone goes over to LIPS, and I need it to be you.”

# **Episode 2662**

**Marta**

Big Mac, Kira, and Okorie were all discussing what we could do to free Dani from Seluna’s possession and get her away from the Vanguard pack. Everything from blipping in to setting some kind of demon trap.

I knew I should have been paying attention, contributing to the conversation in whatever small way I could. But I couldn’t focus on them—and I couldn’t stop thinking about Dani.

How had I not noticed that my friend had literally been possessed? I was a medium, a bridge, a witch in training, you name it! I’d faced down Letifer and had seen a demon up close long before Seluna had ever appeared on my radar. So how the hell had I managed to fail Dani like that?

Sure, Dani could be a little quiet even on the best days, but I should have known something was wrong. If Seluna had gone straight to Dani after being expelled from Cali’s body, then there had still been hours in which I’d been around Dani, in which I’d interacted with her. How could I have missed this?

*It was late*, I tried to tell myself. *So much had already happened. You were in shock. You were exhausted. Nobody else picked up on it either. You shouldn’t blame yourself.*

But I did. And I just couldn’t let myself off the hook for this. I was Dani’s closest friend in the pack house. I was the one who’d convinced her to come live here. I’d told her it would be the safest place for her while she underwent training. If I didn’t have her back, then who did?

I’d been part of the exorcism. I’d been so focused on trying to channel Cali to strengthen her bond with her body, to protect her from Seluna’s onslaught long enough to get the demon out of her, that I’d never even thought about what might happen once Seluna was out.

Maybe if I’d actually been using my brain, I could have somehow stopped the demon from taking possession of Dani. Ugh, I was just so stupid. So careless. And now Dani was paying the price. What was the point of practicing my magic all the time if I couldn’t even use it to help my friends?

“*Marta*.” Big Mac’s voice cut through my self-loathing.

I looked up. “Sorry, what?”

“What do you think?”

I swallowed roughly, heat rushing into my cheeks. I was just failing left and right. Now I couldn’t even listen long enough to be of any help. “Um, about what?”

Big Mac’s eyes narrowed, like she knew I hadn’t been paying attention, and it pissed her off. Kira was gentler, though.

“About trying to perform another exorcism for Dani?” she asked.

“It’s a piss-poor idea.” Okorie shook his head. “It didn’t work out so well last time—why should we expect it to go any better now that she knows we’re onto her? We won’t have the element of surprise on our side a second time, and I’m already going to have to answer to the witch council for removing Marta’s bracelets to help perform the first one.”

I tensed. I really didn’t want to be stuck in the middle of this, even if I did privately agree with Okorie. Seluna was probably protecting herself against us even as we spoke. What we’d done last time had no guarantee of working a second time.

But with all of their eyes on me, I suddenly felt tongue-tied. That hot shame, the nagging sense that I’d failed to protect my friend when she needed it most, increased a hundredfold.

I stood up from the table, my chair screaming across the tile. “I need a moment. Excuse me.”

I brushed past the crowd gathered in the kitchen and didn’t stop until I’d reached the back yard. My heart was racing. My palms felt clammy. I gulped down the cool forest air until I no longer thought I might burn up from panic.

I looked around the forest and tried to imagine the scene the way Cali had described it. Tried to imagine Dani walking across the lawn and into the woods, propelled not by her own motivation and desire, but by Seluna’s. It was a thought so horrific I had to gulp down more air.

*Is Dani struggling against Seluna the same way Cali did? Is she scared? Is she even aware of what’s happening? Or has Seluna seeded herself so deep inside Dani’s body that Dani’s not even conscious of what’s happening?*

I couldn’t decide which was worse—being shoved into some small, dark corner of your own mind, oblivious to everything and everyone interacting with your body, or being present and conscious for all of it, but helpless to change anything.

Oh god. I was going to be sick.

Terror for my friend, for myself, thrummed through me. How could we hope to stand against something so powerful? What if I wasn’t strong enough to perform another exorcism, even with the other witches by my side? What if I failed Dani all over again?

And even if we managed to wrench Seluna out of her host body for a second time, was I even strong enough to face the demon again? With Dani’s amplifying abilities available to her, she’d be even stronger this time. She’d be smarter this time, too.

*What am I supposed to do?*

The kitchen door creaked open behind me, and I turned to see Okorie coming down the steps and onto the lawn.

“What are you doing out here?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“I suppose so.” He glanced over his shoulder toward the kitchen. “It’s pretty intense in there right now. I don’t think I could ever live with werewolves. So much drama. There’s always a fire that needs putting out.”

He fiddled with his hands in a gesture that nervous people sometimes used. I frowned slightly. What did Okorie have to be nervous about?

My mind filled in a few options.

*Oh, you know, a demon being on the loose. One of his students being possessed and spirited away. The witch council holding him accountable for both that and taking off his other student’s control bracelets.*

Okorie had just as much to worry about as the rest of us. To say nothing of the fact that I was pretty sure he cared about Dani as a person.

He reached into his pocket and took out a coin and started fiddling with it, but he still hadn’t said anything. The silence between us was lengthening, and I felt a renewed pressure to break it. To ask him what he wanted.

Instead, I turned away. “I kind of wanted to be alone.”

“I figured as much.”

I spun back around to face him. “Then why are you still here?”

He shrugged. “Because I know you. I know you’re putting all of this on yourself right now.” Before I could argue, he quickly added, “I’ve seen the way you do it in mentoring. When you make one mistake, you sometimes seem to feel like the entire world is crumbling around you.”

I scoffed. “Well, to be fair, in this case something did go wrong, and I likely had something to do with it, and now my friend is possessed by a demon, so yeah. It does feel like the world is crumbling.”

“Are you going to help her?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“So… All this moping and angsting, it’s what? Just for fun? If you’re truly Dani’s friend, then you know you’re going to have to help her.”

“But what if I only make it worse?” I asked, voicing my greatest fear in all of this.

“That’s always a possibility,” he conceded, and I both appreciated and hated that he wasn’t lying to soften the truth. “But I don’t really see how things could get any worse for Dani. Just ask whatshername how it feels to be possessed by a demon.”

“Cali. Her name is Cali.”

He shrugged. “Whatever.”

I huffed. “You can’t even bother to learn people’s names?”

“The point is, we have to try.”

“I don’t understand. Weren’t you just telling Big Mac that you thought it was a bad idea to have me try another exorcism?”

“It *is* a bad idea. But it’s the only idea, so it’s the one we have to use.”

“What about the witch council?” I asked. “Won’t we get in trouble?”

He shrugged again. “What they don’t know won’t hurt us.”

I shook my head. “I’m not so sure. They seem to know everything.”

“One more strike won’t be the end of the world. Plus, I promise I’ll do my best to defend you should it become an issue, and that should be enough to put your mind at ease because, let’s face it, I’m great.”

I rolled my eyes. “What you are is unbearably cocky.”

He raised his eyebrows. “What do you say? Should I take the bracelets off?”

I tried to snatch the coin he was flipping. “Stop being a jerk—”

But he was too fast. He caught the coin and held it far out of reach as I lunged forward. I lost my balance and fell right into his arms, almost tackling him to the grass.

His arms wrapped around my waist, steadying me, and when I looked up, he was looking down at me, the smallest hint of a smile on his lips.

My stomach twisted, and my cheeks heated.

The porch door creaked open again, and I turned to see that Lilac had stepped out onto the porch, and his gaze was narrowed on the sight of me in Okorie’s arms.

# **Episode 2663**

I knew Xavier wanted to talk to me, what with him trying to pull me aside, and he would probably attempt to force a deeply uncomfortable conversation about whatever the hell had happened in Ava’s room last night. Why the hell he’d been in there in the first place.

But I didn’t want to do that with him right now. Maybe if we weren’t in a crisis, I might have been able to find it in myself to talk to him, to give him the benefit of the doubt and hear him out. But I was just so tired of this. The never-ending fight about his connection to Ava, the spiral of anger and jealousy and self-loathing it inevitably caused inside me.

We were dealing with a demon here. Who had time for petty stuff when Dani’s life was on the line?

I wasn’t proud of what I was doing, but avoiding him felt like the safest bet right now. And judging by the look on his face when Greyson had pulled him aside, Xavier knew exactly what I was doing. How could he not?

I fiddled with my coffee mug while around me, the pack members began to disperse. What was I doing? I couldn’t freeze Xavier out forever. It had already been bad enough, feeling this awkwardness hanging over us for even a few minutes. How much longer was I going to drag this out?

Xavier was right. We needed to talk.

I left the kitchen and found Xavier and Greyson in the middle of a tense conversation.

“… need you to go see Rhonda,” Greyson was saying.

I frowned. What did the LIPS people want now? The conversation I’d been planning to have with Xavier was suddenly put on hold.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Xavier met my eyes over Greyson’s shoulder. “I’m going back to the LIPS base to see Rhonda.”

My brows rose. “Now? What about Dani?”

Greyson turned to face me. “I’m going to deal with Lucian and Dani. Don’t worry about that.”

“There’s a situation with Rhonda,” Xavier added, glancing at Greyson for confirmation. His brother nodded. “We don’t know what exactly it’s all about,” Xavier continued, “so I’m going to find out.”

So, my mates were already making plans and jumping into action—without me.

“I want to help,” I said. “I’ll go to the Vanguard palace with Greyson and—”

“Like hell you will,” Xavier snapped.

Even Greyson shook his head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. I get that you want to help, but it’s way too risky for you to be anywhere near the Vanguards right now. We’re dealing with a demon here, and for all we know, Seluna might try to hop back into you if she got the chance.”

“Plus, if Lucian tried something while you were around, there’d be no saving him,” Xavier said. “And seeing as how we’ve only just dodged an all-out pack war, maybe we should try to keep that peace for a little longer.”

He was right. And I kind of hated it.

“Okay, fine. But I’m not going to sit here and do nothing,” I insisted. “I may have been briefly possessed, but I’m fully in control now! You don’t get to sideline me forever because of a little demon-related mishap.”

They both glowered at that spectacularly understated description.

“Then come with me,” Xavier suggested.

I blinked. “Wait, really? That worked?”

He shrugged. “It’s not like LIPS are dangerous. You want to help? You can come see Rhonda with me.”

Greyson nodded. “I think that’s a great idea.”

“Great. It’s settled then. But…” I frowned, looking at Greyson. “I’m not thrilled about you going to the Vanguard palace alone.”

“I won’t be alone. I’m bringing the witches.”

My stomach twisted. “That’s all?”

Big Mac, Kira, and Marta were powerful, sure. But they were three witches against an entire pack.

“I don’t want to risk bringing a larger group,” Greyson explained. “It might be seen as an aggressive move, given what went down last night.”

I swallowed roughly but nodded. At least the witches packed a powerful punch. And if Okorie went with them, even better. They could help protect Greyson if Lucian tried anything. Couldn’t they?

“I still think the wisest thing would be for me to come with you,” Xavier said. “Just in case. Give me a half hour. If I’m not back by then, go ahead without me.”

Greyson nodded. “Be quick, then.”

Xavier turned to me and took my hand. “The sooner we get going, the quicker we can be back.”

“Hold on.” I yanked my hand out of his grip and turned to Greyson. “If we don’t get back in time, promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I promise, love.”

I kissed him gently, not caring one bit that Xavier was inches away. Then, in a whirlwind, Xavier took my hand again, led me out to one of his cars, and we were on our way.

The tension that had already been thrumming between us only seemed to intensify in the small, enclosed space. I glanced over at Xavier in the driver’s seat. He seemed to be gripping the steering wheel with more force than was strictly necessary.

I hated this.

I cleared my throat. “We need to—”

“Talk to me, Cali,” Xavier said at the same time that I tried to break the silence between us.

Another awkward silence settled in before Xavier pushed forward.

“Fine. I’ll go first. We need to talk about Ava,” he said.

Hearing her name on his lips made my stomach churn. I’d known she would be part of this conversation, but already this was harder than I thought it would be.

“I want to explain what you saw this morning. Offer some context.”

My mind flashed back to Xavier kissing Ava in the basement. *Okay, maybe I still haven’t quite forgiven him for that.* My molars ground together. That memory and the sight of Xavier walking out of Ava’s room this morning—shirtless—were two things I’d probably never forget.

I held up a hand. “You don’t need to explain anything. I understand there’s… a struggle happening with your wolf.” And sure, I hated that it was happening, but my feelings on the matter didn’t change anything. Clearly.

And even though I’d told Xavier we needed to talk, I suddenly didn’t want to hear him confess to something that felt so utterly inevitable. Ever since Lola had suggested that Xavier sleep with Ava as a way to fix everything, that solution, awful as it was, had seemed unavoidable.

Maybe now that it had happened, I could find a way to move past it. Even if it was killing me.

“I slept on the floor,” he said flatly.

My eyes widened. “Oh.”

*That’s not what I expected…*

He glanced over at me. “You sound disappointed.”

“I-I’m not,” I stammered. “Of course I’m not. But…”

This new revelation didn’t change anything, did it? He’d still spent the night in Ava’s room.

*And how much longer will he be content with simply sleeping on the floor?*

“But…?” he pressed.

I sighed. “This whole thing is just so frustrating. I want to be the one to help you, not Ava. And I know you’re not doing this on purpose, that you’re not trying to hurt me, and that this isn’t something you can easily resolve, and that it isn’t even fair for me to ask you to. But… I just want you to know that I want you to be able to be yourself. Your whole self. I want you to be able to shift when you want. And if that means I have to tolerate Ava, then I’ll find a way to live with that. Both you and Greyson have managed with the *due destini* as best as you can for a long time now. It’s my turn to suck it up and do the same.”

“I’m not a *due destini* mate.” I could hear the frown in his voice. “It’s not the same.”

Wasn’t it, though?

I was relieved when the LIPS camp came into view. “Oh, look. We’re here.”

Xavier parked the car just outside the main trailer, and as I reached for the door handle, he took my hand.

“I love you. You know that, right?”

I met his eyes, and despite everything, butterflies fluttered in my belly.

I smiled. “I know.”

A loud, *rude* knock sounded at my window. I jolted and turned to see Rhonda standing just outside the car.

Moment over.

We got out of the car, and Rhonda looked past us, like she was expecting a third person to jump out of the back seat.

“Where’s Greyson?” she asked.

“He couldn’t make it,” Xavier said.

“Oh, that won’t do. It was him I needed to speak to.”

“Why are we here, Rhonda?” Xavier pressed, his voice firm. He was Greyson’s brother, after all.

Rhonda looked from Xavier’s face to mine and seemed to decide something. I felt heat rush into my cheeks.

*Oh god, does she recognize us from the drone footage she caught of us having sex?*

“Okay,” she finally said. “But you have to promise me you won’t say anything.”

“That doesn’t sound good, but alright, if it’ll make this meeting go faster,” Xavier said.

When she looked at me, her brows raised, I nodded. “Sure.”

She was jittery, wringing her hands as she led us into the LIPS trailer.

I couldn’t even begin to imagine what this was all about. Why was Rhonda being so intense? She was normally passionate, sure, but this was something else entirely.

Rhonda darted around the trailer, making a big deal of shutting the door and lowering the shades on the windows before she turned on a monitor. “Watch this.”

*Please don’t let this be another sex tape…*

Then the monitor flickered to life, showing a video of Greyson undeniably shifting from human to wolf.

# **Episode 2664**

**Marta**

I sat at the kitchen table with Lilac, who was sipping a mug of mocha while the witches tried to plan Dani’s escape.

If I’d felt uncomfortable when I’d stormed out of the kitchen earlier, I was almost downright sick to my stomach now. I just couldn’t shake this strange feeling, this sick twist of my stomach that told me I’d done something wrong.

I glanced over at Lilac. He was staring out the window, the picture of nonchalance. He’d had that same smooth—if blank—expression on his face since he’d stepped out onto the porch and found me and Okorie standing close together.

Well, no. That wasn’t an accurate depiction. It was probably more truthful to say, when Lilac had found me in Okorie’s arms. In that moment, and even now, I felt like I’d been caught in the act, which wasn’t actually the case at all. Okorie and I hadn’t done anything wrong. No lines had been crossed. He’d just been giving me a hard time and trying to lift the mood a little because he knew I was blaming myself for what had happened to Dani.

It had been a kindness, really. Especially for someone as prickly as Okorie. And more importantly, it wasn’t anything I should feel guilty for. Besides, I might have fallen on my butt if he hadn’t caught me.

I glanced over at Lilac again. He took a long, obnoxiously loud sip of his mocha, never looking away from the window. He hadn’t said much when he’d found Okorie and me, just, “I wanted to see if you were okay, but clearly you are.”

Then he’d turned around and gone back inside. It was hard to take his words at face value, to see them as anything other than a petty, jealous dig. Why he felt he had to speak to me like that, I had no idea.

And he was dead wrong. I was far from okay, and Lilac should have picked up on that. He was supposed to know me better than anyone else, after all. What did it say that Okorie was picking up on my feelings better than my own boyfriend?

Actually, I didn’t want to think about that right now. Maybe not ever.

I just wished Lilac would stop acting so weird. Was he jealous? If so, we had much bigger things to worry about. Dani was still being possessed. She was still in the Vanguards’ clutches. Who knew what Seluna and Lucian and the rest of that horrible pack were putting her through?

I looked back at my own untouched mug. It was cold, now. Maybe I was the one who was acting weird—focusing on this nonexistent fight with Lilac when I should’ve been focusing on getting Dani back home safe and unpossessed.

I needed to talk to Lilac, to clear the air between us. But what was I supposed to say? I hadn’t done anything wrong. I had nothing to apologize for. Yet, he was still giving me his best impression of the cold shoulder. Why couldn’t he just talk instead of stewing?

At the other end of the table, Big Mac, Kira, and Okorie were talking about liberating Dani, discussing different sorts of tracking spells that might be of use. I really should’ve been listening, but I couldn’t—not when Lilac was pissing me off just by breathing.

I couldn’t take it anymore. I leaned over and whispered at him, “Stop acting like a baby.”

He rounded on me, his eyes flashing. “I have a right to act any way I want.”

His voice was low. Apparently, he didn’t want to cause a scene, either. Though he could have fooled me with his horrendously loud slurping and the way he’d been pointedly ignoring me since I’d come back inside.

“What about me?” I asked. “Have you forgotten that Dani’s my friend? That I’m the one who convinced her to come here? If anyone should be upset here, it’s me.”

“Of course I’m worried about Dani.” He said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world. It wasn’t. “But this isn’t about that, is it?”

My brows rose. I hoped to god he wasn’t talking about Okorie—even though, by now, I was almost certain that was exactly the issue.

He stood up.

“Where are you going?” I hissed. “We’re not done talk—”

He marched out of the room, and with an apologetic look at the witches, I followed him. I wasn’t going to be able to focus until this was sorted out, one way or another.

I waited until we reached the relative privacy of the hallway to call after him. “Don’t just walk away from me!”

He stopped short, then turned on his heel and faced me. “What’s going on with you and Okorie?”

Even though I’d seen it coming a mile away, the blunt, harsh way he threw the question at me caught me off-guard.

“What?” I snapped.

Nothing had happened between Okorie and me, regardless of how it might have looked when he’d walked out onto the porch. So why was he reading into it? There was nothing to read!

“I saw the way he was looking at you,” Lilac said.

“What do you mean? He’s my teacher, he was worried about me *and* about Dani. He knew I was taking Dani’s disappearance really hard. He was being supportive.”

Something Lilac could’ve stood to try, honestly. It seemed like all his concern and care had dried up the moment he’d seen me out there with Okorie.

“I’m not stupid.” He scowled. “I know what I saw.”

*Could have fooled me*. I’d been keeping my lips sealed so that none of my angry, less-than-kind thoughts slipped out. But the dam against my anger didn’t last long.

“You don’t know anything,” I said. “Because if you did, you’d know there’s nothing going on between me and Okorie. He’s my mentor. And yeah, he’s annoying, rude, cocky—you name it. But are you seriously telling me you’re jealous of him?

“No!” Lilac scoffed far too quickly. “Why would I be?”

Why, indeed.

I shook my head. “Then what are we even arguing about?”

Lilac opened his mouth, then seemed to think better of whatever he’d been about to say. He pursed his lips and shook his head. “We can talk about it later. For now, you should be focusing on getting Dani back.”

*Yeah, no shit.*

The way he said it rubbed me the wrong way, like I was the one stealing focus from the more important mission at hand. And when he hugged me, it felt stiff and awkward and way too fast.

“Let me know if I can do anything to help,” he said gruffly before heading upstairs.

Part of me wanted to go after him and demand that he cut the bullshit. Another part wanted to go after him to reassure him that he had no reason to be jealous, even though he obviously was.

But in the end, I didn’t follow him. He probably needed some time to cool down, and he was right, in any case: I did need to focus on Dani right now.

I returned to the kitchen and found that Greyson had joined Okorie and the witches. It was a good thing I’d returned. If the Alpha was back at the table, then important decisions were being made, and I needed to be a part of that.

Okorie glanced up at me, a question in his eyes, and I looked away. Heat rushed into my cheeks. Why had I done that? I’d never had a hard time looking him in the eyes before. By the time I forced myself to look back at him, his attention was back on Greyson and the witches.

*Right. Dani. The most important person to worry about right now.*

I took a deep breath and sat back down at the table.

“We don’t know how Dani will react to the exorcism,” Big Mac was saying. “It could have killed Cali, but it didn’t. But, then again, she’s half-Fae. Dani’s a witch with remarkable amplification abilities. So it’s really anyone’s guess what will happen. She could amplify Marta’s exorcism, strengthen Seluna’s hold on her body, or do something else.”

I hated all this talk of death—that the odds were so intensely stacked against us. Against Dani.

“But if we do nothing, if Seluna remains in Dani’s body, wouldn’t that essentially be the same thing?” I asked.

“We won’t know until it happens,” Kira said. “But when it does, we’ll have to trap Seluna this time, or she’ll just find another body and this shell game will never end.”

“I’ll handle that part,” Okorie said. “Just get the demon out and leave it to me.”

“And remember, this fight won’t be on our turf,” Big Mac said. “We’ll be at the Vanguard palace. Doing this will be dangerous for more than one reason. I seriously doubt Lucian is just going to turn Dani over to us.”

“I’ll handle Lucian,” Greyson said. “And I’ll find a way to allow you all to get to Dani.”

It was a bold promise to make, and I couldn’t help but wonder how he planned to keep it. But I decided not to ask. All this talk about danger, dying, and that crazy wolf Lucian was setting me on edge.

“I want to help Dani,” I said, “but if we all fail and get ourselves killed in the process, what would be the point?”

“Thank you for your optimism,” Okorie mused.

Greyson set his gaze on me. “Let me be clear. I’m not planning on getting anyone killed. But Dani is our responsibility—she’s under this pack’s protection. I can’t make anyone come with me, so it’s up to each of you, but Dani needs us.”

Big Mac, Kira, and Okorie all nodded in agreement. I, on the other hand, hesitated.

Okorie turned to me. “Are you going to come?”

# **Episode 2665**

**Xavier**

Visceral horror slammed into me as I watched the footage playing on the screen. It was a continuous loop of the same imagery over and over: Greyson walking into view and then shifting into his wolf form.

*We are so fucked.*

The images were pretty clear, even with the distance—maybe some ten or twenty feet—and the night vision setting on the drone lens. I could even make out my brother’s pale ass.

I glanced over at Cali, who looked as shell-shocked as I felt.

Her voice slipped through my head. *What the hell are we going to do?*

A few ideas came to mind, but I didn’t think Cali would appreciate any of them. *I’m not sure. Just follow my lead for now.*

Rhonda loomed behind us, her brows raised, staring expectantly. “It’s amazing, right? We really caught Marshmallow in action!”

I cocked my head to the side, frowning slightly. “I’m sorry, but, um… What are we looking at here? Is this some kind of student film? Or… a music video shoot? Amateur porn?”

Heat rushed into Rhonda’s cheeks so fast that I almost felt the warmth from a few inches away.

I pretended to scrutinize the footage again, then shook my head. “But really. Is this some kind of joke? Performance piece?”

“I-I-I’m not entirely sure,” she confessed. “It’s footage from last night that I came across today while I was scanning through it. That’s why I wanted to speak with Greyson specifically. Because, well… It certainly looks like him, doesn’t it?”

I turned back to the screen and squinted. “Not really? What do you think, Cali?”

My mate turned to me, wide-eyed, and I had to nudge her shoulder before she caught on. “Oh. Um…” She looked back at the screen for a beat. “Hmm… Yeah. I’m not sure. Greyson, he’s a bit taller.”

Okay, so Cali wasn’t the best liar in the world. But that wasn’t exactly news. Hopefully Rhonda wouldn’t catch on.

The LIPS member’s eyes went wide. Not with shock, but defiance. Anger.

“No,” she said, more firmly. “This definitely looks like Greyson. It… It *is* Greyson. I don’t know if this is some kind of messed-up trick you’re all playing on me, but it’s not funny.”

Inwardly, I breathed a sigh of relief. Rhonda was willing to believe that her eyes were deceiving her, even though she had some pretty damning evidence. She was doubting herself, and I could work with that if I needed to.

I shrugged. “I have no idea what this is, but it seems pretty fake. Are you sure someone on your team isn’t playing a joke on you?”

She frowned. “Why would they possibly use valuable time and resources to play a trick like this?”

Okay, so this was gonna be a little harder than I’d thought. Damn this woman and her obsession with wolves. A normal person might have written this off as faulty footage, or at least rationalized it to the point that they’d believe anything but the truth—that werewolves actually did exist.

Trust the woman who’d named Greyson and me “Marshmallow” and “Big Fluffy” respectively to veer off the path of what was humanly possible and demand answers straight from the source.

I forced my tone to remain flat, uninterested. “Maybe not everyone you work with loves wolves as much as you think they do? Maybe they got bored?”

“Everyone on my team is passionate about wolves. That’s why they’re on my team to begin with. They wouldn’t joke about something like this.”

“Have you asked them?” I asked her. The more people who knew about this footage, the more devastating it could be—for everyone. Greyson had thought he was sending me off on an annoying errand—which this sure as shit was—but if LIPS passed this footage around and started blabbing about it, we’d have an even bigger problem on our hands than a body-hopping demon.

*Jesus, my life is one never-ending horror show.*

“Of course not,” Rhonda said. “I haven’t told anyone about this. I wanted to speak with Marshmallow—I mean, Greyson—about my findings first.” She pointed toward the USB drive sticking out of the monitor. “This USB is the only copy.”

Thank god for small favors. If worst came to worst, this secret would die with Rhonda. Which I wasn’t exactly thrilled about—no doubt Cali would take issue with me killing Rhonda—but this secret was more important than one measly human life.

I crossed my arms over my chest, still acting skeptical. “Why would Greyson want to come over and watch movie footage? Are you trying to ask him out or something?”

“What?” Rhonda gasped, and blushed even deeper. “No, that’s not—this isn’t from a movie. It’s from my drone. This footage was taken out in the woods last night.”

“Are you sure? I mean, special effects have gotten pretty advanced.”

Cali stepped in. “Yeah, it’s not like it was with the *Twilight* movies ten years ago. They can make it look like the real thing. If… If there was a real thing,” she added quickly. “Which there isn’t. As we know. Haha.”

*Jesus, Cali. Pull yourself together.*

Still, Rhonda refused to be swayed. “This isn’t fake footage. It’s not from a movie. This is a direct feed from the drone.” She spoke slowly, emphatically, like she believed we genuinely didn’t understand how drone footage worked.

It showed both how much better a person she was than me that she was putting so much effort and patience into explaining herself, but it also showed me that she wasn’t going to be so easy to convince. Maybe she wasn’t actually doubting herself.

It was a grim thought, mostly because if I couldn’t convince her to give up on this footage, I wouldn’t be able to let her leave this trailer alive.

Rhonda whipped out a notepad and flipped through the pages. “Since you’re here, though, I do have a few questions. Greyson was my preference, obviously, but you might be the next best thing.”

This was, perhaps, my least favorite sentence in the English language.

“Yes.” She scanned the notepad. “I have lots of questions. Was Greyson ever in an accident with a wild animal as a child?”

Dear god. She was going full werewolf conspiracy with this. Not that I blamed her, necessarily, considering the evidence playing on a loop in front of her. But I would’ve expected a scientist to cling a little harder to the established laws of nature before just accepting the existence of paranormal creatures.

I forced a laugh. “Absolutely not.”

She was undaunted. “Do you ever see him during full moons?”

“Who the heck pays attention to what moon is in the sky every night?”

“Is Greyson very hairy?”

I had a snarky response for that one, but Cali piped up, her cheeks heating. “That’s personal.”

“Okay,” Rhonda continued. “Do dogs get scared around him?”

I shrugged. “That would depend on the dog.”

“What about his diet? Does he eat a lot of meat? A lot of rare meat? *Really* rare meat?”

“He’s vegetarian,” I deadpanned.

Cali slapped my arms. “No, he’s not. He loves steak, just like a lot of people.”

I mind linked with her. *Cali, what are you doing?*

“Mixed diet,” Rhonda muttered to herself as she made a note on her pad. “Have you ever seen him touch silver?”

My blood ran cold.

“Rhonda,” I drawled, trying to sound as skeptical as possible. “Are you saying that you think my brother is a werewolf?”

Cali gasped. *Okay, overselling it just a little, babe*.

Rhonda straightened, flipping her notepad shut. “I’m not sure, to be honest, but… kind of? What other explanation is there for that?” She pointed to the screen, and I was once again gifted with the image of my brother’s ass. It was going to be seared into my memory after this.

“So let me get this straight,” I said. “You think my brother, who I’ve known since birth, is a werewolf, and has kept that a secret from me all these years?”

Rhonda nodded slowly.

“You do realize how this sounds, hearing it out loud? Do you still want to go down this path?” I asked.

“I know it sounds insane.”

I shook my head. “You said it, not me. You’re supposed to be a scientist. What you’re proposing doesn’t sound all that scientific.”

Beside me, Cali laughed nervously. “Who would believe you? Are you… Are you getting enough sleep, Rhonda?”

She frowned. “But… the video.”

I ground my molars together. She just wasn’t going to give it up, which meant I would have to do something—but what? Killing her would be the simplest solution, but I couldn’t. Not with Cali here. She’d already made it clear she didn’t want that, and I didn’t think she’d ever forgive me if I made her a witness to murder.

“Maybe I should show this footage to my teammates,” Rhonda said. “They might have the same reaction as the two of you, or they might believe what they see. Either way, it might help us sort out where to go from here.”

I couldn’t let that happen. I had to stop her.

Cali’s voice slipped into my mind. *What are we going to do?*

*I’m sorry, Cali, but this has to stop right now.*

I turned to Rhonda. “Can I talk to you alone?”

Cali grabbed my hand. “Wait.”

*Cali, don’t. She knows too much.*

She shook her head. *Let me try something first!*

# **Episode 2666**

I honestly had no clue what I was doing, but I had to try something. Xavier hadn’t explicitly said what he had planned for Rhonda, but it seemed safe to assume it wasn’t going to be pleasant. Rhonda was proving to be a little too curious for her own good.

I’d told Xavier before that I didn’t support him killing people, and it unnerved me to no end that he clearly felt that the risks outweighed my feelings. But now wasn’t the time to talk him down from killing someone. I couldn’t argue with him that it was the wrong choice because it was immoral and monstrous, but maybe I could change his mind if I convinced him I had a solution that didn’t require putting Rhonda in a body bag.

Xavier looked at me expectantly. *What are you gonna do?*

I wracked my brain for a solution. Some way to keep Rhonda from blabbing about this video footage *without* silencing her permanently.

Then it hit me.

*Remember when I made Phil forget about werewolves?* I asked. *Maybe I can do the same thing to Rhonda.*

“Excuse me.” Rhonda looked from Xavier to me, skepticism and concern etched into the lines of her face. Then she flicked her gaze back to Xavier. “Is there something you wanted to share with me? If not, I’m going to call my team in and let them decide how to proceed with this footage.”

Xavier’s fingers twitched. Oh god, he was going to kill her.

“Wait!” I blurted out. “I… I…” Dammit—what was I going to do? “I want to see the footage again. Now that I think of it, maybe I missed something.”

Rhonda was all too happy to start up the footage again, and I felt Xavier’s eyes on me, wide and expectant, as I stared at the monitor without really seeing it. I had seconds to figure this out. Seconds before Rhonda tried to leave, or tried to call one of her team members, and Xavier would be forced to act.

*Think, Cali! How did you make Phil forget?*

I wracked my brain, trying to think back to that day when I’d wiped the existence of werewolves from Phil’s mind. It had happened before I’d found out about my Fae abilities, before I’d learned how to use my powers. I’d had loads of practice since then, and I now had a much better understanding of my Fae powers. Surely I could make this work—if only I could remember what I’d done. It had happened so long ago…

*Come on, Cali. Just think back.*

I remembered how upset I’d been that the pack wanted to kill Phil. Gabriel had been ready to rip the poor repair guy apart, and why? All because he’d seen a few werewolves. It hadn’t seemed fair to me back then, and I didn’t think it was fair now. Rhonda only *thought* she’d seen one. And even then, she seemed open to the possibility that the footage might not be one hundred percent accurate. She was just doing her job. She didn’t deserve to die for it.

There had to be a way to keep the secret without hurting her. But how had I managed it with Phil?

*I… I talked to him first.*

I turned to Rhonda. “You’re planning on forgetting about this, right?”

It sounded like a threat. A weak, confusing, awkward-as-hell threat.

She frowned. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“It’s a bad idea to expose werewolves,” I blurted. “They don’t like it when humans find out.”

Rhonda pulled back with a lurch, her eyes going wide, then narrowing with suspicion and understanding. “You’ve been lying to me. You both know the truth!”

I glanced over at Xavier, just in time to see his expression darken.

*Shit, shit, shit.*

“I knew it! I knew they were real! Ever since I saw Big Fluffy—” Then she stared at Xavier, and her eyes went wide all over again. “Oh my god. Are *you* Big Fluffy?”

I gasped. *How the hell did she figure that one out?*

“Don’t call me that,” Xavier growled.

Rhonda stumbled backward, reaching for the door. The trailer had seemed cramped when we’d come in, but now I was thankful for the small space. It made it easy for Xavier to reach out and pull her back.

“You can’t leave,” he said. “You know too much.”

“Xavier, don’t!” I cried.

He ignored me, tightening his grip on Rhonda’s wrist. “I’ve been patient, but this has gone too far.”

Rhonda’s face went ashen. “What are you going to do to me?”

“Nothing!” I cried. “He’s not going to do anything!”

Xavier looked like my words pained him. “I’m going to do what’s necessary to keep my pack safe.”

*Dammit, Xavier!* I couldn’t let him kill her, but how could I stop him? He was fast and powerful and lethal. And short of blasting them both with my Fae powers, which could just as easily kill Rhonda as it could knock her free of Xavier’s grasp, I didn’t know what to do.

*Why can’t I make her forget?*

I gently took Rhonda’s free hand. “We’re not going to hurt you.”

Her bloodless, terrified expression told me she didn’t believe me.

I turned to Xavier. “Tell her. Tell her you’re not going to hurt her.”

He stared at me with exasperation. Then his voice slipped through my mind. *What choice do I have here?*

*You’re talking about committing cold-blooded murder!*

*It’s not like that. I don’t want to—*

Suddenly, Rhonda lunged at Xavier, a flash of something dark in her hand.

He let out a roar of pain as she stabbed a pen into his chest. I screamed in horror, and Rhonda took advantage of our shock to make a break for the door.

But Xavier was too fast. He grabbed her again, yanked her back, and pulled the pen from his now bleeding chest.

“You stabbed me with a pen?” he snarled. “A *pen*?”

Then he looked at me, shaking his head.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “but this has gone far enough.”

He pulled Rhonda toward him, and I lunged forward and tried to pull them apart. I couldn’t let him do this! I couldn’t let this happen to Rhonda!

Suddenly, a strange vibration hummed through the air, and the room seemed to warm by a few degrees, just for a second. All the fine hairs on the back of my neck stood on end, like I was being zapped by electricity, and my grip on Rhonda’s hand tightened.

My other hand was pressed against Xavier’s chest, just an inch away from where Rhonda had stabbed him. My head spun, my lungs stuttered, my stomach twisted, and the floor seemed to tilt sideways, to rise up to meet me—

And Rhonda dropped to the floor, unconscious.

The vibrations stopped as suddenly as they’d begun, and Xavier caught me around the waist to keep me from tumbling to the floor as well.

I looked down, squinting to focus my blurred vision. I tried to focus on Rhonda’s prone form. *Did I do it? Did I make her forget? Or did I kill her?*

Xavier was breathing heavily. “What… What just happened?”

I knelt down, my limbs shaking, and turned Rhonda onto her back. She was still breathing—that had to be a good sign. Or at least it was proof that I hadn’t killed her.

Right now, that felt like a win.

Xavier strode over to the monitor and yanked the USB out of it before tucking it into his pocket. “At least now we have the evidence. Even if she remembers what happened when she wakes up, she won’t have any proof.” He dabbed at the small spot of blood on his shirt. “A fucking pen. Unbelievable.”

“Are you okay?” I asked.

He scoffed. “I’m already healed, but she ruined my shirt.” He pulled it off and examined the small, bloodstained hole.

I rolled my eyes. “I can’t believe you’re seriously worried about your shirt. What are we supposed to do with Rhonda?”

He knelt down next to her. “I guess that depends on what she remembers, and whether or not she’s determined to be a pain in our ass.”

I glared at him. “We’ve been through this already. You’re not going to hurt her.”

Rhonda stirred slightly and let out a groan.

“Rhonda?” I looked down at her. “Are you okay?”

She murmured something I couldn’t quite make out.

When I’d altered Phil’s memory, he’d been out of it for a while too. Hopefully this was a sign that she’d forgotten all about the video.

Xavier slipped an arm around my waist. “You don’t look so good. Are you okay?”

I swallowed. My mouth was dry. I was still a little light-headed, and a little out of breath. Apparently, memory alteration was a skill I still needed a hell of a lot of practice with. “We’d better get Rhonda off the floor. Maybe there’s a bed or cot in here?”

“What difference does that make?” Xavier grumbled as he lifted her up. “Ruined my shirt… I liked that shirt.”

“Oh my god, can you stop whining about the shirt?” I snapped. “You rip them apart every day.”

Xavier deposited Rhonda in a chair, and a knock sounded at the door.

We both froze as an unfamiliar voice called out, “Rhonda?”

# **Episode 2667**

**Xavier**

*Good lord. How much worse can this get?*

I paused.

*Actually, never mind. I don’t want to know.*

Cali and I stood frozen inside the LIPS trailer as someone outside knocked on the door again. “Rhonda? Are you in there?”

I looked over at Rhonda, who was unconscious in a chair, locked inside this trailer with two strangers, one of whom had their shirt off and was sporting a bloodstain on his chest.

It was astounding to think that not thirty minutes earlier, I’d assumed Greyson was sending me off on some boring errand. *Thanks, Greyson, for putting me in this impossible position.*

“What are we going to do?” Cali whispered. She must have been too shocked to remember she could mind link.

“Rhonda must have gone out,” said the woman who’d knocked on the door, presumably to another person.

*Great, there’s at least two of them out there.*

“We can come back later,” the same woman said.

My shoulders slumped in relief. *Yes, do that. Come back later.* Even a ten-minute window would be more than long enough for Cali and me to make a clean getaway.

“No need,” a male voice responded. “I’ve got keys.”

My eyes widened. *Fucking shit.* They were coming in.

I started toward the door, but Cali pulled me back.

“What are you going to do?” she whispered. “You can’t go on a murder spree in here! We just worked so hard to wipe Rhonda’s memory.”

Actually, I could. Two unsuspecting humans against a werewolf was easy odds. But then we’d have three bodies to deal with, and the investigation that came along with that. Chances were, it’d just make things worse. To say nothing about how Cali would feel.

She’d probably never forgive me.

Which was why I wasn’t planning to take the easy way out.

“I’m not going to hurt them,” I assured her. “I’ve got this. Now get down and out of sight.”

Cali frowned, but she ducked down behind a desk. I strode forward to open the door.

A young woman and some guy were standing on the trailer steps. Their eyes widened when they saw me taking up all the space in the doorway, and then widened double when they realized I wasn’t wearing a shirt.

“Um, is Rhonda here?” the young woman asked.

I smirked, making sure to flex my muscles. “She’s a little tied up at the moment. Can I take a message?”

The young woman’s cheeks burned bright red. “I thought Rhonda—”

A *thump* from inside the trailer interrupted her, and I glanced back. Cali had somehow managed to pull Rhonda onto the floor again.

*Sorry*, she mouthed at me.

I turned back as the guy asked, “Is everything okay?”

I flashed him my slyest grin, the kind that only men used, usually with one another. “Hey, I’d love to keep chatting, but duty calls.”

The woman’s eyes widened for a third time, and the guy pulled her back.

“It’s okay,” he said. “We’ll come back later.”

“I appreciate it. Later.”

I closed the door and then sank back against it with a sigh of relief. That had been way too close for comfort. Actually, scratch that—this whole task had been nothing short of a shitshow from start to finish.

Cali was staring at me, her brows raised.

“What?” I asked.

“You just seduced your way out of this, didn’t you?”

I shrugged. “It worked, didn’t it?”

We could still make out the young woman and the guy speaking in loud whispers outside the trailer.

“… didn’t know she was seeing someone,” the young woman was saying.

Cali turned to me. “Do you think they really believed you?”

Before I could respond, Rhonda let out another pathetic moan. A *loud*, pathetic moan. She was leaning against the back of the chair, her eyelids fluttering. She must have fallen out of it earlier, and Cali had to struggle to get her back in it.

“They will now,” I joked.

Cali glared. “Put your shirt on. Rhonda’s coming to.”

I pulled my shirt back on, scowling at the bloodstained hole in the chest. *Fucking Rhonda. This was my favorite shirt. Why can’t I have nice things?*

Rhonda leaned forward, blinking slowly, and almost fell out of her chair again. I grabbed her by the shoulders to keep her from tumbling to the floor for a third time in as many minutes. She looked dazed and was obviously unsteady, but considering the sheer number of times she’d hit the floor, she wasn’t too banged up.

I eased her against the back of the chair. “How are you feeling?”

She grimaced, touching her head gently. “My head hurts.”

Behind me, Cali dug around in a small mini-fridge/freezer until she found an ice pack. She carried it over and held it out to Rhonda.

I watched the woman’s face, trying to discern what, if anything, she remembered. She seemed more disoriented than anything else. I had to assume that the fact that she wasn’t looking at me like I was some sort of monster was good news, but I couldn’t leave here without finding out for sure what she knew. For all I knew, she remembered everything and this was all a ruse to help her escape.

Though, for what it was worth, I remembered how Phil had responded when Cali had altered his memories, and this sure looked like the same thing.

“What happened?” Rhonda asked with a pained groan.

“We don’t really know,” Cali lied, far more smoothly than I ever would’ve thought she was capable of. “We came in, and you were on the floor.”

“Oh.” This seemed to sink in slowly. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I really don’t know what happened. I remember wanting to talk to Greyson…”

I felt Cali stiffen, though her expression remained neutral.

Rhonda rubbed her head again and let out a sigh. “But I can’t for the life of me remember what I wanted to talk to him about.” She lifted her gaze to my face, then Cali’s. “Is that why you’re here? To talk to me?”

Before I could respond, Cali nodded. “Greyson’s busy, so he sent us. I’m sorry you’re not feeling well. Maybe you should take the rest of the day off.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

Cali’s voice slipped into my head. *It worked.*

I didn’t argue. If Rhonda was lying about this, then she was doing a hell of a job. I could feel the USB in my pocket. Even if she *was* lying, it wasn’t like she’d be able to prove anything.

I took Cali’s hand.

“We’ll let you rest. Sorry to bother you.” I pointed to Rhonda’s head. “You should probably get that looked at.” I dragged Cali toward the door before turning back and adding, “Oh, and your coworkers might have gotten the wrong idea.”

I pulled Cali out of the trailer and shut the door behind us before Rhonda could summon up a response.

I held Cali’s hand as we hustled back to the car, moving quickly while also trying to draw as little attention as possible. The two other LIPS members were probably still lurking around here somewhere.

We slipped into the car, and I gunned the engine and peeled away from the worksite.

When we pulled out onto the main road, only a mile or two away from the pack house, Cali let out a sigh. “Thanks for not killing her.”

I pulled over. We needed to talk, and I didn’t want to wait until we got back to the pack house to do it.

Cali let out another long breath. Her hands were shaking. “I can’t believe I was able to do that.”

“But you did.” I leaned in and kissed her cheek. “Sorry I made you worry.”

She turned her face so our lips met, kissing me sweetly. “Thank you,” she said again. “I know you did that for me.”

I squeezed her hand. “It all worked out.”

Then I pulled out onto the road again.

It had come very, very close to not working out. I’d been ready to kill Rhonda. My wolf sure as shit wouldn’t have minded. But I’d been in control of my wolf this time—or, at least, that was how it had felt.

I just wasn’t sure if I would have been able to make it back to my human form if I’d shifted, even partially. But protecting the pack, even at the cost of a human life, had felt right. It was better that Cali had found a more humane way to avoid disaster, but I would’ve gone through with killing Rhonda if I’d had to. Even if that method wouldn’t have been ideal for Cali.

It was cold, maybe, but sometimes life was like that. Sometimes you had to make the hard calls to protect the people you cared about. I felt the same way about Cali. I’d always protect her, no matter the cost.

A thought crept into my head uninvited.

*And what about Ava? Is that true of her now too?*

I thought about last night, about the bone-deep certainty that had made me stay the night with her. Even after everything she’d done to make my life a living hell, would I protect her too?

I shook off the thought.

I hoped we didn’t have any more close encounters with LIPS. Last night, we’d gone balls to the wall, shifting-wise. We hadn’t cared—not with Cali’s life on the line. I’d do it all again in a heartbeat.

But exposure wasn’t an option. We were going to have to find a more permanent solution.

But what was that going to be? And would Cali approve of it?

# Episode 2668

Xavier and I arrived back at the pack house, both of us lost in our own thoughts. I was relieved that we’d averted the whole LIPS crisis, and I was pretty impressed with myself for being the main reason why. In neutralizing the Rhonda threat, I’d pretty much saved her life, since there was no doubt in my mind that Xavier would’ve done something drastic otherwise. The thought of killing humans just to protect the pack just didn’t sit right with me, and it never would. I didn’t think I’d ever be on the same page as Xavier—or potentially even Greyson if it came down to it— when it came to that sort of thing. I wanted to keep the pack safe as much as they did, but I wasn’t willing to kill innocent people to do it.

I knew in the back of my mind that the whole LIPS thing wasn’t over by any means, but right now the only thing I could focus on was Dani and Seluna. I shivered, remembering how hopeless I’d felt when Seluna had had control of my body. It pained me to think that Dani was going through the same thing right now.

I would have to put LIPS on the back burner until we figured out how to get Dani out of Seluna’s clutches. Nothing else mattered right now.

We walked into the pack house and found Torin in the kitchen, leafing through a cookbook. He looked up and smiled at us as Xavier made a beeline for him.

“We need to talk to my brother; have you seen him?” Xavier asked.

Torin shook his head slowly. “You just missed him. He headed out with the others a little while ago. They’re going to try to get Dani back.”

“Shit,” Xavier muttered. “I was hoping to have a word with him first. Guess I’ll just have to go catch up with him.” Xavier looked at me. “I’ll be back, I just need to grab a couple things.”

I followed behind him as he sped for the stairs. I was feeling a bit uneasy about how quickly things were moving. It was at times like these that things tended to spiral out of control, and that was the last thing I wanted.

“Wait, Xavier,” I said. “I know that you want to get Dani back as much as I do, but what’s your plan? What are we going to do when we get there?”

“*We* aren’t going to do anything, Cali. How many times do I have to tell you that I don’t want you anywhere near the Vanguard palace after everything that happened the last time you were there?” he asked. “We just barely got you out from under them last time. Don’t you think we’d be pushing our luck a bit by taking you right back into the belly of the beast?”

I opened my mouth to protest, but before I could say a word, Rishika came rushing over. She gave me a quick nod before turning to Xavier. “I just got word from one of the patrols. They caught wind of some Vanguard members at the edge of our territory.”

Xavier cursed again. “I knew it. This is far from over. See, Cali? This is why you need to stay here in the pack house, where it’s safe.”

I tensed. Xavier, Greyson, and I had talked ad nauseum about me staying away from the Vanguard palace—and my mates had a point—but I couldn’t shake the feeling that something would go terribly wrong if I stayed behind.

“I know there are risks—and I understand your reasoning, Xavier—but how can we be sure that leaving me here alone isn’t just what Lucian wants? For all we know, he’s trying to lure you away so someone can come here and get me while I’m alone and vulnerable. Besides, how will any of this end if we don’t all confront the Vanguards together?”

Xavier appeared to be thinking this over, and I could tell by his expression that he agreed with me—though I was sure that he was trying to find an argument against it, anyway.

“Let’s not forget that I’ve got my magic,” I continued. “I can protect you in this situation just as much as you can protect me. If Rishika’s right and Vanguard pack members are lurking nearby, then who’s to say that they aren’t on their way to me? Did that ever occur to you?”

Even suggesting it sent a chill down my spine. If the Vanguards got their hands on me again, I doubted they’d let me get away a second time.

Xavier sighed. “I don’t like this,” he said. “But I like the idea of leaving you behind while the enemy is on our doorstep even less.” He paused, as if trying to wrack his brain for any alternative. Finally, he shook his head. “You’d have to stay with me, Cali. As in, you don’t leave my sight.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I said.

Without delay, we said goodbye to Rishika, rushed out of the house, and bounded toward the woods. I could sense Xavier’s hesitation as we began to weave our way through the trees, and I couldn’t help but think about the racy footage that LIPS had caught of us out in the woods. It was sobering to realize that our privacy was a thing of the past.

“I think that this is urgent enough for me to shift, LIPS be damned,” Xavier said.

I nodded in agreement, after thinking it over for a moment. This was another one of those situations where we just had to weigh the risks. It wasn’t an easy decision, but right now, getting Dani back was all that mattered.

Xavier shifted, I hopped onto his back, and we took off toward the palace. I couldn’t stop thinking about Dani as we raced through the woods. A stab of pity hit me in the pit of my stomach. *Dani doesn’t deserve this. She’s probably terrified. I know I was.* We had to get to the palace and save her before anything happened to her.

I saw a glint of metal a ways ahead of us, and my pulse quickened. *Xavier, I see something in the trees.*

Xavier skidded to a stop. *What is it?*

*It looks like a camera*, I replied, holding tightly onto Xavier.

Xavier let out a huff of frustration, and I knew exactly how he felt. I wanted to get to Dani as fast as we could, but I also didn’t want to put the pack at risk.

*If LIPS is anywhere around here, we should be as cautious as we can. No point taking risks that we can avoid.*

*You’re right. I’ll take a path away from it*, Xavier replied.

He took off again, putting as much distance as he could between us and the camera. I kept my eyes on the treetops and scanned for any more.

*I think we’re good now*, I finally said.

*No, we’re not*, Xavier said. *I can smell LIPS. Someone’s nearby.*

I sucked in a breath. Shit. Was that true?

*Cali, this mission is urgent enough that we might just have to take out any LIPS people we run into.*

*Xavier, no, we can’t do that.*

*It is what it is. Sometimes people get hurt. That’s just the way things are. Anything to protect the pack.*

I hated hearing him talk like that. It was strange to hear the man I loved be so flippant about something so grim. *I don’t agree with you. If there’s a way to avoid hurting someone, that’s the route we should take, always.*

Xavier’s wolf huffed. *You’re lucky that I’ll do pretty much anything you tell me to do so you’ll be happy.*

I let out a sigh of relief. *Well then, I guess it’s a good thing that I’d never lead you astray.*

*We’ll lie low for a moment, see if LIPS passes us by. Once the coast is clear, I’ll run the rest of the way.*

*Sounds like a plan*, I replied, relieved that I’d been able to convince Xavier to be cautious rather than reckless. I knew it had to be frustrating for him to suppress such a big part of himself, especially at a time like this, but I just didn’t think the risk was really worth it.

Suddenly, with no warning, Xavier started to bolt. I grabbed onto him tightly, hoping I wouldn’t fall off.

*What are you doing?!*

*We aren’t safe.*

Xavier ran us a bit further and then stopped behind a tree. After a moment, he shifted back to his human form right before me. Ava wasn’t here, so had he thought about her in order to do it, I wondered? Or had his wolf sensed the danger we were in and wanted to protect me?

“Give me the clothes,” he said, his voice husky. I gulped down all of my Ava thoughts. This wasn’t the place right now. We were just lucky it’d worked.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “What’s going on?”  
“Just give me the clothes, Cali!”

I thrust the bag at him off my back. Xavier was just about to slip into his clothes when I heard movement behind us, and then voices. I looked behind the tree, and there were a couple of LIPS agents in uniforms. My blood went cold. He’d known they were close. I couldn’t quite hear all of what they were saying, but I did manage to make out something I’d never wanted to hear again—especially from a LIPS member.

“Look at these tracks,” one of them said.

“They’re huge,” the other said.

“Gigantic. Can’t wait to tell Rhonda. Big Fluffy was definitely here,” one of them said.

Straining to hear what they were saying, I leaned forward, and there was a loud crack. My foot gave way to a large fallen branch. Both the agents’ heads snapped up, and then they both turned and looked directly at us.

# Episode 2669

**Marta**

My heart hammered away in my chest as I peered through the thick foliage at the Vanguard palace, looming in the distance. Even the sight of it gave me a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach. I was trying to stay calm, but this was all a bit much, and I was starting to feel like I might be in over my head. I rubbed the bare skin of my wrists. It was strange how quickly I’d gotten used to the bracelets. Okorie had removed them just before we’d left the pack house, and now it almost felt strange to be without them. I didn’t miss them, though. That was for sure.

I still couldn’t quite believe that I’d agreed to come along. Back in the safety of the pack house, it had been easy to feel brave enough to agree to an impromptu rescue mission, but now that we were here, I was extremely anxious—and Okorie’s lingering hold after we’d blipped hadn’t helped the situation. Okorie hadn’t made a big deal of our close contact and had clearly thought nothing of it, but it had made me think about my tiff with Lilac earlier.

*I can’t think about that right now. I have to keep my head in the game.*

I had a lot on my mind, and I had no idea what to expect. I didn’t even know how—or *if*—I would be able to handle myself once we faced off with the Vanguards. I was a lot of things, but an experienced fighter wasn’t one of them.

*But this is for Dani. She’s in the Vanguard palace, probably terrified and alone and wondering if anyone’s going to come save her.* I steeled myself at the thought. *I’ve got this. I’m going to be brave. I have to be.*

I glanced over at Greyson, his face set in concentration. I hoped that he had a solid plan in mind for this whole thing. This didn’t seem like the kind of situation where we could just wing it and hope for the best. From everything I’d heard, the Vanguard pack was formidable and unpredictable. It scared me even more to think that we might be going in unprepared. It wasn’t like we’d really discussed anything close to an actual plan before we’d left the pack house. Everything had moved so fast that there really hadn’t been time.

I caught Greyson’s eye and moved closer, making sure to stay low just in case the Vanguards had patrols combing the woods. “So, Greyson, how are we going to do this?”

Greyson tore his gaze away from the palace and looked at me. “We’re going to break in, get Dani, and perform an exorcism,” he said simply.

*I’m surprised he didn’t throw in a “piece of cake” at the end.*

“Oh,” I said slowly. The plan was decidedly low on specifics, and that was a little concerning. Or a lot concerning.

Before I could press Greyson any further, Kira caught our attention.

“Greyson, we’ve got company!” she hissed. We all looked and saw people making their way toward us. They were weaving through the trees at a fast clip, and they started to shift as they got closer.

My heart started beating so fast that I was worried that I would have a heart attack before the fighting even started.

“Shit,” Greyson said under his breath. “Everybody, get ready for battle,” he hissed.

We’d barely just arrived—not even *inside* the palace yet—and already he was shifting into his wolf. He planted his feet and growled.

“Ready for battle?” I said, stifling a panicked scream.

*Did he really just say “get ready for battle”?*

I wasn’t even remotely ready for that, but there was no time to think. The Vanguards were closing in, and before I knew it Greyson had lunged into the fray with his teeth bared.

Big Mac, Kira, and Okorie wasted no time leveling magic shots at the wolves, hitting a few of them and sending them spinning off into the woods with yelps of surprise. Already feeling like I was out of my depth, I ran and took cover behind a tree just as another wolf lunged at Greyson, who dodged him easily. He tore into the Vanguard wolf’s hind leg and flung him against a tree just as Okorie sent a massive blast vibrating across the ground, sending a bunch of Vanguard wolves flying in every direction. Okorie didn’t even pause to take a breath before he was shooting an unbroken stream of magic at another group of wolves who were trying to flank him and the other witches.

*Okorie’s such a natural. I would never say it to him, but I’m impressed.*

I literally had no dog in this part of the fight. I’d only come for the exorcism part, so I thought it best to hide out for now. Even if I wanted to join in, I’d only get in the way and put the others in danger—at least that was what I was telling myself as I all but curled into a ball behind the tree.

Magic was flying in every direction, but I managed to stay clear of it, grateful that none of the Vanguard wolves had spotted me. As soon as there was a break in the chaos, I peeked out from behind the tree and frowned as I realized that there were a hell of a lot of Vanguard wolves, and I couldn’t quite tell who had the upper hand. None of our group appeared to be hurt, and I figured that had to be good enough for now.

Greyson snarled, leaping on top of one of the Vanguards who’d tried to sneak up behind him and pinning him to the ground. Greyson bared his teeth, poised to rip the wolf’s throat out. I looked away, not interested in seeing the carnage up close. I caught sight of a tall, muscular man lingering on the fringes of the fight. I recognized him—it was Andrei.

“Greyson, stop!” Andrei yelled.

Greyson’s eyes flickered to him, and to my surprise, he seemed to listen. The Vanguard wolves all paused too, seeming to take their cues from Andrei and prompting a lull in the fight. I could see that Andrei didn’t like Greyson very much—it was written all over his face—which was why it was so surprising that Greyson was listening to him in the first place.

*There’s something personal festering between those two.*

“We aren’t here to fight,” Andrei said, strolling toward Greyson.

Greyson waited a beat, then shifted back to human. He faced the other man wearily, still breathing hard but looking like he’d barely broken a sweat. “If you’re not here to fight, Andrei, then what are you here for?”

“We’re here to escort you to the palace,” Andrei said.

Greyson and the witches exchanged a look, and a message passed between them that I couldn’t quite decipher.

“Okay…” Greyson said slowly. He gave me an encouraging look, and I finally came out from behind the tree.

Andrei nodded, still staring at Greyson with unchecked distaste. “Follow me.”

We stayed close together as we followed the Vanguard pack members through the woods. I felt even more uneasy than I had in the beginning. We were completely surrounded, and I didn’t need to be well versed in the art of fighting to know that wasn’t the best position.

*What’s Greyson playing at here, anyway? What if they’re kidnapping us right now and we don’t even realize it?*

I looked at Greyson, trying to pick up any vibe that I could from him. He looked calm and collected, so I tried to relax, thinking that he had to have some kind of plan in mind.

Before long, we arrived at the palace, and I was shocked to see how grand the place looked up close. Everyone had called it a palace, but I’d accepted that label without really thinking about what that really meant. It was the very definition of a palace, and it was breathtaking—ornamental hedges dotted the property along with fountains and ancient-looking statues on either side of the entryway. Inside was even more impressive—marble floors, chandeliers dangling from the cathedral ceilings, and lots of antiques and gold accents everywhere. I nearly gasped as Andrei led us into a grand hall that looked like something straight out of a movie. I’d had no clue that places like this even existed around here.

The most surprising thing in the whole place, however, was the imperious-looking man sitting on some sort of throne at the far end of the room. Lucian. The prince.Standing right next to him was his sister Aysel—a stunner for sure—and they both watched us closely as we approached.

“I’ve brought you the Redwood Alpha,” Andrei announced proudly, bowing slightly as he presented us. “So we’re ready to go.”

*Ready to go?* A sliver of fear shot through me.

Lucian frowned as he considered us, his hands steepled in front of his eerily handsome face. “This is only one of them. We need all three, or this will fail.”

# Episode 2670

**Xavier**

Cali’s face froze as the LIPS members took in the sight of us. Both men were completely shocked and confused and making a show of averting their eyes. I was acutely aware that my pants were only halfway up my legs, but that had been my plan. A lot easier to explain the two of us naked in the forest than a girl on the back of a wolf. I quickly bent down and pulled them the rest of the way up and fastened them. Thinking fast, I laughed and pulled Cali in close, then planted a wet kiss on her cheek.

“Sorry about that, gentlemen.” I gave them my most mischievous look. “You caught us at a… delicate time.”

The LIPS members looked at each other and then back at us. It was almost comical how taken aback they were, as if they’d been totally scandalized by the suggestion of two people sneaking away to get it on. *They’re stupider than I thought.* One of them cleared their throat loudly, but otherwise they stood there in silence, both fidgeting and probably searching for the right thing to say that wouldn’t make things even more awkward than they already were.

*Good, I’m glad they’re nervous. I’ll take discomfort over suspicion any day.*

“The two of us have some family staying over, so lately we’ve had to get a little creative, if you know what I mean.” I arched my eyebrows suggestively, laying it on thick—which helped camouflage my annoyance and exasperation with the entire situation. The LIPS crew were the definition of dogged—always snooping around and popping up when you least expected them. They were almost worse than the Vanguards. *Almost*.

Cali looked up at me, her eyes wide, blushing like crazy. “This is so embarrassing. I hope you two didn’t see anything you shouldn’t have?”

*Perfect. They’ll definitely buy it now*, I thought, wishing that we actually *had* been out here trying to get in a little creative alone time rather than trying to stop a delusional prince and his demon girlfriend who was possessing our friend.

One of the LIPS members flushed and ducked his head in embarrassment. He gave the other guy a look like he would’ve rather been anywhere but here.

“Is something wrong?” I asked. I vaguely recognized him as one of the members I’d opened the door to when I’d been shirtless and hiding Rhonda earlier. I assumed he remembered me—and was probably thinking that I got around. I didn’t care what he thought of me as long as he didn’t think I was Big Fluffy.

The LIPS member from before cleared his throat. “We didn’t mean to… interrupt anything.” He exchanged a concerned look with his partner. “You two really shouldn’t be out here right now. We happen to know that there’s a massive wolf in the vicinity.”

“And when we say massive, we mean it,” the other one added. “Two to three times bigger than a normal wolf, and that’s a modest estimate.” He seemed happy to be discussing anything other than what Cali and I had been up to.

“A *wolf*?” Cali gasped dramatically, splaying her hand across her chest. “Out here?” She snapped her head around as if she thought she might spot the huge wolf at any moment.

*Tone it down*, I told her. She was laying it on a little too thick.

The LIPS members nodded gravely. One of them looked down at the device he had in his hands and frowned. “This doesn’t make sense. I was sure that I was following the right heat signature… According to this, Big Fluffy was right here.”

“Yeah, I saw it, too. We were definitely on the right track, but then Big Fluffy just up and disappeared,” said the other.

Alarmed, I glanced at Cali. She looked as distressed as I felt.

*They’re using heat signature tech now, too? These people have a lot of time—and gadgets—on their hands*, I said to Cali.My annoyance ratcheted up a few notches.

“Big Fluffy?” Cali squeaked after the silence had gone on for too long. “Cute name.”

She gave an uninspired laugh and shot me a look. It was clear that she was as tired of the ruse as I was.

The guy nodded again. “Don’t let the name fool you—these are dangerous animals.”

It was my turn to gasp, but I tried to be a little more subtle than Cali. “Well in that case, we should definitely get out of here before we run into one of them. Thanks for the warning! Let’s go, baby, we should get back to our guests before they send out a search party.”

I flashed the LIPS members a smile as I grabbed Cali’s hand and dragged her off in the direction of the Vanguard palace. I kept my gaze straight ahead, hoping that if I ignored them well enough they’d just fuck off.

“You’re only heading deeper into the woods!” one of them called after us.

“Yeah, I know,” I said, increasing our speed. *I know these woods better than you could possibly ever hope to.*

I just wanted to get as far away from them and their little heat signature meter as quickly as possible.

We were making good progress, but when I looked back, I could still see them standing there, shooting puzzled looks our way. But puzzled was better than suspicious.Little did they know, I was saving their lives by leaving. I knew that Cali didn’t want me or Greyson to hurt any of the LIPS members, but I was starting to wonder if there would come a time when it couldn’t be avoided. We’d already had too many close calls. If those two had pressed me or accused me of anything, what other option would I have had but to eliminate them?

Cali and I were quiet as we half walked, half ran away. I only hoped the conservationists weren’t following us.

Cali took a quick glance over her shoulder. “Don’t shift yet,” she said out of the corner of her mouth. “They might still be watching.”

“I know that,” I said. Agitated didn’t begin to describe how I felt. I could feel the urgency thrumming in my stomach.

*I don’t have time for this LIPS bullshit. We’re losing precious time because I can’t shift in my own woods yet.* Cali and I picked up speed until we were jogging. *We’d already be there if I could just shift and run there in wolf form, but thanks to LIPS, that isn’t an option right now.*

It was clear that avoiding LIPS wasn’t going to work in the long term. No matter what we did, where we went, or what precautions we tried to take, they were always there, watching. We were going to need a permanent solution to these meddlesome dorks, and soon. I had no plans to continue tiptoeing around my own property like I’d done something wrong.

Cali suddenly stopped short. She had a strange look on her face as she looked around, her eyes combing the woods as if she were looking for something.

“What is it?” I asked, looking around, concerned. “Did you spot another camera?” I paused and sighed. “Another LIPS member?”

I wouldn’t be surprised if we ran into another one of their little crews every few miles or so. They tended to pop up anywhere and everywhere.

Cali looked distant for a moment, then she shook her head and met my eyes. “I don’t know… It’s really weird. I’m feeling this… pull. Somehow, I just know it’s Seluna.”

Cali closed her eyes, looking distressed. She wrapped her arms around herself and hunched her shoulders, as if she were cold, or trying to protect herself from something.

“Try to fight it, Cali” I said, instantly troubled that she was being stalked by the goddess from hell and there was nothing I could do about it.

She opened her eyes again and frowned. “I’m trying, but it’s getting stronger.”

Frantic, I tried to think of why it would be happening right now, out of nowhere. “You were recently possessed, so maybe some part of that connection is still lingering? Not like you’re still possessed or anything—”

“What, like a magical possession hangover?” Cali said. “I’d take a real hangover over this.”

“I wish I could do something,” I said, feeling helpless. I was terrified, wondering if Seluna might emerge at any moment and take over Cali’s body again. There was still so much that we didn’t know about Seluna and what she was capable of. We didn’t even know what her endgame was, really. *What if she gets a hold of Cali and doesn’t let go? What if she hurts her this time instead of just hanging around inside her?* “Are you okay, Cali? Talk to me.”

She had her eyes closed again, and her skin was getting paler by the second.

“Cali, fight it,” I said, taking her by the arms. “You have to fight it! Don’t let her win!”

Cali just stood there, not opening her eyes, not moving, not assuring me that she was okay, or that Seluna hadn’t come back for her.

“It’s getting stronger,” she murmured, swaying slightly. “I don’t think I can fight it, Xavier…” Her eyes started moving around quickly under her eyelids, like she was dreaming about something that was causing her distress.

Panicking now, I pulled Cali into my arms and held her tight. “Cali, stay with me!”

# Episode 2671

**Greyson**

I narrowed my eyes at Lucian as he sat perched on his throne.

“What do you mean you ‘need all three of us’?” I was asking questions I already knew the answer to, even if I wished I didn’t. He wanted me, Cali, and Xavier together in the palace, but there was no way I was going to let that happen. I almost laughed. If he truly thought I’d bring Cali back here, he was even more delusional than I thought. “If you mean what I think you mean, you might as well give it up now. You won’t be ‘getting’ any of us.”

I balled my hands into fists and stood my ground, preparing myself for the worst. The patina of politeness and tolerance Lucian had used since the moment we’d met was gone now, and all that remained between us was the type of tension that could boil over at any moment.

Lucian nodded slightly, a smile playing across his lips. “Oh, but I shall. Believe me, I know how we Alphas can get about our mates and our pack members. But as I told your dear Caliana when we first met, I always get what I want.”

Lucian was being even more smug than usual, and it was making my blood boil. He settled back in his throne and watched me closely, his eyes hard and penetrating, like he was trying to decide whether or not to reignite the fight we’d started during my last visit.

A big part of me wanted him to go ahead and make a move so that we could finally put an end to our exhausting rivalry once and for all.

*Go ahead, princeling. Make one wrong move, and I’ll be on you before your guards even know what hit you.*

Without thinking about what I was doing, I moved closer to Lucian’s throne. I could feel Aysel’s eyes on me as I approached, and I didn’t even care enough to meet her gaze. I was tired of the Vanguard duo’s antics, tired of the whole damn Vanguard pack, and the only thing they would be getting out of me was a fight.

“This is one time you’re not going to get what you want, Lucian,” I said. “So what’s it going to be? Like I said, we’re here for Dani. That’s it. You’ve now kidnapped yet *another* member of my pack, and I’m here to get her back. That’s all. I didn’t come here for anything else but to make my pack whole again.”

Lucian tilted his head, still smiling. “Why Greyson, I’m sure I don’t know what you mean. I don’t have anyone named Dani here.” He straightened in his seat; his posture relaxed despite the intensity of his stare. “You know, kidnapping is such a strong word, Greyson! You’ve offended me. I assure you that everyone here under my roof is here of their own accord. Isn’t that right, Aysel?”

Aysel nodded stiffly, her gaze on me.

“Give me a fucking break! Considering you just had us escorted in here by a military detail, I hardly believe that’s true. And I don’t care, really. I’m tired of your games. I know that you have Dani locked away somewhere in this palace, and I’m not leaving until you hand her over to me.”

My words sounded hollow, even to my own ears. We were still outnumbered, and there was no way we’d be able to take the Vanguards on without suffering heavy casualties. My thought was that if we could just get inside, I’d be able to figure everything else out from there, and that was exactly what I intended to do.

Lucian put a hand on his chest in faux offense. “Locked away? I would never lock someone up and keep them imprisoned here against their will! What kind of barbarian do you think I am?”

I was about to respond “the worst kind,” but before I could say a word, Lucian made a lazy gesture, and a side door opened. Dani came walking out, looking calm and collected and dressed in a beautiful, shimmering gown. Lucian smiled in adulation as Dani approached.

*Why is he smiling at her like that? Have I missed something important here?*

“Seluna, tell this petulant wolf that you aren’t being kept prisoner here,” Lucian said.

Dani—or Seluna, rather—turned to face me and the others. She had a disdainful frown on her face, and there wasn’t a shred of anything resembling Dani in her eyes. “I’m no man’s prisoner,” she said. “You can leave now. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

Lucian turned back to me. “See? She’s no man’s prisoner. She said so herself.” He spread out his hands. “As you can see, Greyson, I’m not keeping anyone in my pack against their will—at least until now. Unfortunately, I’m not going to be able to let you leave. Guards, take up your posts.”

A few of Lucian’s men broke off and went to block all the exits.

The witches tensed behind me, and I held my hand out in an attempt to calm them. I looked at Dani, searching her face for any sign that she could hear me, or that Seluna wasn’t in complete control of her. “Dani, I know that you’re in there somewhere.”

Dani frowned. “Dani? I think you’re mistaken. My name is Seluna.” She moved to stand beside Aysel, her expression blank.

“Greyson, please, if you’ll allow me to finish my thought.” Lucian smiled. “You and your friends here are going to have to sit tight until Xavier arrives. Then we’ll get started. It shouldn’t be much longer now.”

I didn’t like where this was going at all, but I did my best to appear calm even though I was reeling on the inside. It was obvious that Lucian had a plan—a plan that would fuck the Redwood pack in the end, no doubt, but there was no point trying to reason with him. The time for us to be even moderately cordial had long passed. Our dislike for each other was obvious, and it pulsed between us almost like a living thing.

I turned back to Dani. “I know that all of this must be confusing and scary, but I know that you’re in there somewhere, Dani.”

“Greyson,” Lucian said with barely contained anger. “I’m going to have to ask you to stop talking to my Luna that way.” His voice had risen to a commanding shout by the time he finished his sentence.

I ignored him and kept my eyes on Dani. I could see the conflict in her eyes, a flicker of proof that Dani was there inside Seluna, listening. “Remember who you are, Dani. Shut everything else out—including Seluna. Cali did it, and you can, too. Fight her off and take control. That’s the only way this ends well for you, and it’s the only way that you’ll end up back where you belong—with us at the Redwood pack house. We care about you, Dani. We’re your friends, and we don’t want to leave here without you. But you have to help us.”

“Dani!” I turned to see that Marta was no longer standing behind me, but right beside me. I was impressed by her bravery, especially when she’d looked completely freaked out only a few moments earlier. “Dani, it’s me, Marta! Don’t you remember me?”

Lucian glanced between Marta, Dani, and me, his lips pressed into a tight line. He looked like he was ready to leap out of his chair and clothesline us all at any moment.

*If he makes even one move toward any of us, I’ll take him out. Even if I don’t make it out of here alive, I’ll make sure to take Lucian down with me.*

The most important thing to me was making sure that Cali was safe from him, and if I had to take him out to do that, so be it.

“Really dig down deep and remember who your friends are, Dani. Me, Greyson, Big Mac, Kira, even Okorie,” Marta continued.

“Yeah, even me,” Okorie said, sounding amused despite the circumstances.

“Enough!” Lucian shouted. He was finally starting to look concerned. “I command you to shut your mouths this instant!” His eyes flashed, and his guards snapped to attention.

I could tell that it wouldn’t be much longer before he grew tired of this back and forth and unleashed his men on us. They were all champing at the bit to get the go ahead as it was. If that happened, I knew that we wouldn’t stand a chance in hell of getting out unscathed.

Marta shot an uncertain glance at Lucian, but she kept going. “I’m your friend, Dani, and I know that you’re still in there. I know you’re strong enough to claw to the surface. You have to beat her, Dani. That’s the only way.”

“That’s it!” Lucian hissed, finally on his feet and shaking with anger. “Guards, take them out of here until the others arrive!”

I looked at Dani, hoping that she was finally coming around.

*Wait a minute. It looks like something’s happening…*

A look passed across Dani’s face, and at the same moment, the air started to buzz as if electric current were passing through it.

The buzz in the air intensified, drowning out every other sound, and seconds later a deafening explosion blew through the room.

# Episode 2672

**Marta**

I was blown back against a wall, and I slid to the floor, my ears ringing as I tried to make sense of what had happened. The room had morphed into total chaos in an instant. Just before the explosion, Dani had been surrounded by a halo of glowing magic, and I’d barely had time to wonder what the hell it was before being blasted across the room. Had anyone else seen it? Was I the only one? Was Dani okay?

I staggered to my feet and covered my face with my hands in an effort to block out the dust and debris billowing in the air. I couldn’t see Dani. In fact, I couldn’t see much of anything. I couldn’t hear anything either, because all sound was being drowned out by the bleat of an alarm. Above the alarm, I could make out Lucian screaming at the top of his lungs for Seluna. I caught a glimpse of him moving blindly through the swirling dust and debris.

“Goddess, show yourself!” The commanding tone melted away a beat later. “Where are you, my love?”

I started toward him, determined to get to Dani before he did.

*This could be my chance to save her!*

I jerked as someone grabbed my arm, but then I breathed a sigh of relief when I realized that it was Okorie.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I want to get to Dani before Lucian does. Have you seen her?”

“No, but I’ll look for her—and in the meantime, you should get out of here, Marta. It’s not safe.”

“No, I’m not leaving. She’s my friend, and I feel responsible for this. I shouldn’t have let Dani get involved in the exorcism.”

I slipped out of Okorie’s grasp and charged toward Lucian. I couldn’t stop coughing and choking on the smoke, but I ignored it—I had to get to Dani no matter what.

“Dani! Where are you?” I knew it was a risk to call her name lest I alert Lucian, but I could only hope that I would end up closer to her than Lucian was. “Dani! Can you hear me?”

I waited and strained my ears to listen, but there was no response. My stomach lurched as a dark thought crossed my mind.

*She wasn’t injured in that explosion, was she?*

I was getting more worried as the seconds passed, and I couldn’t keep my brain from dwelling on the worst-case scenario.

I pushed my way through a pile of debris and gasped. It was Dani! She was lying on the ground, and Lucian was on his hands and knees, crawling right for her.

“My love, Seluna! I’m coming for you!” Lucian looked like he’d taken a big hit in the blast, but that hadn’t stopped him from pursuing his “goddess.”

“Shit!” I said, running toward Dani and hoping that I would reach her in time. “Stay away from her!” I yelled at Lucian.

I’d almost made it when a werewolf lunged between Dani and me and snarled like it was itching to take a bite out of me. I stopped short, my legs literally shaking with fear. I realized then that I’d never faced off with a werewolf before. But what was I supposed to do, turn and run? I couldn’t just leave Dani.

*Maybe I can use my magic to defend myself? Can I do to the werewolf what I did to the flowers and the produce at Fairly Fresh?*

My nerves going haywire, I started conjuring my magic. It had been so easy before, second nature, even, but being caught in a magic explosion had a way of making even the easiest of tasks difficult.

Before I could even get a clear thought together, the werewolf lunged and pounced on me, pinning me to the floor. I screamed, doing my best to keep the werewolf from taking a bite out of my neck.

“Get off me!” I screamed, as if all I had to do was tell the werewolf to stop.

I twisted this way and that on the floor, kicking my legs and running out of energy fast. I was no fighter, and I didn’t have the stamina of one, either. I closed my eyes, as much to shut out the image of the snarling beast on top of me as to concentrate so I could channel my magic and wilt this fucker. Unfortunately, concentrating was out of the question. It was taking every bit of energy I had just to stop the werewolf from eating me. *And who’s that screaming?* I opened my eyes just as the werewolf reared back and opened its ferocious jaws, readying itself for the kill—just as I realized that I was the one screaming.I squeezed my eyes shut again, my legs and arms burning and weakening.

*This is it. This is how I’m going to die.*

I waited. Then there was silence.

*Am I dead? If so, that didn’t hurt half as much as I thought it would. Actually, it didn’t feel like anything.*

I opened one eye, then the other. The werewolf was suspended above me, inches from my neck, and it wasn’t moving. Nothing was moving. It was as if the entire room had been frozen in time. The werewolf rose into the air and hovered for a moment before being whipped away. In that instant, the room came alive again, and the werewolf crashed into the wall behind me.

I looked around frantically, wondering what the hell had just happened, and then I locked eyes with Okorie. He was using his magic to shield me, blasting werewolves this way and that as he made his way over to me.

“Don’t worry about me!” I shouted at him, even though I was glad he’d worried about me a few seconds ago. “Get Dani!”

“I told you I’d handle it,” Okorie said as he picked me up off the floor. “You need to get out of here.”

“I—I can’t, not yet!” I scanned the room for Dani, and then I spotted her. Lucian had her cradled in his arms and was trying to escape. I tried to push past Okorie. “No! Bring her back, you asshole!” I didn’t even want Lucian to touch her, let alone abscond with her to a place that we’d probably never find in this massive palace. “Stop him, Okorie! We have to do something!”

Okorie turned around just as a thunderous rumble shook the room, causing plaster and marble to rain down from the ceiling around us. Okorie and I both jumped as a chandelier crashed to the ground a few feet away.

“The ceiling’s coming down!” Okorie shouted. The words had barely left his lips before he pushed me out of the way as a huge chunk of rock fell down and struck him.

“Okorie!” I hit the ground hard, my head spinning and the ringing in my ears back at full force. I tried to spot Okorie through the renewed cloud of dust and debris, but I couldn’t see anything. I could barely see my own hands in front of my face.

“Marta, are you okay?” It was Greyson. He yanked me up off the ground.

“Yes, I’m—Okorie and Dani.” I pointed into the swirl of dust. “They’re over there.”

Big Mac yanked me back. “Come on, Marta, stay back and stay safe.”

Greyson dashed into the thick swirl of dust and grabbed Okorie, pulling him to his feet. The warlock definitely looked worse for wear, but I was so happy that he was standing after being hit by something that big.

“We can’t leave Dani,” I said, running back into the destruction in search of her. Chunks of debris kept raining down around us, and, once again, I narrowly missed being flattened by a huge hunk of rock.

“Marta, stop!” Big Mac shouted.

“I have to find her!” I yelled.

“Not at the cost of your own life,” Big Mac retorted, but I had no intention of heeding her warning.

I dodged and ducked as I ran back toward where I’d last seen Dani. I couldn’t stop. I couldn’t just leave her—especially with Lucian.

“Dani!” I shouted as soon as I spotted them again. Lucian looked dazed and beaten up, but he still had Dani in his arms.

I rushed toward them, but a hand yanked me back just as a beam crashed down not even a foot in front of me.

*Oh my god. I almost died. Again.*

Greyson whirled me around to face him, his expression grave. “Get out of here. The whole room is collapsing on us. I’ll go after Lucian.”

“But—” My words caught in my throat as a mass of werewolves came running toward us, snarling, with murder in their eyes.

Greyson pushed me behind him, just as one of the werewolves attacked. He shifted into wolf form and went at the werewolf without missing a beat.

I backed into Big Mac, who took my hand, gently pulling me away. “Marta, we have to go. There are too many of them, and if we stay here even a second more, we won’t make it out in one piece.”

Greyson and the werewolf were tangled in a ferocious battle, but Greyson had the upper hand. He caught the werewolf’s throat in his jaws and ripped it out with a snap of his neck before turning back to Big Mac and me. Just beyond him, Lucian was heading off into the depths of the palace with Dani still in his arms. The ground trembled beneath our feet, causing even more debris to drop from the ceiling.

“Dani!” I screamed. I tried to pull away from Big Mac, but she held on tight.

“Marta, it’s time to go!” Big Mac yelled, as the room melted into nothingness in my vision and disappeared.

# Episode 2673

I was completely disconnected from my surroundings. It left a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, and I shut my eyes tight against it. It almost felt like I was in a sensory deprivation chamber. The only thing I was aware of was a strange, overwhelming tug coming from somewhere in the core of my body. I’d never really felt anything like it before, and the sensation filled my mind with confusion.

I was dimly aware of someone calling my name, but I couldn’t get my eyes open to see who it was. It was like I was drugged or something, and nothing felt real. There was only the tug and the fluttering feeling churning deep inside me. A high-pitched noise grated against my senses, and I clutched at my head, trying to protect my ears from the sound, even though it seemed to be coming from inside me. I whimpered in pain as electric shocks raced through my body, painful and disorienting. Then my head exploded—at least that was what it felt like—and I screamed as everything went black.

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When I came to, I was lying on the forest floor in a fetal position. I didn’t know how long I’d been there, and I wasn’t even sure that I wasn’t dreaming. I was still clutching at my head, and my brain felt hazy and confused. I opened my eyes slowly and blinked against the brightness of the sun. A moment later, Xavier appeared in my field of view, his face crumpled with panic.

“Cali, thank god! Are you okay?” He reached out and touched my forehead, brushing a tendril of hair out of my eyes.

I tried to sit up, but I was too dizzy.

Xavier moved around behind me before I could collapse back down to the ground. “Take it easy, Cali.”

He wrapped his arms around my waist and held me up in sitting position, then carried me over to lean against a tree.

“I—I don’t know what happened,” I said, still trying to make sense of everything. “I felt this strange explosion in my head—it felt like my skull was cracking open—and then everything went black.”

I wanted to tell him more, but I wasn’t clear enough on what had even happened. I was still trying to ground myself, and I could still feel the slightest echo of that strange feeling in my stomach, though it was fading fast.

Xavier sat down in front of me, his hands on my shoulders to hold me steady as he frowned in concern. “You were out for a while, Cali. Long enough that I was starting to worry that I’d lost you. Are you sure you’re okay? Is there anything I can do? Anything you need?”

Xavier looked more upset than I’d possibly ever seen him, and I immediately wanted to ease his mind. “I’m fine, now, Xavier, please don’t worry.”

I braced my hands on the ground and tried to stand up to prove it to him. I felt super shaky and weirdly exhausted, like I’d just run some kind of magical marathon. My knees buckled, and Xavier caught me before I hit the round.

“Hey, hey, easy there. No need to rush, especially not on my account. Just take some time to get your strength back.” Xavier helped me back down to the ground. He moved around to rest against the tree with me, and I leaned into his chest, comforted by his closeness even though everything still felt a little off.

I frowned as my head finally started to clear. It felt like I was seeing the forest with new, clearer eyes, and then I remembered what we were doing in the woods in the first place. “We don’t have time for this. We’ve got to save Dani.”

Xavier pulled me tighter against him, as if to stop me from attempting to stand again. “Yes, Cali, but that doesn’t matter to me right now. I’m not going anywhere until I’m sure that you’re going to be okay. You didn’t see yourself. You were completely out of it.”

I was about to argue with him, but the look on his face told me that there was no use. A second later, both Xavier and I jumped in shock as Greyson, Okorie, Big Mac, Marta, and Kira appeared out of thin air.

“What the hell happened to you?” Xavier said.

They looked like they’d been through hell. They were covered cuts, bruises, and dust. Kira had a gaping wound on her forehead, and Okorie had a bloody nose and two blooming black eyes. Marta’s hair was a tangled mess, and Greyson’s chest was crisscrossed with bite marks and other wounds that were slowly healing.

I was busy craning my neck to see if Dani was with them, and my heart sank when I realized that she wasn’t. *Shit. She’s not here. They didn’t rescue her.*

“Where’s Dani?” I asked.

Greyson shook his head, looking pissed and frustrated. “We can’t get her now.”

“What? Why not?” Xavier asked. “Will one of you please tell me what’s going on?”

Greyson heaved a big sigh, and there was a distant look in his eyes as he began to explain. “We were accosted by a Vanguard sentry detail in the woods, just before we got the palace. We fought for a bit, but then Andrei came and said that they didn’t want to fight, that they just wanted to take us to Lucian. I knew it didn’t sound good, but I agreed since we were outnumbered. I figured if we could just get inside the palace, I’d be able to figure things out from there. They escorted us inside, and that bastard Lucian had Dani. She was possessed by Seluna, that much was clear.”

My heart leapt into my throat. This was literally the worst outcome I could’ve imagined. I wouldn’t have wished the Seluna parasite on my worst enemy, let alone Dani. I’d fought hard for dominance against Seluna, but there was no question that she’d been holding the reins most of the time. I wondered how Dani was faring against her influence, and I only hoped that we’d get to her before things got too bad.

“So, that doesn’t explain why you didn’t just grab Dani and get her the hell out of there. What happened?” Xavier asked.

“As you can probably tell, things got out of hand,” Greyson said. “I’m still making sense of it all, but before everything went to shit, I was sure that we were getting through to her. Marta was talking to her, and we were trying to draw Dani back to the surface, trying to get her to fight Seluna off—but then all of a sudden there was a huge explosion, and everything was chaos after that.”

“An explosion?” I said, struck.

*An explosion like what happened inside my head? That couldn’t be the same thing, could it?*

Greyson shook his head solemnly. “A huge one. The palace was literally falling down around us. Okorie nearly got taken out—hell, all of us narrowly missed being squashed flat. There was so much confusion, and things just spiraled out of control. Then Lucian ran off with Dani.”

Marta looked teary eyed as she spoke up. “I tried to get to them, but—”

“*But* we had to get the hell out of there, Marta. Don’t you dare blame yourself. We had no choice, regrettably,” Big Mac said.

“Well then we need to go back and get her, now,” I said.

I couldn’t stop thinking about how terrified and confused Dani had to be. I’d felt just the same when Seluna had hijacked my body, and I didn’t want her to suffer that any longer than she had to. I believed the others’ story—that it was a warzone inside the Vanguard palace—but we couldn’t let that stop us.

Greyson shook his head. “Cali, no. you weren’t there, you didn’t see how it was. But believe me, we’re not giving up—don’t think that.”

I could see that Greyson was shaken up, and I didn’t want to push him, but there had to be a way to get Dani back. We couldn’t just leave her there with Lucian and Seluna using her body like it was a piece of meat.

“Okay, so then what are we going to do now?” I asked. “How are we going to get her back?”

Greyson met my eyes. “I’m not sure yet, but we’ll come up with something. But there’s also another situation at play.”

“What else could there be?” Xavier asked, exasperated.

“It’s Lucian. He’s up to something. He implied that he wanted the three of us—you, me, and Cali—for something. He didn’t say your names specifically, so I could be wrong, but that’s my guess,” Greyson said. “And whatever’s he’s up to, I’m sure we can agree that it won’t be in our best interest.”

“Which is why we need to regroup,” Big Mac said, her voice stern. “And if any of you even think of trying to go back to the Vanguard palace right now, I swear, I’ll stop you myself.”

# Episode 2674

**Dani**

My head was still thrumming with the intensity of the magical pulse. I kept my eyes closed, not ready to face whatever would be waiting for me when I opened them. It wasn’t like I could ignore it all entirely—I could hear the screams and the crash of things hitting the ground not far away—and it wasn’t making me feel any better about what awaited me.

*You can’t hide forever, Dani. You’re going to have to face whatever’s happening right now. You can do it.*

Finally, slowly,I opened my eyes and frowned up at the familiar-looking man standing over me, his face marred with concern.

“Are you okay?” he asked. A wide smile spread across his face, and he ran a warm hand briskly down my arm, as if he were warming me up from the cold. His eyes were shining with excitement as he leaned close and looked me over, like he was checking me for wounds or injuries. “I knew you would come back to me.”

Anxiety was building up fast in the pit of my stomach. I blinked my eyes, trying to make sense of things.

*What’s happening? Where am I? Who is this guy?*

I felt like I’d just woken up from a long, awful nightmare, and I couldn’t for the life of me remember what had happened before I’d ended up here. Wherever here was.

I stared at the man, the unease in my gut growing as we locked eyes. I recognized him from somewhere, though I couldn’t place exactly how I knew him. He was staring at me with loving concern, but red flags of danger were ripping up and down my spine. I didn’t feel safe in the least.

*But* *wow is he good-looking.*

It was a strange thing to notice at a time like this—especially with how confused my head still felt—but there was no denying that he was the most beautiful man I’d ever seen. Too bad that didn’t stop the warning bells clanging in my head. If anything, it made them clang louder. No man that beautiful could be up to anything good.

*I have to be careful. Something’s very wrong here.*

I looked around. I was lying on a fancy settee in an even fancier room. The door was open, and outside I could see dust flying and people running around, frantic.

*So that’s where all that noise is coming from.*

This room had been spared from whatever was going on outside, but that didn’t bring me any measure of comfort. I winced as a sharp pain pulsed in my head, almost in time with my heartbeat. It was like I’d hit my head really hard, though I couldn’t recall when that had happened, either. *How did I hit my head? Do I have a concussion or something? Why is everything still so fuzzy?* I searched my memory, but I couldn’t remember what could have happened to cause the chaos and confusion raging just outside the doorway.

“My love, say something! Are you all right?” The beautiful man spoke softly and leaned in close enough that I could feel the heat of his skin. “Tell me you’re all right. You were out for a while, and you gave me quite the fright—not that I ever doubted your strength, my goddess.”

*Goddess?*

I licked my dry, cracked lips. I could tell by how exhausted and spent I felt that I’d just worked a massive amount of magic, but I couldn’t remember why, how, or when.

“How did I get here?” I asked cautiously. “What happened?”

I had a million other questions, but the warnings in my head made me hesitant to do much more than play dumb until I figured out exactly what the stakes were. I bit my lip and waited.

The man frowned down at me. “Do you not remember? There was a bit of an… accident.”

“An accident?” My breath quickened in my throat, and I tried to get up, but the man placed a gentle hand on my shoulder to stop me.

“Relax, relax, my sweet,” he cooed. “You’re safe now with me, right where you belong.” He gave me a loving look as he took my hand in his and rubbed the back of it against his cheek. “You’ll always be safe with me, Seluna.”

*Seluna?* Panic ripped through me as I realized that I knew that name—but I couldn’t make sense of it. My head was still so groggy and hazy, and I was still kind of stuck in the nightmarish feeling that had been weighing on me from the moment I’d come to. It was almost as if I hadn’t woken up at all, even though I was quite sure that I wasn’t asleep anymore—unfortunately. It would have been much better if this were still the nightmare.

*Where have I heard that name before?*

“Seluna,” I said slowly. I hoped that saying it would give me some clarity, but no such luck. I was still just as lost as I had been when I’d opened my eyes a few moments ago.

The man frowned in concern and nodded at me. “Yes, Seluna. You seem a little… confused, my love. Perhaps the explosion shook you up a bit?”

He took my other hand in his and held it against his chest. I could feel his heart beating, and my skin started to crawl. I wanted so badly to yank my hand away, but something told me that I needed to keep playing along, or things would go south fast. I was in a vulnerable position in a strange place, and as weird as this man was being, he was an ally—at least for the moment.

“Explosion?” I said slowly. At least that explained the confusion out in the hallway. “There was an explosion?” That sounded vaguely familiar, but like it had all happened to someone else, not me.

“Yes, my dear, there was a big explosion. But don’t worry, dear Seluna. I’ll take care of you. You don’t have to worry about a thing.” He paused to ply me with a loving glance that made my stomach turn. “I was so worried about you after the explosion, but you’re a goddess. You’re strong and resilient and remarkable. I’m sure that you’ll be back to your normal self in no time.”

He let my hands go and trailed a finger down my cheek, sending shivers of revulsion racing down my spine.

“Oh, Seluna. Now that we’re finally together, you’ll never have to worry about anything again.” There was a strange light in his eyes as he said this, as if he were in some sort of trance. “We’re going to do such great things together. Wonderful things! And I will never, ever, let anything happen to you, I promise. I’ve been so dedicated to bringing you back to where you belong—with me—and now that I’ve got you, I’m never going to let you go.”

Everything he was saying should have been comforting—and probably would have been to whoever this Seluna person was—but my panic was building with every word he said. My head was still reeling from the magic that I must have performed, and I couldn’t think straight. All I knew was that I had a visceral urge to get the hell out of this room and away from this strange person who was proclaiming his love for a person I’d never met before, and also making me feel repulsed and unsafe in equal measure.

“Oh, I can see it now,” he said. He got up, his joy in stark contrast to the chaos that was continuing to rage just outside the door. He was completely unfazed, and it was creeping me out. “You and me against the world, Seluna. Nothing will stand in our way. We’ll bring the world to its knees and make sure that everyone recognizes you as the moon goddess and the Vanguard Luna! And I will be at your side as we rule together in perfect harmony!”

He came back to sit beside me. He took my hands again and brought them dangerously close to his lips.

I cringed at the thought of feeling his lips anywhere on my skin. I couldn’t stand it anymore. I needed to get the hell out—by any means necessary. It was one thing to play dumb and go along with him, but it was clear that if I let him keep going down the path he was on, he was going to want something from me—something physical—that I was in no way willing to give. I had to stop this now before things got any worse.

I yanked my hand away. “But I’m not Seluna! I’m Dani!”

He reeled away from me in obvious shock, then stared at me for a long moment. A cloud passed over his face, and his lip twitched a little. He shot a glance at the craziness beyond the door and then looked back at me, resigned. He sucked in his breath and beckoned to a pair of guards that I hadn’t even noticed before now.

“Ah, I see the explosion did more to you than I had previously thought. Well then, it will be necessary to take some… *unpleasant* precautions until my goddess reasserts her natural control over your vessel. Guards!” His voice was cold and flat, a far cry from the syrupy sweetness it had held only a few moments ago. “Throw her in the dungeon.”

# Episode 2675

**Xavier**

We’d just arrived back at the pack house after a tense, silent journey that had taken what felt like an eternity. The group was beaten up and dejected, and for good reason. We felt like we’d failed. We had failed.

No one had wanted to come back without Dani. We’d all but abandoned her, no matter how much we were all telling ourselves that we would be back. In the end, Greyson had made the call and we’d left with Big Mac’s threat hanging over our heads.

Torin came running out to greet us as soon as we emerged from the woods. “Where is she? Where’s Dani?”

A few others trickled out behind him, searching the group for her.

“We couldn’t get her,” Greyson said grimly. “There was an explosion, and everything broke into chaos. We had to leave without her, for our own safety.”

There was no other way to put it.

“What? That’s horrible…” Torin began to cry.

“I can’t believe it,” Lola said. “She’s just all alone there?”

“There was nothing we could do. We certainly couldn’t have helped her if we’d all ended up dead,” Big Mac said.

Everyone went silent, lost in their own thoughts. The sadness about Dani was palpable in the air, and I felt helpless. I hated that we’d had to leave a pack member behind, but if what Greyson and the others had said was true—and I had no doubt that it was—then they hadn’t had much of a choice. Big Mac certainly hadn’t given us a choice when it came to going back for her.

Cali moved to Tom and Orla, who gathered her into a hug. I knew that she was really broken up about having to leave Dani behind, and I hated seeing her that way. A surge of regret overcame me, but I couldn’t figure out what I could have done differently.

“You think we’ll be able to go back and get her?” Rishika asked quietly as she walked over to join Greyson and me.

Greyson and I exchanged a look, knowing that Rishika was really asking if it was a lost cause.

“We’re putting together a plan,” Greyson said.

I nodded. “We’ll fix this.”

I wanted to believe the confidence in my own voice, but it was getting harder and harder to do that.

Rishika looked at us closely before giving a slight nod and going back to join Artemis.

Greyson gave me a look. “Don’t get everyone’s hopes up,” he said under his breath. “It’s going to be way harder than we thought to get her out of there. Lucian has so many damn guards… I just don’t know.”

I frowned as I looked around at the others, who were crowding around the ragged group that had returned from the Vanguard palace. I grabbed Greyson and pulled him aside, out of earshot of the others. I needed to know exactly what we were dealing with. That was the only way I was going to be able to even start to wrap my head around what our options might be.

“Tell me again—in detail—what exactly went down,” I said.

Greyson shook his head. “I still don’t quite understand it myself. Everything happened so damn fast. The explosion—it was major. It literally brought the ceiling down on us.”

Struck, I started to put it together. *Was that the same explosion Cali felt inside her head?* I didn’t quite understand how the two could be connected, but I still thought it was worth telling Greyson about, in case he had any insight. “Right before all of you appeared, Cali passed out after what she described as an explosion in her head.”

“What? Why didn’t you tell me about this before? Is she okay?”

“As far as I can see, but you know how Cali is—she didn’t want to worry me. It shook her up though, that much is for sure.”

“We need to keep an eye on her then. I’m sure Lucian has some ceremony or something planned,” Greyson said quietly. “Whatever it is most likely involves Cali.”

“When doesn’t it?”

“Exactly. He’s obsessed, and that obsession is only growing. This explosion thing Cali felt… It worries me. It could mean that she’s still somehow under Seluna’s influence.”

“I agree. We weren’t even that close to the palace yet, and it was like Seluna reached out for her or something. I don’t get it,” I said.

We both went silent and stared at Cali, who was still talking with her parents, plus Artemis and Rishika.

“We need to find a way to get Dani out,” Greyson said. “We can’t give up, not yet.”

“Definitely. But however we plan to do that, we have to leave Cali out of it.”

Greyson nodded. “We’re definitely on the same page. She can’t be involved.”

We exchanged another look, both of us sharing a silent understanding that if we couldn’t rescue Dani without putting Cali at risk, then we might not be able to rescue her at all. It was the hard reality that we might have to face.

I cleared my throat, my mind shifting to the mass of other things on our plate. “Dani isn’t our only problem.”

“Shit, what else? Don’t tell me—LIPS?” Greyson said with an eyeroll.

“Yes. Rhonda had footage of you shifting.”

“*What?* Fuck.” Greyson covered his face with his hands and turned away in panic.

“Don’t worry—we managed to fix it. Well, Cali did. She used her memory magic and wiped Rhonda’s mind. I grabbed the drive with the footage on it, but dammit, Greyson, it was too close for comfort. We need to do something about them, fast.”

We both fell silent as Big Mac came walking over with a concerned look on her face. “I hope you two understand why I had to get you all out of that situation.”

Greyson and I nodded, not in the mood to argue. I understood it, even though I didn’t like that the decision had been taken away from me with a threat—a threat that I didn’t doubt Big Mac would have made good on if she’d been forced to.

“But we’re not going to just leave Dani there for good,” Big Mac continued. She looked off into the distance. “The presence of a demon so close to the pack house is worrying, to say the least. Lucian is cooking something up, for sure—especially with that whole ‘I need the three of you’ thing. I hate to admit it, and I don’t want to panic the pack, but we’re in imminent danger until we get this situation under control.”

I was irked, and I could tell that Greyson was, too.

“We’re well aware of that,” I said. “Any ideas about how we would go about getting it under control? Ideas that don’t involve Cali?”

“We don’t want her falling back into Lucian’s hands. We barely got her out of there last time,” Greyson added.

“And there’s more,” I said. “She passed out for a while. Said she felt something like an explosion in her head.”

Big Mac furrowed her brow. “That’s not good at all.” She looked lost in thought for a moment. “It’s possible that Dani’s magical powers are somehow amplifying Seluna’s magic hold on her. Cali isn’t possessed anymore, I’m sure of that, but why Seluna’s magic would still be affecting Cali in such a strong way, I have no idea. I’d need some time to study it a little more closely, but I do have a theory.”

“Which is?” I said, hoping it was something we could act on.

“Since Seluna had a hold on Cali so recently, the magic might have left behind some residual effects that will start to fade now that she’s no longer under being possessed. But it’s still connected to Cali.”

“Like a possession hangover?” I said, remembering how Cali and I had called it that before.

Big Mac gave me a look. “Uh… sure. But you’re right, regardless. We need to keep Cali away from this.”

Greyson nodded, thinking. “Maybe Xavier and I could lead some of the elite members of the pack into an assault. We could sneak onto the Vanguard grounds, and then you and the witches could use your magic to spring a trap and distract them outside while another group infiltrates the palace proper.”

Big Mac didn’t even consider it for a moment, just shook her head briskly. “Absolutely not. If Lucian wants the two of you, then it’s safer if you aren’t involved with the rescue mission.”

I frowned. I didn’t like the sound of that. The pack would need us to help lead the charge, to offer support, and—as much as I hated to admit, it—they would need their Alpha. “What do you mean?”

Big Mac looked me right in the eye. “What I mean is that I think this time around, you need to let the witches handle this *our* way. Sound good?”

# Episode 2676

“I promise you, Mom, Dad, I’m fine. Really.” I was sitting at the kitchen table with my parents, nursing one of Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mochas. It was hitting the spot like always, and I was finally starting to feel clear-headed again. Mrs. Smith wasn’t a witch, but I swore this thing had magical powers.

I was happy to be back in the safety of the pack house, even though my heart still ached for Dani. I couldn’t stop imagining what she was going through. I wondered if she was safe after an explosion of the magnitude that Greyson had described. What if the entire place had collapsed and trapped her inside? Or worse yet… No. I didn’t even want to think about the worst thing that could happen.

*Think positive, Cali. That’s all you can do right now.*

I turned my attention back to my parents. They were giving me a skeptical look that I’d seen a million times before.

“Forgive me if we don’t believe you, sweetheart,” my dad said. “You tend to downplay things, and I don’t like it. We always want to know what’s going on with you, especially if it’s something that could put you in danger. Things have been so crazy lately. You know if there’s anything wrong, if anything’s bothering you, if you need us, you just have to tell us and we’ll be there for you. So I’ll ask you again—are you okay?”

“Dad, *yes.* I promise I’m fine. I wasn’t even anywhere near the explosion.”

*Even though I totally felt one in my head—but they definitely don’t need to know that.*

There was no use worrying them any further. They’d already been through a lot when I was possessed, and I wanted them to think that everything was back to normal for me, even if it wasn’t quite there yet.

“Are you sure, Cali?” My mom’s face was a mask of concern.

“Yes, Mom, and I would tell you if anything was wrong, really.”

I was doing my best to reassure them that everything was fine because I didn’t want them to freak out, but on the inside, I felt anything but. I was worried about what had happened to me in the woods. What was behind it, or rather who.

There was no denying it—Seluna still had some sort of sway over me. I was really starting to worry that the exorcism hadn’t fully taken care of the issue. What if there was a little bit of Seluna left over inside me? Enough that she could make my head explode whenever she wanted? I stifled a shudder and turned my attention back to my parents once again.

“Well honey, I want you to be careful from here on out. More careful than ever. I can’t lose you, okay?” My mother reached out to smooth my hair.

“I promise, Mom. You’re not going to lose me.”

It was hard trying to keep a level head while talking to them, especially when I still felt so shaky and worried inside, but there was no way I was going to share my anxieties with them after everything that had happened. They needed a break almost as much as I did.

I looked over at Artemis. She’d come to check on me and then had gone off to speak with Rishika alone.

“Mom, Dad, I’ll catch up with you later—I need to talk to Artemis.”

My sister had experienced being possessed, so maybe she’d be able to help me think everything through.

I approached Artemis and Rishika and gave Rishika an apologetic smile as I interrupted. “Can I steal my sister away for a moment?”

“Sure,” Rishika said. “Be my guest. I need to go catch up with Ravi about the patrols, anyway.” She gave Artemis a quick kiss on the cheek and left us.

“What’s up?” Artemis asked as I led her aside. “You still feeling okay? Are Mom and Tom okay? They still look so worried.”

“I am—and they are. I tried to assure them that everything’s fine. I mean, I’m still a little shaken up, but it’s nothing I can’t handle,” I said.

“Good. I’m glad. So, I’m curious to hear more details about exactly what happened during the rescue mission. It sounds like everything went crazy pretty fast.”

I shook my head. “I wish I could tell you—but that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I missed the whole thing because something really weird happened to me in the woods before we even made it to the palace.”

I flashed back to the searing pain in my head and the drugged-up feeling, along with the strange feeling I’d had in the pit of my stomach. I still couldn’t quite describe it, even now.

“What do you mean, weird?”

“*Weird*. That’s the only way I can really define it. One minute I was with Xavier, heading toward the palace, and the next moment, I felt… something strange. It was almost like something—or someone—had taken hold inside me. There was this almost electrical pain in my head.”

“Wow, that’s intense.”

I nodded grimly. “It felt like my head was exploding from the inside out. It was so scary. I passed out for a while, according to Xavier.”

Artemis’s eyes widened.

I took a deep breath. “I wanted to ask you… Do you think that I might still be possessed, somehow?”

Artemis snorted a laugh. “Well, you’ve come to the right place, since I’m a possession expert and all.”

“Artemis, come on. This is serious!”

“Okay, okay, I get it. I’d be upset if that had happened to me too.” She paused. “I honestly have no idea though. When I was under Letifer’s control, it came and went. There were moments—a lot of moments—when I was able to think clearly and felt like myself, and I was able to rise above Letifer and control myself. You were yourself for a long time, right? Without feeling Seluna in your head?”

I nodded. “Yes, right after the exorcism I really felt like myself until that weirdness in the woods.”

I’d been so confident that it was all over, and it was disheartening to realize that I might not be free of Seluna—and Lucian—just yet.

Artemis shrugged. “Then it sounds to me like the exorcism worked. Even when it felt like I had the upper hand with Letifer, I was still acutely aware of his presence in my mind. Like a thought I couldn’t shake. So whatever’s going on with you doesn’t quite sound the same as what happened to me. That’s a good thing, right?”

I nodded, relieved to hear that. Still, it didn’t give me any answers. I was just as confused as ever. I had no idea how I was going to get the answers I was after. It wasn’t like possession was such a common thing that I could just get online and read up on it without running into a bunch of untrustworthy information.

“It’s just so frustrating,” I said. “Whatever happened out there—it was supernatural in nature. I just wish that I could figure out what it was, understand it.”

Artemis nodded. “I get it; you know I do. But I’ve learned that sometimes you just can’t understand everything, no matter how much you’d like to. All you can do is take things in stride and keep surviving one day at a time.”

“That sounds bleak, but thanks?”

Suddenly there was a loud knock on the door. Everyone froze. I quickly scanned the room for Greyson.

“I’ve got it, everyone stay back,” he said.

Everyone followed his orders and melted into the background, out of sight of whoever it was on the other side of the door. Everyone but me. I was right behind Greyson, and I was apprehensive about who might be visiting at a time like this. If it were the Vanguards, or even Lucian for that matter, what would we do? We were in no shape to fight back against an ambush. Lucian would overtake us in no time.

I took a deep breath and held it as Greyson opened the door. I stiffened. It was Rhonda? What the hell was she doing here? Didn’t she know now was not the time for a human to show up? We were kind of in the middle of something very supernatural.

I relaxed a little when Rhonda flashed her patented friendly smile. “Hey, I was just stopping by since I was in the neighborhood.”

“Oh, how nice of you,” Xavier said, not bothering to hide his sarcasm as he joined Greyson at the door.

“Of course!” Rhonda said, not catching Xavier’s tone. “I just wanted to let you all know that there’s been an upswing of wolf activity in the area. Lots of sightings. I just want you all to be safe. Stay close, and don’t go out alone—stick to groups of two or three—and don’t let any of your pets out of your sight for the time being.”

Greyson gave her a stiff smile. “Thank you, Rhonda. We’ll be on the lookout—watch the pets, create a buddy system, all that.”

He started to close the door, but Rhonda ducked her head around, clearly not finished.

“We clocked Big Fluffy close by. I thought you should know…” She trailed off with a strange expression on her face. Then, she slowly turned her attention to Xavier, an accusatory look on her face.

I instantly went light-headed with panic. *Oh my god! She remembers everything!*

# Episode 2677

**Greyson**

I knew what Cali was thinking. Something along the lines of, *Oh my god, did Rhonda remember everything?* And closely followed up by, *How are we going to get her out of here?*

I looked at Xavier out of the corner of my eye. He was tense, his hands balled into fists. He was ready for a fight if he needed to be.

If Rhonda did remember seeing footage of me shifting, we were going to have a problem getting her out of here. If Cali’s magic had failed, then things were going to go wrong really quick.

I turned back to Rhonda, who continued to look strangely at Xavier for a couple of beats before she shook her head and gave a little laugh.

“Is something wrong?” Xavier asked stiffly. He stepped forward until he was nearly out on the porch with Rhonda.

*Take it easy, brother. Let’s see how this plays out.* I understood completely how Xavier was feeling, but jumping the gun would be the wrong thing to do right now. We had enough on our plate with the Vanguards as it was without having a bunch of LIPS members swarming us. For all we knew, they were filming us right now.

Rhonda furrowed her brow as she looked up at Xavier, but then she shook her head again. “For a second there, I had the strangest thought… But it must have just been a weird nightmare or something.” She laughed again. “Maybe I’ve been spending a little too much time in the woods, huh?”

*You can say that again.*

I barked out a laugh, and then a second later Xavier and Cali joined in. *Maybe* we were laughing a little too heartily, because after a few moments Rhonda shot us a confused look.

“Thanks again,” I said quickly, moving to shut the door again. “We’ll be sure to take care, and you do the same! Bye now.”

I gave her a stiff wave and shut the door in her face as gently as I could, resisting the urge to slam it. I’d toyed with the idea of being rude enough to her and her LIPS cronies that they would catch the hint and just leave us alone, but I worried that taking that course of action could backfire. So, for now, we were going to continue with the whole “catching more flies with honey than vinegar” route—at least until we had no choice but to do otherwise.

I let out a breath and glanced over at Xavier and Cali. “I told you we’re going to have to think of a more permanent solution for these LIPS assholes. They need to stop lurking around and popping up unannounced. They’re worse than the Vanguards.”

“Yeah, they’ve certainly made themselves right at home,” Xavier said. “Next thing we know they’ll be asking if they can move in here like everyone else has.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. Our pack had grown quite a bit, and had its share of unofficial membership. I would definitely have to draw the line at LIPS, though. “Exactly. It doesn’t seem like they’ll be going anywhere anytime soon—and why would they when this place is crawling with wolves? All I know is that they’re a major threat. Their surveillance alone is enough to challenge the safety of not only our pack, but every supernatural in existence.”

“We’re not killing any humans,” Cali said with a frown. “Let’s make sure that’s clear.”

Xavier and I exchanged a look over the top of her head. I knew that we both loved and appreciated Cali’s kindness, but we weren’t as softhearted as she was, nor could we afford to be if it came down to it. I didn’t want to do it, but I would do whatever it took to protect the pack. I knew that deep down Cali understood that sometimes that meant spilling a little blood. But there was no use discussing it around her, at least not right now.

It hopefully wouldn’t need to come to pass anyway. I didn’t want to break a promise to her. Ever.

I sighed. “We’ll have to come up with some sort of plan.”

“Food!” Torin called from the kitchen.

We all moved into the kitchen and looked at each other in shock. In his anxiety about Dani not coming back, Torin had stress-made at least twenty grilled cheese sandwiches that he’d piled up into a pyramid on the kitchen counter.

Cali’s stomach growled audibly. “I’m starving. With everything that’s going on, it’s like I forgot to eat.”

She dove into the grilled cheese pyramid, but Xavier and I hung back. It was the most appetizing pyramid I’d ever seen by far, but there was still so much that we needed to work out. Time was ticking by, and we were still no closer to figuring out what our next move was going to be to rescue Dani.

Like he was reading my mind, Xavier tipped his chin toward Big Mac, who was standing next to Mrs. Smith and staring at the sandwich pyramid with a perplexed look on her face.

“We aren’t actually going to let them go off to rescue Dani by themselves, are we?” Xavier asked me, his voice low. “I know the witches are big and bad and all, but they’d be no match for the Vanguards on their own, right?”

I shook my head. “Hell no. I can’t let my pack go off to do dangerous things without their Alpha. Big Mac doesn’t know the Vanguards like we do. Those assholes are capable of anything.”

“Well, we’re going to have a hard time convincing Big Mac to fall back. You know how stubborn she is. It would be better for us to just go off and do our own thing,” Xavier said.

I waved that off. “I’m the Alpha.”

I didn’t need to hide what I was doing. I would do what was best for the pack—no matter what anyone else thought.

“Okay then *Alpha*, let’s go eat,” Xavier said, his eyes on the sandwiches.

“Have you ever seen such a spectacle?” Big Mac said as we approached. The perplexed look on her face had turned to hunger as she stared at the quickly dwindling pyramid.

“Torin always goes big,” I said.

“I guess,” Big Mac grumbled. “Just seems like a lot.” Her eyes flicked over to me and Xavier. We were practically flanking her on each side. She crossed her arms and said, “What do you want? I’m hungry, so I’m more irritable than usual.”

“We’ll be quick,” I said. “We need to talk about your plan. I understand where you’re coming from, I really do, but I’m not really comfortable with the idea of sending you and the other witches to the Vanguard palace alone with no support.”

Big Mac sighed. “Greyson—”

“—No,” I said cutting her off. “It’s way too dangerous. I’m coming with.”

“Me too,” Xavier said. “I don’t doubt the combined power of your magic, but you’ll need fighters with you—especially against a powerful pack like the Vanguard.”

Big Mac flashed us both an irritated look. “I told you, you’re not coming. Lucian has plans for you two, so including you would only make the plan more dangerous for all of us. Not that it’s surprising that you two don’t get that. You’re both addicted to danger, after all.”

“What? That’s not what this is about,” I said.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Sure. Look, I get it, Greyson. You’re the Alpha, and Alphas hate to hang back, but in this case, it’s what’s best for the pack. You have to see that. Stop me if I’m wrong, but isn’t the safety of the pack an Alpha’s top concern? You aren’t going to let your ego get in the way of that, are you?”

“I don’t agree,” I said, my jaw tight. I watched as Xavier sputtered a laugh and turned away to get a grilled cheese. He started eating it like he was digging into a bowl of popcorn while watching a boxing match. I addressed Big Mac again. “The pack is safest when the Alpha is with them. Whether you like it or not, you’re in this pack.”

I squared off against Big Mac. I had no desire to fight with her—especially with my mother in the vicinity—but I was the Alpha, and I’d be damned if I was going to let her push me around. She’d already made a show of doing just that when she’d threatened us and made us agree not to go back to the Vanguard palace. One of those incidents per day was just about all I could stand.

Big Mac looked unfazed. She fixed me with one of her patented icy looks. “You’re making a mistake, Greyson, and I don’t want you to have to pay the price.”

“I don’t care what you think you’re protecting me from,” I said, my tone as icy as her look. “I’m coming. I’m the Alpha of the Redwood pack, and this is the last discussion about it. Do I make myself clear?”

# Episode 2678

**Dani**

I pounded on the door, but it didn’t matter.

It felt like nothing mattered anymore—not when I had been locked up in a real-life dungeon for what felt like hours now, screaming for someone to let me out.

“Help! Someone *please* help me!” I screamed. Then I screamed it again, over and over, but I was only met by silence. “Please,” I whispered, tracing the heavy wood of the door. “Someone…”

My throat hurt. My body hurt too, and I shivered, slumping back against the wall. The space was cold, with dark stone walls and a small wooden bench in the corner. There was a pounding in my head that wouldn’t go away, and I couldn’t remember anything past being in the pack house when Cali had returned from the Vanguard palace.

I sat on the bench and hugged my knees. Resting my chin on my leg, I squeezed my eyes shut. I had to focus. I had to recall what had happened after… after the ceremony. *Yes*. Marta had asked for my help. And I’d agreed—I’d been scared, but I’d agreed, because Cali had been nothing but good to me from the moment we’d met.

The rest was murky, as if my memory had been smudged, and my headache got even worse at the thought. Magic had to be to blame, for all of it. But even though I didn’t know exactly what was going on, I was certain that I was in serious danger. I felt achy and heavy, and the fact that the man with the bi-colored eyes had called me something other than my name told me the only thing I needed to know right now.

Cali had been possessed by Seluna, and now the goddess—demon, whatever she was—had moved on to *me*.

It didn’t exactly feel like it right now—there were no voices in my head, or anything—but all the signs pointed to possession. The thought made me tremble, and I looked at my shaking hands—I was in control right now, but how much longer would that last?

How much longer until I stopped being myself?

I had no idea what to do about this—if I even *could* do anything about it—but I told myself that the pack would come for me. Wouldn’t they? They didn’t leave people behind. They cared about people. Cali and Marta cared a lot about everyone and everything, even people like me. People who were quiet and felt tiny most of the time, who felt like they took up too much space, like they were part of nothing.

Technically, I wasn’t actually part of the Redwood pack.

I was just a stray who Marta had helped out. I wasn’t one of them, and that got me thinking… Who was I to expect anything from the Redwood pack when they’d already done so much for me? Who was I to feel like I deserved to be rescued by them when they owed me nothing?

When I was nothing to them and didn’t belong in their pack?

I actually didn’t… I didn’t belong anywhere.

I was all alone, stuck in a cold dungeon, terrified and shivering and crying. I didn’t even know when the crying had started, just that the tears felt hot as they trailed down my cheeks.

But then, the door made a sound.

*Click.*

I gasped, wiping my face quickly as I scrambled to my feet, fighting not to start screaming. My heart hammered harder than ever when the door creaked open, and I had no idea what to expect. I was in an actual dungeon, for god’s sake—what if they were planning to torture me or something?

I skittered back to the far corner, shrinking into myself as much as possible as the man from earlier stepped into the room. Bi-colored eyes were fixed on me, peering out of a wary face that was jarring in its beauty. The way he looked at me, the genuine hope, was so alarming that it made me want to vanish.

“Seluna?” he whispered.

This was like a bad joke.

But I had to play along. I had to do *something*, otherwise I’d be stuck in here forever. I had to at least try to give this megalomaniac what he wanted in order to achieve step one—getting out of this freaking prison.

“Yes,” I said, smiling broadly. “It’s me, Seluna.” I kept smiling, like a creepy, haughty goddess would. Hopefully. “It’s so good to be myself again.”

Lucian scowled.

Apparently, I hadn’t been haughty enough.

“You’re not Seluna,” he said in a low, chilling voice. He slid closer, lowering his face to mine. He smelled like luxury, but I felt like gagging. “Do you think you can trick me, little girl?”

“I’m—I’m not!” I stammered, which was another mistake. “I’d never trick you, I’m…” My eyes burned as tears gathered at the corners. “I’m Seluna…”

Lucian scoffed. “Seluna would never be so weak.”

The way he looked at me, the way he spoke the words was what got to me. My every fear about myself was confirmed—I was weak, a little girl, pathetic in his eyes, and I just…

Even if I didn’t feel like I was special at all, I wanted to be free.

I told myself that I deserved that much. Everyone did.

“Please,” I said, my voice cracking, crying once more because it was the only thing I could do. “P-Please just let me go. I—” I pointed at my chest. “I’m not who you’re looking for! I don’t want any trouble, I won’t say anything bad about you to the Redwoods, I just want—*please*—I just want to be with my friends again!”

He watched me, the king of this castle, so expressionless that it only made me more desperate as I continued.

“I won’t even tell anyone you threw me in here! I won’t cause any issues between you and the Alphas—I’m sure nobody wants a war to break out or to involve more packs. It’ll be okay, just—please, *please* let me go, I…”

I looked up at him, wrapping my arms around myself, my tone breaking down to a broken whisper.

“I just want to see my friends again.”

That was the biggest truth of all. I hadn’t had any friends in so, *so* long.

“There, there, dear…” Lucian tsked, tucking a stray lock of hair behind my ear.

I didn’t dare move. I didn’t dare breathe. Because I knew—I just *knew*—that he wasn’t here to comfort.

“You’re not going anywhere.” He smiled coldly. “You’re the vessel, so you’ll be staying right here until Seluna comes back.”

I choked, flailing about. “But what if she doesn’t come back? What if—”

He gripped both my hands to stop me from moving. His sudden hold shook me up as he stared into my eyes, making my whole body pound with fear, even if his tone was gentle. “She will be back. It seems that she’s gone silent since you hit your head, but I can still feel her nearby.”

His words made my dread grow. He let go and took a step back.

“I know she’s still with you,” he said, looking at me up and down. “It’s just a matter of time.”

“But she’s gone!” I exclaimed, feeling deep in my gut that it was a lie. “It’s just me, and I—”

He pointed at my face, and for the first time since he’d arrived, I saw his temper flare. “She can’t be gone! It’s not possible. I won’t let that happen—do you understand?”

His face twisted into something that looked like agony, as pure and real an emotion as a monster like him could feel. Realization dawned.

*Oh my god… Lucian is in love with Seluna. He’s obsessed with her. That’s why he’s doing this!*

Could I use his feelings to my advantage, somehow? I didn’t know how, but I still set the idea to simmer in the back of my mind—maybe it would be useful when I had no other cards to play.

“Lucian…”

He cut me off. “Do not say my name when you’re not her.” His expression was void of all emotion again. “My only comfort is that Seluna will be back.”

He spoke as if he wanted *me* to understand *his* struggle.

As if I wasn’t the one locked up in a dungeon.

I fell silent with fear. Lucian finally turned his back on me and left, closing the door behind him. He bolted it, too—I heard the locks click shut, and my heart ached with how fast it was pounding.

I was all alone in the shadows again.

I slumped back down onto the bench, shaking, my head heavy. I rested it in my hands, more pathetic tears threatening to emerge from my eyes …

But then I felt a sudden bit of frustration burst inside me.

The emotion shot through me like lightning, and I sat up straight. My mouth dropped open, and when I spoke, it wasn’t me speaking.

“Oh, you stupid, *stupid* girl,” Seluna said. “What have you done?”

# Episode 2679

Greyson’s words echoed throughout the kitchen. *Do I make myself clear?*

My palms were sweating just witnessing this exchange. Before it could escalate more, I stepped in. Literally. Like, between them.

I pat both my mate and Big Mac on the shoulder. “We’re all on the same side here—we want to get Dani back. There’s no need to get into a fight over it.”

Big Mac huffed, crossing her arms. “Say that to the *Alpha*.”

Greyson matched her stance. “There’s already been a decision. There’s nothing more to discuss.”

“Okay, but Big Mac does have a point.” I gripped Greyson by the arm, just to drive my point home. “We know that when Lucian was arguing with Aysel, he said he needed all three of us. Me, you, and Xavier. Why should we give him what he wants?”

“Exactly what I’ve been saying,” Big Mac said.

“Besides,” I continued, because I couldn’t shut up. Greyson’s grey eyes were stormy as I continued. “Isn’t giving him what he’s asking for what got me into the whole possession mess in the first place?”

Greyson didn’t speak a single word. His scowl just deepened, and I saw a flicker of something else in his expression too. Was it guilt? Anger?

“It makes sense to separate the three of you,” Kira said. “Whatever Lucian wants to do, we shouldn’t make it easy for him. If you go there, you could all be taken.”

While Greyson remained silent, looking vaguely murderous, Xavier scoffed. “Lucian isn’t taking us anywhere.”

“He’s locked you up multiple times on multiple occasions,” Big Mac said. “It’s not like it’s a piece of cake for you to deal with him, Xavier. Not with his giant pack behind him. You should at least admit that.”

Xavier growled. I cleared my throat, patting Xavier’s shoulder as I turned to Kira. “Anyway, you make a great point! We shouldn’t make anything easy for Lucian—”

*The FUCKING BASTARD!* I added in my head.

“—and we don’t even know what magic he could use against us,” I continued, turning to my mates. “You’re strong and capable fighters, but we’re talking demons and an obsessed prince here. This isn’t just about fighting. Who knows how far he’s willing to go to get his moon goddess?” I looked between Greyson and Xavier. “If you ask me, he’s already gone off the deep end. And I don’t want to see with my own eyes what he’s going to do next.”

Xavier and Greyson stared at me, both silent. Xavier was the one scowling now, while Greyson’s expression was blank. The thought of Lucian capturing both of them if they broke into the palace yet again made my stomach twist.

*But it’s not like we can leave poor Dani there!*

“Dani needs to be our priority, of course,” I said. “We can’t leave her to Lucian. But we have to think about this first, just like Big Mac said. Regroup.”

Greyson’s gaze flickered between Kira, Big Mac, and me. “Yes, I’ve been thinking about it,” Greyson said, clearly a bit annoyed. “You can’t do it all on your own, that was the point. Xavier and I will go to the Vanguard palace and deal with Lucian and get Dani back. Cali will stay here, away from Lucian. No matter what happens, that way, Lucian won’t be able to get all three of us.”

Big Mac didn’t seem happy. At all. “And what if something happens to you? That’s two out of three pieces, and then there’s just Cali left. And she’s obviously the easiest to get to anyway.”

*Oh, okay then.*

Here I was, supporting Big Mac’s opinion, and she’d gone ahead and thrown me under the bus. Unbelievable—and yet so typical.

“I’ll have you know,” I told Big Mac, “that all my unresolved trauma after the possession notwithstanding, I’m completely fine and capable of defending myself.”

Crickets followed my statement. Greyson coughed into his fist, glancing at Xavier, who was probably glowering because I hadn’t called on *him* to defend me.

“Cali you have a good handle with your magic,” Greyson started.

“Thank you, Grey—”

“—but there is no way in hell you’re going anywhere near Lucian or the Vanguard palace,” Greyson finished, before I could say my piece.

“I agree,” Xavier said.

Why were both of my mates against me right now?!

“We can’t lose you again,” Greyson told me simply.

Xavier nodded.

The way they both looked at me made my heart flutter, so it made a great distraction.

“But when it comes Dani,” Greyson went on, “there has to be some kind of scenario where Xavier, the pack, and I can help the witches out. We were very close to getting Dani earlier, anyway—if the roof hadn’t collapsed, I would’ve made it to her and brought her back.”

“Witches have magic, but werewolves have speed,” Xavier added. “Ultimately, the Vanguard is a werewolf pack. We know how wolves will act better than the witches do.”

Big Mac squinted. “Can you teleport in and out of a dungeon, though?”

Xavier glared at her, Greyson raised an eyebrow, and I said, “This is not a competition about who’s more badass! You all are at different levels! Myself included!”

“Your unresolved possession trauma notwithstanding,” Big Mac told me wryly. “Right?”

“I mean, yes,” I said.

Big Mac rolled her eyes before looking at Greyson. “No matter how good you and Xavier are, there are far too many Vanguard werewolves to take on yourself. Getting Dani will be hard enough—I don’t want to complicate the mission by having to rescue you too.”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “That won’t be necessary.”

Big Mac had this expression on her face that made me think that she felt she was the pack’s last working brain cell. Which was extremely rude, actually.

*But does she have a point?*

“Dani is a witch,” Big Mac said patiently. “This is a witch problem.”

“I obviously agree,” Kira said. I realized she’d been standing there for a while, quietly judging us all. Very her. “Let’s go discuss with Okorie,” she told Big Mac.

“Hurry up. We’ll have to brief you,” Big Mac said to Greyson before walking away.

Greyson nodded. “I’ll be right there.”

“Who the fuck does that witch think she is?” Xavier demanded once they were gone. “Of course the wolves can handle this.”

“I know that, but we have to compromise.” Greyson swallowed, staring at me. “Big Mac *was* the one who teleported Cali home.”

Xavier winced, and I rushed to reassure him.

“I get that you’re upset about this,” I said. “I know you’re used to rescuing everyone every day, so—”

“I’m not about to sit around while the witches make plans without me,” Xavier declared, pacing up and down. “I’m going to talk to them.”

“Xavier, wait—” Greyson started, but Xavier just stomped off.

“I’m tired of waiting—I’m doing things my way,” he called over his shoulder.

“I doubt Xavier’s going to convince Big Mac to change her mind,” I told Greyson.

He exhaled sharply, offering a wry chuckle. “You think?”

I took a step closer, resting my hands on his shoulders. “How are you feeling about this, though?”

Greyson stared. “Although I appreciate Big Mac’s help, I’m not happy with her either.”

“Why?” I asked, frowning.

“She took me out of the palace without talking to me,” he said. “I had a chance to get to Dani, and she stopped me.”

My eyebrows knitted. “I thought you were outnumbered—Big Mac was only trying to protect the pack.”

Greyson’s voice lowered, his eyes sharp. “That’s not Big Mac’s responsibility. Or her call. It’s mine.”

I swallowed, staring up at him. I squeezed his hand. He looked down at our joined hands. His thumb moved over my knuckles as he muttered, “I know she did what she thought was right. But I’m still not happy about it. She should have left me behind. She should have taken the rest of the group and just left me with Dani. To protect her. She’s all fucking alone, and Lucian—”

“Hey,” I whispered, stepping in closer. “It’s okay.”

I wrapped my arms around his torso into a tight hug, hoping to ease his frustration.

“It’s not,” Greyson said into my hair. He embraced me, the powerful feel of him making me feel as safe as ever. “The fact that Lucian’s just out there doing whatever the hell he wants drives me up the goddamn wall, and Big Mac—”

“What if she’s right?” I asked, facing him. “We tried a full-on confrontation with Lucian, and it didn’t work. Maybe the witches can try something else?”

Greyson’s arms remained linked around me, but his expression was grave. “What if this is really what Lucian wants?”

I blinked. Slowly. “To have three witches come after him?”

“There’s something too easy about this, Cali,” Greyson said. “What if Lucian was playing games when he mentioned needing all three of us? Lucian knew we were there, knew we would hear him…” Greyson’s grip on my waist tightened, the quiet fury in his face making me gulp. Under his breath, he said, “What is that fucking monster trying to get us to do now?”

# Episode 2680

**Xavier**

The little witchy group was in one of the studies. I could hear them chattering, all conspiratorial. Marta had joined them as well.

I, of course, walked in without knocking.

Big Mac glared at me. “Have you ever heard of knocking?”

I glared back. “This is my house, so I have a right to know what the hell is going on in here.”

Big Mac scoffed, “Are you a witch, then? Because this is a witches-only meeting.”

Just then Greyson walked in behind me. “Is he a witch now too? I don’t seem to remember you inviting him,” I snapped.

“He’s the Alpha,” Big Mac sighed.

“What are you planning to do with Dani and the Vanguards?”

“We’re still discussing it,” Big Mac said tightly.

I scowled. Okorie and Marta exchanged a look, and Kira snorted.

“I don’t think he likes that response,” Kira informed Big Mac, who rolled her eyes.

I crossed my arms. “If you do manage to get Dani, what then? I doubt Lucian is going to just give up on Seluna—he’ll refuse to lose her twice without a fight.”

“What are you getting at?” Big Mac asked.

“I think we should plan for more than just rescuing Dani,” I said.

Greyson nodded. “We need to deal with Lucian in general.”

“Well, it’s hard to plan anything when you both keep interrupting us,” Big Mac said in a sardonic tone, and I’d had enough of her bullshit.

“Let’s have a little talk, shall we?” Kira interrupted. Then she grabbed me by the arm and led me out into the hallway, leaving Greyson to sit down with the others.

“This isn’t over,” I called over my shoulder, but Kira yanked harder and closed the door behind her.

“*Ow*,” I grumbled, rubbing my arm when she let go.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh my god, stop being such a baby.”

“I’m not a baby, I’m a fucking *Alpha*, so—”

“I know you’re upset, but you should give us a chance to talk first,” Kira said. “I promise we’re not going to do anything without letting you and Greyson know.”

“You’d better not,” I said. “There’s too much at stake here. It’s not just Dani I’m thinking about. Lucian has challenged the Redwood pack repeatedly, and we can’t let him keep doing that.”

Kira paused, raising an eyebrow. “You’re taking this very personally, aren’t you?”

“How the fuck can I not? The Vanguards attacked my pack.”

Kira’s tone lowered. “They attacked your mate.”

“Of course,” I said. “And anything involving Cali is personal. Lucian is lucky I haven’t ripped his head off yet.”

I’d thought I was stating the obvious here, so I wasn’t sure why Kira even needed to ask. Did she still have feelings for me? Was there still some lingering memory of me being her dead husband? That sounded…

Not good.

But it wasn’t something I could focus on right now.

“Bottom line, Lucian has attacked the Redwood pack and my mate,” I said. “He’s violated Cali’s trust repeatedly and treated her like she’s a vessel, a thing instead of a person. Literally. He can’t remain unpunished in the long term, especially not when he keeps trying to terrorize the Redwood pack. A werewolf can’t let this kind of disrespect slide. Do you understand?”

“Of course, that makes sense,” Kira said. “But regardless, you still have to give us time to come up with a plan.”

“Right, but you can’t take forever,” I said. “We can only sit around waiting for you guys for so long.”

Kira raised an eyebrow. Before she could say something obnoxious or teasing, I turned my back on her and walked away. My frustration had only gotten worse, and there was no way Greyson didn’t feel the same. We both hated the idea of hovering around, feeling useless.

There had to be something we could do. *Anything*. Well, anything that didn’t involve Cali. Whatever had happened to her in the woods—those lingering possession effects—couldn’t keep happening.

And then the rage I felt at the thought of everything Lucian and Seluna had done to my mate had me thinking of a different kind of strategy altogether.

I had to think about Greyson and my portion of things. Greyson might be the Alpha, but I had it in my blood. I could easily see setting up a stealth operation to get Dani back and finish off the princeling once and for all. I wanted to make Lucian regret ever returning to Oregon.

Rage continued to brew inside me, like an itch that reached the edges of my fingertips and threatened to grow claws. This was new. Or not—did my wolf want me to shift so we could go take on Lucian? Tearing him apart was something we both wanted, for sure.

This urge to shift felt like something different, though.

It reminded me of shifting when Cali and I had gone to the Vanguard palace. I’d been worried about not being able to shift at all back then, or getting stuck as a werewolf. And then, I’d started thinking of Ava.

While we were at the Vanguard palace, my mate bond had dealt with protecting Cali and wanting Ava, both at once. I wondered if this was why I was finally able to control my shift—if feeling such strong urges toward both my mates kind of balanced my wolf out.

But still, why did I want to shift right *now*?

Was my wolf getting antsy, thinking of Cali and Ava at the same time?

Thinking of wanting Ava?

Why now, though?

Why—

The moment I turned a corner down the hallway, Ava emerged.

My wolf stirred as if to answer my question, my insides going taut at the sight of her.

“I heard about Dani, and the explosion,” Ava said. “Are you okay?”

I kept my cool. I had to. “Do I look like I’m not?”

Ava took a step closer, her light blue eyes scrutinizing every inch of my face. Her scent was overwhelming, and my jaw clenched instinctively.

“You don’t look okay,” she said, glancing down at my mouth. “You’re frowning. You’re upset. Is there anything I can do?”

My wolf growled low and needy in my chest, because he sure as fuck had an answer to that question. There were many things Ava could do, many things he’d love for her to do—touch me, kiss me, get on her knees and bend over for me…

This was out of control.

“No,” I told her, taking a step back. I held my breath, just so I couldn’t smell her. “This is pack business.”

I had to distance myself from her.

Of course, both my wolf and Ava had different ideas.

“You don’t need to pretend everything is okay with me,” she said in that low, soft voice that sent a chill down my spine. “Let me help, Xavier.”

“*Stop*,” I said, widening the distance between us. “I don’t need anyone’s help—I will handle things like I always do.”

“You mean alone?” Ava didn’t approach again. My wolf’s whine vibrated within me, and she raised an eyebrow. “Because that’s the exact opposite of what being in a pack is supposed to be about.”

“*God*,” I huffed, rubbing my face. “I don’t have the time for your lectures, can you just—”

“You don’t have to be alone in this,” Ava said, pointing at her chest, her expression twisting into something fierce. “*I* will fight by your side, Xavier—always.”

I didn’t dare speak for a moment. Ava was saying exactly what I wanted to hear. My wolf urged me toward her, and an image popped into my head: the two of us, Ava and me, storming into the palace, saving the day, fighting side by side…

There was something so enticing and exciting about that.

But I couldn’t allow himself to be tempted. Ever. I had work to do, and Ava would only distract me. My wolf kept fighting my resolve though, always pushing me toward her. I realized that if I spent another fucking minute with her, if I wound up staying with her tonight to protect her again, I had no goddamn idea whether I would make it through the night while lying on the floor.

My hands turned to fists. “Thank you for your offer to help,” I said. “But I got this.”

I walked past her, fighting my wolf every step of the way. He kept growling, urging me toward her, the desire cursing through me so overwhelming that it made me sick.

I was sick for Ava, and that was the one truth I couldn’t fucking avoid.

I needed to do something about this, about these feelings.

“Oh my god, why the hell do you refuse to knock?” Big Mac said when I barged into the room once more.

I ignored her. “Kira, a word.”

Kira left the other witches and walked out with me.

“Xavier, we’re still figuring out our plan,” she told me, looking annoyed. “You were supposed to wait, give us some time to—”

“This has nothing to do with that,” I cut her off. “Can you put a revulsion spell on me?”

# Episode 2681

*What is that fucking monster trying to get us to do now?* Greyson’s words continued to give me goosebumps all over my skin.

*He must be right*, I thought as I paced the kitchen.

I hadn’t been there to hear what Lucian had said, of course, but he was a sneaky kind of guy. He played his cards right; he’d proven himself to be manipulative and sinister, and if he’d said out loud that he needed the three of us… He had to be planning for us to react. But *how*? What did he expect us to do? What did he *want* us to do?

*Ugh, so many possibilities!*

Did he want us to go to the palace together, just so we’d be easier to snatch? Or had he said that to make us suspicious and separate us? What Big Mac had said earlier was true—if Greyson and Xavier were taken, I would probably be easy pickings. Unfortunately. I’d do my best not to be, but the infuriating reality was that I—one half-Fae—wouldn’t perform really well against an entire pack of werewolves. Let alone survive.

This whole thing felt somewhat familiar, too—I’d been taken by Nolan in the past. I’d been a chess piece in a much larger game before. I’d been able to get out of the Samara pack’s clutches only because Maya had decided to have half a heart and Xavier had shown up to help her.

This time, Xavier might not be there to help me. And of course, Maya wasn’t here.

We had a good pack, a strong pack, but if Lucian had some grander plan in mind, would we be able to figure it out in time? Was Lucian that much of an evil mastermind that we’d never be able to escape him? Because that sounded like a real possibility after all the bullshit he’d put us through.

*That horrible son of a bitch…*

“Love?” Greyson’s voice surprised me.

I flinched out of my thoughts, looking up at him. “Oh, are you done with the witches already?”

He shook his head. “Kira stepped out, so I wanted to check on you. Are you okay?”

He was frowning. Of course he was. He scrutinized my expression in a way that made me feel vulnerable, as if he could read my every thought. So I just said the worst of it out loud.

“Is Lucian going to start a war with us?”

Greyson paused. “It certainly seems that way. And if he doesn’t, I’ll have to do it for what he did to you.”

I gasped. “Greyson, don’t joke about stuff like that.”

He raised an eyebrow, still severe. “Does it look like I’m joking?”

“Oh my god,” I said, shaking my head. “Stop it. *No*, I don’t want any wars started for me, ever! I can’t even believe we keep getting into these kinds of horrible situations—can’t we just, I don’t know, *chill*? For once?”

Greyson rested his hands on my arms, squeezing reassuringly. “This is an unusual situation, Cali. But I promise that no matter what, I will get Dani back.”

His eyes were fixed on mine, his voice firm with conviction. I couldn’t help but put my trust in him. Always.

“I know you will,” I murmured, sliding my hand up his chest.

He pulled me into a hug, kissing the top of my head. “The pack will do whatever it takes to help Dani. I don’t want you to worry.”

I let out a dry laugh. “Yeah, as if that’s gonna turn off any time soon.”

He snorted. Then he cupped my cheek, leaning down to brush his lips over mine. It felt as good as ever. “I want you to promise me—a Fae promise—that you won’t go to the palace.”

I swallowed roughly. “Greyson—”

“I mean it, love,” he said firmly. “When the explosion happened, you were my first thought. If you were there, you could have been killed.”

I poked his chest. “Now *you* know how it feels whenever you go off to do something—I worry about you all the time. Twenty-four seven!”

He gave me a half smile that sent my pulse running. “I hate the sound of that. But it’s also kind of flattering.”

I groaned and buried myself in his chest as he hugged me tight again, swaying me back and forth a little.

“I just love you so much…” I trailed off, brushing my nose over the skin of his collarbone. I’d always loved the way he smelled, how warm he was, how good it felt to hold him and be held by him…

I wished I didn’t have to worry about anything else.

“I love you too,” he said, facing me.

His expression was soft as he kissed me again. Differently this time, his tongue brushing up against mine and making me shiver and grab onto him. The kiss was slow, tender but deep. I felt it in my bones, and for a moment, everything felt right.

But then Greyson broke the kiss. “What about that Fae promise, then?”

I scoffed. “You *sneak*.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about—”

“I will *not* be buttered up with kisses, Greyson! No Fae promises—we don’t know what will happen, and I don’t want to be unable to help if I need to. Just as much as you want to protect me, I want to be able to protect you. If I make a promise like that, it could end up hurting you, so I won’t do it.”

Greyson paused, pressing his lips together. Then he broke into a small smile that made my heart ache. “Okay. Then I won’t make you.”

The way he looked at me was so fond that I’d have swooned if he hadn’t been holding me.

He smirked. “You’re blushing.”

“You’re such a brat for calling me out.”

He laughed. Then he nuzzled my hair, my temple, and I felt so happy to be here, in my real body, with one of my real mates, in the pack house I considered home.

I felt like myself for the first time in what felt like forever.

“I should get back to see what the witches are plotting,” he said, breaking the hug. “Come on.”

He took my hand and pulled me toward the living room.

“Good idea,” I said.

He was about to say something when we ran into my mom, my sister, and Torin.

“Greyson,” Mom said. She looked a little more intense than usual. “How are you planning to protect my daughter? Lucian is still out there.”

I sighed. “*Mom*, oh my god. It’s being worked on, please don’t—”

“It’s natural for her to be worried, Cali,” Greyson interrupted. He turned to my mom like the best son-in-law ever and said, “The princeling isn’t going to lay a hand on Cali. We just discussed it—she’s not going to go near the palace. At least not unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

Well, then.

*I don’t think that’s what I agreed to, exactly… Is it? Though Greyson’s just trying to reassure Mom, so I’d better not say anything right now—it would only freak her out more!*

Artemis, who was suspicious by nature, narrowed her eyes at me. “That’s all good in theory, but let’s not forget that the Vanguards have already used magic against Greyson, and now Lucian has been seduced by a demon. There’s no telling what lengths he’ll go to to get what he wants.”

“And there’s also Dani,” Torin said quietly. “The poor girl.”

Artemis nodded. “We have to help her. And we need to get a move on because right now, Dani’s the one with the most to lose. And we have no idea how Seluna could make Dani use her magic against our pack.”

The idea of Dani using magic against Greyson made me feel queasy.

“We need to get Dani out of there ASAP,” I said.

“Actually,” Mom said, turning to Greyson, “while the rest of you go get Dani, we should move Cali somewhere safe, hide her from Lucian just in case he comes after her again once Dani’s been rescued.”

I frowned. “Somewhere safe?”

“Your mom has a point, love,” Greyson told me, squeezing my hand. “You could use my apartment in Portland—Lucian doesn’t know anything about it, so he wouldn’t know to look there.”

The thought of the Portland apartment made me remember my time there with Greyson. I felt a flush creep up at the back of my neck, and okay, yeah. If I had to hide out, that location wouldn’t be so bad.

Artemis, however, didn’t seem so happy. “Oh, please. Lucian has access to witches—they could use a tracking spell on Cali or Dani.”

“That’s a good point,” Torin said, frowning.

“Ideally, you both should be somewhere he can’t follow without a lot of effort,” Artemis said. “And I’m not sure what kind of place would remain hidden from a witch who knows a good tracking spell or two.”

I scowled, crossing my arms. “Then what are we supposed to do? Where am I supposed to go?”

“Maybe we could have one of our witches put a protection spell on Cali and Dani?” Mom asked. “I could try to do one?”

“Fae magic isn’t good for this kind of stuff,” Artemis said.

“We don’t want to risk it,” Greyson said. “But it’s not like we have a lot of options.”

“We could take Cali back to Minnesota,” Mom said.

“That’s even worse than Portland,” Artemis said. “The house is completely in the open, a disaster from a security standpoint, and also—”

Torin interrupted Artemis, startling everyone. “What about the Fae world?”

# Episode 2682

**Xavier**

Kira gave me her signature skeptical look. This time, it was even more skeptical than usual.

“What do you mean?” she asked. “Why do you want a revulsion spell?” Before I could reply, she looked over her shoulder as if to make sure nobody was listening, and then her voice dropped. “Is there something going on between you and Cali? I thought you said you two were in love and all that, so—”

“Hold up,” I said, cutting her off. “It’s exactly *because* I love Cali that I want that spell.”

Now Kira just looked confused. “Elaborate.”

“I want you to cast a revulsion spell on me and Ava,” I said. “I need this over with.”

Kira shook her head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Xavier.”

“Why?” I demanded.

Kira let out a scoff. “Oh, I don’t know—perhaps because technically Ava’s your mate too, and also Big Mac warned me not to get involved? Does it look like I’m looking for trouble with her?”

I glared over Kira’s shoulder. Big Mac always pissed me off. “This has got nothing to do with Big Mac—I just need you to help me, and ignore Big Mac’s bullshit. Is that so much to ask for?”

Kira shook her head, huffing. “Why do you even feel like you need this right now? Did something happen?”

As if I was gonna get into the dirty details. With Kira, of all people. She was chill, for the most part, and I considered her a friend, but those kinds of details were reserved for Jay only. Or not even for Jay. I’d take all my detailed horny feelings about Ava to the grave.

It was all my wolf’s fault.

“It’s not that complicated,” I told Kira. Which was a lie, obviously. “I would just feel better if I had a revulsion spell on me.”

“I’m still not hearing a real reason here, Xavier,” Kira said impatiently.

All I could think about was that there were a million real reasons to keep Ava at bay—my wolf was getting more and more unhinged, and I was getting dangerously close to letting something happen between Ava and me, even while I resisted all I could.

But my wolf was weak, and that made my resolve weaken too, and this was one huge mess waiting to happen. I couldn’t risk it—I loved Cali. Only. She was truly the one for me. She was the one who’d dug me out of an extremely dark place. The one I’d tried to be a better man for.

With Ava, it was… It was like my past had come back to bite me. She was my biggest mistake, a constant reminder of what could’ve been and what was ruined.

“Are you listening, Xavier?” Kira nudged me, interrupting my thoughts. She looked annoyed. “This isn’t a joke—revulsion spells, like any spell, can backfire spectacularly and create all sorts of complications.”

“When Charon did it for Cali and Greyson, it worked,” I said.

Or when Big Mac had made it so Cali and I couldn’t kiss unless we were practically outside, away from Kira. I wasn’t going to bring that one up.

Kira scoffed. “That’s different—there wasn’t an additional extenuating circumstance attached to that!” She gestured at me. “Or whatever it is you’ve got going on with shifting and Ava!”

I shook my head. “I won’t hold you responsible if things go awry, Kira. I’ll even pay you.”

For the first time since we’d started talking, Kira looked uncomfortable. She got all flustered. “What are you even talking about? We’re friends.”

I rolled my eyes. “Come on, I know how witches operate—they always want something in return. So name a fair price, and I’ll double it.”

“But, Xavier—”

“No,” I said, my tone sharp. “I’ll do whatever it takes to stay away from Ava.”

Even as the words left my mouth, I could feel my wolf bristling on the inside, and the sensation of claws digging into the skin of my neck. This obsessive asshole didn’t know when to quit, did he?

“Xavier, this is complicated,” Kira said again. “What about your wolf? Is keeping Ava away a smart thing to do right now? I don’t know how it works, but I know that you *have* had trouble with shifting. Isn’t that why Ava is here in the first place?”

I opened my mouth to keep protesting, automatically at this point. But her words gave me pause.

“If I put a revulsion spell on you, and you’re unable to shift, it could create a huge issue if you have to fight the Vanguards,” Kira pressed. “Weren’t you just coming into our meeting, guns blazing because you want to help us get Dani out?”

I huffed. She had a point. “Yes…”

“Exactly,” Kira said. “There’s no guarantee that our mission be will successful. The way I see it, there’s a huge possibility that we’ll need the wolves as backup in case anything goes south. That’s happened before in the past.”

My frustration heightened. Kira was making one good point after the other, and I hated it. I hated everything about this. “You… are not being completely unreasonable right now.”

She flicked my shoulder. “Can you just wait to do anything that involves Ava?”

I exhaled loudly, putting my hands in my pockets. “Plans can change. But you’re right about having to fight. We don’t know how the spell could affect my wolf. He’s a finicky son of a bitch.”

My wolf was internally offended, but he should fuck right off and admit that he had a huge problem. Especially because thinking about fighting and Ava and Cali all at once made a horrible thought enter my brain…

What if I was in the midst of a fight and both Ava and Cali needed help?

Would my wolf choose Ava while I wanted to help Cali?

It was fucked up. All of it. Ava was an obstacle in my path, and I had to do something to try to combat these emotions inside me, sooner rather than later. Maybe not right now, not when the Vanguards were out of goddamn control, but I had to deal.

“I really do want to help you, Xavier,” Kira said, resting her hand on my shoulder. “Even if Big Mac’s right, and this would be super messy—”

“She’s not right about shit—”

“*Xavier*,” Kira said, more firmly now, before I could go on a rant. “I will help you. I hate that you’re dealing with all this. But I’m still not convinced that right now is a good time to do it.”

I sighed. Deeply. Why did everything have to be so fucking hard all the time?

“Thanks,” I grumbled.

She smiled a little, shaking her head. “Don’t worry. Things will get better.”

Yeah, I wasn’t so sure about that. Kira didn’t know what it was like to have a wolf inside her—instinct rumbling through every inch of your body, trying to control your every thought.

My wolf made me feel less human sometimes.

He made me feel trapped.

Once Kira was gone, I felt ready to punch a wall. I understood her logic, and I knew that she was right, but that pull from Ava and the mate bond… It had to end. Whether it was a polarization spell, revulsion, something. If not Kira, if she refused to help in the end because of Big Mac’s bullshit, then maybe I could drop in on Lakini.

The bond kept interrupting my life, my true love with Cali.

And once all this Vanguard bullshit was over, she was the only thing I wanted to focus on.

“Xavier, there you are!” Rishika’s voice interrupted my thoughts. I looked up to see her rush down the hallway and to me. “We have company—where the hell is Greyson?”

I frowned. “With the witches. What’s going on?”

“I heard my name,” Greyson said, walking right over, Cali in tow.

At least my heart knew that she was the one for me, because it doubled its beats when she came over and stood right next to me, reaching for my hand.

“There’s a large group of werewolves approaching,” Rishika told Greyson.

He looked over at me. “The Vanguards?”

“Can’t imagine why any other pack would come,” I said. I looked at Cali. “This is a problem. All three of us are here, and Lucian wants us.”

Cali swallowed audibly, her grip tightening on my hand. The scent of her fear always made me furious. I wished I could just take her away from all this.

I pulled her into a hug, muttering into her hair, “I’m right here.”

At the same time, Greyson clapped his hands and shouted, “Everyone, gather round! This might be an assault.”

As the pack started arriving in the living room, Cali looked between me and my brother, her face pale. “What are we going to do?” she asked quietly.

“You’re not doing anything,” Greyson said. “You’re going to the Fae world like Torin suggested.”

The Fae had thought of that? Smart. And Cali didn’t argue. Thank god.

“Let’s go find out what they want,” I told my brother after kissing Cali’s cheek.

She squeezed my hand one last time, and then Greyson and I stepped onto the porch. As we walked out to the yard, Andrei approached with three large wolves.

Fucking *Andrei*.

This guy was like mold. He kept reappearing.

Behind him, I could see more and more Vanguard wolves gathering in the woods. They fucking *dared* to invade our territory, but I wasn’t shocked by now. They’d done much worse.

“What the fuck do you want?” Greyson snarled.

Andrei looked all calm and casual. “We’re here for you two, and your mate.”

# Episode 2683

All my hopes of avoiding any further conflict with the Vanguard pack crumbled into a pile of flea-ridden dirt. These assholes were not intimidated by the Redwood pack. Sure, I loved being cute and nice and all, but I also wanted to cut a bitch, because this was, like, far and beyond infuriating.

And *terrifying*.

*Who’s scared? Not me! Ha ha ha—*

I was terrified. I hovered by the exit, staring over at Greyson and Xavier, who were glowering at Andrei as all three stood in the yard. I could clearly see at least a dozen Vanguard wolves roaming around the tree line. Literally could they all just *go away*?

*You need to leave right now, love*, Greyson’s voice echoed in my head. *Go with Torin and Artemis. Go to the Fae world.*

As Greyson mind linked, Xavier barked at Andrei, “Why the fuck are you staring at the house? Look at me when I’m talking to you, asshole.”

I realized that Xavier was distracting Andrei while Greyson urged me to go. They were working together, all for my sake, yet again. They were amazing and beautiful and brave, and I seriously did not want to leave them. Ever.

*Cali?* Greyson’s voice got sharper. *I’m sorry, but this isn’t a debate. You have to leave now.*

*But what about you?* I replied. I sounded like I was about to cry, so that was fun. Because I did want to cry.

“I’m not sure why your Alpha thinks it’s a good idea to keep provoking us. A full-blown war is still not out of the question,” Greyson told Andrei, while Xavier was the one to mind link with me this time.

*We will deal with this. Go to the Fae world. There’s no point in risking you getting caught. Greyson and I are better equipped to handle the Vanguards—they’re a werewolf pack, for fuck’s sake!*

I wanted to argue, naturally. I wanted to insist that I should stay, if only to hover and make sure they stayed safe, probably blast a furry fucker or two. But my mom easily sided with my mates.

“Caliana,” she hissed, pulling me into the house. “We have to go!”

As much as I hated all this, Xavier was right. Werewolves were better at fighting than I was. Even with my magic, werewolves were fast, furious, and—most importantly—they healed much faster than I did.

*Love, please*, *I need you to do this*. Greyson’s voice was in my head again, while Xavier was distracting Andrei. *We will handle everything*. *When it’s safe, we’ll send for you. This is the only way to keep you safe and stop whatever it is that Lucian has in mind. Go.*

I glanced at Andrei while he threw snarky bullshit at Xavier. He looked big, menacing, and most importantly, like he wasn’t going anywhere. The rest of his pack prowled behind him like a swarm of sharks.

Bottom line, Greyson was right. I hated that it had come down to it, but if I stayed and we were all taken, Lucian would win. If I ended up captured right along with my mates, Lucian would pull off whatever fresh hell he had in mind…

Right?

*Wait.*

I remembered something very, very important.

*But Greyson!* I said*. What if this is what we talked about earlier? What you said? What if separating is exactly what Lucian wants, and he was just baiting us by saying he needs all three of us?*

“No,” Greyson replied to whatever Andrei said, though I suspected it went for me too. At the same time, Xavier turned around and marched back over to the house. I jumped back inside as he barged in, his face thundery.

“Cali, there’s no way the prince boy can get to you while you’re in the Fae world. Go there and be safe. For the love of god, I’m *begging* you.”

He looked so raw that I was speechless for a beat too long.

Xavier grabbed his keys and threw them at Artemis. “Get her out of here before I lose my mind.”

I was about to protest, but Xavier grabbed me and gave me a quick, hard kiss on the mouth that left me breathless. With one last burning look, he ran out into the yard again. Toward Andrei, who seemed to be debating something with Greyson.

Artemis grabbed my arm. “Come on, Cali!”

“But—” I pointed at Kira. “Witches! Can’t we just have the witches blip us somewhere safe and nearby? Just so I can pop in and make sure my mates are safe?”

Kira offered a long-suffering sigh that only a witch could’ve pulled off. “All the witches are needed here.”

Torin raised his index finger. “The only safe place is the Fae world, and the witches can’t just blip there.”

I frowned. “Why can’t one of you blip us to Haystack Rock?”

Kira tapped her foot. “It would take a lot of energy and would require one of us to go with you. We need everything we’ve got if we have to defend the house and go get Dani.”

I felt like bursting into sniffles and stomping my feet and walking outside to scream at Andrei, *What are you waiting for*, *asshole?* But I had nothing left to argue with. Everything everyone had said made sense. Like, a lot of sense.

I just hated to leave the pack in a moment like this.

“Oh my gods,” Artemis said under her breath, tugging at my arm again. “Stop wasting time—we have to go!”

I looked out the window, at Xavier and Greyson, one last time.

*Is this the last time I’ll see them? Could it be? What if they get hurt? What if the Vanguards—*

“Stop spiraling!” Artemis barked at me and literally dragged me to the garage.

My parents were hovering by Xavier’s car. Arguing, which was rare.

“But I have to come with you!” Dad was saying. “Cali is my daughter, and I want to make sure she’s safe!”

“Dad,” I said, and he turned to me, his eyes wide.

“Sweetheart,” he whispered, pulling me into a hug. “I’m so sorry all this is happening. I wish I could just—”

“You can’t come with us, Dad,” I said. “I’m sorry, but you’ve never been to the Fae world, and you’re still new to being a werewolf.”

Artemis nodded, but then she said, “Would you rather have Tom fighting experienced werewolves like Andrei, though?”

I shuddered. “I wish he didn’t have to fight *anyone*, Artemis!”

“That’s not an option,” Artemis said gravely.

Dad looked between me and my sister. There was a protective determination in his face that I’d seen just once before, over a decade ago—when a dumb boy had pulled my pigtails.

“I’m going to protect my daughters, and nobody is going to stop me,” he declared.

Mom huffed. “That’s great, but if we don’t get moving, you won’t have a chance to protect anyone. Everybody, get in the car!”

We piled in quickly, followed by Artemis’s barking orders—rude—and then I realized that she was the one behind the wheel. Of all people.

“Shouldn’t someone else drive?” I asked. “You literally have no idea what you’re doing.”

Artemis scowled, pressing the button for the garage door to open to the back yard and rear exit of the estate. “Everybody else will worry about rules, Cali. I won’t.”

I blinked. *Did she… Did she just say that to make me feel better? Because it’s not working!*

Artemis turned on the engine and peeled out with a little too much speed, if you asked me. I jumped, squeezing my eyes shut as she almost clipped a tree, swerving wildly across the lawn and then onto the road.

“That was not very subtle,” I mumbled, my heart pounding.

“What?” Artemis asked, looking at me through the rearview mirror as she drove.

I looked over my shoulder. “The Vanguards probably heard the car. They’re going to come after us if we don’t hurry.”

My sister laughed. A little maniacally, actually. “I’ll make sure to step on it.”

That was what I was afraid of.

*Please, god, let me not die in a car accident after surviving a million supernatural threats!*

Mom looked nervous. “Artemis, perhaps you shouldn’t—”

Right on cue, Torin screamed, “Watch out!”

In the same moment, Artemis turned the wheels sharply to avoid a fence.

“I feel it would be best if Tom or I drove,” Mom said, panting as she gripped the door handle.

“We can’t stop now,” Artemis said darkly. “If we do, the Vanguards will catch us, and there’s only one person in here who won’t hesitate to murder them all!”

Everyone fell silent. I cleared my throat. “Excuse me*?”*

“Honestly, Lucian is lucky I haven’t spotted him in some dark corner,” Artemis said conversationally. “I’d take my sweet time with him too, cut off his ears first, then—”

“Oh my god, we don’t need any details!” I screeched, covering my ears.

Artemis rolled her eyes. “You were the one who asked. Either way, we have to make sure they don’t catch us,” she said, and then promptly swerved away from a stop sign.

*They probably* will *catch us if you drive us into an inanimate object!* I thought, alarmed.

“Exactly how far is Haystack?” Dad asked nervously.

“About four hours,” I answered.

Dad looked very worried.

“Is everyone wearing their seat belts?” Artemis asked.

Mom frowned. “Why?”

“Buckle up,” Artemis said, looking at the rearview mirror. “We have company.”

Everyone in the car twisted around to look through the back window.

A group of Vanguard werewolves was closing in on us.

# Episode 2684

**Xavier**

This asshole Andrei had a death wish. And he was also delusional.

“As if we’re going to just give you what you want,” I said, snorting. “You’re a joke.” I looked over his shoulder at the rest of the wolves. “The Vanguards, everything you are and stand for—a fucking *joke*.”

Greyson didn’t speak, but I knew he shared my sentiments. The intense, enraged way he was staring at Andrei made that very clear. Even if Greyson was always annoying, when it came to protecting Cali, my brother and I were on the same page. Both of us had relaxed the moment we’d heard the car start at the back of the estate.

Knowing that my mate was on her way to safety in the Fae world was what I needed to move on and take out Lucian and his stupid goons. I missed Cali already, though. I hoped she wouldn’t have to hide for too long—I’d make sure that she didn’t have to.

This ended today.

“I don’t understand what you’re doing here,” Greyson said. “We’ll never obey Lucian’s orders. He should’ve realized that by now.”

Andrei’s eyes flashed with fury. And then he spoke, his voice low. “I know you sent your mate away in that car.”

I froze. Greyson was ready, though. Looking collected, he asked, “It was just a car. It could be anyone from the pack leaving. Why do you think it was Cali?”

Andrei laughed and took a few steps closer to us.

A few steps closer to the house.

I growled at him, my wolf thrashing on the inside, ready to attack.

“Because it’s what I would do with Aysel,” Andrei said. “Send her away, keep her safe. It’s always about keeping the ones we love safe in the end, isn’t it?”

I stepped in front of him, growling again. “Back the *fuck* off.”

“But I’m right,” Andrei said with a smirk. “You sent her away to make this harder for us, but rest assured, we won’t stop until we have all three of you. It doesn’t matter where you send her.”

I had to bite my tongue right here. I was pretty sure that the last thing the Vanguards would expect was for Cali to go to the Fae world. And even if they did, it wasn’t like they could just walk in. All Greyson and I needed to do was stall these bastards so Cali could get away and make it to Haystack Rock ASAP.

“All I’m hearing right now is that your Alpha is obsessed with us,” Greyson told Andrei mildly. “It’s pathetic.”

Andrei snarled, snapping his teeth at Greyson. Greyson snorted, as if amused, and I had to give it to him—he could wear his composure like armor, sometimes. I, on the other hand, preferred a more direct approach.

“Hey!” I snapped, stepping between Andrei and Greyson before shoving him back. “If you’re looking for a fight, you don’t have to go very far. We’re ready to kick your ass.”

“All talk and no bite, that’s—”

“Oh yeah?” I raised an eyebrow. “I remember things went down differently at the palace. I kicked your ass. You’re lucky I didn’t fucking kill you. How’s that window, by the way?”

Andrei snarled, but he didn’t approach again. “I’d love nothing more than a rematch, but I was given instructions not to harm any of you.”

“And a good boy like you always does what the princeling says, huh?” Greyson asked, raising an eyebrow.

Andrei cracked his knuckles. “You’re pushing your luck, Redwood Alpha. Not hurting anyone was more of a suggestion than an order. If I have to break a few bones in the process, I’ll be happy to.”

“You better leave us the fuck—”

Greyson cut me off, stepping in front of me. Either to stop me from attacking, or to act like a shield. I could never figure it out with his noble bullshit.

“This is not a debate,” Greyson said coldly. “I don’t know what Lucian is trying to do, but we won’t be part of it. You will have to take our cold, dead bodies to your Alpha. And that doesn’t seem like it’d be something that would make Lucian happy, does it?”

Andrei growled, along with the rest of the Vanguard wolves lurking by the trees.

I didn’t feel any fear. Just fucking fury.

“All we want is Dani,” I said, stepping forward. “We don’t care about Seluna. She’s a demon; she’s nothing to the Redwood pack.”

Andrei’s angry expression switched to one of shock. “You—you dare to desecrate the name of our moon goddess, Seluna?”

I raised an eyebrow. “I’ll say it again. She’s a fucking demon.”

Andrei roared and shoved at me, screaming, “Shut up or I’ll make you!”

I knew that if I kept provoking him, Andrei would have to fight back. And that was what I’d been itching for. This son of a bitch, Lucian’s loyal, rabies-ridden dog, thought he could do whatever the fuck he wanted without any consequences. Just like his master.

He mirrored Lucian so perfectly that I just wanted to tear his throat out.

“Step away from my brother before I rip your fucking arms off,” Greyson told Andrei coldly.

He glared at Greyson. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed”—he gestured behind him, at all the growling wolves—“but I’ve brought a sizable group with me. It’s not like you two can do much. I hope I won’t need them, but it might be fun to force you to watch as we destroy the Redwood pack.”

“I thought you said Lucian wants us alive,” Greyson told Andrei in a sharp tone.

Andrei raised an eyebrow. “We’re under orders not to harm you three…” He looked over at the house, at everybody standing on the front porch. “But the rest of your pack is fair game.”

The thought of these bastards touching anyone from the pack had my blood boiling.

“If you make one move, you’ll be dead on the ground before you have a chance to do anything,” I snarled.

“Unless you want a massacre right here, right now, you should turn and go,” Greyson declared. “We will not go peacefully. Either you leave now, or we will fight. And then you’ll have to deal with Lucian’s disappointment.”

“Exactly,” I said. “What would happen if you returned to your little boy prince to tell him that both Greyson and I were dead? Who do you think your prince would blame?”

Andrei sneered. “The mind games you’re playing are beneath me! Don’t you fucking dare—”

“What about Aysel?” Greyson cut Andrei off.

He choked on his words.

“True,” I said, raising an eyebrow. “You know Aysel has a thing for my brother, Andrei. A pretty huge thing. She fought her brother to save Greyson, so it’s safe to say it’s closer to an obsession. She might not forgive you if you tried to kill him.”

Andrei glowered, marching up to me to grab me by the neck of my shirt. “Leave my princess out of this!”

“Then get the fuck out of here!” Greyson snarled, shoving Andrei off me hard enough that Andrei stumbled backward. “Tell Lucian we want Dani, and we *will* get her back.”

Andrei was panting. He looked between the two of us, his eyes sharp and calculating. But he didn’t seem ready to make a choice. I just wanted him to shift right now—my wolf was ready to tear him apart. The guy was like a cockroach, never dying, but if he attacked, he was fair game.

Instead of attacking, though, Andrei said, “I’ll make you a trade. One of you two for Dani.”

Greyson looked at me. I looked at Greyson.

Then Greyson said, “That’s never going to happen.”

It couldn’t. Even if we’d been at odds with Big Mac earlier, she was right. We couldn’t let Lucian have any of us no matter the cost. We didn’t know why he needed all three of us.

“That’s the only way this is going to work out without a slaughter. A fair trade,” Andrei said. He looked over at the house, licking his lips. “We could always take Cali instead.”

My wolf howled, and I charged straight at Andrei.

“Xavier!” Greyson grabbed at me and held me back.

“Do you really think we’d hand over our mate?” I snarled at Andrei.

*Our* mate.

I surprised myself by using that kind of language. For including Greyson. Cali might have been mated to both of us, but *I* was her mate. Right now, though, it felt like Greyson and I were a unit, created for her protection.

“That’s not a good idea. Obviously,” Greyson deadpanned after he made sure I wasn’t about to tear Andrei’s head off. “Try again.”

The front porch door opened and closed again before Andrei could speak.

His gaze shifted past us and to the house.

He smiled sardonically. “Oh. How nice to finally see all three of you. Makes my job much easier.”

My stomach dropped. *What the fuck?*

I turned around as Cali came down the stairs. *Cali*.

I stopped breathing.

“It’s okay,” she said calmly. “I’ll go with him.”

# Episode 2685

I was internally—and probably externally?—screeching as the giant wolves started to chase after the car. Oh, if LIPS could see us now!

*I have no regrets about ever calling the werewolves “wolf-bears.” They really are bear-sized.*

“Oh my god,” I gasped, shoving my sister on the shoulder. “What are you waiting for? Step on it!”

A sharp-eyed Artemis stepped on the gas—she looked totally stone-cold for someone who had no idea what the fuck she was doing—and the car raced forward. Everyone screamed as it swerved.

*This is going great! NOT!*

“Torin!” I squealed.

“What!” he squealed back.

I flailed, gesturing at the crossbow behind us. “Shoot at them!”

“I’ll do it,” Dad said gravely, grabbing the weapon.

I blinked rapidly, so alarmed I almost short-circuited. “Oh my god, *Dad*?”

“I’m from Minnesota,” Dad said with a shrug. “Everybody learns how to use one of these before we’re ten.”

I couldn’t believe this was real life.

*Is… Is my extremely sweet dad secretly a badass? IS HE?*

My whole life had been a lie.

“But Dad—”

“I’ll protect you all,” he declared, cutting me off.

I could’ve sworn my mom swooned a little. I just sat there gaping as my dad—the most dad-like person I knew, dad jokes and all—very calmly opened the window and leaned out. He was literally sticking his neck out!

“No, come back in!” I yelled, just as mom grabbed at his waist. The swooning was over, and now she was freaking out. Relatable.

“Tom, be careful!” she shouted.

Meanwhile, Artemis said, “What are you waiting for—shoot one! Tear its guts out!”

Great to hear my sister’s POV. Always wholesome.

“This is way too intense for me,” Torin said, wide-eyed as he stared at Dad, who was aiming the crossbow like a professional—

The car jumped up and slammed down as it hit a bump in the road.

“*Damn*,” Dad grunted as the crossbow fired, the bolt going wide.

“Try again!” Artemis said, eager, and Dad just reloaded like a pro while both Mom and I held onto him, terrified he’d just spill out of the window. He was being super casual about all this, but still.

*Who knew he’d be so good in a crisis?*

“How much farther is it to the highway?” I asked my sister.

“Five miles? I’m not sure—why?”

“The Vanguards aren’t going to risk exposing themselves as werewolves to the public. If we can make it to the highway, they’ll probably give up the chase,” I said, trying not to start hyperventilating.

“That’s such a good point, Cali!” Torin said, squeezing my arm. It was good to have a hype man—Torin was the best.

Artemis, of course, had objections. “Perhaps—but in the meantime, I would feel better if Tom shot one, just to send a message. A bloody one.”

It was good to see that Artemis *never* forgot her priorities.

“I’m trying to shoot here!” Dad called as the wind blew over his face. “Just keep the car steady!”

And then he fired another shot.

This time, there was a loud yelp from behind us. I gasped, looking over my shoulder. A wolf came howling to a stop, an arrow in its shoulder.

“Oh my god, Dad! You did it!” I enthused, clapping right along with Torin.

But then another wolf ripped out the arrow, and they resumed the chase.

“Dammit,” Artemis said, huffing. “Don’t waste my arrows—shoot to kill!”

I turned around to smack at Artemis’s shoulder for not being more encouraging. And then I realized that we were about to run into a fucking bridge wall!

“ARTEMIS!” I shouted. “Watch out!”

“Huh?” Artemis said, and I couldn’t wait any longer—I lunged for the steering wheel and yanked it. One of the side mirrors was knocked off, we were shaken up, and I was fucking trembling, but AT LEAST we’d avoided a full-on crash.

“Keep your eyes on the road!” I screamed. “I don’t want to die trying to escape from wolves that are trying to kill us!”

*THUD!*

“AH!” Torin shrieked, clutching at my hand with one hand and pointing at the window with his other.

A werewolf had caught up to us. He lunged at the car, biting at the tires.

“Tom, can you shoot it?” Mom asked, her eyes wide.

“Yes!” Dad said, fighting to reload. But then the wolf noticed him and charged forward once more. He hit the car hard enough that my dad dropped the arrow. And then he tried to nip at my father.

“Be careful!” Mom said, pulling Dad back inside.

“Leave my dad alone, you filthy animal!” I shouted and opened my window.

*I am going to BLAST this fluffy asshole!*

Or at least I would try. It was very hard to conjure up my magic and steady my hands as the car bounced and swerved. The wind was blowing on my face, and then—

*Whoosh!*

Artemis drove too close to a tree branch, and I was almost hit. *Goddammit!*

“Sorry!” Artemis said sheepishly. “I’ll be careful—just blast the bastard!”

I took a deep breath and steadied myself as I leaned out of the window. I made eye contact with one of the wolves that was gaining on us. Its gaze was full of hatred, its teeth bared. This monster had another thing coming if it thought we’d go down without a fight.

*Here we go…*

The wind blowing through my hair, I raised my hands and twisted them into a circle before letting the magic loose. The wave hit the wolf in an instant, and the last thing I saw before he tumbled backward, head over heels, was the wolf’s wide, shocked eyes.

*TAKE THAT!* I thought triumphantly.

But unfortunately, it lifted itself up only seconds later. With a growl, it continued the chase. *Fuck!*

“Is that it?” Artemis shouted.

“You’re not helping with morale, Artemis!” I snapped, my hair still flapping in the wind as the car sped down the road. I pushed it out of my face only to see a sign ahead. I gasped. “The highway!”

I pulled myself back inside as Artemis finally skidded onto the entrance ramp.

“The highway is our best bet! They won’t follow us out there!” I exclaimed.

“Is it working?” Torin asked urgently.

Mom, Torin, Dad—everyone looked back, through the rear window. We held our breaths, watching as the pack of wolves…

Finally slowed down.

“Oh my god,” I said under my breath, holding my mom’s hand tight. “I think we’re in the clear.

“We did it,” Torin said. “We did it!” He grabbed both Mom and Dad and squeezed them into a hug. Dad laughed, and I grinned.

Until I realized how fucking fast we were going.

“Artemis?” I poked her shoulder. “Slow down!”

“Don’t tell me how to drive,” she scoffed. “They could still be chasing us along the woods, out of sight.”

“Right,” I said wryly. “But there’s this thing called a speed limit, and you don’t have a license. And we have a crossbow in the car, which isn’t something I want to explain to the police.”

Artemis groaned. “So many rules in the human world!” She rolled her eyes. “Why do they make a car able to go so fast, only to have a speed limit—it makes no sense!”

The things that my sister decided to be outraged over were truly amazing. Thankfully, she did ease up on the speed. A few beats passed, and I looked around at everyone, so relieved they were safe.

*But not everyone is safe…*

I thought back to the pack house and swallowed roughly. We had put the wolves behind us, but I had no idea what was happening with Xavier and Greyson. Things had been tense when I’d fled. I’d hated the idea of it—of fleeing and leaving my mates to deal with all that bullshit—but I’d had no choice.

*Still feeling guilty about it, though! Good times!*

My heart pounding, I pulled my phone out and sent my mates a group text.

*Some Vanguards followed us, but we got away. We’re on our way. I’ll be in touch, hope you’re okay.*

I didn’t exactly expect a response right away, but how long should I wait until I started feeling concerned? Because a full minute later felt like a good time to let the worrying commence.

“What’s the plan now?” Dad said, interrupting my thoughts. “We get to Haystack Rock, and then what?”

“We’ll have to get to the portal,” I said, thankful for the distraction. “We might get wet, depending on the tide.”

“We need Fae blood and a Fae item to get in,” Mom told Dad, and she held up her necklace. “We’re covered.”

“And the best part is that once we cross through the portal,” Torin said, “the Vanguards won’t be able to find us. We’re free!”

I could not believe we were going back to the Fae world. How long would I have to hide there? I hadn’t been back to that place in months, so—

*Wait.*

“Mom,” I said, swallowing roughly as the realization hit me. If I hadn’t been back to the Fae world in months, my mom hadn’t seen the place in *years*. Since she’d fled *two* *whole* *decades* ago!

“What’s wrong, sweetie?” Mom asked, frowning.

My voice cracked with anxiety as I asked, “What will happen to you if you go through the portal?”

# Episode 2686

**Xavier**

This girl would be the death of me.

Why the fuck was she still here? Why the hell had the others just let her walk out? Where was Rishika? Where was Big Mac? My wolf got riled up, pissed off at everyone in the pack for not stopping her from doing this. Though he wasn’t angry with Cali, because he was a sucker like that.

Andrei needed to stay the fuck away from her.

“Don’t take another step closer,” I ordered Cali. I was done playing nice. Did she want me to tie her up, throw her in the trunk of that car, and send her to the Fae world? Because I’d do it at this point. I didn’t care if she hated me for it, as long as she was *alive* to hate me. My mate had zero self-preservation instincts.

“You’re not going anywhere with Andrei, Cali,” I added.

*Seriously, what the hell is going on right now, Cali? I thought we agreed on this!* I mind linked to her.

I froze when it wasn’t Cali’s voice that replied. *It’s me, Xavier. Ava.*

This was some creepy déjà-vu shit. I remembered how Ava had taken Cali’s face months ago, though back then Nolan had forced her, and Silas had orchestrated the entire thing. What was her angle this time?

“Greyson,” Ava said, walking up to Greyson.

To his credit, my brother didn’t look surprised. Did he realize who she was? She hugged him, he hugged her back, and she whispered something in his ear. Then, she faced me. She inched closer. To the untrained eye she did look like Cali, yeah. But to me, it was now obvious from the way she moved, the way she looked, that this wasn’t Cali.

The way she touched my arm was entirely different too. Sharper, somehow.

*Let me do this*, she mind linked, brushing her hands up my chest before pulling me down for a kiss. It was light, and I stopped myself from flinching—didn’t want Andrei to get suspicious. I kissed her back, hating myself for liking it. She looked like Cali, but she felt like Ava. She tasted like Ava.

This whole thing was confusing as fuck.

My wolf had no problem, though. This seemed like a great deal to him— second only to that one fantasy where we got to have both of them. At once. In my bed. He had no shame.

I broke the kiss and stared at Ava, trying not to grip at her waist too tight. *Why do you want to go with the Vanguards?*

My instincts were going haywire—on the one hand, I was glad that Cali was safe and Ava would be the decoy. But on the other, my wolf felt protective of Ava too.

*I’m doing this to protect the pack, to avoid a bloodbath*, she replied.

I squinted. That didn’t sound right. Since when did she care that much about the Redwood pack? I bet she had another reason. This was Ava, after all.

*I’m doing this for you, Xavier*, Ava said, like she was spelling things out for me. As if she could read the doubt in my face. *Let me help.*

“That’s enough cuddling for now,” Andrei scoffed and reached for Ava’s arm.

I batted his hand away, my wolf growling. “Keep your hands off her!”

“She already agreed to come back with us,” Andrei snarled. “If you’re smart, you’ll join her.” He offered a sardonic smile. “You wouldn’t want poor little Dani to be released all by herself, would you? It’s a long walk back—the kid might get lost, or run into a Rogue or two.”

“Cali agreed to come with you,” Greyson said darkly. “There’s no need for any more bullshit veiled threats. They just make you look ridiculous.”

Andrei growled at Greyson, and I realized that I had no idea if my brother was bluffing or not. We needed to form a plan of action. I turned to Rishika, who had walked up to us a moment ago, arms crossed over her chest. “Keep an eye on them,” I told her. “Don’t let… *Cali*…” I gestured at Ava awkwardly. “Go anywhere.”

Rishika raised an eyebrow. “Right. On it.”

*What the fuck is happening?* I asked Rishika.

*I think you’ll have to talk to the witches about that*, she replied.

But of course. The witches.

With a scoff, I grabbed Greyson by the arm and pulled him toward the house.

“Hey!” Andrei barked. “Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

“I need to talk to my brother. Try and fucking stop me!” I called over my shoulder before stomping up the front porch stairs.

“This should be an interesting conversation,” Greyson said in that sarcastic tone of his that made me want to punch him.

The moment we got into the house, away from Andrei’s prying supernatural hearing, I hissed, “You know that’s Ava, right?”

“Of course. The vibes are all wrong,” Greyson replied, like it was the most natural thing in the world. But then he scowled, looking frustrated. “Though I have no fucking idea how that happened.”

“Ava asked me to do a spell,” Big Mac spoke up, walking over to us. Of course this was her work. Of course. “It seemed like a good way out of this.”

Greyson frowned. “But why did Ava offer?”

“I asked the same question. Ava said she thinks she can help,” Big Mac said evenly.

Greyson turned to me, eyebrows arched. “Well, little brother. You know your potentially evil ex better than anyone. What’s Ava’s angle here?”

My wolf was pissed to hear Greyson call Ava evil. The moron had no sense of reality. I, on the other hand, knew that Ava was up to something. She was always up to something. That was a general feeling I constantly had about Ava. And it was rare that I was proven wrong. But what could she have in mind right now? Could this be different? Was she really trying to help? Or was I starting to believe her? To believe *in* her?

Could Ava really be changing?

“I honestly have no idea what the hell—”

I heard her footsteps first, and then the front door opened. Ava walked in, looking like Cali, and all those confusing feelings returned tenfold. “I need to talk to Xavier.”

*Good luck*, Greyson said. I wasn’t sure if he was mocking me or not. Either way, he gestured at Big Mac, and they both stepped away.

I was alone with Ava in the study, and I…

I had a hard time looking at her. She looked like Cali—she was soft and sweet and cute like Cali—but she definitely wasn’t. Any of that. As Ava. I was still attracted to her, though. I still felt my mate bond throbbing, stirring things up, making me flinch when Ava rested her hand on my shoulder.

Did she have to touch me?

Did she *really* have to?

“Xavier,” she said in Cali’s light voice, and I felt a little sick with how much I wanted her. My wolf was having a fucking field day. I put a healthy amount of space between us as Ava added, “I know you have lots of questions, lots of doubts, but I want to do this. I want to help, so—are you even listening?”

I nodded curtly, staring at my feet.

“Xavier, I’m talking to you. *Look at me*.”

I could no longer resist. I looked into her eyes—they looked like Cali’s hazel, warm ones… But was there a flicker of Ava’s icy blue in there? Or was I imagining it? Was this how I lost my fucking mind?

I didn’t have time to ponder that.

“You realize you’re putting yourself in danger,” I said, my voice sharp.

“I know,” she replied. “But I’d rather take that risk than have you killed in a battle with the Vanguards.”

My hands started to ache with the need to grab her, pull her close—kiss her. But I had no fucking idea if this was my wolf’s doing, or mine. Did I want to kiss her because she looked like Cali and wanted to protect me? Or because Ava wanted to help me?

Why did things have to be *so fucking complicated*?

“Time’s up!” Andrei’s loud voice interrupted my thoughts. It came me from outside, and I knew that we needed to do this. Logically, all my confusing emotions aside, it was a good idea, no matter what.

“You sure about this?” I asked Ava.

“I’m sure,” she said.

She looked stoic in a way that Cali never was.

Ignoring the thought, I called for Greyson and Big Mac.

“What’s happening?” Greyson asked.

“If we go with Ava, we can protect her,” I told my brother. “And it’s still only two out of three for Lucian—they still won’t have Cali, not the real Cali, so whatever they have planned isn’t going to work.”

“We can use that to our advantage. To get Dani,” Greyson said.

“Exactly. So we’re doing this?” I asked.

Greyson turned to Ava, his gaze serious. “We’re doing this.”

We walked outside, to the yard. Andrei stared at Ava in a way that made my wolf growl. I reached for her hand in an instant. The warmth of her skin was jarringly familiar, almost comforting.

“It’s agreed,” Greyson told Andrei. “We’re going with you.”

# Episode 2687

**Greyson**

Andrei laughed. “I knew you’d see the light. Nobody says no to the Vanguards.”

This guy’s face just begged to be punched, but I restrained myself yet again. Sometimes I wondered how I wasn’t a candidate for sainthood by now.

“Not so fast”—*you brainwashed, needle-dicked douchebag*—“we’re only coming with you if you get your pack to back off,” I said. “I want them off Redwood territory right the hell now.”

Andrei shrugged. “Whatever. I have what I came for—there’s no need to keep the pack.” He turned toward the woods and signaled to his minions. The cockroaches scurried away, retreating.

I turned to Rishika. “Keep up a patrol. If you notice any Vanguard wolves, you have my permission to kill them.”

“It would be my pleasure,” she replied. She was the ideal Beta.

Andrei scoffed. “Is that a threat?”

I turned to him. “I don’t think you realize how lucky you are to be alive right now.” I looked around, at the trees. “Your pack just retreated, and it’s Xavier, Rishika, and me against you. How do you know it wasn’t all just a trick so I could kill you?”

Andrei paused, looking at the other two. He tried to look angry, but I could see the flash of fear in his eyes. “Fuck off,” he snapped.

I smiled. “Let’s go see your master, dog.”

Andrei growled but didn’t do anything else, because he was a coward now that his backup was gone. He gestured for us to follow him toward the woods.

*How’s Ava? Still evil?* I asked Xavier.

*I think she really wants to help*, Xavier replied. I noticed he was still holding her hand. But that was none of my business.

Meanwhile, Andrei continued to be a little bitch.

“I’ve been curious about the *due destini*,” he said, turning to Ava. “When your mates shift, who do you ride?”

There was some insinuation in his use of the term “ride,” but thankfully Xavier didn’t catch a whiff of it. I was in no mood to break up a fight.

Before Ava could speak, Xavier asked Andrei, “Shift? What about LIPS?”

Andrei snorted. “Fuck LIPS. I’m not about to let humans dictate how I’m going to live. If you’re afraid of them, then you’re weak.”

“Right,” I said wryly. “But we could be recorded by a drone.”

“And so what? Haven’t you seen a Hollywood movie? Special effects? What human would believe that there are real werewolves?” He laughed.

“Right,” I repeated, still wry. “But if they capture one of us, they’ll take our DNA and see that it’s all true. Risking exposure is foolish and naïve.”

Andrei shrugged. “If there’s a problem, the Vanguards will kill all the evidence, pay a bunch of humans, done. It’s how we roll.”

I scowled. Could Andrei actually have more than one working brain cell? *Fascinating*. Not that I exactly approved of his methods, but still. I hadn’t expected him to have any sort of backup plan.

“Let’s get going,” Andrei added, turning to Ava. Xavier snarled when he winked at her and said, “See you at the palace.”

After Andrei shifted, I did too. When I turned back, I saw Xavier had done the same, bending to let Ava onto his back. At least the finicky bastard wouldn’t have a shifting problem with her around. Small victories.

As we ran through the forest, I kept an ear out for drones. I also tried to figure out how we would play this. I doubted Lucian was really planning to make a swap—if he thought I’d agree to give up Cali, he was a complete moron. And as much as I despised the moon boy, I didn’t think he was a moron.

The princeling was horrible and monstrous and fucked up, but he wasn’t a moron.

*I guess you’re right*, I said to Xavier as we ran through the woods. *We have to trust Ava when she says she wants to help. Dani’s life may depend on it*.

*I know*, Xavier replied. *And at least we have the element of surprise on our side. Ava’s a werewolf, and Lucian is expecting a half-Fae.*

*I just hope we can pull this off before someone realizes it isn’t Cali*, I said*. I could tell when she came down from the porch—something seemed off.*

Xavier scoffed. *The vibes?*

*The vibes*, I confirmed. *She seemed far less jittery and adorable. She was like a snake wearing the skin of a bunny.*

*I’m going to ignore that disturbing imagery*, Xavier said, *and agree that she felt different. But at least Andrei’s buying it*. *What’s the plan, though?*

*Big Mac and the other witches are going to blip in and grab Dani*, I said. *We just have to make sure we can distract Lucian long enough to let that happen.*

*And then what?* Xavier asked.

*And then we’ll have to wing it*, I said. *We have no choice. Ava can shift and we can fight our way out if we have to. We just have to make sure they don’t recognize her.*

*I’ll try to keep Lucian from getting too close*, Xavier said solemnly.

I glanced over at Ava. Her arms were around my brother’s neck. A little too tight. Her eyes were shut. Was she enjoying this? God, she probably was. This had to be so awkward for Xavier. Messy, messy.

But again, it was none of my business.

*What about Cali?* Xavier asked, then. Right on cue, as if to remind me that Cali remained his priority, despite whatever was going on with Ava.

*As soon as we get Dani back*, I said, *Cali will come home. We’ll go fetch her from the Fae world.*

Xavier paused, glancing at Andrei, who was leading us straight into the mouth of the wolf. Perhaps literally.

*You think this is gonna work?* my brother asked.

*It had better*, I said*.*

For Cali and the pack, it had to.

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When we arrived at the palace, I didn’t have to get into a fight to walk in. It felt weird. Unnatural. But I wasn’t going to complain about saving my strength for when the real battle begun.

“Follow me,” Andrei said, after shifting into human form.

Xavier and I did the same, and then we all walked inside.

Andrei signaled to one of the attendants. “Take the Alphas to one of the wardrobe rooms.” He looked over at Ava, smiling like a fucking sleaze. “Cali can come with me.”

Xavier stepped between him and Ava in a heartbeat, growling. “She doesn’t leave my side until the exchange. Nonnegotiable.”

Well, then. That was a lot. My brother was protecting Ava as if she were the real Cali. Maybe it was just an act to convince the Vanguards. But that whole thing remained—you guessed it—none of my business. Xavier would have to sort it out. And survive it. Hopefully.

“Fine,” Andrei said, rolling his eyes. “Lucian will be expecting you in the Moon Room. I’ll go announce your arrival.”

There was a Moon Room. I’d forgotten about that.

“Follow me, sirs,” the attendant said, turning to Ava. “Miss.”

“Thank you,” she said.

And then she said literally nothing else, which was the most anti-Cali thing ever. Yet another reason why she didn’t feel like Cali—Ava had said, like, five words this entire time, whereas Cali would’ve recited fifteen sonnets of her own creation, filled with anxiety and anger. Half of them out loud, the other half via mind link.

She was perfect, really.

I missed her already, but I was very happy she wasn’t here. Everything was already going a little too smoothly for my liking. Lucian was plotting something for sure.

We got dressed in the wardrobe room, all of us quiet until I whispered to Xavier and Ava, “Be careful. There’s no telling what Lucian is planning.”

They both nodded.

“Ahem.” Another attendant appeared by the door the second we were done dressing. “His Highness Prince Lucian is waiting for you in the Moon Room.”

As he led us away, I sincerely fucking hoped that this would be the last time I ever had to set foot in this palace again. I wanted to rip Lucian’s head off after all he’d done, but there would be so many fucking consequences to that that it couldn’t be my priority.

Above all, I wanted to get Dani back and make sure Cali returned home safely.

I wanted to hold Cali, kiss her, feel like nobody would ever fucking dare hurt her again, not after—

“Greyson!” A familiar female voice interrupted my thoughts as we approached the room.

I turned around to see Aysel sauntering over to me. She was wearing a sparkling sheer dress. Super subtle. I was so incensed with fury toward her brother that when I saw her now, I didn’t even think she was the worst thing in this castle. Imagine that.

“I’m so glad you three came to your senses,” she said, resting both hands on my shoulders. She looked over at Xavier and Ava, especially at Ava—Cali to her—and then she pointedly leaned closer to me…

To kiss me on the goddamn mouth.

I wanted to throw her off me and into a deep well filled with piranhas. But before I could step back, she brought her lips to my ear and spoke in a whisper.

“You need to get out of here. He’s going to kill you.”

# Episode 2688

**Dani**

I looked around the dark, dank dungeon. It was quiet—the only sound was the steady drip of water from somewhere in the distance. It had been a while since I’d heard Seluna’s voice chastising me. What the hell had that been? Was it the hit on the head from that explosion I couldn’t remember? Memory loss was sometimes a sign of concussion—I was pretty sure I’d read that somewhere. Was that what had happened? My head *was* still throbbing.

I’d given up pounding on the door. There was just no point. There was no one coming to help me, and Lucian seemed intent on keeping me for as long as he wanted.

Without anything else to occupy me, I thought back to the explosion. I thought through it carefully, trying to remember the moments beforehand. I had felt what I could only describe as a struggle within myself. Now I realized that must have been Seluna trying to grasp for control.

But after the explosion, Seluna had disappeared—or at least she’d seemed weakened by it. Which was interesting. I thought about that for a long moment. I wondered if I could use that to help me escape. Would I be able to turn Seluna’s powers against her and blast my way out of this dungeon?

Truthfully, I had no idea if that was even possible. What had happened before the explosion was a bit of a hazy memory.

*You’re a failure as a witch*, a smooth voice hissed in my ear.

“Leave me alone,” I muttered to myself.

But Seluna didn’t leave me alone.

*You have to be mentored in order to control your magic. You’re a fool if you actually think you’re going to be able to use it to escape. You almost got the two of us killed. A better idea* *is to stop fighting me. Let me use your magic. Think of the possibilities. Give yourself over to me.*

I shook my head. “I’m not going to do that,” I said firmly. I didn’t understand what Seluna wanted from me, but I was sure it wasn’t anything good.

*You are wasting my time trying to resist me*, Seluna snapped. *Eventually you will be nothing more than a distant memory*. Suddenly the voice changed again, growing wheedling. *And if you’re a good girl, I will give control back to you when I’m done.*

This sounded enticing. I liked the idea of being able to gain control again, without having to fight for it—but maybe it was *supposed* to sound enticing. It sounded too good to be true.

“No!” I shouted, trying to use my own voice to push back against the voice in my head. I was hoping the conflict between us would conjure up my magic and weaken Seluna. Then maybe I’d be able to take the chance and blast my way out of this place.

But before I had a chance to try, the lock clicked and the door swung open. Lucian strode into the room, his eyes searching my face.

“Has my beloved returned?” he asked hopefully.

As he moved closer to me, the dim light hit his face, and my breath caught. With his wide bi-colored eyes, his high cheekbones, and sharp jaw, it was hard to ignore the fact that he was a beautiful man. And strong, too—I could see his muscles moving underneath the fabric of his clothes—but despite his beauty, I could feel a hatred growing for him.

I expected Seluna to react to Lucian’s question, as she’d been plenty vocal with me, but she was quiet. I had a choice to make. Lucian was here, and it was clear that he was desperate for Seluna. I didn’t know how long this would last, and I knew I needed to take advantage of the moment. I needed to exploit his love for this goddess, and I could only do that by pretending that I was Seluna.

I got to my feet and stood as tall as I could. “Bow down before me!” I thundered. “How dare you show me such disrespect.”

His eyes widened, and he dropped to his knees. “My goddess, I am so sorry. I would never seek to offend you—”

“And yet you lock me up here like a common criminal?” I hissed, trying to mimic the sound of Seluna’s voice in my head.

Lucian’s face went pale. “I did this to protect you, my goddess. The young woman was claiming you weren’t in this body. That you were only someone named Dani…”

His eyes bored into mine, and I was struck again by his beauty. He wasn’t just handsome—he was otherworldly. I’d seen plenty of beautiful faces before, and many of those had been twisted by cruelty. Lucian was probably just like them—he had locked me in a dungeon, after all—but at the moment, there was no trace of that. His look was hopeful and anxious and—more than anything—full of love. Well, “love.”

“And are you satisfied now?” I barked. “Because if you keep me in here a moment longer, I will move on and find a more worthy… lover.”

I blushed at that last word, feeling like a fool. I felt like I was laying it on pretty thick, but I was clueless about all of this. What exactly were you supposed to tell a lovestruck prince? I just had to do and say whatever I could to get myself out of this dungeon and out of this palace.

Lucian gestured toward the open door. “Please, my goddess, your freedom awaits.”

I glanced over his shoulder at the door. I considered making a rush for it and slamming the door behind me, trapping Lucian inside, but I hesitated. Lucian was a werewolf, and I had seen how fast they could move. If I tried it and failed, he’d know I’d been lying. And even if I did make it out of this dungeon, was I going to be able to escape the palace? The place was crawling with Vanguard wolves.

I tried not to let my anxiety show on my face, but I had no idea what to do.

Then, before I could decide anything, Lucian fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a ring.

“Please,” he whispered, looking up at me, “accept this.”

When I looked down, I realized he was holding an engagement ring, which featured the biggest diamond I’d ever seen in real life. It was cut like an emerald, and there were clusters of smaller diamonds on each side. Even in the dim light of the dungeon, the ring shone like the sun.

Without even really thinking about it, I reached out my hand, letting Lucian slip the ring onto my finger. It was a little too big, and the weight of the diamond slipped to the side.

Lucian rose to his feet, his smile like sunshine. He took me by the arm and led me out of the dungeon. “I’ve given our union so much thought. I know exactly how we will celebrate.”

“Our union?” I asked, looking down at the ring.

“As Alpha and Luna. We will hold the ceremony at night, of course, at the full moon. We will be surrounded by hundreds of white roses and thousands of candles. Everyone will see your beauty, as I see it.”

I felt my heart pound as he tightened his grip on my hand.

“I have waited so long for this, and I can’t wait to have you by my side as my Luna.”

I looked straight ahead, but my thoughts were spinning. I knew a little about Lunas, but not much, and I had no intention of letting myself be used by Seluna like that.

Okorie had warned me that people would try to use my magic, and I’d believed him. I’d seen it happen before. And now both Lucian and Seluna were trying to use me.

A jolt of anger surged through me. As beautiful as Lucian was, I had no intention of going through with this “union,” and I sure as hell was not going to be this crazy man’s Luna, whatever that entailed.

“I realize you must be disappointed by this vessel’s wardrobe,” Lucian said as we reached the main floor of the palace and he led me to a room off one of the hallways. “It’s hardly worthy of a goddess.”

I glanced up at him but didn’t respond.

*What the hell is wrong with what I’m wearing*? I wanted to ask, but I bit my tongue. I mean, I knew I was a little dirty from the explosion, but still. This prince was such a snob.

Lucian gestured to a pair of attendants within the room, who jumped to their feet. “See to it that Seluna is dressed properly for the ceremony.” He turned to me and smiled. “I look forward to seeing you, my goddess.”

As he leaned in, my brain seemed to be moving slowly. Finally I realized he was going to kiss me, but I only had time to turn my face slightly, so his lips brushed my cheek. That was bad enough.

With another worshipful smile, he left, leaving me alone with just one thought: how the hell was I going to get out of this?

# Episode 2689

**Greyson**

*He’s going to kill you.*

Aysel’s warning rang in my ears. I looked at her, her face still close to mine. I wasn’t surprised that she’d kissed me—she’d always made her feelings toward me perfectly clear—but she was also a Vanguard pack member. So why was she taking my side now?

But, if she *was* on my side, then this was an opportunity—maybe I could exploit it. I eyed Aysel, wondering just how far she was willing to go for me. If she helped me escape, she would be betraying her brother. I didn’t know whether she had it in her to do that if it really came down to it—a choice between him or me.

I decided I needed to test the waters. “Do you know *how* your brother is planning to kill me?” I whispered.

She pressed her lips into a thin, tense line. “I’ve told you all I know. My brother hasn’t been very forthcoming with me, not since I defended you.”

I nodded. “Thank you,” I said quietly, but as I went to step away, Aysel grabbed my arm.

“Do what you must,” she said, a wild look to her eyes, “but do not harm my brother. Promise me.”

“I promise, I won’t hurt him,” I said smoothly, though I knew I would kill every last one of them if I had to.

But Aysel looked relieved, and when she leaned close to kiss me again, I endured it. I didn’t like the feel of anyone’s lips but Cali’s, but I also knew I needed to keep Aysel on my side for as long as I could. I was lucky as hell that she cared for me enough to warn me. Though, did that mean she was going to want something in return?

Whatever. It really didn’t matter. I wasn’t planning on sticking around long enough to find out.

As Aysel walked away, I could see Andrei glowering at me. Apparently, his unrequited love for Aysel was as strong as ever, and his glare was lethal. I believed Aysel’s claim that Lucian wanted to kill me, but if there was anyone else who wanted me dead, it was Andrei.

I shot a glance toward Xavier and Ava. I needed to tell them what Aysel had just told me. To warn them. But Andrei was watching me too closely, and I couldn’t risk letting him overhear me saying anything.

I was trying to think of a covert way, but Andrei abruptly grunted, “This way,” and led us forward.

We entered a large, formal dining room. The walls were hung with gold-framed oil paintings, and a large, sparkling chandelier hung over a huge dining table. The table was set for a dinner party, with bone china, silver, and crystal that sparkled in the flickering candlelight from the chandelier.

“What is this? A werewolf brunch?” Xavier asked, looking around critically. “Is this what you all do around here?”

But I wasn’t in the mood to joke. Whatever this was, it looked like a celebration, and I assumed it was part of whatever twisted plan Lucian had in motion.

“Wait here,” Andrei said, shooting Xavier a particularly nasty look.

He walked over to speak to a uniformed attendant on the far side of the room, and I waited until he was out of earshot before I leaned toward Xavier and Ava.

“Lucian is going to try to kill me.”

Xavier looked quickly at me. “What? How do you know that?”

“Aysel told me. She doesn’t know how, just that he’s going to try.”

Xaiver took this in. “It doesn’t surprise me. Not really. I feel like we were always going to end up here. So now the real question is, when is Lucian going to make his move?”

“I wish I knew,” I muttered. “Remember that Lucian believes he has all three of us—including the real Cali—so he thinks he has what he needs.”

“Do you think that killing you is part of the plan?” Ava asked.

“I have no idea. Maybe. Maybe murder is part of this dude’s delusional plan to marry a goddess. But maybe it’s just as simple as revenge. I have no idea. What I do know is that we need to be careful not to let them know about Ava until we have access to Dani,” I said.

“You don’t need to remind me,” Xavier said. “It’s about the only advantage we have over the little princeling. I’m not anxious to give it up in a hurry.”

Ava nodded. “I’m going to do whatever it takes,” she said firmly.

I had to admit, I was impressed, and glad that Ava was with us. Though it was weird that she looked like Cali, and I had to force myself to act like that was who she was. I would—of course—rather be with Cali, but I was also grateful as hell that she was nowhere near this palace of horrors. As far as I knew, she was heading toward Haystack Rock and the Fae portal. I just hoped she was safe and that they weren’t running into any other complications.

A door on the far side of the room opened, and Lucian entered with his usual swagger. Spying us across the room, he smiled, and I noticed his gaze settling on Ava.

Strangely, Lucian wasn’t surrounded by bodyguards this time. He only had Andrei with him and a few uniformed attendants. That seemed odd, but it made me feel better. If the shit were to hit the fan right here and now, we’d stand a good chance.

“I’m so glad to see you,” Lucian said smoothly. “And I’m so glad you decided to come of your own accord.”

“That’s not exactly how it happened,” I said coldly. “But we’re here. Just like you wanted.”

“That is wonderful. It’s so nice when we can avoid all the unpleasantness of—”

“Where’s Dani?” I demanded, uninterested in beating around the bush. I hadn’t come here for small talk.

Lucian flushed slightly, but he recovered himself. “The woman you call Dani is getting dressed for the ceremony.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Lucian looked nonplussed. “Pardon me?”

“*Ceremonies!* That’s all you people do here! Ceremony for this, ceremony for that. Your whole pack is consumed by ceremonies. What the hell is up with that? Does having them make you feel important?” I demanded.

Lucian’s placid smile dropped a bit. “I had hoped this meeting wasn’t going to be antagonistic in nature.”

“Well, it is,” Xavier snapped. “None of us want to be here. You know that. We want Dani. You forced us to come here.”

Lucian shrugged unconcernedly. “The ends will justify the means.”

“What does *that* mean?” Xavier asked testily.

“It means that you’re here, and that’s what counts,” Lucian said.

“What counts is that we’re only here because our mate agreed to come. And she only agreed to come to save her friend.”

Lucian frowned at this, looking genuinely unsettled by this. “Dani doesn’t need to be *saved*.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

Lucian smiled. “See for yourself.”

To his left, a door opened and a woman entered the room. It took me a moment to realize that it was Dani—she looked so different. Her dress was ice blue and reached to the floor. It had a beaded top and a skirt that swayed gently around her legs as she moved. She looked taller, somehow, and older. She looked like a calm, confident stranger.

I looked carefully at her face. I didn’t know Dani that well—she hadn’t been with us all that long, and I hadn’t had a chance to sit down and talk to her—so I wasn’t even sure what I was looking for. Would I be able to tell if Seluna had taken over, just by looking at her?

Was she even *aware* that Seluna had taken over, or had the demon taken over Dani’s mind and body too completely?

As Dani walked forward, approaching Lucian’s side, I looked sideways. The Vanguard guards had started to encircle Xavier, Ava, and myself, drawing closer and closer.

I’d had enough. I was sick of Lucian’s shit.

“Why did you want all three of us?” I demanded, looking into Lucian’s satisfied face. “What do you want from us? Are we just party guests for your little ceremony? Do you need witnesses while you take your Luna?”

Lucian’s smile grew, and he took Dani’s hand. He brought it to his lips and kissed it before he answered me.

“Once again, you mistake my intentions, Greyson Evers,” he said quietly.

“And what the hell are your intentions?” I asked, feeling my pulse tick up.

He looked completely at ease as he gazed at me. “You are not here for *my* Luna ceremony.”

“Then what am I here for?” I demanded.

“You’re here for yours.”

# Episode 2690

**Xavier**

I stared at Lucian, thrown. What the *hell* was this idiot talking about?

“*Our* Luna ceremony?” I asked. “What Luna ceremony?”

“Yes. I wish for the *due destini* to be fulfilled,” he said calmly. “It is time for Caliana to choose her mate and become Luna of the Redwood pack.”

Greyson shot a glance at me, and I could tell we were thinking the exact same thing:

*What. The.* Fuck*?* “The *due destini* has nothing to do with you, or your damn pack,” I snarled. My head was spinning, but my main thought was how lucky we were that it was Ava with us instead of Cali. We would’ve been in such deep shit if Cali had come instead. I didn’t know what Lucian had planned, but what if he could somehow force her to make a choice? We had no idea what could happen. To any of us. “This is Redwood business.”

“And it’s business you have all put off for far too long. The time is long past due for a decision, don’t you agree?” Lucian started mildly. “You—”

“That’s not going to happen,” Greyson said, more forcefully. “I’m the Alpha of the Redwood pack, and I will choose my Luna when I am good and ready. And not a fucking moment before.”

The Vanguard werewolves were coming closer, closing in. The air in the room felt like it was being charged with electricity.

“Please do not think I am unaware of the tension here,” Lucian said. “And I’m sympathetic. That’s why I want to do this. I understand that both brothers want the same things. You both wish to be Alpha of the Redwood pack, and you both wish for Caliana to be your Luna. I am offering you an opportunity. A third option, if you will.”

“An opportunity to do what, exactly?” Greyson asked warily.

“To settle this conflict, once and for all.”

I looked at the guy. “Are you suggesting we have a Lupo Finale right here? Right now?”

Lucian smiled. “Now *that* would be amusing to witness.”

I rolled my eyes. “For someone who’s so horny for ceremonies, you don’t know shit about a Lupo Finale.”

Lucian’s eyes narrowed at this.

“It’s a sacred ritual,” I went on, “not a cock fight. It requires proper preparation. You can’t just demand one because you’re bored. It’s not a cage match, man.”

Lucian looked angry. “Whatever it is or is not, no one is leaving tonight until the Redwood Alpha has been properly chosen and a Luna is selected.”

Greyson crossed his arms over his chest. “My brother and I are not fighting each other for your sick entertainment.”

“I don’t particularly care how you settle it,” Lucian said. “You can flip a coin and let fate decide. But I’d rather see which of you loves Caliana more.” His eyes sparkled menacingly. “And, maybe more importantly, which one of you *she* loves more.”

It was then that I understood Lucian’s plan, and the realization hit me like a sucker punch. He was going to try to pit Greyson and me against each other, and then force Cali to choose the winner. It was madness. What Lucian was proposing was total madness. It made no sense, no matter how you looked at it.

There had been mutinies within werewolf packs in the past, where a pack member would challenge the Alpha and fight them to the death. But those instances were few and far between. It just wasn’t the respectable way to go about things, and those few who won never held on to their power for long. The Lupo Finale was the only way to do things. The winner of that was always accepted by the pack, and the werewolf council.

This had nothing to do with who was the Alpha of our pack; this had to do with Lucian wanting to diminish the Redwoods in the larger werewolf world. I looked at the guy, who was gazing at us, a smug look on his face.

It had to be driving him nuts that Cali didn’t want him, and that we’d taken her away from him when he’d tried to keep her. It must have made him crazy that we’d kicked his demon lover out of Cali’s body, which he’d probably thought was going to be the best of both worlds. Lucian was a guy who was used to getting his own way, and now he wanted revenge because we wouldn’t let him have it.

As much as I wanted to be Alpha of my pack—and believed I *deserved* to be Alpha—there was no way I was doing this. When I became Alpha it would be on no one else’s terms but my own.

“You know what, you can go fuck yourself,” I growled.

A look of shock flashed across Lucian’s face. “I beg your pardon.”

“You heard me. We’re not fighting,” I said firmly.

Lucian’s jaw worked silently, then he clapped his hands. The Vanguard pack members moved closer. Uniformed servants moved the huge dining table out of the way, pushing it up against a far wall. Now, the middle of the room was clear.

“Are you familiar with the gladiators of Rome?” Lucian asked conversationally.

“I’m not looking for a history lesson,” Greyson snarled. “We’re not doing this for you—I don’t care who the hell you think you are. I’m the Alpha of the Redwood pack. You have no power over my pack, or anyone else’s. You can call yourself a duke, a prince—hell, you can call yourself the fucking queen of England for all I care—at the end of the day, you’re just another Alpha. Just like me.”

I looked around as the Vanguard wolves moved even closer. There were more of them now. How were they calling in reinforcements? I could feel my shoulders tensing as my brain went into fight-or-flight mode. How much longer was this going to last? How much longer were we going to be able to play along with this little game? How were we going to get out of here?

“You’re not going to fight?” Lucian asked, looking like a disappointed kid who’d just been told the clown wasn’t coming to his birthday party. “I don’t understand. I know you both wish to be Alpha, and I know that Greyson only became Alpha by defeating you, Xavier—his own brother—in the Lupo Finale.”

I could feel myself bristle at this. I hated to be reminded of that—not that I needed the reminder. I thought about it enough on my own.

“In any case,” Lucian said airily. “I suppose it doesn’t really matter. I confess, the fight would’ve been for my own amusement, which you both seem to have guessed. And in the end, it’s not the fight that matters. It’s the choosing that’s truly important.”

He smiled a wide smile and gestured to Andrei. Andrei nodded, and two guards grabbed me, two grabbed Greyson, and another two grabbed for Ava.

On instinct alone, I’d almost started to shift—ready to start fighting back—when I felt the ice-cold press of a blade against my neck. And in the space of an instant, I knew: it was silver.

Looking sideways, I could see Greyson and Ava, both being held with their arms pinned behind their backs, and with a silver blade pressed against their necks.

It wasn’t hard to do the math here—if I shifted, I would be killed. We would all be killed. It would be quick, and we wouldn’t even have a chance to fight back.

“If you won’t fight for me, so be it,” Lucian said briskly. “As I said, that’s not really the point. I have a Luna ceremony to complete, and I don’t want to keep my goddess waiting.”

He reached for Dani’s hand and pressed another kiss to the back of it, then walked to Ava. His eyes raked up and down her body before he looked into her eyes.

“It is all in your hands now, Caliana.”

“What do you mean?” Ava asked hoarsely.

“*Due destini* requires a choice, of course.” Lucian gestured to Greyson, then to me. “Both of these Evers men are worthy of being your mate. Both have proven themselves in their loyalty to you, and to their pack. But…” He shook his head. “You cannot have your cake and eat it too.”

“I can’t?” Ava asked quietly.

Lucian looked amused. “Fate demands that you choose.”

Ava shot a look at me, and I could see the terror in her eyes. It was Ava, so if she chose, nothing would happen. Then again, that was the damn problem… *nothing would happen*, and Lucian would know that she wasn’t really Cali.

Would we be fighting our way out of here, in that case? My muscles tensed at the thought.

Ava cleared her throat nervously. “I’m not going to choose.”

Lucian looked surprised. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “I’m sure.”

His face took on an expression of affected concern. “I’d rethink that response, my dear. Because if you don’t choose, you will kill them both.”

“What are you talking about?” Ava asked quickly, a note of fear in her voice.

“Oh, you know full well. It’s quite simple,” Lucian said. “Either you choose one and the other dies, or you choose neither and you all die.” He looked between the three of us. “So which will it be?”

# Episode 2691

**Dani**

I could feel my eyes widen as I took in the scene in front of me. Greyson and Xavier were surrounded by Vanguard wolves and were being restrained with lethally sharp knives pressed to their necks. My stomach twisted with anxiety. I felt horrible that they were in such clear danger, but I had no idea what I could do about it.

Quickly, I cycled through my options. Would I be able to produce another explosion? I wasn’t sure how I’d done it the first time, but I felt like I had to try something. The Redwood werewolves were my friends. They’d taken me in, fed me, given me a place to stay, and they’d been protecting me at the pack house. They were some of the only good werewolves I’d ever met. And now *this* was happening to them. Sometimes it felt like I was cursed, that anyone remotely kind to me suffered in some way.

I wanted to close my eyes. This looked like an execution, and I couldn’t stop myself from covering my mouth with my hand. I felt like I was going to be sick.

*You’re a weak little witch. Don’t you dare shut your eyes. Look at this. This is what real power looks like—and it’s yours for the taking.*

I could feel something swell within me. It felt like pride, but it wasn’t my own. It was Seluna. It was a warm, hungry feeling, and I liked it, but I also knew I had to try to push against the temptation of sinking into her words. It was so intoxicating, but I knew I had to try. Seluna clearly wanted this to happen—this conflict between packs—but I was terrified. I had no idea what was going to happen next.

Lucian was still looking at Cali, who looked as terrified as I felt.

“Go on, Caliana,” he said softly, “*choose*. Choose between your mates.” He smiled. “Surely you don’t want either of them to suffer too much. I promise you, we’ll make it very quick for whomever it is you don’t choose.”

Cali made a small noise in her throat, like a frightened animal, but that only made Lucian’s smile grow.

“Or,” he went on, “I’ll make it very slow for *both of them* if you choose no one. Don’t make this harder than it has to be, Caliana. It is up to you. Everything is in your hands now.”

She looked at him, and something in her eyes hardened. “No, this is in *your* hands, Lucian. You’re the one doing this. Not me.”

I swallowed hard, my throat burning. I couldn’t do this—I couldn’t stand to watch this play out. It was too awful.

*I wonder which one the* due destini *mate will choose*, Seluna mused. *Both of her options are worthy Alphas.*

I wanted to cover my ears. I couldn’t stand to listen to her speak about this so casually, as if Lucian weren’t threatening someone’s life. I pushed hard against her, struggling to keep her back. And as I did, I remembered that it was this inner struggle that had set off my magic the first time.

Maybe if I could argue with Seluna, it would get her angry enough that I could make something happen.

“Stop!” I said sharply, looking over at Lucian. “This has gone far enough.”

*You keep your mouth shut!* Seluna screamed in my head, her anger erupting like a volcano.

Lucian stared at me in disbelief. “My goddess, you do not wish this to continue? But why?”

“Because… Because I—” I had no idea how to answer him. But as I struggled to come up with a believable excuse, I stopped pushing back against Seluna, and she reared forward, gaining the upper hand.

“You fool!” I screamed, in a voice not my own. “How could you not see that the pathetic mortal was speaking, and not me? Not Seluna! Of course I want the *due destini* fulfilled! Proceed with the executions if the girl will not make her choice,” Seluna snapped. “And perhaps I will think to overlook your inability to know when it is not my will being enacted in this mortal vessel.”

Lucian’s face paled. “My goddess, I am so sorry. I don’t know why I didn’t see this. I won’t make the same mistake again, I promise you.”

I struggled against the power of Seluna, but even as I did, I could feel the magic building up inside me, like an electric charge. This was working, and if I could keep it going—and keep needling Seluna—I might be able to save everyone.

Seluna laughed inside my head, the sound of her vicious giggles bouncing against my skull. *You have given yourself away, girl. If you try to use your magic against me, I will turn it against you.*

I gritted my teeth, feeling determination settling into my bones. *Then I will die, and you will die with me.*

Again she laughed. *There are plenty of other bodies for the taking. Look around.*

*I think you’re the one who needs to take a look around*, I snapped at the demon. *No one else here is a witch, or even Fae. How are you going to use your magic in a body that has no magic?*

Seluna was quiet for a moment, apparently considering this small problem.

I used the moment of her distraction to keep building my magic. I *had* to do this.

Lucian turned away from me to look back at Cali. “Time is wasting, Caliana. Choose now, or watch both of your mates die.”

My heart thumped hard in my chest. I didn’t know what the hell I was supposed to do. I wanted to help my friends, but I didn’t know how.

I tried to open my mouth to yell at Lucian again, but Seluna was back, and I couldn’t get the words out. She wouldn’t let me even move. I couldn’t do anything to help. It was like I was being held hostage as well.

I felt helpless, and I was starting to panic. Which was exactly what Seluna wanted. I didn’t want to give that to her, but there was nothing I could do. Seluna kept pushing, and I was so tired, it was getting harder and harder to fight back. She was gaining ground. I was being used by her, and there was nothing I could do about it.

*What is it?* I asked.

*What is it that your pathetic little mortal mind wants now?* Seluna snapped.

*What is it about the* due destini *that’s so important to you?* I asked.

She made a dismissive noise that shuddered into my ears. *You are too weak to understand.*

*Obviously not so weak if I have you in here with me*, I replied, trying not to sound weak.

*You have not utilized your powers in ways you should have. How could you have allowed yourself to be mentored? Perhaps when the* due destini *mate’s power is transferred to me, I will allow you to understand. You will experience how magic was truly meant to work.*

Like seeing something out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of fire, then felt a shudder echo through me as something huge crashed to the ground, destroyed. It was a warning of great power, and I couldn’t keep it to myself.

If Cali did this—if she chose, and the *due destini* power passed to Seluna—Seluna would become unstoppable.

*Stop! Listen to me! Don’t do this!*

But, once again, I couldn’t say a word.

“Caliana,” Lucian said, his voiced laced with menace. “You must choose *now*.”

As Cali stayed silent, Lucian gestured to his guards, who pressed the blades of their knives tighter against Xavier’s and Greyson’s necks. Xavier tensed, and Greyson took a deep breath.

I tried to close my eyes—I didn’t want to watch what was about to happen—but I was no longer in control of my body, and Seluna kept my eyes open.

*You must watch this*, she hissed.

It felt like torture, and I couldn’t turn away. I had no control over this demon in my body, and it was horrifying.

Cali shot a glance at Xavier, then looked back at Lucian. “I choose…”

I could feel Seluna’s eager, urgent energy as she waited for Cali to speak.

Cali took a deep breath, steeling herself. “I choose Xavier.”

The air in the room changed as she spoke, and the guards shuffled, waiting for something to happen.

Lucian turned to look at me. “Caliana has chosen. The *due destini* is yours.”

Seluna was quiet for a moment, waiting. Then a surge of anger jolted through me.

“I feel *nothing*!” her voice shrieked. “*Nothing!* What did you do wrong?”

Lucian’s face flushed. “Nothing, my goddess, I did only as you requested.”

“Something must have gone wrong. I feel no power.” Seluna was furious, and as she walked my body toward Cali, I tried to stop her—she was filled with rage, and I had no idea what she was capable of—but it was no use. I was powerless to stop her.

Seluna stepped in front of Cali and looked at her carefully. She looked like Cali to me, but I could feel Seluna’s rage erupt as she whipped around to face Lucian.

“You fool! That is not Caliana!”

# Episode 2692

**Xavier**

I struggled against the hands pinning my arms to my sides—and against the blade at my throat—as Lucian looked over at Ava with a furrowed brow.

Lucian may have been confused, but I knew what had happened, clear as day: we’d been rumbled. Seluna had somehow realized that this wasn’t really Cali. I knew the second Ava had been forced to “choose” that they’d know.

The prince shook his head. “I don’t understand. It *is* Caliana. I know it. Unless she has an identical twin that I wasn’t aware of, this has to be her. My goddess, is it possible that you are somehow mistaken—”

“My only mistake has been relying on you,” Dani snapped, though it was really Seluna speaking. “This is not Caliana, that much I know. There was no connection to the false choice she made. No surge of magic or *due destini* bonds that would have fed my own magic.”

But Lucian didn’t look convinced. “You must look at her. It is Caliana. I know it is. I am certain it is her.”

“It is not!” Dani screamed. “I shall not argue with fools.”

“I’m not a fool!” Lucian responded hotly. “I know it is her. I brought her here, just as you requested. I have done all you’ve asked of me—”

As they continued to argue, I glanced around the room. It might be time to make a move. At some point, Lucian was going to cave and agree that this wasn’t Cali, and then what? They might blame Ava, who was wearing Cali’s face. They might blame us all. And what would that look like?

Though I knew that Lucian and Seluna still needed Greyson and me for their creepy-ass ceremony, they wouldn’t need Ava, and they’d made it clear murder wasn’t off the table here.

My wolf growled within me. My instinct was to protect Ava. It was always there, but it had received an electric jolt when she’d chosen me. The whole thing had been surreal. I knew she wasn’t really Cali, but she looked just like her, and for a moment there, I’d let myself imagine that it *was* her, and that Cali had finally chosen me over Greyson. It was what I wanted, and it was what I knew would eventually happen.

But today, it was a fantasy. Ava wasn’t Cali. I didn’t feel the same about Ava. But… I had felt *something* when she’d chosen me. Something that my wolf had reacted to. He’d felt good—triumphant. Like I’d just won a prize. My instincts told me to protect her, and the mate bond between us was still there. I couldn’t deny that. And I’d be damned if I was going to let Lucian harm a hair on her head.

Lucian turned to look at Greyson. “Well, it appears we have a situation here. What did you do with her?”

“Who?” Greyson asked, playing dumb.

“Where is Caliana?” Lucian snapped, his face turning red.

Greyson shook his head. “You’re both delusional. Cali’s right there. Just look at her—”

“This isn’t what we agreed to!” Lucian exploded, fury radiating from him like waves of heat. “How dare you interfere with my Luna ceremony? I have grown impatient with the defiance of the Redwood wolves. Your impudence will bring you nothing but destruction. I am a prince, and my word is law! Everyone listens when I speak, and you will too, or you will feel the wrath of my displeasure!”

I looked at Ava and saw the tension on her face.

*Don’t do anything rash*, I told her. *We’re going to get out of this.*

She took a shuddering breath. *I won’t do anything until you give me a sign. I don’t want anything to happen to you, X.*  
 There were always going to be trust issues between us, but in that moment, I believed her. When Lucian had believed she was Cali, she’d chosen me, knowing that Lucian would’ve tried to kill me if she’d chosen Greyson. Everything she was doing was to protect me.

*I have no idea what Lucian and Seluna expected to happen*, I told her, *but it’s safe to assume they didn’t get it. They still need something from us, though. We can use that against them to buy some time.*

She nodded, understanding what I was saying. *They don’t need me.*

I could see the resignation in her eyes, and my heart gave a strange thump. It looked like she’d already decided that she was going to sacrifice herself in order to save the rest of us.

*Stop*, I said firmly. *I said not to do anything rash.*

*X—*

*No. I’m not going to lose you in this. The witches should be here any minute. We’re far from done here.*

She looked at me, hard. *I trust you. And I’ll do my best.* Then she turned to Lucian. “I am Caliana,” she said, in a dead-on Cali impression. “Don’t you remember me?”

I looked over at Greyson. What the hell were we going to do here?

Lucian was looking between Ava and Seluna. It was clear he was frustrated and getting overwhelmed—and worst of all—losing patience with the situation. Lucian hadn’t ever demonstrated an ability to regulate his emotions, and it was only a matter of time before he just blew up.

So I examined my options. There weren’t many, so it didn’t take much time. I had been in worse situations before, but in those, the risk had only been to myself. This situation was harder, because I had to consider what could happen to Greyson, Ava, and Dani if I acted.

Moving only my eyes, I glanced around. I thought I could probably distract the guy holding the blade to my neck and fight my way free. I could probably take out a few more, besides. Greyson could probably take a few more. Ava didn’t have a knife at her throat anymore, so she could shift and take them by surprise. She was a good fighter, and good to take another few Vanguard wolves down.

Then the problem became getting out of this place alive. I looked around, taking in more of the room. There were at least a dozen more Vanguard wolves clustered in the dining room, standing beneath the sparking chandelier. The three of us versus all of them—they weren’t impossible odds, but they didn’t seem good enough to justify the risk. I wasn’t going to die here, not without seeing the real Cali one more time.

“Where’s my sister?” Lucian screamed, looking panicked. “Aysel!”

Aysel, who’d been standing against the wall near a far door, strode toward her brother. “Lucian,” she said sharply. “Get yourself together and stop acting like an infant.”

“Where have you been? I was looking for you—”

“If you keep yelling at me like that, I’m going to walk away,” she warned.

Lucian looked angry. “I want you to get that warlock on the phone. Right *now*. I don’t care what it costs me.”

Aysel pressed her lips together in a disapproving way but pulled out her phone.

What the hell was Lucian talking about? A warlock? I shot a glance at Greyson, who looked just as confused as I was. Was Lucian talking about Charon?

“Get him on the phone!” Lucian was still ranting. “He will answer to me.”

Why the hell did Lucian want a warlock? Was he going to have him cast spells on us? Spells to do what?

The silver lining in the situation—if I was really looking for one—was that if it was Charon that Lucian was trying to call, he wouldn’t be able to put a spell on Greyson. Now I wished we’d taken the same protective measures for me.

“What’s taking so long?” Lucian bellowed.

Aysel looked pained. “He’s not picking up. Do you want me to leave a voicemail asking him to call back?”

“Then *find* me another warlock!” Lucian shouted.

Lucian was losing it more and more every moment, but that was strangely encouraging. I figured the bigger the tantrum, the more distracted he was going to be, and the easier he’d be to surprise.

“Stop!”

The yell startled me, and I looked up quickly. It was Dani yelling—speaking as Seluna, of course.

“I have had enough of this!”

“My goddess?” Lucian said quaveringly, apparently forgetting that he’d just been in the middle of a princely temper tantrum.

“If you can’t see the obvious, then I will show you myself,” she snarled. Seluna waved her hand at Ava, who began to tremble.

For a brief, strange moment, I could see both Cali’s face and Ava’s face, like two photographs laid on top of each other. Then Cali’s face faded away, leaving only Ava standing there looking dazed and hurt, and groaning like she’d been punched.

“Now do you see?” Seluna demanded, pointing at Ava.

Lucian, shaking with rage, stared at Ava. He whipped around to address his guards. “Take them! All of them. To the dungeon. Now.”

Two guards descended on Ava, and the guards holding me gave me a shove. As we were shunted out the door, I could hear Lucian screaming again.

“Get me that warlock! We are finding the real Caliana Hart, right now!”

# Episode 2693

The GPS on my phone said we weren’t far now from Haystack Rock. I was glad we were close, but I was still nervous. I kept thinking about how my mom had assured me that she’d be fine going back into the Fae world. I *wanted* to believe that she would be safe, but I had some doubts. And her explanation had sounded a little like a quick and easy excuse, just so I wouldn’t worry about her.

I gave my head a little shake, trying to rid myself of the thought of anything horrible happening to my mom. She was going to be fine. She had better be. I had already gone into the Fae world and gone through a ridiculous amount of bullshit to save her, and the last thing I wanted was to undo all that. And I didn’t want to have to go in search of *another* moon buttercup, for the love of god.

*But what about Dad?* a small voice in my head asked. I frowned at the thought. How was my dad going to feel about being in the Fae world? I didn’t know the answer to that question, and I worried it like a hangnail.

“What snacks did you bring?” I asked, turning to Torin. I knew he had a bag of food, though I was surprised he’d been able to find a moment to grab anything at all as we’d hurried out the door at the pack house.

“I’ve got Chex Mix and trail mix. Just pick a mix,” he said brightly.

I looked at the snack size bags in each of his hands, debating which one to choose.

“This one’s sweet, this one’s salty,” Torin said helpfully.

“We still have a bit to go,” Dad said from the front seat. “Why don’t we play the license plate game?”

“*Dad*,” I groaned.

“What’s the license plate game?” Torin asked, looking interested.

“We used to play it on family trips when Cali was little,” Dad said. “It’s easy. You just have to find a license plate from every state. Come on, pumpkin,” he added cajolingly.

“Okay,” I said, smiling. It did sound fun—I’d always loved playing the license plate game. “Hawaii and Alaska were always the hardest to find, but that was in the Midwest. We might have better luck out here in Oregon.”

“That’s the spirit!” Dad said, smiling.

“That one says Washington!” Artemis said, but as she pointed at the car to her left, our car swerved out of our lane and toward the Washington car.

I gripped the edge of my seat and swallowed hard. “Maybe let’s just stick to finding the license plates right in front of the car. Otherwise we’re never going to make it to Haystack Rock.”

“Sorry,” Artemis mumbled, getting the car back into the lane.

I grabbed both the Chex Mix and the trail mix from Torin and looked out the window, searching for more license plates.

“California!” Torin called happily.

“Idaho!” Dad called out.

There were a few long moments of quiet, then:

“Massachusetts!” Dad yelled triumphantly.

Smiling at their excitement for the game, I looked down at my phone. There were no new notifications. I hadn’t expected Greyson or Xavier to reply—I figured they’d be busy—but it had been a while now, and I was starting to get worried that I still hadn’t heard anything.

I wished mind linking worked over distance, so I could check in with them more easily. It would be helpful now, and in a few situations we’d dealt with in the past where communication would have been key.

“Florida?” Torin said hesitantly. “Is that a good one?”

“That’s a great one!” Dad exclaimed. “That’s all the way across the country. Great job, son.”

Torin grinned happily.

I looked out the window, trying to refocus on the game. There wasn’t much more time to play before we arrived at Haystack Rock. We’d made good time—thanks to Artemis’s lead foot. She’d been speeding the entire way, but it had paid off.

We hadn’t had any more issues with the Vanguards either, not since we’d gotten onto the highway. Which was a relief.

“You’re going to want to merge,” my dad said to Artemis, pointing at an upcoming interchange.

And just as Artemis started to move the car across the lanes, the strangest sensation came over me. I didn’t know how, but I immediately knew it was my mate bond. There was something about that certainty that set off alarm bells in my head. My heart started to pound. Then, without warning, a wave of pain crashed over me. It started at my heart center, then fanned out. I gasped at the surprise of it and leaned forward, squeezing my eyes shut, clutching the edges of my seat.

“Cali, sweetheart, are you okay?” Mom’s voice asked. Her hand was on my back, rubbing softly. “Are you feeling carsick?”

I tried to shake my head, but the pain stopped me. It was nearly paralyzing, and it felt unlike anything I’d ever felt before.

“Yeah, I feel like I’m going to throw up,” I mumbled, barely able to get the words out.

These must have been the magic words, because there was a flurry of motion and voices behind me.

“Pull over,” someone said tensely.

The car jolted, and there was some kind of commotion going on around me, but I couldn’t pay attention to any of it. I felt like I was barely holding myself together by the seams, and if I let go, I’d just fall apart. So I had to focus. It was a struggle, but I kept breathing—*in and out, in and out*. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I wondered if I was having a heart attack.

I felt the car come to a stop, and the door opened. A wave of cold air engulfed me, and I leaned toward it, stumbling out onto the road. I couldn’t get my feet under me, and I dropped to my knees.

“Cali?” Mom said, coming around the car. Her voice was thin with worry. “Cali, sweetheart? What’s happening?”

I sucked in gulps of cold air. It felt good, and I was grateful for it. “It’s the mate bond,” I finally managed to get out. “Something with the mate bond.”

“The mate bond?” Mom repeated, sounding perplexed.

Beneath the pain and the dizziness, my heart was throbbing hard. Greyson and Xavier. Where were they? What was happening to them? Were they in danger?

I had felt something like this once before, with Xavier, but this was so much more intense. That was how I knew this involved both of them. I was certain of that, too. They were in danger, and I had to do something.

“We have to turn around,” I gasped out.

I opened my eyes and looked around. Artemis had joined Mom, and she looked worried.

“Turn around?” she asked.

I nodded. “Now.”

“No, we can’t do that,” she said firmly. “We have to take you to the Fae world.”

I took a deep breath, trying to get my thoughts in order. “Something is going on with Xavier and Greyson. They’re in danger.” Every fiber of my being hurt, but I had to keep talking. I had to get to them. “We have to turn around and go back.”

But Artemis shook her head. “If they’re in danger, that’s all the more reason to try to keep you safe.”

“Artemis—”

“It’s what they asked us to do!” Artemis said sternly.

I looked up at Mom. “Help me up.”

“Cali—”

“I’m going to try to walk this off,” I said, trying to catch my breath. Now my heart was beating like a hummingbird in my chest. What was going on with me? This had come out of nowhere. “Maybe this is nothing. Maybe it’s just because we’re separated and I’m worried.”

Mom looked worried, but she grasped my hands and helped me to my feet. Then she put a hand beneath my elbow and let me lean on her as I took a careful step.

“I can do it,” I said breathlessly, trying to take all my own weight. I was trying to breathe deeply, but the pain was still strong, and hot as fire.

I tried to remember how it had felt when I’d blacked out in the woods. That had been scary, but this was a different feeling. I still didn’t know what had caused that, but I had some kind of internal knowledge that recognized this pain for what it was—the mate bond. It’s something I’d felt in Portland with Greyson, too.

Mom let go of my arm, and I kept walking, my steps slow and methodical, as though I was just learning how to do it. I’d barely made it a few steps when I heard a familiar popping sound.

I looked up—startled—to see Charon standing right in front of me.

I stared at him for a wild moment. “What are you doing here?”

# Episode 2694

I stared at the figure in front of me, taking in the shaggy hair and wrinkled clothes. It was like my brain couldn’t process the information. Was Charon *really* standing in front of me? Or was I just imagining him? It was hard to know the answer, because I was in so much pain it was getting hard to think straight.

Then he started toward me, and—freaked out—I stumbled backward. Okay, he definitely *seemed* real.

The expression on his face was grave as he looked at me. “I’m sorry about this, Cali.”

I was baffled. “Sorry about what? What are you doing here? What are you talking about?”

He shrugged. “You have to understand, I was offered a price I couldn’t say no to.”

“What?” I asked, struggling to understand amidst the burning pain I felt. “A price for what?”

“I need the money, Cali. Lakini and I didn’t work out, and I’d bitten off more than I can chew. I’m in trouble,” he explained.

“But what about Aysel’s money? You have that, don’t you?” I asked, staring to feel panicked.

He shook his head sorrowfully. “It’s gone. Used up already.”

*Shit*. *Does this guy have a gambling problem?* I wasn’t completely sure what was going on, but instinct told me it was nothing good. Reflexively, I tried to conjure my magic, but I felt it fizzle uselessly. I couldn’t concentrate.

“*Get away from my daughter!*” Mom screamed.

I looked over to see her charging toward Charon. I had to warn her not to do whatever it was she was going to do. She would always want to defend me, but Charon was a warlock, and she had to be careful. I would never forget how Charon’s magic had almost killed Kira. He was dangerous.

But Mom was coming closer, and I couldn’t get the words out. I was overwhelmed as another wave of agony washed through me, and I started to fall to the ground.

Mom’s hands caught me and pulled me upright. I grasped onto her, gasping in pain.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone,” Charon said warningly. “I just came for Cali.”

Artemis had sprinted over, and now she stepped in front of me, facing the warlock. “Well, you can’t have her.”

Charon looked pained. “I really do hate to do this—”

I tried to reach out to grab Artemis, to pull her back—to protect her—but she took a step toward Charon. “I warned you.”

My dad appeared behind Charon, and I could see he had shifted one arm to its wolf form. “Stay away from my daughter!” he growled.

Charon spun to look at him, his eyes crazed. “Get away from me! All of you!”

Then Artemis moved. She moved so quickly I wasn’t sure it had really happened until Charon collapsed on the ground in a heap, felled by a lightning-fast dropkick.

Torin rushed toward me and took my weight from Mom’s arms. “Let me help you, Cali. I can heal you.”

Almost insensible with pain, I nodded. “Yes,” I breathed.

Torin gathered me into his arms and carried me back toward the car.

Over his shoulder, I could see Artemis holding Charon down to the frozen ground. He was gasping for air as Mom walked toward him.

“Release him,” she said to Artemis.

“No, he’ll come after us—”

“Release him,” Mom repeated.

Artemis looked dubious, but she took her knee from the back of his neck. An instant later, roots had sprung up from the frozen mud and wrapped themselves around Charon’s legs and wrists, holding him to the ground. He struggled against them, but they held him fast.

“Okay, Cali, tell me what’s wrong,” Torin said as he set me gently down on the seat of the car.

“It hurts,” I gasped out.

“Where?”

“All over,” I said, barely managing to get the words out.

Torin took my hand, his expression calm and soothing. “It’s going to be okay. I can help you. Just try to breathe.”

He dropped his head and passed his hand over me, an inch from my body. As his hand moved, the pain began to recede. My muscles unknitted slightly, and I could breathe again.

“Do you feel better?” he asked, looking back at me.

I nodded. “Yes, thank you,” I said, marveling at how my pulse was staring to return to normal.

He smiled at me. “You’re welcome.”

But as he turned and started walking toward where the others were standing, I felt a pulse of pain jolt through me like an electric shock.

Torin turned back when he heard me gasp. “It’s not working?”

I shook my head, barely moving, everything hurt so badly. “It came back.”

Torin dropped to my side again, but before he could do anything, the pain disappeared.

“It’s gone,” I said, baffled. “It’s gone again.”

Torin looked confused, too, but he nodded. “Good.”

But as he rose to walk away, the pain shot through me again.

I reached for his hand. “It helps when you’re nearby. Gets worse when you walk away.”

Torin looked thoroughly confused. “Interesting.” Then he smiled. “I guess we should stick together, then.”

I nodded as the pain started to ease once more. I looked over to see Charon still on the ground, still struggling to break free of the roots Mom had conjured.

“You’re only making matters worse, you know,” he said angrily.

“You want to know what’s worse?” Dad said in a dangerous voice, leaning close to the warlock. He reached for a thick branch lying nearby and broke it across Charon’s chest.

The warlock let out a grunt of surprise and pain, and I stared at Dad, stunned. I’d never seen him act so aggressively before.

Mom reached out and put a hand on his wrist. “Dial it down, honey. He’s held fast. He can’t hurt any of us.”

Face hard with anger, Dad let the broken branch fall from his hands. But he leaned in close again. “Try anything at all, and I’ll finish you.”

“Wow. Cali, your dad has such a bad ass,” Torin said admiringly.

“What?”

“Wait, that’s not right. Your dad *is* a badass,” Torin said, correcting himself.

“Just stop, please,” I begged. But he was right. My dad was a badass. My whole family was badass.

“How are you feeling?” Torin asked, looking down at me.

“Better,” I said, surprised to realize it. “Try walking away, let’s see what happens.”

As Torin paced slowly away, I braced myself for the pain, but nothing came.

“I’m okay,” I said, surprised. I still didn’t feel one hundred percent, but I felt functional, which was a big improvement.

“Who is that warlock?” Dad asked, striding over to me. “Do you know him?”  
 I nodded. “Kind of. His name is Charon, and he’s done some work for Lucian’s sister. Some shady work, truth be told.”

“We need to get going,” Artemis said, walking back toward the car. “Charon was able to find us, which means others might start finding us too. Let’s get out of here.”

Everyone climbed back into the car, but there was a slight slowdown when Dad insisted on driving.

“I’m doing fine,” Artemis insisted.

“You are, but I’ll take it from here,” Dad said.

Artemis rolled her eyes but handed over the keys.

“Hang on, I forgot something.” Dad tossed the keys in the car and walked back toward the warlock, picking up another thick branch on the way. He used it to hit Charon, who slumped back, knocked out.

“Let’s go,” Dad said in a business-like way, walking back to the car. I couldn’t believe my dad—my dad who researched things like how to keep butter cold when making croissants—had knocked out a warlock without a second thought.

Once we were heading toward Haystack Rock again, Mom turned to look at me. “Are you okay, sweetheart?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m feeling a lot better. I don’t know what that was about, but whatever was threatening the mate bond—or my mates—feels like it’s passed.”

Mom nodded and turned back around, leaving me to think about this. What *had* the threat been? Whatever it was must have been awful to have caused me that much distress.

I pulled out my phone again, but there were still no messages. I was starting to get worried, but I knew I had to trust my mates—just like they trusted me. My instincts wanted me to turn the car around to find them, but even if I could do that, I’d be putting everyone at risk—including them. I wouldn’t do that—even though waiting to hear from them was killing me.

A gasp from the front seat yanked me out of my reverie.

“What is that?” Dad asked suddenly.

I looked past him out the windshield, and in an instant saw what he was asking about.

“That’s it,” I said, a smile spreading over my face. “That’s Haystack Rock.”

“That’s it?” he asked, squinting at it.

I nodded. “We made it.”

# Episode 2695

**Greyson**

The dungeon cell the Vanguard wolves had thrown us into was dark and bleak. It was quiet too, with nothing but the sound of Xavier and Ava breathing beside me. That, and the sound of my heartbeat pounding in my ears. I’d already tried the door. Xavier had tried the door. Ava had tried the door. It was hopeless. Even if we all shifted, we wouldn’t be able to break it down. It was locked, strong as hell, and—worst of all—barred with silver. Until someone opened it, we weren’t going anywhere.

I ran a frustrated hand through my hair. We’d been so close to pulling it off. So close to tricking Lucian. He had believed us. It had been Seluna—living inside Dani—who’d found us out.

The only good thing was that whatever Lucian had planned for us wasn’t going to work. Not now, with Cali safely in the Fae world. Despite the grim reality of being locked in a Vanguard dungeon, knowing Cali was headed toward safety made everything seem a little better.

Xavier had started pacing, his agitation showing on his face. “We have to do *something*,” he muttered.

“What can we do?” I asked, looking around. It wasn’t a rhetorical question; I was open to suggestions.

“I don’t know, but the longer we’re in this fucking place, the less we can do to protect Cali if these bastards find her,” he said, his voice tense.

I glanced over at Ava, wondering how it felt for her to hear Xavier talking about Cali. She had risked her life to help Xavier, and now he was thinking only about Cali. I had no love for Ava, but she had helped us out, and that had to hurt.

Her face was pale, but her expression was unreadable, and she didn’t directly address it.

“We *can* do something. I say the next time a guard comes in to check on us, we should shift and attack. Try to fight our way out of here,” she suggested.

I’d already thought about this, and I shook my head. “That’s not going to work.”

“Why not?” she asked.

“We can’t do anything until we know Dani is safe,” I told her. “If we try anything, I’m sure Lucian will use her against us.”

Ava leaned back against the damp wall with a sigh.

“Where the hell are the witches?” Xavier demanded. “I thought they were supposed to show up as backup. What happened to them?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. I’d been wondering the same thing. “Maybe they’re having trouble tracking Dani.”

Ava looked thoughtful. “The Vanguards want Cali, right?”

“Yeah,” Xavier said warily.

“So what if we gave them Cali?”

I looked at Xavier, and he looked back at me, and one of those rare currents of perfect agreement passed between us.

“That’s not going to happen,” we said together.

Ava rolled her eyes. “Oh my god, relax. I don’t mean we really turn Cali over to Lucian, but what if we pretend to cooperate with them and help them find her?” She shrugged. “It might buy us some time. Which we could probably use.”

“How would we do that?” Xavier asked. “How do we *pretend* to cooperate?”

“Just pretend that you don’t know where she is, but you want to find her for them. Throw them off the trail,” Ava said.

“I don’t know. I doubt Lucian—or more likely Seluna—would fall for that. She figured out you were you pretty fast. And it sounds like they already have a plan B. They’re calling a warlock,” I reasoned. I rubbed my head. “Where are our witches? We need some magic of our own. Big Mac was so confident they could do this. Something must have gone wrong, otherwise they’d be here already. Where the hell are they?”

Before anyone could hazard an answer to this, the door of the cell opened and two guards walked in. And behind them was Aysel.

She stepped forward, and her gaze swept around, taking me in. “I’m sorry about this,” she said. “But I did warn you that my brother had made plans.”

“I guess you did,” I said flatly.

Aysel turned to Ava. “It’s too bad we couldn’t trust each other, Ava. Together, we both could have gotten what we wanted.”

Ava just stared at her, and Aysel shifted her attention back to me.

“Come with me.”

“What about my brother? What about Ava?” I asked. Whatever else, I wasn’t going to leave them to be harmed.

“Nothing will happen to them—as long as you don’t try anything foolish,” Aysel said cryptically. “The guards will remain stationed just outside the door. If we don’t return in ten minutes, then there’s nothing I can do to guarantee their safety. Now come with me, Greyson.”

I bristled. I didn’t like being ordered around, and I didn’t like being forced to make decisions. But right now, it didn’t seem like I had a lot of options. Besides, I had to admit that I was slightly curious about what Aysel was up to.

It was clear that *something* was going on between the siblings. First Aysel had told me what Lucian had in mind for me, then I’d noticed some discord between them when they’d discovered Ava’s true identity. Maybe their tight-knit relationship was finally starting to fray. Ever since Aysel had helped me escape after they’d kidnapped Cali, things had seemed tense between her and her brother.

I supposed it was bound to happen. They were both too volatile for any long-lasting peace.

I shot a glance at Xavier, who shrugged in a “why the hell not?”kind of way. I followed Aysel out the door.

Outside the dungeon, Aysel hooked her arm through mine and led me along the corridor, and I decided to test my theory about her brother.

“Any chance you’re going to tell me why your brother is letting me out of captivity to take a leisurely stroll?”

“My brother doesn’t know about this. He doesn’t know I’m down here. And frankly, I don’t care,” Aysel said.

I thought about this, wondering how I could exploit this growing rift between them. Now, if possible, since it might be the only chance I got.

I decided to give it a try. “It must be hard to take orders from your own brother all the time.”

Aysel stopped and looked at me. “I don’t take orders,” she clarified.

I raised an eyebrow. “You could have fooled me.”

She looked offended. “I do what Lucian wants, but only when it suits my own needs.”

“And what are your needs?” I asked.

Aysel smiled but didn’t answer. She hooked her arm through mine again and kept walking. “Charon is weak. You tell him the right price, and he’ll do anything. He’s tracking Cali even now, and if he manages to find her, she’ll be dragged back here and the ceremony will be conducted again.”

My whole body tensed at this information, and I thought fast, wondering if the warlock would be able to find Cali before they made it to the Fae portal. And if he did find them, would Artemis and the others be able to protect her?

“Is that what you want, then?” I asked.

“What?” she asked, looking at me curiously.

“To have a moon goddess as the Luna of your pack? Wouldn’t that lower your standing?”

Aysel’s pale face flushed. “Seluna is not acting like the moon goddess I’ve spent my life worshipping.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Exactly what I say,” Aysel snapped.

I noted her skepticism and pushed a little at it. “Did it over occur to you that your goddess might not be what you think she is?”

Aysel stopped again and looked at me, her eyes wide. “What do you mean?”

“Seluna isn’t a goddess,” I said frankly. “She’s a demon. She’s been lying to all of you.”

Aysel looked freaked out, but she shook her head. “No, that’s not true. It couldn’t be true,” she said stubbornly. It almost sounded like she was saying it more to herself than to me.

“It is,” I said firmly.

“How could you possibly know that?” she snapped.

“Because we performed an exorcism—”

“*What?*”

I nodded. “And during that exorcism, Seluna revealed herself to one of our witches as a demon.” I gave Aysel a long look. “I don’t think you’re as surprised about this as you think you are. I think you knew something was strange. You already admitted Seluna wasn’t acting like the moon goddess you were expecting.”

“Yes, but…” Aysel started, looking distressed.

“Is this what you want?” I asked, pushing hard. “For your only brother to bind himself to a demon? To let that demon loose within your pack? To turn your palace into the demon’s playground? To make her your Luna, so you are answerable to her?” I grabbed Aysel by the shoulders. “What do I have to do to convince you that I’m telling you the truth?”

# Episode 2696

Dad pulled the car into a small, deserted parking lot near the sand, and, as soon as I opened the door, the sharp salt smell of the ocean washed over me. I took a deep breath, drinking it in. I was still feeling woozy, and the cold air cleared my head.

I stepped out and looked at the huge hulking mound in the midst of the crashing waves. Now we just had to get out to that stupid rock. We were so freaking close, and once we got to it, I’d be safe. Charon wouldn’t be able to get to me. The Vanguards wouldn’t be able to get to me. No one would. Not unless they had a Fae to guide them, and I doubted very much they’d be able to find one of those. And even if they did, what self-respecting Fae would willingly help a pack of werewolves?

Artemis, Torin, Mom, and I were the only Fae I knew who would help werewolves—though to be fair, I didn’t know that many Fae to begin with—and we were going into the Fae world, taking Dad along with us. There weren’t going to be any spare Fae hanging around the help the Vanguards.

As I stepped away from the car, I could see that Dad had parked haphazardly, taking up about three spaces. But it was cold and windy and—as we were one of the very few cars in the lot—it probably didn’t matter much. Besides, we were in a hurry.

“Cali, how are you feeling? Can I help you?” Torin asked, coming up beside me. “I could carry you?”

“Oh, no, that’s okay,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m feeling a lot better now, thanks—”

But Torin, not listening, was already scooping me into his arms. His strength always surprised me, and he hardly seemed to struggle as he hurried onto the sand and down the beach, my family trailing quickly behind him.

We were so, so, *so* close, I could practically smell the Fae world. I wondered if I’d see my grandmother, Hera, while I was there. I looked over at Mom, whose eyes were on her feet. Mom hadn’t seen Hera in over twenty years, since she’d left the Fae world to live on the outside.

I glanced up at Torin, whose face was set against the sharp bite of the wind whipping off the water. What would it be like for him to go back? Would it remind him of Astrid? Was he going to want to stay?

Artemis was beside Torin now, looking around, checking for anyone who might have followed us. What about her? Would she want to stay? She’d spoken about going back before.

I prayed she wouldn’t. Artemis was my sister, and I needed her—but I was getting ahead of myself. If everything went as expected, this trip to the Fae world would be short. If Greyson and Xavier were able to rescue Dani and get her out of the Vanguard palace, then it would soon be safe for me to return to the human world.

“We’re in luck,” I said as we approached the water. “The tide is out.”

That meant the walk to the portal wouldn’t be as difficult as it could have been. It wasn’t nearly as hard as I remembered it being—though being carried by Torin probably didn’t hurt either.

There were a few other people near the rock—tourists, probably—but they didn’t pay much attention to us as we walked to the ancient formation.

Dad looked skeptical as he peered at the rock. “Is this really a portal to another dimension?”

“Yeah,” I said, as Torin set me gingerly back on my feet.

We made our way around the rock to the far side, to the place where I remembered the entrance being.

Artemis nodded. “This is it. This is where I tried to hide the Orb.”

Dad still looked skeptical. “So what do we do now? Is there some kind of ritual or something? I don’t see a door. How are we supposed to get into the thing? Is there some kind of teleportation service? Like an interdimensional Uber?”

“Just relax,” I muttered, staring at the rock. “You’ll see soon enough.”

I held out my hand to Artemis, palm up. “You need to cut me.”

Artemis frowned. “Why?”

“The portal only opens with Fae blood,” I reminded her.

Artemis shook her head. “I’ll do it, then.”

“Artemis, it’s fine—”

“You’re still recovering from whatever weird thing just happened to you. You need your strength,” she said.

“Artemis, stop. I can do this. I’m not giving a pint here, it’s just a little cut—”

“It’s done.”

Both Artemis and I looked over at Torin, who held up his bloody palm.

“I got it. We just need the item,” he said in a business-like tone of voice.

“Here,” Mom said. She took off her necklace and held it against the rock, keeping it secure in her hand.

The surface of the rock seemed to shift, then it shimmered.

I glanced around, making sure none of the tourists were watching. We weren’t here to put on a show.

Artemis pulled her knife from her belt. “I’m going in first,” she said, and she stepped into the portal.

I opened my mouth to tell her *I* was going to go first when there was a sudden rush of wind. It pushed hard against me, and I lost my balance, slipping on the wet stones beneath my feet. I reached out for Torin to catch myself before I fell, but someone else grabbed me from behind.

I craned around, expecting to see my mother, but it was Charon holding me fast.

“I’m sorry about this,” he said quickly. “But you didn’t need to make it so difficult.”

“Let go of me!” I screamed, twisting around, trying to break free of his grasp. But Charon was strong and held on tight.

Artemis had heard my scream and—halfway through the portal—turned to come back. Dad rushed toward me, but Charon blasted him back with a jolt of magic. This sent Dad slamming back into the rock, and he crashed into Artemis.

The two of them fell backward and disappeared into the portal.

“Dad!” I screamed, trying to lunge after him.

“Cali!” Mom yelled, making a grab for me.

Charon went to push her back, but his feet slipped, and we all tumbled down into the rocky water. I had just begun to scream when a wind started to roar in my ears and a strange feeling overtook me. Haystack Rock disappeared, and the scream died in my throat.

I looked around in horror. I had been blipped back at the Vanguard palace!

Yanking with all my might, I pulled away from Charon. “What have you done? Why did you bring me here?”

Charon leaned against an elaborately papered wall, looking tired and ragged. “I’m sorry, Cali—”

“Stop apologizing and tell me why you brought me here,” I demanded.

He gave me a long look. “Surely you must know the answer to that.”

My stomach knotted. “How much did Lucian pay you? We’ll pay you more. Just get me back to Haystack Rock, back to my family!”

“I can’t,” Charon said, looking wretched.

“Why not?!”

“I already made the deal with Lucian. I had no choice,” he said, his voice high and plaintive.

I was so sick of his shit. “You *always* have a choice, Charon. You made the wrong one. But if you don’t take me back to Haystack Rock right this second, I’m going to blast your ass.”

Charon’s eyes went wide, and he backed himself harder against the wall, looking terrified. “Don’t,” he said. “Please don’t. Listen, even if I wanted to take you back, I couldn’t. Moving people around like that is no mean feat. Haystack Rock is far, and I used up almost all of my energy chasing after you.”

“You should at least try,” I snapped, feeling frustrated.

“I can’t,” he said again.

Okay, I’d had enough of this. Screw this guy. I raised my hands and felt my magic starting to build within me. He’d blasted my father—I didn’t even know if Dad was okay—and I was going to blast this asshole so hard he was never going to be able to perform magic again.

I was advancing, the feel of my magic building inside me, when the door opened.

I looked over to see Lucian standing in the doorway, an amused look in his face. When I looked back at Charon, he gave me one last frown before blipping out of the room.

*Fucking liar!*

“I have to admit I’m a little surprised, Caliana. I didn’t think you were the vengeful type. Today is just full of surprises.” He strode purposefully over to me and grabbed my arm, and not gently. His eyes were a little crazed as he looked down at me. “Now, come with me. We have a ceremony to finish.”

# Episode 2697

**Xavier**

I stared at the closed dungeon door—the one I knew was reinforced with silver bars—and thought about the guards I knew stood outside it.

“Why the hell did Aysel come for Greyson?” I wondered aloud. I turned to Ava. “Do you know? You know her better than I do. What do you think she’s up to? Do you think the princess is having second thoughts about Lucian’s fucked-up plans?’

Ava shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s possible, I guess. But I think there might be another explanation.”

“What?”

Ava shook her long curtain of hair away from her face. “Aysel is obsessed with Greyson. She might be so determined to get him that she’s willing to cross her brother to do it.”

I thought about that, and how she could have been describing herself and how she felt about me. But I didn’t say that out loud. The air in the dungeon was tense enough. I turned and started pacing again.

“Where the hell are the witches?” I muttered. “They should have been here. I never should have trusted them. We were waiting on them, but now we’re trapped in a fucking dungeon, we don’t have Dani, and I have no idea how the hell we’re going to get out of this.”

Frustration threatened to overwhelm me, and I walked faster and faster across the small space. I needed to get out of here. I needed to shift and sprint through the forest. I couldn’t think in this small space. I felt like I was going to crawl out of my skin.

Ava watched me for a moment. “Have you considered the idea that we might *not* get out of this?”

“What?” I snapped.

“Have you considered that Lucian might go through with his plans to kill us?”

“If he does, I’m planning on taking that little prince with me,” I growled.

“Stop, X,” Ava said softly. She shook her head. “You don’t have to prove that you’re an Alpha. Not to me. I’m asking if you’ve considered that this might be the end. For both of us.”

I looked over at her in surprise. She was sitting, her back against the stone wall, her knees pulled up to her chest and her arms wrapped around them, as though she was trying to keep herself warm. She looked tired and small and almost helpless.

The urge to protect her—the *instinct*—came rushing back to me. My wolf howled, urging me to go to her and comfort her.

I thought about what she said. If this was the end, what would that mean? Did I owe her some kind of acknowledgement of that? And of what she had done to get here? When Lucian had asked, she had chosen me, ultimately. I knew that part hadn’t been for show.

I stepped toward her, standing over her. “You didn’t have to do all this. And—for what it’s worth—I’m sorry you got dragged into this.”

She shook her head. “I wanted to do this, Xavier. I offered, remember? I’m not naïve. I knew what the risks were when I volunteered.” She looked up at me. “And I’d do it again.”

I frowned. “Why?”

She got to her feet. Even standing, she was so small that the top of her head barely reached my chin, and my wolf felt that urge to protect her again. She was so close to me. Only inches away.

“Do you really not know why I did it?” she asked quietly. “I think you do.”

I thought back to when she’d first appeared as Cali. She’d claimed that she was doing it for the pack, and for me. I’d questioned her motives. Of course I had. Whatever Ava did always seemed to have some benefit for Ava. But now, looking around at where we’d ended up, I wasn’t so sure I’d been right about that.

Something of what I was thinking must have shown on my face, because Ava’s mouth tightened.

“I meant what I said. I did it for you, Xavier. Everything I do is for you.”

My wolf was pushing me, begging me to touch her.

“You know I love Cali,” I said gruffly.

“I know,” she said, her voice sad, “but I love you. I’m never going to give up on you. And you shouldn’t give up on yourself.”

Without meaning to, I found myself leaning closer to her.

*Show her how much you care*, my wolf was begging. *This might be it. We may never have another chance*.

I was struggling to resist these feelings, but it was a battle. These suppressed feelings for Ava were rising up, stronger than ever. Maybe it had to do with the physical closeness, or maybe it was the dire situation we were in. I *wanted* her. I had to admit that. I wanted her, but I knew I couldn’t act on that want. I didn’t want to. I loved Cali. Cali was who had brought my wolf back, who had brought me back literally from the brink. Cali was my whole world. What would she think of what Ava had done to protect her?

The door opened suddenly, snapping the tension between us. Thank god.

Greyson walked in and raised a surprised eyebrow at me, but he didn’t speak.

Aysel was standing next to her guards, and she looked at Greyson. “You let me know, Greyson Evers.”

Greyson didn’t answer, and the door slammed shut.

I turned to Ava, wanting to close the loop. “Don’t you give up on yourself either, Ava.”

Then I stepped away from her. I needed to focus on the problem at hand—getting the hell out of this place. I didn’t need to create new problems.

“What the hell was that all about?” I asked Greyson. “What did Aysel want? Is she breaking with Lucian? Is she going to help us? Or was that just an offer for a last goodbye or something?”

Ava stepped next to me, her shoulder against mine, waiting for Greyson’s answer.

He motioned for us to follow and moved as far from the door as possible. “Keep your voices down,” he hissed.

“What did she say?” I asked again.

“She offered to help us,” Greyson said in a whisper, “but there are conditions.”

“Of course,” Ava muttered.

“What were the conditions?” I wondered.

“She’ll only help us if we take her with us,” Greyson said.

That surprised a chuckle out of me. “You’re kidding.”

Greyson shook his head.

“Is she so obsessed with you that she’s willing to throw her own brother under the Seluna bus?” I demanded.

Greyson looked unsettled. “I don’t know, and I really don’t care. All I know is that if Aysel is willing to help get us the hell out of here, then I’m going to let her. Whatever happens after that is something I can deal with later. When I’m not trapped in a fucking dungeon.”

“Do you trust her?” Ava asked.

I glanced over at her. It was a good question, and one that needed to be asked, but it was also complicated. I hadn’t trusted Ava, but I was starting to, now. It surprised me to realize it, but it had been like a slow drip, building up over time.

Greyson shook his head. “No, not at all. I don’t trust any Vanguard wolves, but I don’t see that we have much of a choice here. It’s not like we have a lot of options—unless either of you have come up with something,” he added wryly.

“The only other option I see is playing along to whatever degree, and then choosing a moment to attack and try to fight our way out,” I said.

But Greyson was already shaking his head. “Think about it, man. How many Vanguard wolves are running around this place? We don’t have a chance. We’ll be killed trying, and then Dani will stay in Lucian’s hands. And I’m not leaving here without her. We did that once before, and it was a mistake.”

I agreed with that. “We have to get her out of here. It’s dangerous for her to stay, but it’s also a matter of fucking principle at this point.”

“Which means that we’re going to have to try to trust Aysel,” Greyson said with a sigh. He didn’t look like he relished the prospect. “I think we’re agreed that there’s no other way.”

Before any of us could respond to this cheery statement, there was a noise on the far side of the room, and we all looked over in alarm.

There was a small popping noise, and Okorie materialized out of thin air. We all stared at him in dumbstruck silence as he looked back at us, a smug, self-satisfied expression on his face.

“*Ta-da*,” he said, his tone wry. He looked around and raised an eyebrow at us. “So, the news is that there’s another way out of here. Anyone want to come with me?”

# Episode 2698

I jerked my arm, trying to break Lucian’s grip. I couldn’t let this happen! I was *done* with goddess ceremonies and every other creepy, invasive thing Lucian wanted me to do. If I could just get away, maybe I could make a run for it—

“Caliana, enough!” Lucian snarled. His grip on me was unforgiving, almost bruising in its intensity. He pretty much dragged me up to the rotunda. “Really, this is most inappropriate.”

“Right,” I breathed, dragging my feet and trying to break free. “*I’m* the one who’s being inappropriate.”

I’d given Lucian a hundred chances to prove himself as something other than an entitled creep, but helping Seluna possess me—and then treating my body like it was his and Seluna’s to use as they liked—was the final straw. I could barely stand to be here with him, and for a potent string of seconds I seriously considered trying to gnaw my own arm off if it meant getting away from him.

“You should be pleased,” he continued as he dragged me along. “You’ll forever be revered as the one who helped reunite Seluna with her people. Perhaps I will have your portrait commissioned to add to the gallery in your honor. As a show of gratitude.”

I wasn’t sure which was worse—that he genuinely seemed to believe a portrait in the Vanguard palace gallery was a carrot worth me giving up my body, or that he felt I could honestly be convinced to help him after everything that had happened. Everything he’d done.

But there was no reasoning with Lucian’s brand of twisted entitlement. I’d learned that the hard way. If I wanted him to stop, I’d have to try something else.

“Lucian, you have to listen to me. Seluna is not who you think she is. She isn’t a moon goddess!” I cried. “She’s a demon, and she’s been manipulating you this whole time.”

He froze, and then his expression turned thunderous. “Still you continue with this impudence.” He jerked me along by my arm harder than was necessary, and I stumbled. Pain lanced up my arm where he gripped it. “Don’t you dare disrespect Seluna! After the favor she’s shown you! Your lack of gratitude is very unbecoming.”

We arrived outside the rotunda room, and my heart plummeted to somewhere near my knees. “Please, Lucian! Just wait! You’re making a huge mistake. Please, listen to me. Seluna has deceived you—she’ll turn against you!”

In a blur of a movement, he pulled me against him so we were almost nose to nose. His eyes flashed with barely restrained violence. “I’ve already warned you once. If you dare to disrespect my goddess again, you *will* regret it. Don’t make things worse for yourself, Caliana.”

I jerked back, trying to put all possible distance between us. *Worse? How could anything possibly be worse than this?*

Lucian was hell-bent on doing anything to satisfy the whims of Seluna. There was no getting through to him. He was hopeless. And I couldn’t let myself be made a prisoner any longer. My mates were in grave danger. There was no such thing as *worse*. I dug my heels in again. “Where are Xavier and Greyson?”

“You’ll see them soon enough.”

His words brought me no comfort. I looked around wildly. They had to be here, right? The full force of the Vanguards had fallen on the Redwood pack when Lucian had come to collect me and my mates. Xavier and Greyson had to have given themselves up to save the pack. It was the only logical course of action.

I tried to mind link with them. *Xavier? Greyson?*

Silence answered back. Had Lucian done something to them?

An attendant opened the doors into the rotunda, and I let out a gasp. Dani was standing by the throne, dressed like the goddess Seluna was trying so hard to convince everyone she was. Dani hardly looked like herself anymore, and that alone made my blood run cold.

A group of Vanguard pack members were standing nearby, no doubt protecting Lucian’s precious “goddess.”

“Dani!” I called to her. I hoped she was still in there somewhere, that Seluna hadn’t completely sunk her claws into the young girl.

Lucian’s grip on my arm hardened, and I winced at the bright burst of pain.

“Be silent,” he growled.

I’d never felt particularly comfortable around Lucian, but seeing him like this was something else. The raw edge of his voice, the violence in his touch, the obsessive gleam in his eyes… He looked unhinged. Lucian had always been obnoxious, but in a graceful way. He was dangerous, yes, but he was civilized too.

But this version of him, this harsh Alpha, was a Lucian that Seluna had pushed to the edge.

“What’s happened to you?” I asked.

Something flashed in his eyes. Something I couldn’t quite make out. “*Quiet*,” he hissed.

Then he dragged me toward the throne. Toward Dani.

“Dani!” I called to her. “You have to keep fighting her. You can’t let her win.”

Lucian growled, but I didn’t back down. He was scary as hell, but he clearly still needed me for something. And I wasn’t about to back down from a chance to help my friend.

Dani turned her gaze on me, and I couldn’t suppress the shudder that slipped down my spine. Her stare was so cold, so merciless. Seluna was in charge, then. But did that mean she’d taken complete control? Or was Dani still in there? Trapped in her own body, unable to speak or move freely?

I knew the special kind of hell Dani had to be going through right now, and my heart ached to see someone else trapped in that situation. It wasn’t something I’d have wished on even my worst enemy, the complete violation that came with demon possession.

“Please, Dani! I know you’re still in there! Fight back. Take control of Seluna and show her she can’t just take whatever she wants!”

Dani’s eyes flickered for a moment, the cold and unforgiving stare giving way to something softer, something confused and fearful that broke my heart in two.

*Am I getting through?*

I saw Dani in that expression, fearful and begging for someone to help her.

“That is enough.” Lucian shook me hard enough that my bones rattled. “Stop this now, Caliana!”

I ignored him. “Come on, Dani! I know you can take control.”

If I could urge Dani to fight back like I had, there was a chance she could regain some control. She was a powerful witch, from what I understood—maybe she could even completely take back control, long enough for us to escape.

“Bring her closer,” Dani commanded. She sounded like Dani, but there was an empty, toneless quality to her voice that was chillingly like Seluna.

“Dani, I believe in you,” I said as Lucian dragged me forward. “I know this is scary. Believe me, I get it. But I also know how strong you are. You can do this! You can beat her!”

Her eyes flickered again.

Then they clouded over, and her expression became cold and regal once more.

“You thought you could trick a goddess like me?” Seluna hissed. “You thought you could run away to the Fae world and escape your destiny? There is no fighting this, Caliana. And despite the fact that you’ve proven to be nothing more than a weak, rude host, I still have grand ambitions for you.”

My blood ran cold. “You can keep your grand ambitions. You won’t take my body again!”

She scoffed. “Why would a goddess want to remain in a wretched vessel like you?”

“You’re not a goddess. You’re a demon.”

Seluna reared back and slapped me so hard my head snapped sideways, and I was blinded to everything but the bright-hot pain running up my cheek. The metallic taste of blood burst inside my mouth.

I pulled in a breath and winced. “I know you’re not the one doing this, Dani. I know this isn’t your fault.”

For a moment, it looked like Seluna was going to hit me again. Then Lucian took her hand.

“Let us finish what we started, my love,” he said. “I apologize for bringing the *due destini* mate to the ceremony without properly preparing her.”

He clapped his hands, and another attendant rushed over. They seemed to be in limitless supply.

“The *due destini* mate needs to be bathed and dressed for the ceremony at once,” Lucian said.

“Stop!” Seluna snapped. Then she turned on him, her eyes blazing. “This is a waste of my time. Please tell me you aren’t always this incompetent.”

I blinked. Even though I knew Seluna was the one speaking, it was still so jarring to hear such harsh language coming out of Dani’s mouth.

*Is this what everyone else thought about me when Seluna possessed me?*

“I’m done waiting,” Seluna continued. “The girl is here. There is no reason for useless formalities. Begin the ceremony.”

Lucian looked shocked bordering on scandalized. “The ceremony is part of the ritual, and Caliana’s mates still aren’t present, so—”

“Then fetch them!” Seluna barked.

Lucian gestured to another attendant, who rushed off to do Seluna’s bidding.

Then the Vanguard prince bowed low. “I apologize for upsetting you. I just want to make sure everything is perfect.”

Seluna’s tone softened, sounding much more like Dani’s natural voice. “I appreciate everything you’ve done.” She reached out and stroked his jaw. “I’ve been waiting to be with you for so long. Can you blame me for being impatient?”

Lucian took her hand and kissed it. “Of course not, my beloved.”

I didn’t bother to disguise my frown. *I’m not buying this. She’s playing Lucian, and he’s falling for it!*

Not that I felt bad for him. He deserved everything he got, though I knew better than to point this out. My arm still ached in his grip, and my face throbbed where Seluna had hit me. And that had just been a warning blow. Who knew what she’d do the second time around?

Suddenly, Andrei hurried in. “The Evers brothers are gone!”

# Episode 2699

**Greyson**

I hunkered down in the corner of the cell, watching as a surprised guard did a double take. I couldn’t see Xavier, Ava, or Okorie, but I could feel them. They were crouched down next to me, in plain sight. Or at least, we would have been in plain sight if Okorie hadn’t just cast some kind of invisibility spell on us.

For now, though, the guard couldn’t see what was right in front of him.

“What the hell?” the guard burst out. “How did they… Shit. Andrei is gonna have my ass for this!”

He spun on his heel and raced out of the dungeon, leaving the cell door wide open behind him.

I stood up. “We need to get out of here before they come back with more guards.”

Xavier’s voice seemingly materialized out of thin air, coming from my immediate left. “Sure, but this would all be a hell of a lot easier if we could at least see each other. How are we supposed to escape together if we don’t know where everyone is?”

It was a fair point. “And it’ll probably defeat the purpose of being invisible if the guards can hear us talking to each other…”

Okorie sighed, his voice coming from several feet to my right.

“You werewolves are always so demanding,” the warlock griped. “How the witches put up with it is beyond me.”

“Are you here to help us or not?” I snapped. I didn’t have time to argue with an uppity warlock. We had to make it out of here and escape with Dani, and those two tasks were already near impossible even without wasting time bickering.

“Unfortunately, yes.” Okorie muttered something under his breath that sounded like Latin, and just like he’d materialized in front of us in the cell, we suddenly all materialized in front of each other.

Okorie pointed to the door. “You wanted another way out—there it is.”

“How did you know where to find us?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Oh, that was the easy part. Don’t bother asking for details.”

“Well, thank you for helping us escape,” Ava said.

“I didn’t do it for you—I did it for Dani. She’s my responsibility, and I figured it’d be a hell of a lot easier to break her out of here with three werewolves along for the ride.”

“Did Cali make it to the Fae world?” Xavier asked.

The warlock shrugged again. “I don’t know.”

“You’ll have to do better than that,” I said. “We need to know she’s safe from whatever Lucian and Seluna have planned. If she didn’t get away—”

“I’ll look into it,” Okorie said. “But do you think we can get the hell out of here first? That seems pretty important, too.”

“What about making the deal with Aysel?” Ava asked, her eyes on me. “She could be a valuable asset. An inside connection to whatever crazy stuff Seluna and Lucian have planned.”

“Fuck Aysel,” Xavier said.

“I couldn’t have said it better myself.” I shrugged at Ava. “She could have been useful to us, but I’d rather we not have to make a deal with the devil to get out of here in one piece. And thanks to Okorie”—I nodded at the warlock—“we don’t have to. Now let’s get Dani and get the fuck out of here.”

Despite my best efforts, I still thought on what Ava had said. Aysel *would* have been a valuable asset. But I doubted she would have had a change of heart. We couldn’t risk it. And with Seluna’s claws so deep in Lucian, it seemed like the Vanguard leadership was going off the deep end. Aysel, for her own part, had always seemed more like a figurehead than an actual leader in the pack. Maybe she could see things were going south and knew she’d be better off getting out ahead of it than getting pulled into whatever Seluna had planned?

I shook my head. Even if that were the case, it didn’t matter. Aysel wasn’t an ally, and she sure as shit wasn’t my friend. She’d have to take care of herself, something I had no doubt she was fully capable of doing.

We headed out into the corridor, Xavier and I flanking Ava and Okorie and glancing up and down the hallway for any guards.

“How effective is this invisibility spell?” I asked, my voice low.

“It won’t mask your scents, and it doesn’t muffle any sounds you make.”

“So it’s useless,” Xavier growled.

“You’re out of that cell, aren’t you?” Okorie asked, raising his brows. “Tell me how useless it was to you when the guards looked right through you. But the spell only affects sight. It’s still easy to give yourselves away if you’re not careful. My advice to you? Don’t give yourselves away. I can only do so much.”

I started down the corridor in the direction I thought might lead out of here. I’d been here so many damn times I actually had a pretty good handle on the overall layout, but the place was still a huge maze that I hadn’t fully explored.

Voices sounded around the corner, and shadows lengthened down the hallway, coming closer to us.

“Back against the wall,” I hissed, and we pressed ourselves against the stone as a group of guards rounded the corner and hustled past us. No doubt they’d been tasked with finding and recapturing us. I personally planned to make sure they wouldn’t be successful. But when they failed, they would call more guards. Eventually, everyone in the palace would be on the lookout for us. And the bigger the search party, the more difficult it would be for us to remain undetected—especially once the guards stopped panicking long enough to start tracking our scents.

We had to get out of here before that happened.

I waited until the guards were nothing more than a soft rattle in the distance before motioning the group forward.

“What’s the plan here?” Xavier asked. “We’re invisible; that gives us an advantage. It buys us time to search and could even give us the upper hand in a fight as long as we’re not too outnumbered.”

I didn’t bother to point out that it wouldn’t be very long at all before we were woefully outnumbered. Lucian and Seluna wanted us, which could only mean bad things for us. But it also meant that the Vanguards weren’t just going to give up when they couldn’t easily find us. Lucian was a lot of things, but easily dissuaded was not one of them.

I glanced back at Okorie. “Do you know where Dani is?”

Ava laughed under breath. “The palace is too big to search. We could look for days without finding her.”

“Not if we start in the right place,” Okorie said, then turned back to me. “I believe she’s been brought to the room with the rotunda.”

Xavier stiffened. “Shit.”

Couldn’t have said it better myself. That room held special significance. If Dani was there, did that mean Lucian was still going through with the ceremony?

I frowned. *But that doesn’t make any sense. He needs all three of us—me, Xavier, and Cali. And I’m sure they know by now that Xavier and I are out of the holding cell. But I heard the guards coming to get us for Lucian’s ceremony. How is that possible? Lucian needs Cali to proceed. And Cali—*

My eyes widened, and a sense of foreboding hit me somewhere between my heart and my stomach.

*What if Cali didn’t get away?*

I locked eyes with Okorie. “What about Cali? Is it possible she never made it to the Fae world?”

He shrugged. “I really don’t know. Like I said, I’m here for Dani.”

That wasn’t nearly good enough. I grabbed him by the shoulders. “I need to know!”

“I’ll do a tracking spell, I promise. But first, we have to get out of here.” He pointed upward. “If we head to the roof, we can observe the rotunda room through the skylight. If Dani’s in there, that’ll give me the perfect vantage point for what I need to do, anyway.”

I wanted to drag my feet, to demand that Okorie drop everything and make sure Cali was safe. But I knew he was right—we had to focus on what we knew, and every second we wasted was another opportunity for the Vanguards to capture us again.

We wound our way through the palace, avoiding guards where we could. As we rounded a corner, I ran smack into a patrol guard and had to scramble to knock him out. We stashed him in a nearby room and kept moving.

“I guess being invisible does have its advantages,” Xavier said grudgingly.

After a few more close calls, we reached the top of a tower with a window that opened onto the roof. I led us forward, noting that Xavier held out a hand to help Ava onto the roof.

*What’s going on there?* I pushed the thought away. I’d have plenty of time to worry about Ava and my brother when we got out of here.

Okorie gestured to the large skylight. “That’s the rotunda room.”

We crawled up to the edge and peered down through the skylight. We had a birds’ eye view of the room, where Lucian was talking heatedly to Andrei. I smirked. He was probably getting chewed out for letting Xavier, Ava, and me escape.

“There,” Okorie whispered, pointing toward the throne. “There’s Dani. I’ll let Big Mac and Kira know that I’m in position.”

I still didn’t know what the witches were planning, but as I was about to ask, a strange sensation suddenly tugged at my chest.

*Cali.*

My mate bond was stirring with urgent intensity. Why now?

I looked at Xavier. “Do you feel that?”

He nodded, his brow furrowed with concern.

I grabbed Okorie’s arm. “Find Cali. Now.”

I didn’t know how or why, but I could sense her nearby—even though she was supposed to be far away in the Fae world.

But could she be down there? Could Lucian have captured her after all? Or was this another one of Seluna and the Vanguards’ tricks? It was hard to tell.

I tried to mind link, hoping to hell I was wrong.

And then I saw her in the throne room below me, partially obscured from view as she turned around, looking for me.

*Greyson?*

My stomach tightened, and I grabbed Okorie again. “Don’t do anything. Cali’s down there.”

# Episode 2700

Confusion, fear, and relief slammed into me all at once. The mixture of sudden emotions almost unbalanced me.

My mate bonds were tugging at me. But how could that be? How could Greyson truly be here? Was Xavier with him? I couldn’t see them anywhere, but they had to be nearby. My mate bond wouldn’t—couldn’t—lie to me.

My heart sank. I’d been so relieved when Andrei had come in and said the Evers brothers had escaped. I’d thought that even if I hadn’t managed to get away, at least my mates were safe now. But if they were here, nearby, then none of us were safe.

Were Lucian and Seluna going to get what they wanted after all? Suddenly, there was so much more at stake than just my life and Dani’s. I couldn’t let anything happen to my mates.

Xavier’s voice slipped through my mind. *Don’t look now, but we’re up on the roof.*

My heart beat in double time. They *were*. But that was wrong. They were putting themselves, putting *everything*, at risk. I had no idea what would happen if Lucian and Seluna got the three of us together like they wanted, but I couldn’t imagine it would be a *good* thing.

*You need to leave!* I told him. *You have to get out of here. Get far away from here!*

*We will—after we free you and Dani. We’re all getting out of here.* Greyson’s voice was smooth, confident, and I wished more than anything that I could curl up in that comforting, deep warmth. That I could forget this horror show we’d all gotten sucked into.

I knew it would be useless to try to argue with him at this point, and as comforted as I was by his presence, I was still so, so afraid of what could happen if Lucian and Seluna realized where my mates were.

*Charon is here*, I told Xavier. *His power’s depleted, but it won’t stay that way for long. Please, be careful.*

Suddenly, Lucian grabbed me by the shoulders and gave me another firm shake that rattled my bones. I bit back a cry, and through my mate bond I felt both Greyson and Xavier growl.

*You can’t do anything stupid. If Seluna sees you...* I begged them, even though it was probably useless to even hope for that.

“Answer Seluna!” Lucian snarled.

“W-What?” I managed breathlessly. Fear—for myself, Dani, and my mates—had my body trembling. My mind felt fragmented, torn between my mates and the situation playing out in front of me.

Seluna’s eyes narrowed. “Where. Are. Your. Mates?”

It took everything I had to not look up at the skylight. “I-I-I don’t know! How could I? Lucian kidnapped me, remember? Pulled me away from my family and transported me here. I haven’t seen them since I left the pack house.”

That much, at least, wasn’t a lie. I knew Greyson and Xavier were nearby, but I hadn’t actually *seen* them.

Lucian sighed, like I was an unruly child and his patience was being put to the test.

*Good. He could do with a dose of disappointment.*

“You forced my hand, Caliana,” he said in that same maddening, patronizing tone. “If you’d just cooperated for once—”

“Enough,” Seluna said, cutting him off. “It doesn’t matter. Her mates will come for her. All we have to do is threaten her, threaten their mate bond, and they will appear. Mark her.”

I gasped. “*What?*”

Even Lucian seemed taken aback. “But… I only want you, my love. I don’t want Caliana to be my Luna. Why should I mark her?”

I half expected Seluna to rage at him again, but she gave him an indulgent smile. “That’s very sweet. You will have me, Lucian. Make no mistake about that—but only if we can get her mates. Do whatever you have to, but make sure they come. This body is growing tired. I need to rest it. Come and get me when you have all three.”

She took a step toward the door, and Lucian dropped to his knees in front of her. “My love, Seluna. Please stay. I need you here at my side. Your love sustains me.”

I wrinkled my nose. *Laying it on a little thick, there.*

“I’ll do whatever I have to,” he continued. “I’ll get you anything you want, but—”

“Hush.” Seluna seemed unmoved by his declaration. “Come to me when this is fixed.”

She headed toward the door. I wished I could stop her. If Seluna walked out, then she’d be alone with Dani. It’d be that much easier for Seluna to establish her control.

I dared a peek up at the skylight. I didn’t see Greyson or Xavier. Were they still here?

Lucian turned back to me, and the cold resignation on his face sent chills down my spine. “I suppose I have no choice.”

I backed up, my hands in front of me. “You can’t mark me, Lucian. Please. You know you can’t.”

“I’m a prince, Caliana. I can do whatever I want.” His words lacked the usual air of superiority. If anything, he looked kind of sad. Not that I would ever shed a tear for a monster like him.

“But we’re not mates—and I already have two of those. Marking me as your Luna could interfere with the *due destini*.”

That finally seemed to give him pause. “You make a decent point, for once. And we wouldn’t want to tamper with such volatile magic. Then again, if the goddess demands it…”

The bastard. Of course he wouldn’t stop this on my account, but now that his precious *due destini* was at risk, suddenly he was having second thoughts. But I’d take anything at this point—any bit of leverage I could use to defend myself against this psychopath and the demon controlling him.

*Think, Cali! Seluna and Lucian want you because of the* due destini*.*

Lucian had never said it outright, but I knew he was infatuated with it. Fascinated by it, at minimum. And Seluna… She seemed to want it for something. She wanted it enough that she kept dragging me back after all the headaches I’d given her.

It was a weak bargaining chip, but it might be my only one.

So I doubled down. “Being a *due destini* mate and a half-human makes me especially vulnerable to marks of any kind. This could kill me.”

“Oh.” His shoulders relaxed. “I’m not worried about that.”

My jaw dropped. God, he was such a bastard! “Are you kidding me, Lucian? I can’t believe you’re really an Alpha prince.”

He glared. “A prince would have no issue at all sacrificing a human for the sake of his goddess.”

“What about your *pack*? If you’re truly royalty—if you’re truly an *Alpha*—then why are you agreeing to everything Seluna says? Especially when she treats you like garbage? Everyone in the Vanguard pack sees it. She doesn’t treat you like you’re an Alpha. She treats you like you’re her little lap dog.”

He reached for me, his eyes flashing, and I stumbled back to keep some distance between us. He wasn’t above hurting me to get what he wanted. He’d more than proven that by now.

“I *am* their Alpha!” he roared. “And nobody in this pack would dare question my authority!”

It was probably stupid, but I couldn’t stop pressing his buttons. Because as long as he was angry, as long as he was busy raging at me and fighting with me and defending his honor, he wasn’t marking me.

“And what do you think your pack will do when they find out she’s a demon?” I taunted. “You’re going to look like such a fool!”

“*Caliana, enough*.” The veins in his neck bulged as he reached for me, but again, I danced out of his reach. “I swear on all that I am, if you keep continuing that monstrous lie, I will snap your neck.”

I swallowed roughly, my heart beating against my ribs like a caged animal. He’d do it, too. And he wouldn’t even break a sweat.

“But you can’t,” I said. “And you know it. Seluna needs me. For all your talk of marking and sacrifices, you know if you kill me, she’ll turn against you.”

This was a dangerous game. Perhaps the most dangerous one I’d ever played. I hoped to hell I was right about my importance to Seluna. That I could keep pressing his buttons without actually risking my life. Tempting his rage was one thing, but allowing him to mark me? That *would* kill me. Or worse.

If he tried to mark me, would I have a chance to use my magic? His rage was slowing him down now, but he was still an Alpha. He was still fast and powerful, and if he channeled that rage into a single purpose—say, pinning me down and marking me as his Luna—I doubted I would stand a chance.

Lucian looked around. “Where is Andrei?”

Andrei stepped forward. If he’d been in his wolf form, his tail would’ve been between his legs. “I’m here, my prince.”

“Have you found the missing Redwoods yet?”

“We’re still searching. I doubt they’ve left the palace grounds. We’ll find them.”

Lucian’s face, already red and splotchy, was turning a violent shade of purple. “You’d better.” Then he looked wildly around the room. “Where is my sister? I need to speak with her!” He snapped his fingers, and an attendant rushed forward. “Find her and bring her to me!”

I’d never seen Lucian so out of control. So completely ruled by his emotions. He looked absolutely unhinged.

This might be my chance. I slowly began to back away.

Suddenly, fast as lightning, Lucian partially shifted, and I stumbled back in terror. His royal mask was completely gone, and he looked like a feral monster.

I threw up a hand and blasted him back. He sailed into the throne and toppled it over. Andrei rushed up to help his prince, and I tried to blast him too. The shot went wide, and as Andrei helped Lucian to his feet, I broke into a sprint.

Immediately, I was met by a wall of Vanguard pack members. There were too many of them. I couldn’t blast through them all. Seluna might need me alive, but there was a whole lot of pain between where I stood now and that boundary of not killing me.

*I have to get out—*

A hand grabbed my arm and whipped me around. It was Lucian. He held me tight enough that my bones groaned under the pressure. His other hand was shifted, and the look in his eyes was absolutely rabid.

Was he going to rip my throat out?

“You will be *mine*,” Lucian snarled before his human form shifted before my eyes into that of a vicious wolf.

# Episode 2701

**Xavier**

All I could see was red.

I’d watched Lucian shake Cali, watched the pain on her face when he’d grabbed her. And now I saw complete terror on my mate’s face as the princeling grabbed her and shifted. I was so furious I could barely see straight. So furious that only one thing, one single thought, filtered through the rage.

*I’m gonna fucking kill him.*

Not only was this bastard hurting her, threatening her, frightening her, not only had he written his own death sentence the moment he’d lured Cali into being possessed by Seluna, but now he was marking her as his Luna—against her will.

I’d never had a chance to mark Cali as my mate, mostly because Greyson had shown up again and the *due destini* had come into play. But I’d never given up hope that eventually the stars would align. That one day I’d finally be able to make Cali my Luna.

And now Lucian was trying to take that from me too? An Alpha marking another werewolf’s mate—especially one with Alpha blood—was nothing short of an act of all-out war. It was something my bastard of a father would have done. A line of basic decency that, once crossed, there was no coming back from.

And there was no saving Lucian now. Not from himself, and sure as shit not from me.

I couldn’t stop myself, because I had to stop this. I was operating on pure instinct—the deep, animalistic drive to protect my mate.

I lunged for the glass, only dimly aware of Okorie shouting at me.

“If you go down there, the invisibility spell will be gone!” he cried.

I couldn’t bring myself to care.

I didn’t care what Greyson was saying either, couldn’t even register his words. If he really cared about Cali, he’d be right by my side, jumping in to rip that so-called prince apart.

I pulled my fist back, and Ava reached for me.

“Xavier, don’t—”

My fist smashed into the window, and cracks spiderwebbed out across the thick glass. I pulled my fist back and slammed it into the skylight again, and this time my hands came back dripping with blood.

I barely felt the pain, even as I punched the glass again and again, further tearing my knuckles. How could I feel pain when Cali was down there? When that bastard was hurting her? When every second that passed was another moment for Lucian to try to mark her?

I had to get to Cali. Nothing else mattered.

Underneath my fist, the glass shattered and finally gave way. I didn’t miss a beat. I kicked in the rest of the glass and jumped through the broken skylight. I had no fucking clue whether or not I was still invisible, and I didn’t care.

All I saw was red. Red—and Lucian grabbing my mate. Trying to mark her as his.

I shifted in midair and landed inside the rotunda a few feet from Lucian. Mere seconds later, Greyson slammed down nearby, also in his wolf form, followed by Ava.

I mind linked to Cali. *I’m here.*

And then I lunged for Lucian, breaking his grip on my mate and sending him sprawling across the floor. Dimly, I was aware of Greyson howling behind me. When I glanced back, I saw that Andrei had shifted and the scene had dissolved into an all-out wolf brawl.

Lucian regained his feet with a snarl, and I mind linked to him.

*I’m going to rip your fucking throat out for touching her.*

*This is bigger than you and your precious mate*, he said.

I lunged for him, and he jumped out of the way at the last second, evading my bite, but not the bulk of my body. I slammed into him, and we tumbled to the ground. As I bit and clawed at any inch of the prince I could reach, the Vanguard wolves moved in to protect their Alpha, and I was put on the defensive.

I dodged out of the way of two mean-looking Vanguard wolves, scanning the room for Cali. Greyson was still battling it out with Andrei, though it looked like some Vanguard wolves were coming to help him too.

Then I saw her. My mate. Well, both of my mates. Ava was standing her ground in front of Cali—truly a weird sight—while Cali blasted any Vanguard wolves who got too close.

We were sorely outnumbered. The four of us against the whole might of the Vanguard pack. This was the exact situation we’d all been hoping to avoid, but I didn’t regret stepping in when I had. Lucian had forced my hand. The moment he’d made a move on Cali, any plan we’d come up with had gone out the window.

Jumping in like that had been beyond dangerous, beyond impulsive, but I had to save Cali. And now we were ad-libbing to save our asses.

Greyson’s voice, breathless and agitated, slipped into my mind. *How the hell are we going to get out of this?*

*I have no fucking idea.* All I wanted to do was kill. Rip the throat out of every Vanguard wolf responsible for doing this to Cali. Hell, maybe every Vanguard wolf, period. Every wolf who’d made it possible for Lucian and Seluna to bring this shitstorm down on us.

*Helpful, as always*, Greyson groaned.

*They all have to pay for what they’ve done*, I responded. *Ava can take Cali and make a run for it while you and I slaughter as many as we can.*

*As fun as that sounds—*

Greyson was cut off when Andrei slammed into him. I looked over, momentarily distracted, which was the perfect opening for Lucian to lunge at me, his teeth snapping. It was thanks only to my fast reflexes that the prince ended up with a mouthful of fur instead of the flesh of my throat.

Still, it stung like a bitch when he ripped that patch of hair off my neck. *You little fucker.* I wasn’t leaving here until Lucian was dead on the ground.

I mind linked with Ava. *Get Cali out of here.*

*I don’t want to leave you!*

I let out a snarl—one that wasn’t meant for Lucian. *Do it!*

I made another move on the prince, but three more Vanguard wolves popped up in my path. I ripped through one of them like tissue paper, and blood sprayed across my face and fur as I tried to move forward, but another fucking wolf popped up in the dead one’s place. There was no end to them.

I glanced across the room to see Greyson in a similar predicament.

Cali was still using her magic, blasting werewolves left and right as she and Ava fought their way toward one of the doors. That was my last hope. The last glimmer of light in this shitshow.

*Maybe Cali will escape—even if Greyson and I don’t make it out alive.*

Suddenly, the room rumbled like it was the epicenter of a giant clap of thunder.

More Vanguard wolves poured in through the doors, surrounding me, Greyson, Ava, and Cali. Blood obscured my vision, and I blinked rapidly as Dani stalked into the room behind the wolves.

No. Not Dani.

Seluna.

The Vanguards stepped aside for her, creating a path through the middle of the morass like the parting of the Red Sea as Seluna clapped her hands.

“I think that’s quite enough!”

The Vanguard wolves immediately froze, but I was too shocked to take advantage.

Seluna turned to look at me, then Greyson, then Cali.

“I knew it would end this way.” She smiled. “Werewolves and their mates—so predictable. You’ll risk your own lives to save your mate, won’t you? There’s no avoiding your destiny.”

Lucian shifted back to human, sporting a few gashes and bruises that hadn’t been there before, and I was pleased to see I’d gotten in a few good blows.

Seluna turned to Lucian, wrinkling Dani’s face with disdain. “There’s no reason to fight. We have everyone we need.”

I mind linked to Ava. *You need to get the both of you out of here.*

*I want to*, she replied, *but there’s no way we can make it through.*

I glanced over at Greyson. *Can’t we fight our way through this?*

Greyson’s voice was full of grim resignation. *I’ll be right by your side. We’ll take as many down as we can.*

I glanced at Lucian. He was completely focused on Seluna. This might be the last move I ever made, but if I played it right, I could kill Lucian before anyone else killed me.

But I had to do it fast.

I mind linked with Cali. *I love you.*

She looked over at me, her eyes widening in alarm. *We can get out of this. Don’t do anything stupid!*

*Everything’s going to be okay. I told you I’d protect you*, I said.And then I lunged for Lucian, my teeth bared.

# Episode 2702

“Xavier, no!” I screamed, as he lunged for Lucian.

I’d known, even before he attacked, what he was going to do. I could sense it—feel the grim resignation in our bond. Xavier was sacrificing himself to kill Lucian.

And he was doing it for me.

Words couldn’t describe the horror and love and devastation that poured into me as I watched him attack Lucian. The fact that he was willing to give his own life so I could have a better chance at a future was too much for me to bear. Especially because his sacrifice would be for nothing.

Even if Xavier succeeded in killing Lucian, he’d be killed by the Vanguards. And then the rest of the pack would wipe us out for killing their Alpha. But I wasn’t convinced I’d care about that second part—how could I live in a world without Xavier?

I stumbled toward them, clumsily and desperately breaking into a run out of sheer instinct when suddenly everything lurched to a halt—and I mean *everything.*

A cool breeze slipped over my skin, making me tremble. Xavier had stopped mid-lunge, his body suspended in the air. Lucian was frozen, staring at Seluna. Everyone was frozen. Time had screeched to a stop.

And then, in a blur, Big Mac and Kira appeared.

The room shook, time picked up, and everyone around the two witches hit the ground. Their momentum was lost in the spell, and in its absence we all scrambled to recover.

The Vanguard wolves, Lucian included, looked around in a daze. They were clearly confused by what the hell had just happened. I was too, and I’d seen Big Mac and Kira in action.

But in the end, one thing was very clear.

Xavier was alive. He was on the ground, his attack thwarted.

My heart swelled with gratitude. The witches couldn’t have picked a better time to step in.

I felt hope all over again now that Greyson and Xavier were here and the witches were backing us up.

It had seemed like something out of a dream, or an action movie, when glass had suddenly rained down on us and I’d seen Xavier jumping down to save me, shifting in midair and landing in his wolf form. My heart had skipped a beat a second time when Greyson had joined him moments later. Even Ava had been a sight for sore eyes, and I’d never be able to thank her enough for protecting me and fighting alongside me against the Vanguards.

But even then, we’d been sorely outnumbered. The element of surprise had only gotten us so far, and our chances of making it out of the room alive had been slim at best—and that didn’t even include saving Dani.

But now that the witches were here, we had a real chance. We could finally get out of here. Three witches were better than one, right?

Big Mac fixed her gaze on Dani-slash-Seluna, who seemed to still be recovering from the spellwork. Still, seeing the absence of Seluna’s cold, regal expression gave me another burst of hope.

*Did that spell just knock Seluna out?*

If so, it would be like what had happened to me when I’d hit my head during that scuffle with Ava at the Vanguard palace. Dani was powerful in her own right. Surely if she had the opportunity, she could put up a fight against Seluna. It wouldn’t be the same as kicking the demon out of her body, but even if she slowed Seluna down, that would be another edge, and we needed all the help we could get if we were all going to make it out of here alive.

With the witches here and Seluna knocked out into the passenger seat, we might have a fighting chance.

“Dani?” I called out. “Are you in control again?”

“We can sort that out later,” Big Mac said, striding toward Dani. “We have to get out of here.”

The Vanguards were already starting to emerge from their stupor. If they rushed us a second time, we’d have no chance. As soon as Ava recovered from the spell, she rushed toward Xavier and nudged him with her nose. It seemed like she was making sure he was okay.

I couldn’t blame her for that, as much as part of me wanted to. She loved him the same way I did. That love was how she’d ended up here, I was sure. It was why she’d protected me when they’d all jumped in through the ceiling.

If we made it out alive, I’d have plenty of time for jealousy. But right now, I couldn’t worry about that. I was just glad she had Xavier’s back.

Besides, Xavier was ready to sacrifice himself for *me*. Both of my mates were.

I’d never have anything to be jealous about again.

I turned to Greyson, who was padding toward me.

From up on the roof, Okorie called out, “Kira! Behind you!”

The warlock sent a blast down from the edge of the broken skylight, but it was too late. Another blast was coming toward Kira, thrown by Charon, who had just appeared in the doorway.

*That asshole traitor!* He was like a bad penny—he just kept popping up when he was the last person I wanted to see. *Does he really care more about the money he was offered than he cares about us? You know, the people whose lives he keeps messing up?*

Call me naïve, but I’d really thought we’d all bonded when we’d dealt with the Aysel curse together. Apparently intense emotional experiences didn’t count for much with him. Dammit!

Kira dodged the attack—thankfully—but Charon’s blast was successful in one way: it broke her concentration, and the hold she had on the immobilizing spell. The Vanguard wolves moved toward us, much faster now, thanks to Charon’s work.

*Shit! Shit! Shit!*

I blew out a breath and raised my hands. If they wanted a fight, I was gonna give it to them. Nearby, Greyson and Xavier seemed to come to the same conclusion as they braced themselves.

Big Mac moved her arms in a complex motion and then slammed a bunch of the Vanguard wolves against the wall as if they were nothing more than a bunch of ragdolls. I wished we had ten more of her—then the fight would’ve been truly even.

As if she’d read my mind, Kira stepped up next to Big Mac and performed the same attack, and the two witches moved toward Dani now that the path was clear again.

“We don’t want any trouble,” Big Mac called. “Just give Dani back. She has no fight with any of you. She’s an innocent.”

Dani laughed, but the sound was cold. Joyless. And I knew even before she spoke that Seluna was back in the driver’s seat.

“This is quite a show for this little witch,” she said. “But I will think about it.” She pressed her fingertips to her chin and screwed up her face in concentration. “Hmm… I think not. This body is much stronger than the half-Fae. It can put up more of a fight than your ragtag group is ready for.”

I swallowed audibly. *If the witches really fought her, could Dani get hurt? Could she die?*

I couldn’t allow that to happen. I wanted to stay here and help—I might’ve been half-Fae, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t pack a wallop when needed.

Ava shifted back to human and grabbed my arm roughly. “Cali, come the fuck on. Let’s get you out of here.”

Trust Ava to be bitchy and surprisingly caretaking all at once.

I jerked my arm out of her grip. “I’m not leaving without Xavier and Greyson.” How could I? They’d come here to protect me, to stop Lucian, to save Dani. They were doing so much for all of us. I couldn’t abandon them now.

The mate bond was practically glowing inside me now, pleased that I was staying to help.

Suddenly, a loud *pop* echoed through the room.

Up above, smoke began to pour in, dark and thick. I didn’t know if this was part of the witches’ plan, or some messed-up demon power, but I didn’t like it. I coughed and tucked the neckline of my shirt over my mouth and nose, only faintly able to make out Big Mac moving toward Seluna.

*Was this their plan? Choking us all out with magic smoke?*

I looked around, still coughing. All of the wolves around us were disoriented, wheezing from the smoke just like I was.

“Xavi—” My voice broke, and I started coughing again. “Greyson!”

I couldn’t even see Ava, and she’d been standing right next to me when this all started.

This felt like total chaos, and not the controlled kind either.

But Greyson and Xavier were still here. I could feel it through the mate bond.

*Greyson?* I mind linked to him. He’d been so close before the smoke had spread. He still had to be nearby.

*I’m here, love.*

I felt his fur brush up against me, and my mate bond lit up like a Christmas tree. I put a hand on him and then mind linked with Xavier.

*Where are you?*

*I’m with you.*

I felt him brush up against my other side, and the mate bond responded in kind.

We were together now. We could try to get out.

Suddenly, a bright light cut through the smoke, followed by an intense blast of heat.

I shielded my eyes.

*It feels like we’re in hell. Is this part of the witches’ plan?*

Through the smoke and heat, I could make out a figure standing nearby.

“Dani?” I gasped out.

“Not anymore.” Seluna turned to face me and raised her arms.

The smoke disappeared, and suddenly Xavier, Greyson, Lucian, Seluna, and I were separated from everyone else by a ring of fire.

Seluna smiled. “I’m so glad we can finally get started.”

# Episode 2703

**Greyson**

We were caught in a goddamn ring of fire with Lucian and a Seluna-possessed Dani.

*I already got my action movie quota filled for the day with that jump through the skylight.*

I instinctively moved in front of Cali, and to my left, Xavier did the same. If this was part of the witches’ plan, I wasn’t in on it. And judging by how smug Seluna looked, I had to assume that this wasn’t part of their grand scheme. Something had gone terribly wrong, and now, instead of making an escape with Cali and Dani, we were locked behind some kind of magic literal firewall.

Whatever fresh hell Seluna had planned, it had to be better than a fight to the death against a horde of Vanguard wolves, right? Maybe that was the one piece of silver lining to this shitshow.

Yeah… I wasn’t going to hold my breath.

I didn’t know what Seluna was trying to get at by making Cali choose, what the demon stood to gain from that situation, but it couldn’t be anything good.

I glanced around, my eyes narrowing as I tried to peer through the unnatural flames.

*Are the witches still there? Maybe I should throw Cali on my back and try to break through the fire. Maybe we can still escape whatever the hell this is.*

A few burns were a fair price to pay in exchange for keeping Cali safe from this horror show.

I mind linked with Xavier. *What if one of us carries Cali out of here right now?*

*And how do you think we’ll manage that?* His voice was tight with worry, lacking its usual biting sarcasm.

*Jump over the fire? It might burn, but it’s probably better than whatever Seluna and Lucian have planned for us.*

I watched his eyes flick over to the wall of heat surrounding us. *If we’re lucky, you or I might survive, but I doubt Cali could withstand the heat.*

He was right, I realized. I wasn’t normally a fan of him being right, and I hated it even more now, because it meant we were well and truly trapped. I started to pant. The heat was overwhelming, especially with a thick fur coat. But it was better protection than Cali had. I glanced back at her and saw sweat trickling down her face. Her cheeks were red.

Whatever game Seluna was playing with us, it was dangerous—in more ways than one.

“Why don’t you werewolves shift back?” Seluna suggested sweetly. “That way we can have a proper conversation.” She pinned Lucian with a stern look. “Lucian, why don’t you be a good boy and start us off?”

It was still strange to me to see the so-called prince delegated to the position of Seluna’s trained dog, but that dynamic didn’t seem to have changed now that Seluna was wearing Dani’s face. Lucian immediately obeyed and shifted back to human before approaching Seluna.

He stood at her side and turned to face us, trying to look like a unit, but I knew better. Seluna was the one pulling the strings, and probably had been for a long time now.

Seluna’s brows rose. “Evers brothers? It’s your turn.”

I was hesitant. If Xavier and I both shifted back to human, we wouldn’t be at as big an advantage to fight her. Maybe that was Seluna’s goal in asking us to shift. Maybe she was trying to keep us weak. She had to know if we had the chance, we’d rip her apart.

Well, I could still do it with my hands too.

“I’m getting impatient, boys.” Seluna huffed. “I asked nicely, but we all know you don’t have a choice here.

She was right. And I fucking hated it.

I shifted first, and Xavier quickly followed.

Seluna smiled. “There we go. Was that truly so hard?”

I frowned, eyeing Seluna. Or, Dani, rather. *How much of Dani is even left inside that body now? Can she still be saved, or are we too late?*

I knew from Big Mac that Cali, as a half-Fae, had only had a matter of days before Seluna would’ve taken over forever. Was the timeframe the same with Dani? If so, that didn’t bode well for the young witch. Regardless, Big Mac had told me that the longer Seluna remained in a body, the more dangerous it was for the host. Dani could be lost to us already.

I just wished I knew for sure whether or not she still had a chance. A real chance. If I knew for sure that Seluna was the only one in that body, I could turn on her. I could kill the host body before Seluna could harm Cali.

But until I knew for sure that Dani was gone, I couldn’t make that move. I wouldn’t. It went against everything I stood for as the Redwood Alpha with Dani as my charge.

“Seluna, what is it that you want?” Cali asked. “Why are you going to all this trouble? If you want Lucian, take him. He’s all yours. Nobody here wants him but you.”

Lucian scoffed. “The half-Fae had better watch her mouth.”

I stepped between Lucian and Cali with a growl. “If you have something to say, say it to me. Alpha to Alpha.”

I was seriously considering doing what Xavier had set out to do: kill Lucian before he could become even more of a gigantic pain in my ass. But I had no idea what Seluna would do if I actually succeeded—which was also a pretty huge *if*. Would she punish me by killing Cali in return?

“Why the hell are we here?” Xavier snapped. “The pyro show is cool and all, but I’m getting really sick of wasting my time with your schemes. So just tell us what the hell you want.”

I couldn’t have said it better myself.

“The three of you will soon have all your questions answered,” Seluna said. She turned on her heel and started walking away from us.

*What the fuck? Where is she going?* She was heading straight for the ring of hellfire. Was she going to walk through it?

To my surprise, the ring of fire moved *with* her, the epicenter following her as she walked away from us. The outer edges pressed in on us, and so we were forced to follow her or be burned by the magical flames.

I caught a glimpse of the palace as we moved ahead. Nothing was actively burning—the fire wasn’t spreading like natural flame would have—but I could still feel the heat.

*This must be demon magic.*

Lucian ran up and took Seluna by the hand, and Xavier and I flanked Cali as we followed the creepy couple into the courtyard.

Lucian grinned, almost looking demonic himself. “Should we dress Caliana for the ceremony?” he asked Seluna. “She looks so common.”

I ground my molars together. Killing him had never felt more tempting—it’d be worth it, just to stop the never-ending games of dress-up. I’d already warned Lucian once—I wasn’t going to warn him again.

“There is no need, my love,” Seluna said. “We’ll finish this soon enough.”

Lucian nodded, the picture of a lovestruck man.

*Pathetic.* It couldn’t have been clearer that Seluna was deceiving him. She’d created a ring of moving fire, for god’s sake. If that wasn’t a sign of a demon, what was?

Clearly, Lucian had drunk the Seluna Kool-Aid, and there would be no changing his mind.

*How long has Seluna been using him?*

I had no idea what her endgame was here, but I had a feeling Lucian wasn’t going to be a part of it. She’d used him this long because she’d needed to, but sooner or later, she wasn’t going to need him anymore. Why would a demon need a vainglorious princeling like Lucian? And what would happen to him when he outlived his usefulness?

We were outside the palace now—above the flames, I could make out storm clouds moving in. How appropriate. We stopped in front of the statue of Seluna.

*Speaking of vainglorious*… Did Seluna really need to do this in front of her own idol? It seemed so vain. So needlessly trivial.

I glanced at Cali and squeezed her hand. Things weren’t looking good, but I didn’t want her to give up hope. I looked over at Xavier, who was watching Seluna and Lucian with a flat, vaguely pissed-off expression.

*What’s he thinking about right now? Besides how great it would be to murder Seluna and Lucian? Is he looking for a way out of this?*

Cali looked up at me, her eyes wide with fear, and I clenched my jaw.

I’d promised her I’d keep her safe. I couldn’t fail her now. Our mate bond had never felt stronger.

Xavier laughed, drawing an icy look from Lucian and a positively glacial glare from Seluna.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“I think it’s hilarious that an allegedly powerful goddess like you has to go through all this bullshit to get whatever it is that you want. You’re supposed to be a goddess, right? Can’t you just take what you want?”

Her eyes flashed. “I always take what I want.”

She pulled out a silver dagger.

# Episode 2704

**Xavier**

The sight of Seluna clutching a silver dagger made my blood run cold. Cali gasped, tightening her grip on my hand.

“It’s okay, Cali,” I murmured. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“*Is* it okay?” Seluna snapped, twirling the knife in her hand. “Truly, do you think any of this is *okay*? I have to admit, I’m impressed by your confidence. But giving your mate false hope, making promises on which you are sorely equipped to deliver—that’s hardly a sign of love. Don’t you think?”

*Fuck.* Seluna had to be a demon, because I’d never met another creature in my life who loved to play with its food like this bitch did. And that included my father. Could she just get to the fucking point and stop with all the perverse foreplay?

“I’ve had about enough of your bullshit,” I snapped. She knew nothing about love or mates, and she was the last person on this planet I was going to take relationship advice from. “Why the fuck are we here?”

Lucian growled, stepping in front of Seluna and moving toward me. Apparently, I’d hit a nerve—or he was just mad that I wasn’t drinking the same punch he couldn’t seem to get enough of.

Seluna threw out an arm to hold him back. “It’s all right.”

Then she gestured to the ring of fire, to the space the five of us were locked in. “This is why. We’re going to watch the *due destini* mate make her choice.”

I both felt and heard Cali pull in another gasp. “I’m not making a choice!”

Seluna laughed. “Oh, Caliana. You should know by now that I’m not asking.” She turned her gaze on Greyson and me. “I’ve gone through so much trouble for this moment—to force a choice that should have been made long ago. To give you an opportunity to put this ugly, divisive moment behind you, to put the agony of the *due destini* curse in the past.”

Seluna looked at Cali again.

“I know how difficult this has been for you,” she said. “The fear of choosing wrong. The fear of the consequences of making such an impossible choice. You’ve been torn between these two Alphas, your heart split down the middle. But a half-love… That’s not a real choice. That’s only prolonging the pain to spare yourself from what is already inevitable.”

Then Seluna looked at Greyson and me.

“Would you not rather have a complete love with Caliana? Do you not deserve to be loved with her whole heart? Even if the cost is great? Why not put an end to all of this? Why not simply make the choice?”

“It’s Cali’s choice to make,” I said.

“And she’ll do it when she’s ready. Not a moment before,” Greyson added.

Seluna rolled her eyes. “You three should be thanking me for giving you this opportunity! Who knows how long you would drag this out, otherwise? It’s been months of suffering now. Would it take years to finally reach this point without my intervention? So much pain—and for what?”

“There’s not going to be a choice,” Greyson said. “Forget it.”

Seluna smiled again, brandishing the knife. “Well, that’s the funny part. There is no choice. I must make the choice.” The silver blade flashed in the light of the hellfire. “Here’s another funny thing—for all the strength and power you werewolves wield, all the danger you pose, one little prick from this knife would kill you all.”

Cali shouldered her way forward. “Leave them alone! If you touch them—”

I pulled her back.

“Oh, I’m not going to touch them,” Seluna said. “You are.” She held out the silver knife to Cali. “Take it.”

Cali’s eyes went wide, and what little color was left in her face drained out of it. “No.” She skittered back, away from the blade.

Well, this was fucking great. I wasn’t totally sure where the hell this was going, but one thing was clear: Seluna was planning on having at least one of us die today.

Seluna shook her head, clicking her tongue in disappointment. “It will do you no good to resist, Caliana. If you don’t make the choice yourself, the other option is to watch them both die. And let me assure you, it won’t be pretty.”

“You forced us to come here so you could kill us?” I asked. “That’s your grand plan? How original.”

“That’s not how it’s going to work. I’ve already told you what I want—you and Greyson will fight each other. If Cali cannot choose now, then she’ll choose when you’re both bloodied. We’ll see which scenario is easier for her to stomach.”

I pinned Lucian with a glare. “Nice job picking this one. She couldn’t be more fucked up.”

Lucian’s nostrils flared. “That’s my goddess and future Luna you’re talking about.”

“She’s a demon,” Greyson snapped. “But you can bet she’s got big ambitions, all the same. Bigger than being a Luna, I bet.”

“My patience is wearing thin,” Seluna said, her voice deadly soft. “Are you two going to fight or not?”

I ground my teeth together. “We already told you—that’s not going to happen.”

Seluna waved her hand in a lazy motion, and Cali gasped. I spun around in horror. A necklace of hellfire was snaking its way around Cali’s throat. I lunged forward and tried to peel it off, but it burned with all the white-hot heat of a branding iron, and the scent of burning flesh filled my nose as I jerked my hand back.

Cali looked at me, wide-eyed, gasping as the necklace tightened around her throat. The only bright side was that the flames didn’t seem to be burning her. Yet. I had no doubt that Seluna could make it so if she wished.

“Stop!” Greyson growled.

“It won’t harm her,” Seluna said. “As long as you agree to fight. If not, you can watch her choke and burn before I do the same to each of you.”

Pure terror shone in Cali’s wide eyes, and a feral protectiveness shuttered my brain to everything but bloodlust. I lunged for Seluna, determined to rip her apart. I’d tear her throat out with my blunt human teeth if I had to, but that bitch was going to die—

An explosion of sparks and flames burst up from the ground at my feet, forcing me back.

“Do you think I’m stupid?” Seluna demanded. “I know exactly how you operate, how to protect myself against your strengths and exploit your weaknesses. There is no beating me. There is no way out of this. You will fight each other, or you will watch your mate die. Tell me you understand exactly what’s at stake here. Am I correct in assuming you’d rather fight than watch your mate burn alive?”

A hollow, impotent kind of fury pounded in my skull. I knew, deep in my bones, that Seluna was right. She fucking had us. There was no way out of this except for the way she’d provided. We had to play her fucked-up game if we wanted Cali to have even the slimmest chance of surviving this.

Which meant I would have to fight my brother.

I turned to look at Greyson and saw the same sense of utter defeat staring back at me.

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to fight Greyson, but not this way. Never this way. Not while Cali’s life was on the line.

But did we even have a choice?

Seluna put the silver knife on the ground. “Caliana, the knife can be used to spare the one you truly love. When you see your mates fight, when one of them gains the upper hand—you will have a choice to make. Do you let one brother mate kill the other? Or do you stop him to save the other? The one you truly love? Whatever you do, it will reveal your choice. One of them will live, and one of them will die. Who lives and who dies is entirely up to you.”

Grim resignation settled over me. It was something I was beginning to get used to when facing this bitch of a demon, and I was so fucking over it.

Seluna had found a way to force Cali to choose. Because I knew in my bones that Greyson wasn’t going to allow Seluna to burn Cali. I knew it because I wasn’t going to let Cali be harmed either.

Cali turned to Seluna, gasping around the fire choker. “Please… Don’t make me do this. There’s no need to fight.”

“If that’s true,” Seluna said with a shrug, “then go ahead and make your choice.”

“Cali, no,” I said. “You don’t have to do anything.”

She turned to me, her eyes brimming with tears. I wanted to hug her, to tell her everything would be okay. Maybe even to have one last kiss with the woman who meant everything to me. But I knew what I had to do.

“What do you mean?” she asked, her voice breaking. “What are you doing?”

I forced myself to turn away from her, to face Seluna.

“I’ll fight my brother.”

Without another thought, even as Cali’s scream echoed through the night, I shifted.

# Episode 2705

For a long time now, I’d been haunted by the thought of Greyson and Xavier fighting over me, fighting *for* me. As much as choosing between the two men I loved so much felt impossible, letting fate and violence make the choice *for* me? That was something I didn’t know how to live with. Didn’t know if I *could* live with.

And so this? As awful as it was to be here with Lucian and Seluna, to feel that fire necklace tightening around my throat, it was this moment, watching Xavier shift and lunge at his brother with the intent to kill, that brought all my nightmares to life.

“Xavier, no!”

I leapt after Xavier, screaming, desperate to stop him, but he was too fast. I couldn’t even hope to keep up with him in his wolf form. He lunged toward Greyson, who shifted and managed to evade Xavier’s attack at the last second.

The two wolves circled each other, their battleground constrained by the ring of fire.

“Stop this!” I screamed. “Please! Don’t do this! There has to be another way.”

There wasn’t. I knew there wasn’t. They would never choose their own lives over mine, so for them, this choice was easy. Even if they knew it would tear me apart.

I mind linked with each of them in turn. *Don’t do this! There has to be a better way!*

Neither one of them responded. Their focus was singularly on each other. Why weren’t they listening to me? Were they so intent on killing each other that they couldn’t focus on anything else? Was this all my fault?

That one I knew the answer to: both of my mates had repeatedly told me that the *due destini* wasn’t my fault, but here they were, fighting to save me. How was this *not* my fault?

I knew I’d put off this decision for too long. But what was I supposed to do? I loved both of them with all of my heart—and Seluna could crawl back underneath whatever rock in hell she’d come from for going on about the whole “half-heart” BS. I loved both of them equally, differently, with every inch of my mind, heart, and soul. There was no way to choose, because no matter how much I loved both of them, my life and my heart wouldn’t be full without both of my mates.

And then there was the killing curse that I wasn’t one hundred percent sure was gone… How could I sentence one of my mates to death? What kind of selfish monster would that make me? What, was I supposed to just ride off into the sunset with the remaining mate and live happily ever after, knowing I’d signed the other’s death certificate?

I would much rather be the one who died than the one who survived.

And I was pretty sure Seluna knew that. She’d lived in my head, after all. She probably knew everything about me. So she definitely knew how impossible this was, how I’d suffered with the idea of choosing, how I’d been paralyzed for so long and was paralyzed even now as I watched my mates begin a fight to the death.

Seluna really was a demon. Because nobody else would do something this cruel.

I tried to step between them, knowing they would never risk hurting me by mistake. But they were so much bigger and strong and faster than me. How could I hope to keep them apart?

*Wait… My magic!*

I could use it to keep them apart. Or… I could blast the demon.

But the demon was inside Dani, who I never wanted to hurt, not in a million years.

*Maybe I could just knock her out? Maybe it’d help Dani regain control and we could get the upper hand.*

I turned on Seluna and raised both hands to blast her. The magic rippled from my fingertips, but it was met by a wall of fire that sprang up in front of Seluna. And just like that, the magic seemed to burn up.

Seluna smirked. “Don’t even try. You’re no match for a goddess like me.”

I didn’t bother arguing with her. I didn’t have any time to waste.

I spun back around. Maybe I could knock my mates out? If they were unconscious, they wouldn’t be able to fight.

I mind linked with Xavier. *Sorry about this.*

I raised my hands again and sent a blast his way—but once again, the wall of fire rose up and burned my magic before it ever made contact with my target. Horror and desperation washing over me, I tried the same thing with Greyson, and I was met with the same result.

“Like I told your mates,” Seluna said, “there’s no way out of this. It is long past time you made a choice, Caliana.”

Tears burned my eyes. I’d never felt so helpless. So trapped.

I turned back to the demon. “Please! Please, stop this! I’ll do anything!”

The cold, triumphant look in Seluna’s eyes chilled me to the bone, despite the ring of fire surrounding us.

“You’re already giving me everything I want,” she said softly, almost sweetly.

My stomach twisted. *How far gone is Dani now?* Seluna was absolutely feasting on this—watching my mates face off in a death match had to be like food to a demon. She was practically glowing. I’d never seen her looking so pleased.

I looked at Lucian. It was a long shot, but maybe he’d help me. Seluna was making a mockery of werewolf customs, all for her own enjoyment.

He was watching the fight with his arms crossed. He was seemingly more interested in pleasing Seluna than in the horror that was taking place in front of him.

Still, I had to try.

“Can’t you stop this?” I asked him. “How is any of this serving a goddess?”

Lucian ignored me. His gaze flitted between my mates and his precious demon.

*What a fool. I swear, if I get out of this, I’m going to make him pay for all the deception, the kidnapping, the threats, those horrible kisses…*

That helpless fury built inside me as I raised my hands once more. Maybe I couldn’t get to Seluna, who seemed too distracted, too focused on the fight, to even remember I was standing here. Maybe I couldn’t stop my mates, either. But maybe, just maybe, I could get to Lucian. Give him a taste of what he deserved.

I loosed a giant blast of magic, but once again, the fire consumed it.

Seluna shifted her gaze to me, almost looking bored as the fire necklace flared to life, snaking not just further around my neck, but all around my body.

It was just hot enough to make me gasp, but it stopped short of actually burning my skin. Only just, though.

“Caliana, you will watch this to the end, or you will burn.” Her voice dared me to defy her further.

I jerked against my bonds. I wanted to defy her, to fight her until my very last breath. I wouldn’t watch either of my mates die, and definitely not at the hands of the other.

Seluna flicked her wrist, and the knife flew up from the ground and toward me.

I tried to back away, but the fire tightened its grip, and I screamed as the knife spun toward me. My hand, forced upward by the fire like a puppet’s limb on a string, caught the knife.

I tried to let go of it, but it stayed in my hand.

This was it.

Seluna was trying to force me to make the choice.

I wouldn’t do it. I *couldn’t* do it.

I tried to imagine what it would be like to watch Xavier kill Greyson, or Greyson kill Xavier. Both scenarios were almost too painful to even imagine. And it didn’t truly matter, because there was no difference. In either case, it would be like cutting off my own head.

I couldn’t live with just one of my mates. I needed them both. That was what our mate bond was all about, wasn’t it? I loved them both with everything I had.

And if only one of them survived this, I didn’t know if I’d ever be able to forgive the other. No matter how much I loved Xavier, I didn’t know if I’d be able to forgive him for killing Greyson, his own brother. And the opposite was true, too.

That was the thing that Seluna just didn’t seem able to understand. She was a demon—she couldn’t possibly comprehend what this was like, the cruel impossibility of the situation she’d put me in.

I tried to close my eyes, terrified of what could happen next. But the fire flared across my face, heating up until my eyes snapped open. When I closed them again, the flame burned bright once more.

There was no hiding from this.

Xavier was bleeding now. He’d been hurt, but he wasn’t down for the count. He lashed out, nipping Greyson’s flank.

“Stop!” I screamed, tears rushing down my face.

The necklace burned bright again in warning.

Greyson paused to look at me. Our eyes locked, love and determination meeting terror and heartache.

And then Xavier struck.

He sank his teeth into Greyson’s throat, and blood sprayed everywhere.

# Episode 2706

Blood.

My entire world had narrowed onto it. To the blood splattering against Greyson’s grey fur, turning it pink in some places, and a deep, visceral shade of red in others.

“*NO!*” I screamed as my world shattered.

If the flames hadn’t been forcing me to stay upright, I would have crumbled then and there.

Hot tears rushed down my face as sobs tore through my chest. My vision blurred as I tried to swipe at my eyes. This couldn’t be happening.

*Xavier!* I mind linked to him in a rush of fury and grief. *What have you done?*

I couldn’t believe it. Even as I’d watched the two of them fight, I’d never truly believed that they’d harm each other. That they would aim to kill.

How could Xavier do that? After everything the three of us had been through, my mate was attacking my other mate. I wanted to rush forward, to wrap my arms around Greyson and fold my body over his, but the fire wouldn’t let up. I couldn’t move, couldn’t do anything but stand there, helpless, useless, and crying.

The mate bond was ripping at my heart now, a sharp ache dragging itself against the inside of my ribcage. I couldn’t watch this. I couldn’t survive this. There was no coming back from this—for any of us.

I’d wondered before if I’d ever be able to forgive one of my mates for hurting the other. And now I knew the truth: if Greyson died today at his brother’s hand, I would never, *ever* forgive Xavier. In all the ways that mattered, I’d lose him too.

Seluna must have taken some pity on me, because I was able to slump to my knees.

“Greyson,” I sobbed. “No… *No!*”

I didn’t know what to do. I could barely breathe around the grief and terror and heartache, against the bright agony thrumming through my mate bond with Greyson. It echoed through every inch of my body like a warning bell, a siren warning of the worst-case scenario playing out in front of me.

Seluna slowly approached, then knelt down in front of me. “Is this what you want? Have you finally decided who to choose? You can still stop Xavier, maybe save Greyson?”

It was the cruelest thing in the world that after everything she’d done to us, her voice sounded kind. Like she genuinely wanted to help. Like she hadn’t been the one to rip my world to pieces in the first place.

My fingers tightened around the handle of the silver knife in my hand. If I could, I’d plunge it into my own heart without hesitation. Because seeing this play out was more agonizing than anything else I’d ever experienced. If I could, I’d choose myself. I’d choose to take *me* out of the equation, so that my mates could live. They’d never forgive me, of course. And they’d never forgive each other, or themselves, for failing to save me.

There was no way out of this. No way to win.

Of course, Seluna knew that already. She’d planned it that way.

I shook my head, trying to erase the image of Xavier’s teeth sinking into Greyson’s throat, but it wouldn’t go away. It just played on repeat in my mind, a relentless reminder of all the ways that I’d failed my mates.

“Please,” I sobbed, my head bowing so low my cheek brushed against the grass beneath my feet. “Please, let me hold him.”

My body trembled with grief and pain. The mate bond between Greyson and me was screaming in agony. It felt like a fuse had been lit the moment Xavier had drawn blood, and I was moments away from exploding with devastation.

“Is this your decision?” Seluna pressed.

I shook my head, too overwrought to speak. I could only cry, could only let out broken keening sounds. I didn’t even sound human anymore.

Even now, there was no decision to make. How could there be, when Seluna had taken away my choice?

I mind linked with Greyson, gritting my teeth at the exquisite agony humming through our bond. It slammed against my skull as I opened that connection between us.

*Greyson, please stay with me. I love you.*

A gentle touch brushed against my forehead, burning hot without harming me.

When I looked up, Seluna was touching me. The demon’s eyes were closed, and she was breathing deeply. Almost like she was meditating.

*How can she be so calm?*

Then my breath hitched, and I felt a new wave of raw devastation inside myself. Inside my mate bond with Greyson. It was screaming again, pulling at me, thrashing against me like it was being torn from my body.

I looked over at Greyson, who was staggering to his feet, bloodied but upright.

I gasped. *He’s alive!*

Xavier prowled forward.

“Don’t!” I called to him, my throat raw from screaming. “Leave him alone! Don’t you fucking touch him!”

“You can still choose,” Seluna said. “It’s not too late.”

Then Greyson took a faltering, clumsy step toward me.

I reached for him, unable to move an inch past where I’d collapsed to my knees.

His voice slipped through my mind, a soothing balm and a dose of pleasure-pained loss all at once. *Don’t worry, love. It’s not over yet.*

“W-What?” I gasped.

But before I could even wrap my head around what he’d told me, Greyson collapsed to the ground in a bloodied heap. He didn’t move.

“Greyson?” I whispered.

I reached for our mate bond, which had gone still as Greyson’s body.

*Greyson?* I thought frantically down the mate bond, praying for a response.

Silence answered back, deafening in its finality. Its emptiness.

And then the realization set in—along with so much pain I thought I was drowning on dry land.

“No…” The breath stuttered out of me.

My scream echoed through the night, and I collapsed fully to the ground, my nose pressed against the grass. I couldn't breathe. Couldn’t move. I felt like my insides were being torn out. Like my heart had forgotten how to beat. My lungs had forgotten how to draw breath.

All of Seluna’s fire, all of her power and wrath were nothing compared to this loss. This pain.

She stood. “The choice has been made.”

I couldn’t stop thinking about Greyson’s words to me. *What did he mean? Why did he… Why did he do that?*

Xavier’s voice slipped into my mind, gentler than I’d ever heard it.

*Cali.*

I flinched. I wanted to slam my hands over my ears. I didn’t want to hear his voice. He’d killed my mate. His brother. I didn’t want to hear him, didn’t want to look at him, ever again.

*It’s okay. We have a plan.*

I froze. And some tiny piece of hope sparked to life inside me.

*What?*

*I’m sorry we couldn’t tell you*, Xavier responded. His voice was soft, but it was thrumming with everything he’d left unsaid. All the emotion I’d poured into our mate bond when Greyson had crumpled. *Just play along, please. This will be over soon.*

I could only blink. Was I somehow imagining this? Was this another one of Seluna’s mind games? Another part of her wicked torture?

I forced myself to look at Greyson’s bloodied body. He was still on the ground. He hadn’t moved an inch.

Hands closed around my arms and pulled me to my feet. Lucian.

“It’s over,” he said. I couldn’t tell how he felt about that. His voice gave nothing away. He turned to Seluna. “Did you get what you need?”

With a wave of her hand, the fire around my body disappeared, the circle of fire vanished, and the knife fell from my hand.

I immediately stumbled over to Greyson. I couldn’t believe he was alive. I couldn’t *allow* myself to believe it. Because if I did, and it turned out I was wrong…

*Oh god. There’s so much blood.*

I knelt down next to him and touched his fur, still wet and warm with his blood. A fresh wave of tears blurred my vision, and I folded myself over him with a desperate cry.

There was no playing along. Every ounce of my grief was too real.

“I can feel the power emanating from Cali,” I heard Seluna say. “From her distress over her mates, from the love she feels for both of them. This is exactly what I wanted. I never needed a choice to activate the power of the *due destini*, just this alone.”

I couldn’t have cared less about the *due destini*. I held Greyson tightly, sobbing into his fur. And then I heard the sweetest sound in the entire universe.

Greyson’s voice.

*I need you to get out of the way, love.*

I froze, barely daring to believe that I’d heard him. *W-What? Why?*

*I don’t want to hurt you. Trust me. Step away.*

I stumbled back, wiping at my face. What was he planning? I looked over at Xavier for the first time since Seluna had released me.

*What’s going on?* I asked him.

*We’re finishing this. Right now. I need you to promise to stay back.*

*Don’t kill Seluna*, I begged. *Dani’s still in there!*

*We’re just going to subdue her. Back away slowly, and keep playing along. We don’t want her getting suspicious.*

I didn’t argue with him—or tell him that my tears were real.

Still sniffling and raw from everything that had happened and was still happening, I tentatively stepped back. Just in case, I prepared my magic. I could feel it building inside me. If I had to blast Dani, I could. I’d definitely blast Lucian if he so much as looked at me wrong.

And then Greyson pounced, moving so fast I stumbled back against the fountain.

Greyson slammed into Lucian, who staggered back as he shifted into his wolf form. In tandem, Xavier lunged at Seluna and knocked her to the ground. A scuffle ensued—Seluna was spewing all sorts of dark and vaguely satanic-sounding words while Xavier tried to capture her throat between his teeth. Lucian and a still-bloodied Greyson were squaring off.

I looked back and forth between the two fights. *Can I blast either Seluna or Lucian without harming my mates?* I was especially worried about hurting Greyson, who still hadn’t healed the wounds he’d received from Xavier.

Then Seluna suddenly appeared in front of me. Her pupils dilated, and her eyes became two endlessly black orbs.

“I’ve been waiting for this.” She reached out and touched my forehead, and my screams lit up the night as every nerve ending in my body burned.

*What is she doing to me?*

# 

# Episode 2707

**Dani**

Seluna’s power was growing exponentially with every passing second. I could feel it pooling and simmering inside me. I wanted to break Seluna’s grip—my grip—on Cali, but I couldn’t fight against her. I’d been trying from the moment she’s regained control over my body.

I didn’t know what Seluna was doing to Cali, but I couldn’t stop her. I wasn’t strong enough. Not without outside help. And in the meantime, the demon was only growing more powerful as it took magic from Cali and then used my power to amplify what it had stolen.

That was what it felt like she was doing, anyway. Like Seluna was somehow absorbing Cali’s energy. I didn’t know how that was possible, but I’d learned very early on that few things in the supernatural world were truly impossible.

*Is she using the power of the* due destini*?* Seluna had taken all the pain and heartache she’d caused Cali and her mates so she could… So she could do what?

I’d thought that using that power required Cali to make a choice. From what I could tell, Cali hadn’t made one so much as it had been made for her. Did that count, in some kind of twisted way? It was going to take a long, long time to forget Cali’s screams when she’d thought Xavier had killed Greyson.

And while she’d been screaming for Xavier to stop, I’d been screaming for Seluna to do the same. Not that it had done any good. I was useless to them, a liability more than anything else, considering how Seluna was helping herself to my amplifying abilities.

From the moment I’d realized I had these powers, they’d been nothing but a liability. A resource that someone else always wanted to use, whether or not I actually allowed them to. It was… dehumanizing. To be used as a tool over and over again by the worst creatures the world had created.

I wished I could stop it. Hell, I wished I’d never been born with these powers to begin with. I’d take being a boring, normal human any day. I could have gone the rest of my life never knowing I’d had this ability within me. What good was it to me? These powers had brought me nothing but pain. They’d taken everything from me—my family, my life, my sense of trust and safety.

There was only one thing I knew for sure.

Nothing would ever be normal again.

Assuming, of course, that I even survived this possession. I could feel myself slipping away, falling deeper into my own mind as Seluna gathered more and more of Cali’s energy.

How cruel would it be for me to disappear completely, leaving behind my body and the powers that had ruined my life?

*No. I can’t give up. I can’t let her win.*

Maybe I was a lost cause, but this wasn’t just about me. I had to keep fighting. For Cali. For Marta. For a world that would be devastated by Seluna if she succeeded.

I tried to fight against the power pooling inside me, and my own magical response that was making it grow so much and so fast that my body was thrumming with it.

*I’m an amplifier, yes. But every amp comes with a power switch. Can I try to turn it off now?*

I’d been learning to control my magic, and it was the hardest thing I’d ever done to try to turn off this innate ability inside me. But it was worth a try, wasn’t it? That way, Seluna might lose the strength she needed to keep doing this to Cali.

Seluna’s grip on Cali’s forehead tightened, and a tidal wave of energy poured in as Cali let out a scream that should have made my hair stand on end.

I was dimly aware of Xavier and Greyson hovering at the sidelines of a dome that Seluna had created to contain Cali and keep her mates out. They were beating against the barrier, desperate to get in and save their mate before Seluna drained her completely.

Lucian seemed completely awestruck as Seluna absorbed Cali’s energy.

Nobody was coming to save Cali. It had to be me. Thankfully, Seluna was too busy sucking Cali dry to notice my thoughts. My plan to stop her.

*Okay, Dani. You can do this. This is your magic, too. Your body. Focus it—just like Okorie taught you.*

I ignored the hot rush of bright, shimmering energy pouring in from Cali and instead focused on the energy signature below it, the one wrapped around Seluna’s darker, simmering magic. My magic was a soothing blue, a magic of growth, of taking something that was already there and making it better, stronger.

I imagined it inside me, twined around Seluna’s power, fortifying it for the monumental task she was trying to pull off.

And then I felt something inside me click.

I could see where Seluna ended and I began. And that was the key. Now that I knew where the line between her and me was, I could separate my power form hers. And then *I’d* be the one in control. I could stop her—or at least nullify the upper hand I’d been giving her all this time.

It was exactly like Okorie had taught me, when he’d explained using the faucet metaphor. I was trying to turn it off, but Seluna’s magic was like a raging river. It kept trying to blend my magic in with it, even as I sought to untangle our shared magic.

Seluna’s voice thundered in my head. *Stop trying to fight me! You can’t win!*

But I would. I could. I had to. I was *done* being used by this demon.

I focused on my magic again and heard Okorie’s mantra in my head. *Focus. Turn it off.*

Suddenly, the barrier surrounding us shimmered and fell away. I could feel myself pulling the power away from it, my own power. And then I took it a step further and used it *against* Seluna. I stopped her magic in its tracks, stopped her from draining Cali of her magic and the power of the *due destini*.

*This is a lost cause*, Seluna snarled. *No matter how much you fight against me, you’re never going to win. I’m more powerful than ever. It’s already too late.*

Seluna looked at Lucian. “The time is now. I will finally get my own body back. I’ll use the power of the *due destini* to finally take what’s mine—my body, my power, my respect. I was locked away for too long, but now this world is mine. I’ll do what I want, when I want, and no one will be able to stop me.”

And while she went off, I kept trying to smother her magic, to weaken her. I was so close—

And then, suddenly, it all disappeared. Seluna slipped out of my body and took her power with her, but to go where? She had no other body.

It took me a moment to realize what was happening, and then another to believe it wasn’t just some trick. *Am I alone in here?*

I looked down at Cali and removed my hand.

Cali looked dazed and pale. “What just happened?”

I was afraid to say it, like speaking the words might jinx the whole thing. But I forced myself to admit it. “I think Seluna’s gone.”

Greyson came rushing over as Cali crumpled, and he caught her in his arms. As terrible as she looked, I felt the opposite. I was back in my body, back in control, without Seluna pulling the strings.

A breeze ghosted over me, and Big Mac, Kira, and Okorie appeared.

“Where did you all come from?” I asked.

Big Mac looked around and did a double take at Greyson’s bloodstained form. “Never mind that, what happened to you?”

He shrugged, his arms still locked around Cali. “It’s a long story.”

Xavier came over and eased Cali out of his brother’s arms so he could hug her tightly. Even though we were all out in the open, I couldn’t help but feel I was somehow prying on something intensely private between them, so I turn my gaze away, focusing instead on Big Mac and Kira.

“She left,” I told them. “It’s just me in here.”

I hugged Big Mac, who offered me a stiff hug in return.

Lucian rushed over. “Where is she?” His hands landed on my shoulders, and he shook me roughly. “What have you done to my goddess?”

Greyson and Xavier pulled him off me in a heartbeat.

“Touch anyone else without their permission, and I’ll rip your fucking arms off,” Xavier snarled.

“Then do it!” Lucian wailed. “If I can’t be with Seluna, I don’t care what happens to me.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes and then turned back to me. “How do you know she’s gone? We never did the exorcism.”

“The last time I regained control I could still feel her in the back of my mind. This time… there’s nothing. It’s like a haze has been removed.”

“Maybe you should check,” Kira suggested with a glance at Big Mac.

Okorie stepped up. “I’ve got it.” He chanted something under his breath, and it suddenly felt like my body was transparent, as if some kind of search light was passing through me.

Then he smiled. “She’s clean.”

“What have you done with her?” Lucian screamed as Xavier dragged him away. “Where. Is. My. Goddess?”

A cracking sound echoed through the courtyard, and we turned toward the Seluna statue. Cracks were webbing out across the stone, and pieces crumbled off to reveal pale skin beneath.

The last of the sculpture fell away, and a beautiful woman was revealed underneath it.

Lucian broke away from Xavier and raced up to the fountain, dropping to his knees. “*Seluna?*”

# 

# Episode 2708

*Am I seeing what I think I’m seeing? Or maybe I’m not seeing it at all. Maybe this is all just some horrifying illusion.*

I stood there in shock, as frozen as Seluna’s statue had been before it had apparently started to come to life. To my horror I could see the stone crumbling away from the base, revealing very human flesh. I blinked quickly, still unsure that I wasn’t hallucinating.

*No. It’s real. Seluna is right here, in the flesh.*

Standing proudly in the fountain was the very same woman from my dreams and visions—Seluna, the moon demon.

My mates were standing stock-still on either side of me, clearly as shocked and horrified as I was. Lucian was still on his knees and thoroughly ecstatic that his dream goddess had just been resurrected right before his very eyes.

*Except she’s no goddess.*

I didn’t get it. Why couldn’t Lucian understand that he’d been worshipping a demon? We’d all tried to warn him, but he’d just ignored it like there wasn’t even the slightest possibility that it was true. Maybe he didn’t want to believe it.

*I have to make him see that he’s making a big mistake welcoming Seluna back here*.

I was just about to yell out yet another warning to Lucian when Seluna turned to glare right at me. Whoa. Never mind.

“Why is the half-Fae still here?” she hissed. “I have no further need of her, or her witch friend.”

Lucian rose to his feet. “What do you want, my goddess?”

“I want the Redwoods to leave.” Seluna curled her top lip into a snarl as she spoke, and a chill raced down my spine.

“That’s fine by me,” Xavier said quickly. “In fact, that’s what we’ve wanted from the very first time we set foot in this place—to leave and never come back.”

“I still don’t understand,” I spluttered, unable to help myself. “Why did you put Dani, me, and my entire pack through this? Why did you even need us?”

“I didn’t need you or Dani, really. Only your bodies. Your essence. You, Caliana, provided the *due destini*—a powerful magical spark that I needed to finally be able to bring forth my corporeal self. And Dani’s amplification magic helped me to complete it. You two subpar beings have served your purpose, and now you can see the results.” Seluna beamed at us, her cold eyes shining.

“You used us!” I yelled. “Just like you used Lucian!”

“Don’t speak ill of my beloved!” Lucian snapped.

Greyson grabbed my arm and pulled me away. “Forget this, Cali. I want to get the hell out of here. Let Lucian deal with the monster he’s summoned.”

“I’m not sure that’s such a great idea,” Xavier said. “I want to get away from these Vanguard weirdos as much as you do, brother, but after everything that Lucian’s put us through? After everything he’s done to Cali? We’re going to just walk away? Doesn’t sit right with me.”

“That may be, Xavier, but take a look around. There are still far too many Vanguard wolves for us to go up against. We did what we set out to do—we have Dani, and we have Cali. Let’s get out of here while we still can.”

“He’s right, Xavier. I just want to go home.” All the fight had drained out of me, and I was tired of being involved in the Vanguard drama. I just wanted to get back to the pack house to spend time with my family and my mates. I was long overdue for a little rest and relaxation.

“Fine, if this is how you want to leave it, far be it for me to argue,” Xavier said, obviously still angry. “Let’s get Cali out of here.”

Lucian waved us off. “Be gone.”

Seluna pulled Lucian close. “You’ve done well, my prince, and you shall be rewarded.”

Xavier groaned, rolling his eyes.

I turned to Big Mac, who was watching the scene unfold without bothering to mask her distaste.

“Can you take us home, Big Mac?” I asked. I was exhausted, and something in me just didn’t feel quite right, though I couldn’t tell what it was, exactly.

*Today has been the definition of crazy, so maybe it’s just stress.*

“Gladly,” Big Mac said. “Let’s go.”

A second later, we all blipped into the front yard of the pack house. Okorie and Kira landed effortlessly, and even Dani landed on her feet, but Xavier, Greyson, Ava, and I crashed awkwardly to the ground.

“Sorry about the rough landing,” Big Mac said gruffly. “I think I was still a little thrown off by that scene back there—my execution was a little sloppy.”

“It’s no problem,” Xavier said, getting up and dusting himself off. “I’m just happy to be away from the Vanguards.”

“You can say that again,” I replied. I was still feeling a little weak, but at least we’d made it home safely.

“You should go get some rest,” Greyson said.

“Yeah, you should. You look a little worse for wear,” Xavier added.

“Thanks a lot.” I feigned annoyance, but if I looked even half as tired as I felt, then Xavier was probably right.

“So glad to be out of that crazy place. Let’s all agree to never deal with moon goddess… demons ever again,” Ava grumbled under her breath before heading into the pack house.

Xavier and Greyson began to lead me inside when the door burst open. Rishika, Lola, and Jay came running out.

“Are you guys okay?” Lola asked, gathering me into a hug.

“Nothing we couldn’t handle,” Xavier said.

Jay gave Xavier a hard pat on the back. “Glad to have you back in one piece.”

“Glad to be back.”

“The best part is that the Seluna threat is over,” Greyson said. “At least for now. I’m going to think about what to do next, since it appears that we now have a demon living next door.”

I looked around. “Are Artemis and my parents back yet? Charon snatched me away from them just as we got to Haystack Rock. They must be so worried.”

“We spoke to Orla,” Rishika said. “They’re on their way back. You should probably call her to let her know you’re okay.”

“Yeah, I will. Thanks, Rishika.”

Xavier and Greyson led me into the pack house and walked me to my room before heading off so that I could have some privacy. I lay across the bed and called my mom. I was relieved when she answered on the first ring.

“Oh, Cali, we were so worried! Are you okay?”

“Yes, Mom, I’m fine. Sorry about Charon blipping me away like that.”

“Oh, Cali, why are you apologizing? I know that wasn’t your fault. I’m just glad that you’re home safe. We’ll be back as soon as we can.”

“Good, I’ll see you when you get here.”

I hung up and rolled over onto my back, letting out a deep breath. I was so happy to be home. All I wanted now was to go take a shower and try to wash the memory of today down the drain.

*If only it were that easy…*

I was still haunted by the sight of Xavier attacking Greyson—even if it had been part of their plan. It had felt so damn real—and it was something that I’d worried about since I’d first learned about *due destini*. To see it play out right in front of me like that had been terrifying.

I turned at the sound of a soft knock on the door. “Come in.”

It was Lola. “Hey, how you feeling?”

“Thanks for checking in on me. I’m fine. About as fine as I can be after all of that.”

She pulled me in for a quick hug before holding me at arm’s length so she could look me in the eye. “Well, good. You’d better not get possessed by any more demons, okay? I don’t think I can handle any more body snatching.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that—not if I can help it, that is.”

“Glad to hear that. Man, you look really tired. I don’t understand why Dani doesn’t look as tired as you do after everything she’s just been through!”

“I don’t know why that is. I feel really tired, yes, but there’s something else off, too. I can’t quite put my finger on it.”

“What do you mean?” Lola asked, instantly concerned.

“Things got pretty crazy at the palace. Lucian and Seluna pretty much forced Greyson and Xavier to face off, and they did—Well, at least they pretended to. But it looked so real, Lola. Xavier attacked Greyson, and it looked like he’d killed him! I really thought I’d lost him, and I felt this… *strain*, inside me. I think it might have something to do with the mate bond.”

Lola cocked her head to the side, thoughtful. “That makes sense. We both know how powerful the mate bond can be. I can’t even imagine what it must have felt like to have to stand by and watch as your mate was killed—how could that *not* affect you?”

“It really did, and it’s got me worried big time. Seluna said that she needed the magic from the *due destini* to complete her resurrection. Now, I keep asking myself the same question over and over again.”

“What question is that?”

“Has my mate bond with Greyson and Xavier been damaged?”

# Episode 2709

**Xavier**

I splashed some cool water over my face as I fought hard to relax. I sucked in a breath and clutched the edges of the sink, letting the droplets of water splash back down. The only thing I could think about was going back to check on Cali and make sure she was okay. I didn’t think I’d ever forget the look on her face when I’d attacked Greyson. We’d had to make sure it looked authentic, or else our plan wouldn’t have worked. Even after we’d convinced Cali that we weren’t really going at it, she’d looked terrified. I wanted to go to her and assure her that it really had been our plan for it to look as savage as possible—and that I’d had no intention of seriously harming my brother. First, though, I needed to speak to Greyson.

I found him in the living room with Rishika, talking over what happened at the Vanguard palace. I gave Rishika an apologetic nod for interrupting and then pulled him aside.

“What are we going to do about the moon prince?” It just didn’t feel right that we’d left without putting a period on the run-on sentence that was the Vanguard saga. I’d never been one for loose ends.

“Nothing right now.”

“Nothing? That’s a mistake. We should have just killed him on the spot.” *If I were Alpha, Lucian would be dead right now.*

“I get your frustration, but again, we were outnumbered. If we’d cut Lucian down, we would have been cut down right after—there’s no question about that. None of us would have made it out of that palace alive, and there was no way I was going to put Cali or the pack in danger like that. It sucks that Lucian’s still breathing, but you should be content for now that we were able to rescue Cali and Dani.”

“I am, but we left Lucian with a demon. There’s no way that’s not going to come back to bite us in the ass.” I could see it now: Seluna and her army of Vanguards storming out of the woods and coming straight for us with her lapdog Lucian right on her heels.

“I’m well aware, Xavier. I’m going to have a chat with the witches to see if there’s anything we can do to protect ourselves without getting into another pack war. Nobody wants that—including you, right?”

I hated it when Greyson was right. “Fine, I’ll drop it for now.”

I left Greyson and headed upstairs to check on Cali, but I ran into Ava as soon as I reached the top of the stairs. As usual, my wolf went into overdrive. With everything that had happened, all of my attention had been squarely focused on saving Cali. Now that the immediate threat was over, my attention was being pulled elsewhere.

Ava looked tired, which was no surprise, given she’d been put through hell today. Rather than just pass her by to get to Cali, I lingered.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“I’m alive, so that’s a plus, right?” Awkward pause. “I’m going to go get cleaned up.” She turned and hurried off toward her room.

“Ava, wait—I didn’t get a chance to thank you for putting your life on the line and going through with our crazy plan. I owe you one.”

*Those are four words I never thought I’d ever say to Ava, of all people.*

She smiled wistfully but said nothing and went into her room, closing the door softly behind her.

*Follow her.*

My wolf was clamoring for me to go after her, to burst into her room, but I held my ground. I was grateful to Ava for helping—but it had all been to save Cali. My mate. Ava had known that going in, and she knew it now.

I hesitated outside Ava’s door for just a moment before I made my way to Cali’s room. Lola came out just as I was about to go in.

Lola smiled. “Thanks for bringing my girl back safe and sound. You did good.”

“Don’t I always?” I asked, and she gave me a quick teasing laugh before hurrying downstairs.

I went into Cali’s room to see her heading toward the bathroom, towel in hand. I was taken aback by how beautiful she looked for someone who’d just been possessed, kidnapped, and used and abused by a demon. But she also looked tired. I pulled her into a hug, and we stood there for a while, entwined in each other’s arms.

*This is why I didn’t follow Ava. This is why I risked everything and would again. Just to be back with Cali.*

I kissed her gently and inhaled her scent. “You doing okay?”

“I just want to hold you,” she said, her voice muffled by my chest.

“I have no problem with that.” For once my wolf wasn’t arguing with me and finally seemed to be aligned with my emotions. “Do you want to rest?”

“I do, but I want to grab a shower first. I feel gross from being around Lucian that long.”

I smiled. “How about something better? Want me to draw you a bath?”

“I’d like that.”

I went into the bathroom and started the water, pouring in a dash of her favorite bubble bath. Cali came in behind me and lingered in the doorway, watching me.

“Hey, Xavier?” she asked.

“Yeah?” I knew the exact tone of voice she was using. The one where she had a difficult question to ask and didn’t know where to start.

“You don’t feel any… different, do you?”

I wrenched around to look at her as I tested the temperature of the water. “Different? How so? The only thing I really feel is complete happiness that the Vanguard nightmare is over.”

*At least the most recent nightmare…*

“That’s not what I mean. Is there anything about our mate bond that feels… different to you? That’s the only word I can come up with.”

“What? Why? Is everything okay?” I didn’t know what she was getting at. “My mate bond with you feels as strong as ever. Maybe stronger.”

Cali shook her head. “Maybe it’s nothing. I’m just paranoid that Seluna might have tried to tamper with it.”

“Well, if that’s what you’re worried about, it’s pretty easy to check. Do you love me?”

Cali reached up and linked her arms around my neck, pulling me into a hug. “Do you really need to ask?”

“Just answer the question.”

“I love you.”

I kissed her. “Then do as I say and get in the tub.”

She reached up to unclasp the button at the neck of her blouse, but I stopped her.

“Let me.”

I unbuttoned her blouse and lifted it over her head, letting my fingers trail along the warm flesh of her stomach. I could feel my entire body tense with anticipation. I couldn’t wait to see her naked, and I couldn’t wait to finally get close to her, just like I’d fantasized about doing ever since this whole mess had started.

I cupped her breasts for a second, and she gasped in surprise, then I undid the front clasp of her bra and let it fall to the floor. She leaned back against me as I hooked my fingers into the waist of her panties and pulled them down the soft, silky skin of her thighs, and I couldn’t help but imagine how her thighs would feel wrapped around my waist.

“This feels heavenly,” Cali said as she dipped a toe into the water before taking the plunge. She submerged her entire body, even dropping her head under the water and coming up dripping wet with a smile on her beautiful face.

“Glad you like it.” I took a seat on the edge of the tub. “Lean forward, I’m going to scrub your back.”

Cali did as I asked, and I dipped her bath sponge into the water and then dragged it slowly up and down her back. Cali leaned forward and moaned, and I leaned in to kiss her neck every so often. My wolf was going crazy again, but this time it was for the right woman.

Cali’s breathing slowed and deepened, and I could tell that she was enjoying it. I realized then how much I’d missed sharing moments like this with her, and how worried I’d been that something might happen to her.

Suddenly, all the stress of the day seemed to hit me all at once.

*Can I join you?* I mind linked. I stood up and removed my shirt as I awaited her reply. When she didn’t answer, I paused, feeling a little thrown. “I guess not.”

“Huh?” Cali said as she turned and looked up at me.

“I just mind linked to ask if I could come into the tub with you.”

“You did? Maybe I was zoning out.” She gave me a sly smile. “Try again. Tell me how much you want to join me.”

*I want to get in there with you and run my hands over every inch of your wet body. I want to slide you onto my lap and feel your soft breasts pressed against my chest while I kiss your neck and take your perfect nipples into my mouth. Then you’ll stand up, and I’ll kiss you in the best place of all.*

Cali was staring up at me with a blank look on her face. “Well?”

Now I was alarmed. “I just did—what the hell?”

“Let me try.”

I waited, hoping that I’d hear her soft voice come drifting into my mind, but nothing happened. My heart sank.

Cali’s eyes went wide. “Why can’t we mind link anymore?”

# Episode 2710

**Greyson**

I couldn’t stop thinking about what Xavier had said. He wanted to wipe the Vanguards—namely Lucian—off the map, and I felt exactly the same as he did. I wanted to rip Lucian to pieces. I’d fantasized about it ever since the first time he’d crossed the line.

*But I’m the Alpha, not Xavier. The decision isn’t his to make, and I have my reasons.*

As much as killing Lucian would’ve satisfied a primal urge for revenge, it wouldn’t have been in the best interests of the pack. Not only would it have endangered Dani and Cali, but it would most likely have exploded into a fully-fledged pack war. We didn’t need that right now, especially not with LIPS breathing down our necks. Xavier had eventually agreed with me, but it had been all too clear that he wasn’t happy about my decision.

But really, what else was new?

Right now, I had other things on my mind besides when and if we’d finally be able to get our revenge on Lucian. I was happy to leave that on the back burner for now—especially when we had more serious things to worry about when it came to the Vanguards. I was looking for Big Mac, eager to talk about possible protections against our new demon neighbor. I finally found her in the den with my mother, whose face crumpled with concern as soon as she laid eyes on me.

“Greyson, you’re hurt.”

I looked down at my arm, realizing that I still hadn’t fully healed from my brother’s bite. It wasn’t bothering me much at all, and I’d nearly forgotten about it. I’d told Xavier to do as little damage as he could while making sure that it looked convincing—and he’d done a good job at both.

“It looks way worse than it is. Doesn’t even hurt, and I’m healing pretty fast.”

“That may be so, but maybe Kira should take a look at it since Torin isn’t back from Haystack Rock, yet.”

“I’m fine, I’m fine, but okay,” I said, not wanting to argue with her. I could tell that she was worried, and if going to see Kira would ease her mind, then it was the least that I could do. “I was actually looking for you, Big Mac. I just wanted to thank you for all your help today.”

Big Mac waved me off in her usual grumpy way. “It was nothing.”

I paused for a moment, wondering whether the question on my mind was worth asking. “There’s something I need to know. Why did you blip us out of the Vanguard palace right after the explosion? I wanted to stay and get Dani out, but you stopped me. Why?”

“It was too dangerous to stay,” Big Mac said dismissively. “Way too hectic. It’s a moot point, anyway. We got Dani back in the end, didn’t we? Problem solved, crisis averted, and you’re not smashed under a chunk of Vanguard palace. I call that a win-win.”

I nodded. She was being a little evasive, which wasn’t totally out of the ordinary when it came to Big Mac.

“If you’ll both excuse me,” Big Mac said, getting up from her seat, “I have some things to take care of.” Without another word, she left.

I stared after her, perplexed. “What was that all about?”

My mother put a hand on my arm. “Sit down, let me look at your arm. I know you’re insisting that it’s fine, but it looks bad. I just want a closer look.” She patted the seat beside her, and I sat down. She held my arm up close to examine it. “You know as well I do that MacKenzie isn’t always so forthcoming about her feelings.”

I chuckled. “Understatement of the century, but yes, I’m well aware. I don’t get why she can’t explain why she literally yanked us out of there before I even had a chance to figure out what was happening, or exactly what we should do. She wouldn’t even listen to me, which isn’t all that surprising since it’s Big Mac we’re talking about, but she usually gives me a bit more leeway than that. I’m more than capable of taking care of myself.”

I thought back to my time as a Rogue, and how the only person I’d had to watch my back was me. I’d survived well enough then, so there was no question in my mind that I still could. Being with the pack hadn’t changed that.

“I know that, Greyson. You’re a very capable Alpha. I’ve known that all along, and MacKenzie does, too.”

“Okay, then why? Why was she so adamant about protecting me at all costs? Even when I had the situation under control?”

She sighed. “She wasn’t trying to protect you. She was trying to protect me.”

I shook my head. “What?”

“She did it because you’re my son, Greyson,” my mom said. “She loves me and she knows how much I worry about you. I’ve accepted that you’re an Alpha, but a mother’s love for her son knows no bounds. No matter how big and strong you are, I still worry.”

Struck, I just sat there staring at her. Why I hadn’t thought of that before?It was still strange hearing her talk about me that way, and though I’d been slowly getting used to the idea of us having a more traditional mother-son relationship, it still made me a little uneasy—like it was all just an illusion.

“MacKenzie’s guarded with her emotions, but beneath all that, she loves me deeply. She worries about me—and about you. She pulled you out of there to save me.” She pulled me into a tight hug. “But MacKenzie will never admit it, so don’t press her on it, okay?”

“Okay,” I said as she finished looking over my wound. She seemed satisfied that it was healing up as well as I’d said.

“It’s healing okay, but I still want you to have Torin give it a look when he’s back.”

“I will, thanks.”

We both jumped at the sound of a commotion—it sounded like feet pounding down the stairs.

“Greyson!” Cali yelled.

I excused myself and ran out to find Cali and Xavier hovering at the foot of the stairs. They both looked like they were in distress.

“Hey, are you two okay?” I asked.

Xavier’s shirt was hanging off him, as if he’d put it on in a hurry, and Cali was wrapped in a bathrobe. I could smell the perfumed soap rolling off her, and her hair was soaking wet. It didn’t take much for me to connect the dots. My conclusion didn’t make me happy—at all—but I steadied myself and worked overtime to keep my voice and my expression neutral. “So… What’s going on?”

Cali gave me a frantic look. “Our—we can’t—we tried to mind link, and…”

“Slow down, Cali, what’s going on?” I glanced at Xavier. He looked tense.

“I can’t mind link with Xavier.”

“And I can’t mind link with her, either,” Xavier said.

“It’s like our link was severed or something,” Cali added.

“What?” I felt the hair on the back of my neck rise. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” Xavier said. “You should try mind linking with her.”

“Okay.”

*Cali, can you hear me, love?*

Cali was staring at both of us, her expression pained. “Did you try it already? If you did, I can’t hear you.”

“What?” My mind started racing.

“Let me try doing it,” she said. She pressed her lips together in concentration, but nothing came through to me.

“What the fuck is going on?” I couldn’t believe this was happening. I’d just started to relax a little after how tense the last few days had been, and now this? I didn’t even want to consider what it might mean—especially after everything that had happened at the Vanguard palace.

“Oh my god.” Cali started pacing back and forth, her arms wrapped tightly around her chest.

“Cali, don’t panic. We’ll figure this out.” I returned my attention to Xavier. “Have you tried to mind link with anyone else?”

“Yes, I did it with you at the palace, remember?”

“Okay, why don’t we try it now?”

Xavier nodded and shifted into his wolf form. I focused on him and opened the mind link. *Xavier, can you hear me?*

*I can hear you*, Xavier replied. *Now try with Cali.*

I turned to look at Cali. *Cali, it’s me. Can you hear me?*

I waited, trying to stay positive, but I could tell by the look on her face that she hadn’t heard me. There was something in the pit of my stomach that felt… off. Xavier shifted back, and I looked from him to Cali, still trying to come up with an explanation for why our most intimate form of communication had been cut off—but only with Cali.

“Something’s wrong,” I said. It was an obvious statement, but it was the only thing I could manage.

Cali nodded, her eyes wide and wild. “It’s our mate bond. It’s broken!”

# Episode 2711

**Marta**

“Dani!” I ran up to her and hugged her tight, then stepped back to get a good look at her. “How are you feeling? It is you, isn’t it?”

She looked normal enough, but with how crazy things had been lately, you could never be too sure. I wasn’t quite sure what I expected a recently possessed person to look like, but it wasn’t the calm, collected person in front of me. Dani looked a little tired, but otherwise, she looked great.

Dani ducked her head and smiled. “Yes, it’s me. I’m just Dani now, no more demon—I think.”

My eyes went wide. “What? Do you think there could still be a little demon lingering around inside you?” My heart jumped. If she was still possessed, what did that mean for the pack?

“No, no, I was just joking. Really, no more demon.”

“Oh,” I said, my hand on my heart. “Don’t scare me like that.”

I was tickled that she’d tried to pull one over on me. I wasn’t sure that I’d heard Dani crack many jokes, or be particularly playful.

Okorie came walking up to us. “I’m proud of you—both of you. You were able to control your magic well enough to help oust a demon. Just goes to show what an amazing mentor I am!” He puffed out his chest and smiled.

I groaned. “Can’t you get over yourself and give Dani credit where credit’s due?” I asked. Did he have to be so vain all the time? “Everything’s not about you, you know. She’s the one who just went through being possessed.”

*And she looks like she barely broke a sweat.*

“All true, but she wouldn’t have succeeded without my guidance and perseverance. That’s just a fact.” He pointed at me. “Haven’t you gained more control over your magic since I started mentoring you?” He pointed to himself. “Behold! The common denominator!”

I felt the overwhelming urge to tell him it was unbecoming to gloat, but I didn’t think I’d be able to get a word in edgewise. He was going on and on, and showing no signs of stopping.

“Ah, isn’t it grand to finally have agency over your magic? Isn’t it freeing? Empowering? Enlightening?” He looked off into the distance. “You know, when I was a young prodigy trying to get a handle on my rare and awesome power, it felt so good to have these small victories. It’s a rite of passage, really. I’m happy that I was able to be there to guide you on your journey, Dani, to becoming a respected magic wielder like me. There really is nothing like it.”

*Wow, he really likes hearing himself talk about himself.*

“I agree, I’ve definitely gained a lot of control,” I said. I held up my bracelets. “So, does that mean that you can remove these for good? You’re such a great teacher that I don’t think I really need these things anymore.”

Okorie held up a finger. “I understand your impatience, Marta, but this was but one battle in a war. We still have lots of training to do. In fact, I’m going to increase your training, starting first thing tomorrow. Plan to spend your entire day with me, honing your blossoming skills. Now that I’ve seen what you’re capable of, I won’t be taking it easy on you any longer.”

*He’s been taking it* easy *on us? And what happened to being rewarded for besting an enemy? Having to work harder because we’re doing better with our magic doesn’t seem fair.*

“*More* training? But you just said—”

“Ah, ah, ah, not so fast, Marta. I’m absolutely thrilled that you and Dani have made so much progress. It’ll definitely prove to the witch council that I’ve done my duty, but you’re not ready to be on your own quite yet, so the bracelets will remain on your wrists and your training will continue—double time.” With a slight bow and a smirk, he turned to go. “See you ladies first thing tomorrow.”

I sighed as I watched him walk away. He looked like he hadn’t a care in the world. *Must be freeing to only have yourself to think about.*

“He’s so full of himself,” I grumbled.

“Yeah, he does seem to think pretty highly of himself.” Dani paused. “But the truth is, I *was* able to control my magic and fight off Seluna using some of the techniques he’s taught me, so I guess he kind of has a point about his impact on us.”

“Oh god, don’t tell him that—his head is big enough already. I’m worried that if he gets a compliment, especially from one of us, his head might literally explode, and *then* where would we be?”

Dani laughed. “You’re probably right about that.”

*Hmm, I haven’t heard her laugh so much lately, either. That’s encouraging.*

“Okay, so now that the demon stuff is all over, I can focus on finding my sister.” All traces of Dani’s smile were gone, now. It broke my heart that she still hadn’t made any progress in contacting her sister.

“Yes, definitely. I’d like to help if I can.”

“I appreciate that, Marta,” Dani said. “Do you think Okorie might be willing to help? He’s a warlock after all, and he might have some knowledge about this kind of stuff. Also, he really proved himself back there with the Vanguards.”

I shrugged. “It wouldn’t hurt to ask him—though Okorie does seem to be in this for himself. He’s only mentoring us because he has to. If it weren’t for that, I suspect he’d be long gone by now.”

Dani considered this. “I’m not so sure about that.”

I laughed, a little shocked that she seemed to be defending him. Okorie had been tooting his own horn since we’d first laid eyes on him, but clearly Dani wasn’t as offended by it as I was.

“Well, he did just try to take credit for how well you did against Seluna,” I pointed out. “And as recently as a few seconds ago, all he could talk about was how your success will make him look to the witch council.” *But he did help Cali and the others with all the Vanguard stuff, which I guess he didn’t have to do.* Still, he was a piece of work. “Why would he want to hang around otherwise? To *help*? I doubt it.”

Dani went quiet and shifted uncomfortably. She looked like she was about to say something when Lilac came walking over.

“Hey, how’s it going? I was just out on patrol, and I heard that you were back.” He hugged her, and she looked relieved, as if Lilac had just saved her from something.

*I wonder what she was about to say?*

“I’m glad you’re okay, Dani, but can I steal Marta away for a sec?”

Dani nodded. “Sure, see you later.”

“You must be relieved,” Lilac said, once Dani was gone. “I know you were so worried about her. Looks like she made it through all right.”

“She did.”

“Whoa, that patrol was brutal. I’m so glad I’m done for the day. We’re still looking for any signs of LIPS… I thought I saw a sign, but it ended up being just a ball of foil in the brush. I thought it was a trap! Then there was a bird sitting stock-still up in a tree, and I thought it was a drone…”

I was barely listening. I was thinking back to our last conversation, and how Lilac had seemed to be jealous of Okorie. I’d felt like he was reading way too much into it, and Lilac had denied it of course, but things had been left a little unresolved.

Lilac was looking at me as if waiting on a response. He furrowed his brow. “Were you listening? I asked if you maybe wanted to go for pizza sometime this week? It might be good to get away from the pack for a while and have a little fun.”

“That sounds good… But what about our last conversation?”

“What?”

I was trying to read him, wondering if he really didn’t remember or if he just wasn’t interested in talking about it. “Don’t you remember being jealous of Okorie?”

Lilac sighed. “I thought it over, and I decided that I don’t have anything to worry about.”

“That’s good… And you’re right,” I added quickly. “But why did you make such a big deal out of it in the first place?”

“I don’t know. I guess I realized that I was a little jealous—only because Okorie has gotten to spend so much time with you lately. He can help you with your magic, and I can’t—it’s kind of frustrating, honestly. But I know I shouldn’t doubt how much we mean to each other.” He pulled me into a hug. “So, how about that pizza date—you game?”

I hugged him back and laid my head on his shoulder. I wanted to believe what he’d said about our connection, but I couldn’t help but wonder if he was right. Maybe he felt like we were meant for each other right now, but he had a mate out there somewhere. The world was a big place, and we were both really young. What if Lilac crossed paths with his mate one day? Would he still feel the same way about me?

# Episode 2712

*Could our mate bond really be… broken?!* Panic surged through my body, and I suddenly felt light-headed. “Did Seluna somehow destroy our mate bond? Is that what she meant when she said she was using the *due destini* power?”

I should’ve suspected that from the beginning. If she’d siphoned magic from the *due destini*, it only made sense that it would negatively affect us. It wasn’t like Seluna had cared about ruining our mate bond in the process. Hell, it had probably been a perk for her.

Greyson shook his head. “It can’t be that the mate bond is broken—I still feel it.”

“I feel it, too,” Xavier said. “Wouldn’t we all have felt something it were broken?”

“But that’s the thing, I *did* feel something while Seluna was transforming herself—it was subtle and hard to explain, but I felt it. It was almost like my energy was being drained—and I still feel weak. Maybe that was when she tampered with our bond?” I asked. “You’re my mates; we should be able to mind link, and now we can’t.”

I knew that getting worked up wasn’t going to help the situation, but I couldn’t help but go to a dark place as I considered what losing our ability to mind link might mean. What if this was just the first symptom of a degrading mate bond? What if we started to lose other parts of our connection, too?

“There has to be some explanation,” Xavier said.

“We can talk to Big Mac,” Greyson suggested.

While we searched the pack house for her, I kept hoping that I was wrong about our mate bond being damaged. I had no idea what I would do without my mates. It pissed me off that we’d finally semi-removed ourselves from the Vanguard drama, only to have residual effects from their crazy antics.

We found Big Mac in her room, and she looked none too pleased to see us.

“What do you want now?” she said, closing the thick tome she’d been reading with a sigh.

“We’ve got a little problem,” Xavier began.

“Oh? What else is new? I’d literally die from shock if you *weren’t* dealing with some fresh turmoil. So, what is it now?” She narrowed her gaze. “Since it’s all three of you together and Cali looks like she’s about to melt into a puddle of tears, I’m going to guess that it has something to do with your mate bond?”

“Uh… Yes, how’d you know?” Xavier asked. He looked genuinely shocked.

“Lucky guess,” Big Mac said dryly. “So, what are the details?”

“We think something happened at the Vanguard palace when Seluna used our bond to take her original form. Cali felt something strange inside her, and she thinks Seluna might have damaged the mate bond.”

Hearing Xavier say it all out loud only made me feel worse. I wished that I’d understood the weird feeling right when it had first happened. Then I might have been able to stop Seluna, or at least demanded that she reverse what she was doing. *Not that she would have listened to me…*

“As a reminder, I’m not an expert on werewolf mate bonds, but it seems reasonable that the mate bond could have been affected by Seluna’s magic.”

“Affected? Permanently?” I was so out of breath with panic that I could barely get the words out.

Big Mac flashed me an exasperated look. “I’m not saying that. My suggestion is to not panic—give it some time to heal. Seluna might have drawn magic from the *due destini*, and as a result, she might have weakened it, but she can’t break it. I’m almost certain that she doesn’t have that sort of power.”

“But how long will it take to come back? I can’t even mind link with either of them.” I hated feeling disconnected from my mates. I just wanted everything to be okay between us, but clearly that was too much to ask. “Are we talking a few hours? Days? Weeks?” *Months, years?* It felt like I was starting to come apart at the seams.

Big Mac’s exasperated look turned to a full-on glare. “I told you, I’m not an expert on mate bonds. All you can do right now is take it day by day. If you still can’t mind link after, let’s say, a week, we’ll see what can be done.”

“Okay,” Greyson said, nodding. “Given what we just went through, we might need time to recuperate.”

When Greyson said it that way, it sounded so simple. But what if he was wrong? What if Big Mac was wrong, and nothing came back after a week?

“Now, if there’s nothing else, I have a life, and I’d like to get back to it, if you don’t mind.” She stood up and ushered us out, then slammed the door. I wasn’t sure, but it almost sounded like she locked it, too.

“What are we going to do?” I was absolutely hopeless. Big Mac had told us not to panic, but that was all I could do.

“We’re going to have to wait it out,” Xavier said.

“I hate the idea of that, but I guess we don’t have any other options.”

I sulked as we went downstairs, none of us speaking. It was like a black cloud was hovering over the three of us. As soon as we reached the kitchen, I realized I was starving. There hadn’t exactly been much time to think about eating, lately.

*Maybe stuffing my face will take my mind off things.*

Kira was in the kitchen, too, and she rushed over to Greyson as soon as we came in.

“Your mom wants me to look at your wound,” she said. “I think she’ll kill me if I don’t.” She chuckled.

Greyson sat down at the kitchen table, and Kira sat across from him, her face set in concentration as she examined his wound.

Xavier took my hand and squeezed it. “Hey. It’s going to be okay.”

“I really wanted to believe that, but it’s hard when everything that can go wrong seems to be going wrong.” I sighed and turned to grab something from the fridge, just as Ava came walking in. She looked amazing, of course, and was freshly showered. As usual, she only had eyes for Xavier.

“Can I talk to you, Xavier?”

I tensed at the question.

“Can it wait?” he asked.

“It’ll only take a minute.”

Xavier gave my hand a squeeze. “I’ll be right back.”

I watched him follow Ava out, wondering if Ava could somehow sense that my mate bond with Xavier had been weakened. If she had even the smallest inkling that it was vulnerable, I was sure that she’d swoop in like a predator, hungry to exploit it.

Greyson pulled me to him. “Everything’s going to be okay. You know that, right?”

“How can you be so sure? What if we can never mind link again?”

“Look into my eyes, Cali. Really look.”

I did. It was comforting to gaze into his intensely beautiful grey eyes.

“Tell me what I’m thinking.”

I was taken aback. “I’m not a mind reader.”

Greyson pulled me closer. “Come on, give it a try. Don’t do anything but look right into my eyes and tell me what I’m thinking.”

My heart fluttered as I tried hard to imagine what might be going through his mind at that very moment. Just like that, it came to me. *Wow, that was easier than I thought it would be.*

“You love me,” I whispered.

Greyson smiled. “See? We don’t need to mind link, do we, love?”

My cheeks warmed, and for the first time since I’d had suspicions about the state of our mate bond, I relaxed. “Look into my eyes, now. Can you tell what I’m thinking?”

I thought about how much I loved him, how he’d told me time and time again that he would always protect me. Then, before I could stop it, I remembered the agony and despair I’d felt when I’d thought Xavier had killed him.

Greyson kissed my forehead. “I won’t ever scare you like that again.”

I was stunned. “Can you really read my mind like that? Even without our mind link?”

He smiled. “I could see it in your eyes. I saw it before, too, when I had to pretend that I was dying. I felt so awful when I realized how painful it was for you. I promise to never put you through anything like that ever again.”

“You’d better not!”

“You have my word… As long as you promise never to get possessed again.”

I gave him a swat on the arm. “That’s so not funny.”

I was feeling a bit better, though. Talking to Greyson and really feeling and seeing our connection in action had let me know that our bond was still strong, even if it was a little off at the moment.

Before long, Xavier came back. I watched him, curious about what Ava had wanted to talk to him about. When it came to her, I just didn’t trust whatever she wanted. But, I had to admit, she’d helped us at the Vanguard palace.

Still, what could she need? I couldn’t mind link with him to ask, but if I said it out loud it might come off as me not trusting *him* instead of *her*—and I trusted him more than ever. I looked into his dark blue eyes and imagined that he was thinking about how much he loved me. I hoped that he’d be able to tell that I was thinking the same thing about him.

Xavier turned to Greyson and me with a thoughtful look on his face. “If the mate bond has changed, does that mean the death curse is gone?”

“I told you it was gone,” Greyson said.

“Then I think it’s time we actually find out,” Xavier said.

# Episode 2713

**Xavier**

I didn’t fully know where the thought had come from. Maybe I owed it a bit to Seluna for putting us in that position of a choice, but now it was gnawing at me. Could Cali choose me and all Greyson would feel is regular heartache instead of his heart stopping?

“The three witches told me that the death curse was already broken,” Greyson said again.

“Yeah, but I’m not about to take the witches’ word on that,” I said. He was clearly getting agitated I wasn’t taking his word. But for all we knew, they’d only told Greyson that so that Cali would make a decision that would literally ruin our lives. Witches couldn’t be trusted in general, but those three had shown themselves to be particularly untrustworthy.

“Let’s talk to Big Mac,” Greyson said. “Last time she tried to check, she wasn’t able to tell because of Charon’s revulsion spell and Cali’s Seluna handprints. With all of that gone now, she should be able to see if the curse is still active.”

“Well let’s ask her right away.” I didn’t want to wait even a second longer. I longed to be out from under the weight of the curse—as anyone would. Now that there was a chance to know for sure that we were free of it, it was all that I could think about. I could already imagine the relief and the lightness that I would feel if Big Mac said that we weren’t cursed anymore. I couldn’t wait.

“Okay… But we all saw how grumpy she was when we were in there before. She’s actually a little grumpier than usual, which is saying a lot,” Cali said, her voice sounding unsteady. “If we go up there again, I wouldn’t be surprised if she cast a revulsion spell to keep us away from her. Should we maybe wait until she’s in a better mood?”

I rolled my eyes. “Like that will ever happen. This death curse thing has been hanging over our heads for too long. If what happened with Seluna has affected the mate bond in some way, then we should at least find out if the curse is broken.”

I could see that Cali was nervous. It was clear that she had mixed feelings about the state of the curse. If the curse had really been lifted, then the final barrier to her having to make a choice would be gone, too. She’d already voiced her concerns about having to make that choice back when the three witches had claimed the curse was no more, so I wasn’t surprised that she still felt the same. Still, I was confident about the outcome, and I wanted to remove any roadblocks on the path to getting what I wanted.

*She’ll choose me, of course. She’d be crazy not to. She has to see that.*

Either way, I knew I had to be patient and remain sensitive to Cali’s situation. For whatever reason, she still loved my brother, and I’d been working overtime to accept that—but it was still a work in progress.

We gave each other nervous looks as we approached Big Mac’s door.

“Maybe we really should come back another time?” Cali whispered. She was wringing her hands and casting furtive glances at the stairs, as if she wanted to race back downstairs and hide.

“Don’t you want to know? Once and for all?” I asked her.

“Of course I do…”

I couldn’t help but notice the note of uncertainty in her voice. As far as I was concerned, it wouldn’t matter if Big Mac breathed fire at us for coming back to see her—I wanted to know. I needed to know. It was clear that Cali didn’t care one way or the other, which I didn’t understand. Who *wanted* to be cursed? Not me.

“I’m with Cali. Maybe we should hold off. What’s another day in the grand scheme of everything?” Greyson said.

I wondered if Greyson was afraid of finding out.

*Is he worried that if the curse is lifted, Cali will be free to choose me? Too bad. Time for a reckoning, Greyson.*

Ignoring my brother, I pounded on Big Mac’s door. There was the click of a lock, and then Big Mac yanked the door open.

“What *now*? Can’t a witch get a moment’s peace around here?”

“It’s the mate bond,” I started, trying not to stutter in the face of Big Mac’s almost palpable annoyance. “We were wondering about the curse—”

“I already told you, I’m not an expert on werewolf mate bonds. Do I need to put a sign on my door that says that?” She started to slam the door in my face, but I wedged my foot in, blocking it.

“I know that, Big Mac. I’m asking about the death curse this time. We want to know if it’s actually broken. Once we get an answer on that, we’ll leave you alone, I promise.” I knew that I might not be able to keep that promise for very long, but I was willing to say anything.

Big Mac huffed and opened the door wider. “Fine. Since nothing else matters but you, I’ll help,” she said sarcastically. “What other purpose do I have, right? I’m obviously here just to be at your beck and call.” She slammed the door all the way open to let us in. “This could’ve waited until tomorrow, but no! It has to happen right *now*. It’s always right now with you three.” She started digging through an ornate chest on the floor next to the bed. “Now where did I put those vials?”

While Big Mac puttered around, I took a moment to think about what all of this might mean. With the curse broken, Cali would finally be free to choose. There wouldn’t be any more excuses.

*Once she chooses me, I can formally challenge Greyson to a Lupo Finale. Then I’ll become Alpha, and I’ll make Cali my Luna. Everything will be as it’s supposed to be.*

I smiled to myself as I pictured everything falling into place, just as I’d imagined it since the moment I’d fallen for Cali. It had all started when Colton had introduced us all those months ago, and now it was finally coming full circle.

“I want to talk to you both,” Cali said, interrupting my thoughts.

She pulled us out of the room as Big Mac rounded on us. “Do you want me to do this, or not?”

“Hold on,” I said. “We’ll be ready in just a second.” *Wow, she can be such a pain in the ass!*

“I don’t want to go through with it,” Cali said as soon as we were back out in the hallway. She looked even more panicked than she’d been when we were discussing Seluna’s damage to our mate bond.

“What? Why?” She was stalling, just like I thought she might. I didn’t even want to think about why she was hesitant to find out if we weren’t cursed. I would have thought she’d be happy to know that we weren’t being controlled by a dark power anymore.

“If we find out that the curse is lifted… I’m worried that you’ll both start pressuring me to choose between you.”

“I can’t speak for Xavier, but I’d never pressure you. I know that you’ll choose when you’re ready, curse or not.” Greyson looked at me. “Well?”

*Greyson’s such a suck-up, always trying to look like the stand-up guy to Cali.* I suppressed an eyeroll as I looked at him. *Truly, I shouldn’t have to pressure her. As long as I’m patient, she’ll choose me in the end.*

I ignored Greyson and reached out and lifted Cali’s chin. “I will never pressure you, but I still want to know if the curse is broken. We all need to know. It’s the only way to move forward. What will waiting any longer accomplish?”

Right then, I wanted so badly to be able to mind link and reassure her that everything would be okay. That I would never do anything to make her feel pressured. I knew that this whole thing was complicated, and I didn’t expect her to go right into deciding as soon as we learned there was no danger in her doing so. *But it would be nice if she did.*

Cali looked between Greyson and me, and then, finally, she nodded. “Okay.”

Pleased, I turned to go back into Big Mac’s room.

“Wait,” Greyson said. He looked down at Cali. “Are you sure? If you’d rather do this some other time—”

“No, Xavier’s right. We’ve waited long enough.”

*Too bad, big brother. We’re about to take the first step toward Cali choosing me as her one and only mate. There’s nothing you can do about it.*

I led the way back into Big Mac’s room, where she was holding a vial filled with peach-colored dust and looking as irritated as ever.

She glared at us. “Well?”

“We’re ready,” I announced.

Big Mac flashed a hard glare at me before stepping up to Cali and blowing the dust in her face. She stood back to study Cali as the dust glowed around her for a few seconds before dissipating.

I glanced at Greyson. He looked as anxious as I felt.

Big Mac put the vials away. “Well, it seems—”

Cali waved her hands frantically in front of Big Mac. “Wait!”

# Episode 2714

It felt like all the air had been sucked out of the room. Big Mac was staring at me, frozen, her mouth hanging open in confusion. Her hands were hanging loosely by her sides, still holding the vials.

Xavier and Greyson turned to look at me with concerned expressions on their faces.

“What’s wrong?” Xavier asked.

“I’m sorry. I know I said that I was ready, but I’m not. You said that you wouldn’t pressure me, but you are. Even if you don’t mean to, you’re pressuring me into doing this.” I hated that I was being so indecisive, and I’d thought that I was finally ready to face it all head-on, but I couldn’t. I wasn’t strong enough right now.

“So… Now you *don’t* want to know?” Big Mac asked with a sigh.

“I *do* want to know. Desperately. But after everything that happened…” I shuddered.

The scenes from the Vanguard palace ripped through my mind, and it was like I relived the entirety of our recent showdown with Seluna all at once. My breath caught in my throat as I tried to push the thoughts away. I hoped that Greyson and Xavier couldn’t tell how much internal turmoil I was going through; I didn’t want to worry them.

“Okay, so… Yes or no? I have things to do—not that any of you care,” Big Mac grumbled.

“Yes. Yes, I do want to know. But there’s no rush.” I looked from Xavier to Greyson and back again. “I love you both, you know that. I’m just not ready to choose. Even if the curse is broken, it doesn’t make any difference.”

After everything that had happened, there was no way I was in any position to learn the one piece of information that stood in the way of one of the biggest decisions I’d ever have to make in my life.

“I don’t care one way or the other, but if you don’t want to know, fine,” Big Mac said.

“Hold on, are you sure about this, Cali?” Xavier plied me with a searching look.

I took Xavier’s hand. “I know you’re disappointed, but I can’t handle knowing. Not right now.”

Xavier just stared at me and shook his head slightly, clearly in disbelief. He wasn’t happy, that much was obvious. I looked at Greyson. He didn’t look any happier.

“I wish I could explain it better to make you both feel better,” I said, “but I don’t know what else to say. The truth is, I’m feeling the pain of what the eventual choice will mean for the three of us all over again, and it’s tearing me up.” I looked at Big Mac as my entire body started to shake. “I’m sorry for wasting your time. Please, promise not to tell anyone what you learned about the curse.”

Big Mac shrugged and sighed, already turning to put her supplies away.

I turned back to Greyson and Xavier. “Swear that you won’t ask her?”

I looked into their eyes, wishing that I really could read their thoughts at that moment. I hoped they weren’t upset with me, I hoped that they understood how seriously I was taking this—which was why I couldn’t handle it right now.

“Please just pretend that the information doesn’t exist? Just for a little while?” I felt horrible even asking them for that. They deserved to know, but I couldn’t think about that right now. I needed to recover from what Seluna had done to me. What she’d done to us. The thought of reliving that feeling…

“I won’t make any promises,” Big Mac said, “but I won’t reveal what I know.”

“And I won’t ask,” Greyson said.

“Neither will I.”

“Thank you both. I know that this isn’t what you want, but it’ll have to do for now.”

Without another word, I left them and headed back to my room. I needed to clear my head. So much had happened over the last few days—ever since we’d laid eyes on the Vanguards, really—and I hadn’t taken the time to process any of it. It seemed like we’d just been hopping from one life-changing event to another, and I needed a breather.

Xavier ran to catch up with me. “Hey, I wasn’t trying to pressure you.”

He put his hands on my shoulders and massaged them, like he was trying to knead away the tension. I leaned into his touch, happy that he wasn’t holding my decision against me.

“I know, and I’m sorry for disappointing you.” I smiled up at him the best I could. He’d been pushing for us to close this chapter of our lives, and here I was, leaving it open and keeping us in limbo because I was too afraid to face it.

Greyson was standing in Big Mac’s doorway, watching us.

“It’s okay,” Xavier said. He lifted my chin and kissed me. “Let’s not worry about it for now. Why don’t we heat up that bathwater and pick up where we left off?” he said, his voice low.

I could feel Greyson watching us.

“Maybe later. I just need to rest right now.” I kissed Xavier on the cheek and went to my room.

I collapsed facedown on the bed, exhausted. I didn’t feel good about turning Xavier down, but if I’d said yes to him with Greyson watching, it would have been the same as making a choice. Right now, I didn’t want to do anything that would remind me of the choice I’d have to make sometime down the line.

*If I could have it my way, I’d never make another choice in my life.*

I sighed and closed my eyes, and I was immediately faced with the image of Xavier attacking Greyson. Seluna had planned to force me to choose between my mates so that she could stir up the *due destini* and make it easier to exploit, I guessed. I could have used the knife to stop Xavier—but then that would’ve been the same as choosing Greyson. By not doing that, had I inadvertently chosen Xavier? I didn’t know, and even thinking about it was starting to make my head spin.

*I’m just happy it’s all over for now.*

I started drifting off to sleep, only to awaken with a start sometime later. I gasped as I realized Lucian was standing over me, offering me the knife.

*What’s going on? What am I doing back in the palace courtyard?*

Seluna was standing over me, too, urging me to choose. “Save your mate, or kill your mate. There are no other options.”

I looked at her in confusion, trying to figure out how I’d ended up back at the Vanguard palace. *Didn’t all of this already happen?*

I jumped at the sound of a loud roar. It was Xavier and Greyson. They were facing off in wolf form, snarling and lunging and snapping at each other. They were already bleeding, though I couldn’t tell who had the upper hand as they circled each other.

*Stop it! Don’t do this!* I tried to scream, but no words came out. Seluna was stopping me from speaking. *Am I still possessed?*

The Seluna fountain was overflowing with lava, and the entire courtyard grew smoky and hot. I coughed silently, still unable to make a sound. It felt like I was choking. I tried to run toward my mates to stop them, but my feet were rooted to the ground, and no matter how much I pulled at them, they wouldn’t budge. I turned just in time to see a river of lava heading straight for me.

“You can do it, Xavier! Kill him! Rip his throat out!” It was Ava. She was standing just behind Xavier, urging him on. “Take your rightful place as Alpha! Show them that you’re the true leader of the Redwood pack!”

I gasped as Xavier’s mind link came through to me, clear as day. *Cali. I choose you.*

He lunged toward Greyson, his teeth bared and shining in the bright moonlight. Greyson tried to jump out of the way, but before he could, Lucian spun around and sliced Greyson across the face with the silver blade. Greyson collapsed to the ground, and Xavier was on him in an instant, wasting no time ripping into Greyson’s exposed throat.

Greyson howled.

I could feel the mate bond ripping apart inside me as I tried to scream, but again, no sound came out. I started to choke as my mouth filled with blood. Someone was holding me down, so I couldn’t fight it. I was dying! The lava rushed in and coated my feet and my legs, and just like that, I started to burn.

I gasped, awakening with a start. I sat there panting as I tried to make sense of the world around me. It took me a second to realize that it had all been an awful dream.

But then, as I tried to get up, I realized that someone was still holding me down, and I screamed.

# Episode 2715

**Xavier**

My heart was still racing as I gently took Cali by the shoulders and shook her. I’d heard her screams, and without a moment’s hesitation, I’d bolted into her room to find her tossing and turning in bed. For a moment, I’d worried that somehow the demon had returned—I couldn’t put anything past Lucian and his demon girlfriend—but I quickly realized that she was just having a nightmare.

“Cali, wake up!” I shook her as gently as I could, not wanting to startle her awake, which would only make things worse for her.

She woke suddenly, her eyes unfocused and wild with terror. It was like she was looking straight through me.

“Cali! It’s okay, I’m here. It’s just a dream.”She was shaking like a leaf.

She didn’t seem to hear me, but then she looked at me, said my name, and recoiled in fear. She drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them.

A chill ran down my spine. The look on her face would haunt me forever. I pulled her to me and wrapped my arms around her.

“It’s okay,” I whispered in her ear over and over again, hoping that it would get through to her. I could feel her heart pounding, and she tensed as she struggled to push away from me. “Cali, I’ve got you.” I tightened my hold, not wanting to let her slip back into her nightmare. “It’s me. You’re okay. You’re just having a bad dream.”

I stroked her hair and held her until her breathing finally started to even out. I kept thinking about how much I would do to protect her, all the things I’d done already—but the one thing I couldn’t do was protect her from herself, or her dreams.

“Xavier,” she said as she looked up at me, her eyes finally clear. “It was so awful.”

She turned to me and wrapped her arms around my neck before burying her face in my chest. She’d finally stopped shaking, but her entire body was hot and slick with sweat.

“What happened? Do you want to talk about it?” Any number of things could’ve crept into her dreams—we’d had an awful day, and it was no surprise that she was being haunted by remnants of all the bad things that had happened. I wished that I could somehow clear her mind of it all so she wouldn’t be hounded by it.

“I—I was back at the palace, and I had to watch as you killed Greyson again, and there was nothing I could do about it. Seluna and Lucian were there, and Seluna wouldn’t let me speak, wouldn’t let me move. I tried to scream out to make you stop, and I wanted to run over and stop you—but I couldn’t. And Ava was there, cheering you on,” she said bitterly. “I saw the Seluna fountain. It was full of lava, and it overtook me, and I burned up in it.”

I stroked her back, realizing that she was getting worked up again as she relayed the details. “It’s all over now, Cali. It’s not real. You’re safe. I’m so sorry, baby. Greyson and I wished that we could’ve warned you beforehand, but it all happened so quickly,” I explained, hating the way she was looking at me. “We weren’t sure what Seluna might do if she knew it wasn’t real—what she might do to you if you knew it wasn’t. So, we did what we had to do. I’m sorry, baby. I never wanted to hurt you or frighten you this much.”

I’d never thought in a million years that Cali would suffer so much from what had amounted to Greyson and me putting on an act. We should’ve known that even the thought of us going at each other with that sort of ferocity would affect her deeply.

“I understand, I totally get it. And believe me, I don’t blame either of you. After all, the situation was pretty dire, and you both handled it as best you could.”

I nodded grimly. “Our hands were tied, and we had to think—and act—fast. I wish it could’ve gone another way.” I smoothed a strand of her away from her face. “Are you okay now?”

“I will be. It just felt so real… Would you mind staying and just holding me for a while?”

My heart lurched. “Of course. You know you don’t even have to ask.”

I lay down beside her and pulled her close against my chest. I stroked her hair and caressed the warmth of her cheek, wishing that I could keep her from ever thinking about our little performance at the Vanguard palace again, but I was sure she’d be haunted by the image of it for a while.

*I guess we did too good a job… But if we hadn’t, we might not have gotten Dani or Cali back.*

“I’m so sorry about backing out on finding out about the curse. After that whole thing with Seluna today, how she tried to force me to choose… I just couldn’t do it. But the worst part was watching you kill Greyson. I know it wasn’t real, but it’s like my brain won’t let go of it. It’s all I can think about.”

I reflected on what she was saying, unable to forget the look on Cali’s face when she’d woken up and realized it was me. It gnawed at me.

*If she had to choose right here, right now, she wouldn’t choose the man who’d scared her to death, the man who she’d looked at with such terror in her eyes.*

For the first time ever, I began to consider the possibility that Cali might not choose me in the end. I’d had the occasional flicker of doubt here and there, but those doubts had always been fueled by Greyson.

*Life would be so much easier if my fucking brother had just stayed a Rogue and never come back to the Redwood pack.*

But that was wishful thinking at this point. The reality was that he was back, and there was nothing I could do about that now. But even if Greyson *were* out of the picture, would Cali choose me?

“Xavier, are you okay?” Cali asked, breaking me out of my thoughts. “I’m sorry, you’ve been so focused on me, I haven’t asked how you’re doing.”

I shook my head. “You shouldn’t worry about me. I’m fine.”

That wasn’t entirely true, but I didn’t want Cali to worry. She had enough on her mind without being drawn into my problems. It was a strange feeling, being unsure about where I really stood with Cali, and I didn’t like it.

“Wrong answer,” she said. “I’ll always worry about you, you know that, right?”

I sighed. “I’m frustrated about the mind linking, sure, but there’s nothing we can do. We have to just do what Big Mac said. Wait.”

A part of me was as worried as Cali probably was about the damage to our bond being permanent, but I had to stay positive. If there was any lingering damage after a week or so, like Big Mac had said, we’d cross that bridge then.

“And what about me not letting Big Mac tell us whether the curse is broken?”

I sighed again and waited a beat, really trying to tap into how I was feeling. I didn’t want to be talking about this, truth be told. “I want to know if it’s broken, but if you want to wait, that’s okay. I can wait, too.”

What else was I supposed to say? There was no other real option right now. I wanted to just table it.

My mind was elsewhere now, anyway. I was now wholly consumed by the thought that if it came down to it, right now, Cali wouldn’t choose me. Not until she could get the memory of me killing Greyson out of her mind.Of course that’s what would drive her to him. Me.

Cali looked at me. “You would tell me, right? If you were upset?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Just try to rest, Cali.”

Cali sighed and settled back against me. I let my eyes drift shut, enjoying the warmth of her skin against my chest, the softness of her hair, her scent. I took a deep breath, taking in even more of it. Having her like this was all I wanted. I wanted her for the rest of my life, no matter what that took.

*Maybe she won’t choose me, but she’s with me right now, isn’t she? She’s looking to me for comfort, not Greyson. I guess that has to be enough for now.*

“Can I ask you something?” Cali’s voice was soft and uncertain.

“Anything.”

“I know it’s not really my business, and you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to…”

I took Cali’s hand. “Stop, it’s fine. What is it?”

“What did Ava want to talk to you about?”

# Episode 2716

Immediately regretting my question, I backtracked. I didn’t want to be that person, asking her significant other where they’d been, who they’d been talking to, and everything in between. I trusted Xavier, and I didn’t want him to have to feel like I didn’t.

“Actually, I’m sorry. Forget it,” I said. “You don’t have to tell me. I was just a little insecure after everything that’s happened. I shouldn’t have asked.”

I was out of sorts in general, and my Ava concerns were just another part of that.

Xavier leaned in and kissed me. “It’s okay. I’d be a liar if I said I never got jealous because of my brother.”

Well if that didn’t make me feel bad… I shook the feeling down. This wasn’t about me right now. “I know,” I said. “It’s normal to feel that way from time to time. So you really don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

Xavier shrugged. “I have no secrets from you. Ava asked me to go to the Samara pack house with her—or what’s left of it after the fire.”

*Wait, what? I didn’t expect that.*

“Really? Why?” Was she just trying to get him alone and as far away from me as possible, or was it something else? My old habits of distrusting Ava weren’t going to go away easily—especially when she’d given me so many reasons to think the worst of her. Sure, she’d helped us out, but with Ava, there was always a Xavier-leaning angle.

“It was Nolan’s birthday a few days ago. Ava just wants to go back as some sort of memorial.”

“But why did she ask *you* to go?”

“I don’t know; I didn’t ask. I just assume that she doesn’t have anyone else to go with her.”

I waited to see if he’d add anything else. Was he annoyed he had to go? Somewhat excited? How was his wolf reacting? Most importantly, I wanted to know if he’d *agreed*.

After a long silence, Xavier finally spoke. “I told her I would go. But I won’t go if you have a problem with it.”

Xavier wrapped his arms tighter around me, and I snuggled against him, feeling content and calm. There was something about being so close to him that made me feel like we could face anything, and it drove home the point that I had nothing to worry about when it came to Ava.

“Listen, I would prefer it if you didn’t spend any time at all with Ava, but I also know that she’s been trying to be helpful. She risked a lot to help me and Dani, and I can’t ignore that.” No matter how I felt about the things Ava had done in the past, she’d done her best to save me from the Vanguards.

*She didn’t have to do that, and she did. Whatever her reasoning, it definitely counts for something. Unfortunately…*

“I agree.” He paused. “Are you worried about my mate bond with Ava at all? You know I’ve been struggling with my wolf lately.”

I took a deep breath, choosing my words carefully. “I’m not happy about it, but I also know and understand what you’re going through.”

How could I not understand? I’d just forbidden my mates from going down the path to my having to make a decision about my own double mate bond. I knew better than anyone how complicated these things could get.

Xavier kissed me. “I’ll tell Ava I can’t go.”

The sincerity in Xavier’s eyes warmed my heart and bolstered my confidence even more.

“No, you should go with her. It’s the right thing to do. Besides, you’re right—I don’t think she has anybody else to go with.” It was rare for me to feel bad for Ava, but now, when I thought about how alone she was in the world, I actually felt a shred of pity for her.

We lay there in silence for a while. I was on the cusp of sleep, but every time I closed my eyes, I saw Xavier killing Greyson. It was like a movie scene playing over and over in my head, no matter how many times I tried to shut it off. It was unsettling, to say the least.

*Why can’t I let it go? I needed to get through my thick skull that it. Wasn’t. Real.*

But I knew why I couldn’t let go of it—it reflected exactly what haunted the three of us from the very beginning. The prospect that one of my mates might kill the other because of the *due destini*. Or with the additional twist on the curse that I would kill one by choosing the other. We’d been hounded by the possibility of one of the three of us dying since this whole thing had begun, and having it happen in what had seemed like real time had shaken me to the core.

“You want me to stay the night?” Xavier asked.

I hesitated. This felt like yet another choice.Even though I’d made choices like this one a zillion times before, it felt different this time. Everything felt different now, if I was being honest with myself. When Greyson had been “dying” before my eyes, had I somehow made a choice then? It terrified me to think that I had. Anything that reminded me of the fateful choice looming over my head terrified me.

I was trying to figure out how to let Xavier down easy when I heard a car roll to a stop outside. I could hear doors opening and closing, and Rishika’s excited voice as she welcomed Artemis back.

I sat up, relief flooding through me. “My family’s back from Haystack Rock!”

I wanted to see them, needed to see them. They had to be so worried. I’d tried to call my mother again earlier but hadn’t been able to reach her. I’d called her a few more times with the same result before I’d realized that they must have been in a dead zone.

I hopped up from the bed and scrambled into my clothes, but I stopped at the look of disappointment on Xavier’s face. I crawled onto the bed and kissed him. “Maybe another time?”

“Sure.”

We made it downstairs just as Rishika, Artemis, my parents, and Torin came walking in. They looked exhausted but otherwise fine. My mother lit up when she saw me, and she wasted no time pulling me into a warm embrace. I relaxed into the hug, feeling comforted and protected, just being in her arms.

“How are you, sweetie? We were so worried when Charon snatched you away like that!”

“I’m fine. And I’m so happy to see you all. I’m a little tired, and other than a few lingering things, I’m okay—Oh, and so is Dani!” I hoped Mom wouldn’t ask about the “few lingering things,” and I was relieved when she didn’t.

“Oh, honey, I’m so happy to hear that! I’m glad to be back—eight hours in a car in one day is always brutal.” Mom gave me a squeeze before releasing me.

“What happened to Artemis and Dad? I saw the both of them fall into the portal just before Charon blipped me away.” I’d worried that something else could’ve happened to them after Charon left. I was so relieved to see them both back safe.

Dad came up and gave me a hug. “Nothing bad. I don’t think, at least. It’s all kind of fuzzy.”

“We fell through, but I basically just grabbed your dad and went back where we’d come from,” Artemis said.

“Maybe we can go sometime as a family,” Mom said. “But plan it.”

“Sure, I think I could handle that, right?” Dad said. “But maybe after the holidays…”

“Speaking of holidays,” Torin said. “I need as much help as I can get with making more cookies. They disappear nearly as fast as I make them!”

Dad laughed. “Happy to help—but first, I could use a hot shower and twelve hours of sleep.”

“How’s Dani?” Artemis asked me.

I recalled what Dani had been through, how she’d totally foiled Seluna’s magic, and how she hadn’t looked at all worse for wear once it was all over.

*On the other hand, I’m a complete mess, but they don’t need to know that.*

“Dani’s fine, but it must have been pretty traumatic. You and I both know what it’s like to have someone inside your body, controlling you and manipulating you while you can’t do a damn thing about it.”

“Yeah, don’t remind me,” Artemis said, just as Dani came walking up.

“Hey, I heard you all made it back,” Dani said in her patented soft tone.

Torin, having moved on from cookies, said, “How about I whip up a nighttime snack for everyone? How about pierogis?”

My parents and Artemis followed Torin to the kitchen.

“What’s a pierogi?” Artemis asked.

“How are you, Cali?” Dani asked me, as soon as the others had gone.

“Tired, but okay, I guess. Why?”

Dani looked around like she was checking to see if anyone else was within earshot. “Because something isn’t right.”

# Episode 2717

**Greyson**

I was in the kitchen drinking some Earl Grey when Torin came in, followed by Cali’s parents and Artemis. He was going on and on about his latest recipe adventure—pierogis. Artemis was giving Torin her full attention as he gave her a crash course on the dish.

“There are so many different types. They’re one of the most versatile foods out there, and also really simple and easy to make. They’re usually filled with stuff like potatoes and cheese, that sort of thing, but really you can think of any two things that you’re excited to try together, and then boom, we put it in a dumpling, and there you have it! Pierogi magic.”

I admired Torin’s energy. He had a lot of it. But he always managed to look at the bright side of things. I could tell by the look on everyone’s faces that they were tired from their trip, but Torin was full of energy and, as usual, trying to feed everyone.

I took a quick look at my wound. It was mostly healed, which was great since I didn’t want anything to remind Cali of watching Xavier “kill” me. Where was she, anyway?I’d heard her voice as she’d greeted everyone.

I left the kitchen before I could get roped into the pierogi party and reached the front door just as Dani bade Cali goodnight and went upstairs.

“Everything all right?” I asked. “Dani must still be pretty shaken up.”

I was impressed by Dani. She’d been through a lot lately, and she was still standing. That took a lot of strength after what she’d been through. Not to mention that she’d literally gone up against a demon and lived to tell the tale.

“I don’t know… She just told me that something doesn’t feel right,” Cali said, her brow creased with worry.

“What does that mean? Realistically speaking, she’s been through hell—you both have—so it makes sense that things wouldn’t feel quite normal yet.” I would’ve been more surprised if she’d told Cali that she was perfectly fine. No one could possibly be feeling a hundred percent after that.

“Yeah. I can’t even say that I feel normal right now,” Cali said with a sigh.

“I’m sure, love. I think everyone just needs to sleep. We’ll all feel better in the morning,” I said, rubbing her arms. “Do you want to take a walk before going to bed? Sometimes the fresh air helps.”

Cali hesitated. “I’m not sure I should do that.”

I was genuinely surprised at her response. “Why not? It’s a nice evening, and we wouldn’t go very far—we don’t even need to go into the woods or anything,” I said. “We’ll just walk along the front, look at the stars, all that. What do you say?”

She still seemed unsure. I wasn’t sure why.

“Is something wrong?” I’d never seen anyone look so nervous at the prospect of a walk.

Cali looked even more uncomfortable now. “I’m probably being a little paranoid, but I’m worried that if I agree to go with you, it would constitute a choice.”

“What? Like a *due destini* choice? But it’s just a walk.”

“I know you’re right, Greyson, but I just can’t stop thinking about what Lucian and Seluna tried to get me to do.”

She had a faraway look in her eyes. I had no doubt in my mind that she’d been reliving those intense moments over and over again ever since they’d happened, and that saddened me. And pissed me off. Seluna and Lucian had done this to Cali. If Seluna hadn’t used Cali to play her sick game, things could be different. She wouldn’t feel afraid to take a walk with her mate.

“I know, love, but Seluna isn’t our problem anymore. She’s Lucian’s—and they deserve each other. That said, I don’t want to stress you out. I know you’ve been through a lot, so if you don’t want to go for a walk, I get it. I really do.”

“No, no, you’re right.” Cali shook her head, as if getting herself out of a trance. “Let’s go for a walk. I think you’re right about the fresh air.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “Only if you’re sure.”

She nodded. I went to grab Cali’s coat from the closet and opened the door for her before following her out. It was a beautiful December evening, and the last of the sun was almost gone. I put my arm around Cali as a crisp breeze kicked up, swirling leaves around our ankles.

I took in a big gulp of air, already feeling better now that we were here. There was something about the wide, open air that just put things in perspective. It was why I loved to run as a wolf. You had the whole world at your feet, it felt like. I hoped it was having the same calming effect on Cali.

It didn’t look like it. She was hugging herself, her bottom lip starting to wobble. I could tell she was still a bit uneasy.

“If you’re still worried, we can turn back.”

“No. I’m okay,” she said, giving me a quick smile. “But Greyson…” She took a deep breath and turned to face me, pushing her hair behind her ears.

“What?”

“Are you upset that I stopped Big Mac?”

“No, why would I be?”

She frowned. “But don’t you want to know if the curse has been broken?”

I cupped her cheeks with both my hands. “I know that it is,” I said. “But I know you want more proof, and I can’t wait for the day that it’s not hanging over your head. It’s not what I want for you.”

She was quiet for a moment, then asked, “And if the curse really is gone?”

“If Big Mac told us tomorrow that the curse was gone, that our lives weren’t on the line anymore, I would be relieved. I’d know that you could finally have peace of mind.” I looked into her eyes and stepped closer to her. “But I meant what I promised you, love—I will never, *ever* pressure you to choose.”

I kissed her, and she leaned into me and wrapped her arms around my waist. I just wanted to protect her, to take all her anxiety and uncertainty away once and for all.

“I can’t help but wonder… If you two had really been in a fight at Seluna’s request, would you have expected me to use the knife to stop Xavier?”

“I wouldn’t have let you,” I said. “I don’t ever want you to have to face a decision like that, and I wouldn’t let Seluna or anyone else cause Xavier’s death.”

*That’s why I came back to the pack—to protect the Redwoods and my brother.* I would always protect Cali too—by any means.

I smiled. “When we were in Portland, I really thought we could live like that: no pack to worry about, no demons. Just the two of us.”

Even as I said it, I felt a twinge of longing for that very thing, even now. It had been so wonderful, just me and Cali on our own, like a normal couple. It had been nice not to think about Xavier or the *due destini*. It had been better than nice. It had been pure heaven.

“I thought the same thing,” Cali said softly.

“Then I guess we’re both fools.”

Cali laughed, and it was like music to my ears.

“I’m not trying to pressure you or imply any kind of choice or anything, but whenever you’re up to it, whenever you’re comfortable, do you want to go back to Portland sometime?” I asked. “I want like to go back there with you. It’d be nice to get away from all of this for a while and just be… normal, for a change.”

Heat soared through my body as I recalled how sexy Cali had looked while we’d made love on the balcony of my apartment. We’d been beneath the stars with the river and the city lights shimmering around us. It’d felt so good to be daring and brash with our love like that. I looked at Cali. God, she was beautiful.

*Maybe tonight—*

“But, Greyson… Can we *be* normal?” Cali asked, interrupting my thoughts. “Is that even possible?”

With Xavier around? Not likely. He would want to spend time with Cali, too, and I knew that was something I had to accept. But it didn’t mean I couldn’t want. I couldn’t hope.

She looked up at me, and I could tell that she was hoping that I believed it was possible.

“I don’t know, but I’m willing to find out. But only when you’re ready.”

“I’m grateful for that, and for you.” Cali rose onto her tiptoes and kissed me. “Maybe we could go after the holidays? Things will have calmed down a little by then, hopefully. It would be the perfect time to get away.”

“Whenever you feel ready, we’ll do it.”

I kissed her forehead and then took her hand. We kept walking in a pleasant, comfortable silence. She was the only person I could imagine a silence like this with.

Then a loud *crack* broke the silence.

I turned at the sound of someone approaching. Instinctively, I pulled Cali close, just as a figure materialized out of the night. “*Aysel?*”

# Episode 2718

Greyson stepped in front of me the moment Aysel moved further into the clearing. He grabbed my hand, and I held his right back.

Aysel’s arm was wrapped in a bandage. There were beads of perspiration on her forehead, and her usually flawless skin looked pale and wan. Her eyes were the most jarring thing of all, though. She looked like she was… in pain?

*What fresh hell is this?*

We literally couldn’t catch a break.

It made me want to *scream*.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded, moving next to Greyson just so I could face Aysel. Greyson went rigid, his grip on my hand tightening, but he didn’t try to hide me again.

He was right about one thing—we could communicate even without the mind link. Greyson could feel my anger, my apprehension, and he was allowing me to express it. He knew I needed to confront Aysel first, just to maintain a speck of my dignity after everything the Vanguards had done to me.

“Caliana—”

“Aren’t you tired of doing Lucian and Seluna’s bidding?” I interrupted, and Aysel growled at the mention of the demon’s name.

“I barely got out of the palace with my skin intact,” she snapped at me, her gaze darting to Greyson. “Or did you forget that I asked you to get me out of there?”

My anger was undermined by shock. I looked up at Greyson. He shrugged. “I had other things on my mind. Besides, it’s not like you always keep your promises.”

I didn’t like the idea of Greyson breaking a promise, but he’d be a fool to trust Aysel after all the shit she’d pulled. In fact, how did we know this wasn’t yet another trap? As Aysel demanded explanations from Greyson for leaving her—she was an entitled nightmare, so I wasn’t surprised about that—I looked around.

Could there be other members of the Vanguard pack nearby, hidden in the trees? Ready to jump out and grab Greyson and me again?

*No*, I reminded myself. *Big Mac said that the Vanguards have no use for us anymore, now that Seluna has her body back. All she needed was the power of the* due destini*…*

The fact that that actual fucking *demon* had used my love for my mates to bring herself to life filled me with a visceral, ugly feeling that I’d never quite felt before. It was rage, but more. I didn’t like it—it made me feel unlike my normal self, unlike who I knew I was. But seeing Aysel here right now, after everything she and her brother had done, didn’t help matters any.

I couldn’t just believe that Seluna had truly given up on me and my mates.

Her motivations for things had always been a mystery, and she seemed to change her demon mind a lot. It wasn’t enough that she was a horrid spirit—she had to be an indecisive one as well. Two huge flaws in one horrendous package.

“… that’s what I think,” Greyson told Aysel as I tuned back into the conversation.

She gasped. “How dare you disrespect me this way!”

“You’ve always disrespected me, Aysel,” Greyson said. Shrugged again. “I think the least you can do right now is cut the bullshit and go away.”

“But—”

“What is it that you want right now, exactly?” I asked Aysel impatiently. “Why are you here?”

She took a deep breath, turning to me. “I think your Alpha was right.”

Greyson’s eyebrows rose. “I’m usually right, so you need to narrow it down.”

She huffed. “About Seluna. You were right about *Seluna*, Greyson. Happy?”

“What do you mean?” I pressed.

Aysel gritted her teeth while holding her bandaged arm. “Seluna is on a huge power trip now that she has her own body back. She has no respect for the hierarchy of the Vanguard pack. She’s changing everything…”

“Is that how you got that?” I asked, jerking my chin toward her wounded, but healing slowly, arm.

Aysel nodded. “I questioned Seluna about one tiny thing, and she blew up and threw a freaking *fireball* at me, hit me right in the shoulder. Who throws fireballs at people like that, out of the blue?”

“Demons,” Greyson deadpanned. “Demons do that.”

“And Lucian didn’t even try to stop her!” Aysel said. God, was she going to cry? She’d better not cry, because I refused to feel sorry for her right now. Or ever. “He normally never would have let anyone hurt me, but he seems to be so out of it! Like a shell of his normal self.”

Aysel’s words struck a chord. Lucian was an obnoxious megalomaniac with a sadistic streak, but he hadn’t been quite so horrible before Seluna had entered the picture.

“I’m worried that Seluna is doing something to Lucian’s mind, so—”

Greyson’s laughter was humorless. Dangerous. “You’re not going to blame your brother’s fucked-up behavior on the demon. I won’t let you. This was all Lucian.”

*And he’s lucky I haven’t killed him yet.* Greyson didn’t say it, but I could see it written all over his face.

“Greyson,” Aysel said pitifully, moving closer. Greyson took a step back, still holding my hand. “Please,” she whispered, “I had to get out of there and find help.”

I narrowed my eyes on Aysel’s face. How could I ever believe her? Short of asking her to show us her wound, I wasn’t sure how we’d be able to see if there was any proof that this wasn’t another Vanguard trap.

I looked over at Greyson, just to gauge how he was feeling. It was so frustrating that we couldn’t mind link right now. He seemed skeptical and pissed off too, so at least I knew that we agreed.

“I’m still not sure why you came to us for help, though,” Greyson said to Aysel. “The Redwood pack has no quarrel with Seluna anymore. We just want to live our lives.”

Aysel looked shocked. “After all she did to you, to your mate, you’ll just lie there and take it? What kind of Alpha are you?”

Greyson’s face was thunderous, and I swallowed roughly, squeezing his hand to calm him down. Seriously, why did people keep provoking him? I knew he had a good head on his shoulders, but I wondered if there was a chance he’d just snap one day. And then who the hell knew what he’d do?

*Just… LEAVE GREYSON ALONE!*

When he spoke, his voice was so even it felt dead. “I’m the kind of Alpha who prefers logic over a pack war that could cost the lives of my people. Also, if I wanted to go down the revenge route, what makes you so certain you wouldn’t be the first one I went after?”

Aysel flinched, shocked and obviously intimidated. I almost felt bad for her, but I needed to stop that empathy nonsense immediately. I needed to stand strong against Aysel and the Vanguards.

“I don’t think there’s anything more to discuss,” I said.

“We’re done here,” Greyson agreed and turned his back on Aysel, pulling me with him.

“Wait!” Aysel called out. “Please, you can’t just leave me.”

Greyson’s jaw clenched. He just kept on walking, his hand still in mine. I—for once—kept my mouth shut, scurrying along. I felt like a duckling that had imprinted on a tiger, which was great as an idea, because I felt very protected right now.

But Aysel wouldn’t quit. I could hear her running steps behind us. “You really think that Seluna is going to stop at taking over the Vanguard pack? If she’s really a demon like you say, then she’ll want more.”

That stopped Greyson dead in his tracks.

My chest heaved as I looked up at him. I remembered the feeling of Seluna’s dark presence in my body, how she’d wanted more and more power. Suddenly, I could feel it in my bones that Aysel was right.

“Greyson,” I whispered. “I hate it, but I think she just made a good point.”

Greyson scowled, then glanced over his shoulder. I was the one to pull him around to face Aysel again. She’d run to catch up to us, her hand pressed to her wound. Her eyes were wild.

“Seluna will want to take over the whole region after she solidifies her control of the Vanguard pack,” she said. “You might think your pack is safe now, but soon Seluna will come for you again.”

I shivered at Aysel’s words. My anger took a back seat, and the fear returned front and center. It was ice-cold, dragging down my spine. I recalled Seluna’s dark power absorbing the energy of the *due destini*. She’d plucked it out, torn it out, leaving a gaping wound in her wake. She’d harvested the *due destini* like a beating, live organ, and now she was more powerful than ever.

*What if Seluna uses that power against the other members of our pack?*

I felt sick at the thought. I didn’t even want to imagine what would happen to the Redwoods if they came face-to-face with the demon.

“If Seluna comes after the Redwoods,” Greyson said, “then the Redwoods will take care of themselves. We always do.” He gripped my hand tighter and made a move to turn away again.

But Aysel wasn’t done.

“You’ll be useless against her unless I tell you the secrets I’ve learned.”

Greyson barked out a laugh. He glared at her. “We don’t need your lies to defeat Seluna.”

Aysel glanced at me. Then she stared at Greyson. “Not even if I know what Seluna is planning to do to Cali?”

# Episode 2719

**Xavier**

I paused outside Ava’s room.

Did I *really* want to go with her to the Samara pack house? Cali had said I should do it, and Ava *had* been really helpful to us lately—to the point where she’d risked her life. But doing anything with Ava at this point would only make our mate bond stronger, and I was certain that the second my wolf saw her, he’d act up again.

He was already stirring, sniffing around her door, eager for her.

*Maybe this was a mistake.*

*Maybe I should just go—*

The door opened.

Ava stared at me, her eyes wide with surprise. She was freshly showered and looking gorgeous, as if she hadn’t just spent hours fighting with psychotic werewolves. It was a little sickening how my wolf vibrated the second she came in sight.

“Xavier, hi,” she said, her surprise replaced with a smile. Then a frown. “Did you change your mind? About my request?”

My wolf went into full yearning mode once he heard her voice. I shoved the feeling down, stepping on it for good measure. Brusquely, I told Ava, “No, I didn’t. I’ll escort you to the Samara pack house. Meet me downstairs in five minutes.”

Without sparing her a look, I turned on my heel and hurried away while my wolf whined for me to go back to Ava this instant, to touch her, to feel her. It was such a visceral feeling to battle, but I had to.

I calmed the asshole the fuck down, hating that he was drawn to Ava like this. The fact that she’d been so nice and helpful was making everything worse. It was getting harder and harder for me to convince myself to stay away from her—it had been much easier when she’d been evil.

Maybe she was doing all this to fuck with me.

To manipulate me.

I didn’t trust her—I’d never trust her completely, not after all the times she’d betrayed me.

*Cali* had never betrayed me.

I reminded my wolf that Cali was my mate. And even though we couldn’t mind link right now, I’d meant it when I’d told her that our bond felt stronger than ever. I just had to keep remembering that while I was with Ava.

I pulled the car around to the front yard just as Ava walked out of the front door. She arched an eyebrow at me but didn’t mind link anything. For that, I was grateful, because my wolf would rejoice at the intimacy of it. A moment later, she climbed into the passenger seat, and the motherfucker flared again at her presence.

Where the hell did he find the energy?

When would he get tired of this nonstop horny bullshit?

The answer was, of course, never.

*Fuck.*

I considered telling Ava to go to the back seat, just so he’d stop salivating, but then I realized that would sound ridiculous. I wasn’t a damn Uber driver. I was just a stupid asshole with an infuriating wolf that went wild when Ava flipped her hair over her shoulder as she put on her seat belt.

And then, she asked, “How come we’re taking a car? It would be better to go through the woods.”

It would be better not to go at all, but I wasn’t going to say that. I wasn’t supposed to be that much of a dick anymore. Technically.

“LIPS is still out there, so better to drive,” I said. I decided I’d just breathe through my mouth for the duration of the trip. Block out her scent as much as possible. My wolf was offended, but fuck him. “We don’t need any more cameras to catch giant wolves in the forest,” I explained to Ava. I also didn’t need a lecture from my brother about the risks of exposure.

She nodded, pursing her lips. And now I was done looking at her, because there was a limit to how much I could handle. I turned up the volume on the radio to fill the silence and avoid conversation with her. It was a good idea, actually—the music muffled the sound of her breathing, and that made me less attuned to her.

This was working.

And then it wasn’t, because she turned the radio off to speak to me again.

“Thank you for doing this,” she muttered.

Did her voice have to be so soft? Every time I heard it, my wolf felt more and more drawn to her. *I* felt more drawn to her.

I didn’t want to talk to her any more than necessary, so I just gave a curt nod.

I hoped she was done talking now, but no such luck. Before I could make a move to turn the radio on again, she said, “I just can’t believe I’m going back to the Samara house after so long…” She paused. “Everything’s burned to ash. Seeing it that way will probably make all these memories rush back.”

She was feeling nostalgic. Reminiscing. Being all *sentimental*. My wolf whined for me to comfort her, and I was barely staying afloat here. This was actually horrible.

But what had I expected when I’d decided to help her?

“… Nolan,” she was murmuring. “God, he’d probably freak if he was around to see our family home completely destroyed and the pack pretty much decimated like this.” Her laugh was humorless. Grim. And then she quietly added, “I’m sure he’d find a way to blame it on me.”

I gripped the steering wheel tightly. Nolan had always been rough with Ava, always pushing her, always humiliating her. The ways he’d been able to affect her were fucked up, and he’d proven that time and time again.

Most recently, by bringing her back from the dead with Silas’s assistance.

Ava was responsible for her own bad deeds, but I couldn’t ignore Nolan’s input in them.

“Nolan was an asshole,” I said. It was the first time I’d spoken in the last few minutes, but at this point I couldn’t fucking contain myself. “His opinion shouldn’t matter to you.”

Ava blinked in surprise. Then she said, “Maybe you’re right.”

I scoffed, “Obviously.”

She chuckled.

My wolf howled.

We finally arrived at the house. Thank fuck.

The Samara pack house’s remains had been cleaned up a bit, but the ash remained. Ava climbed out of the car slowly. She’d fallen silent, pausing before the sight, her eyes glued to the remains. I could feel the hesitance rolling off her—as if she was scared about what she’d see if we got closer.

Before I could think, before I could control myself, I lifted my hand slowly and then—

Gave her a quick comforting pat on the shoulder.

“Let’s go,” I said. My voice cracked, because I was ridiculous. I headed toward the house, away from her, but my wolf was still going insane after touching her. It had been a fucking mistake, obviously, so now I needed to deal with the consequences.

As I walked toward what would have been the house’s entrance, I forced myself to think of something else.

Of Cali.

I had to remember the feel of her instead. The comfort of her. Her smile and her softness and the fact that she hadn’t, not once, betrayed either me or my wolf. It worked—my wolf settled down, purring like a fucking cat. I’d distracted the son of a bitch, and I exhaled in relief.

This was the first time distracting him had worked, and I wondered if I’d be able to do it again. Maybe I could start to control my shifting as well, using the mate bond with Cali as an anchor. But one step at a time.

Right now, we had to deal with the Samara pack’s ashes.

“This is…” Ava swallowed. “What I expected, I guess.”

We walked around the remains, through the ashes. There were some items still visible. A fork, a picture frame, a chest full of charred clothes—random things, just a few, not enough.

I stole a glance at Ava.

She looked struck, like this whole thing had been a mistake, and she wasn’t actually ready to see this place once more. My wolf wanted me to comfort her again, but I refused. That wasn’t what I was here for. I was just escorting her here and back—that was all I’d promised, nothing more.

And then, Ava sniffled.

“Are you…” I frowned. “Are you crying?”

She rubbed at her eyes. “It’s the dust,” she muttered. She was lying. I wasn’t going to push it—I knew what it was like to want to put up a brave face. “It’s just—”

Before she could finish, there was a shuffling sound from behind us.

In the same instant, instinct took over, and I pushed Ava behind me as I turned toward the woods. She gripped the back of my T-shirt, gluing herself against me.

My heart was pounding.

“Hello?” I called.

No reply.

But then I heard the shuffling sound again.

My wolf growled on the inside, ready for a fight.

“If anyone’s out there,” I said sharply, “you’d better show yourself.”

“It’s just the wind,” Ava whispered.

I nodded just to appease her. I wasn’t sure if I was ready to let down my guard. My wolf wanted to protect Ava, but being paranoid didn’t help anyone, did it? I took a deep breath, and I was about to step away from Ava and the ashy remains when another noise echoed in the woods.

A giant, unmistakable growl.

A wolf leapt out, lunging straight at me.

# Episode 2720

“What does Seluna want with me?” I demanded, fighting to hide my fear.

Aysel scoffed. “This is the only leverage I have to make the Redwoods help me. I’m not going to give it up that easily.”

Greyson’s hand twisted in a half shift. “You’ll tell us if you know what’s good for you.”

Aysel held her chin up. “I’m not afraid of you.”

That was what Aysel said, but it *felt* like Greyson was intimidating her. Could I be wrong?

“Sure, you’re not afraid,” Greyson replied, smiling coldly. “You’re just a fallen, pathetic princess who came here to *beg* for my help. Humbling, isn’t it?”

His look of derision made Aysel snarl. “I’m done talking about this. If you want to partner with me to fight a demon, then this is where you can find me.”

She tossed a matchbook toward Greyson. He grabbed it. With one last glare, Aysel turned her back on us, quickly disappearing into the forest.

Greyson stared at the matchbook, his expression sardonic. “I know this place. It’s a local five-star hotel. That woman is such fucking joke.”

I stared up at him, swallowing nervously. “But do you think… Do you think she’s right? That Seluna still wants me?”

Greyson closed his fist around the matchbook. When he faced me, he was calm. “Try not to worry about that right now. I’ll get you back to the pack house and see if one of the witches can sense anything going on. Okay?”

There was a pointed softness in his voice, as if I were a deer and he was making an effort not to spook me. I felt so grateful for it. For *him*.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

He picked up my hand and kissed the top of it, and then we headed back to the pack house.

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When we got there, we were met with utter fucking chaos.

*What is it this time?*

“I leave for five minutes, and all hell breaks loose,” Greyson muttered, pausing in the front yard. “You stay here, and I’ll go check—”

“No,” I said firmly. “I’m coming with you.”

There was smoke coming from the kitchen, and my heart started pounding. People were shouting everywhere, and a myriad of possibilities rushed through my head. Had Seluna and the Vanguards come after the pack house while Greyson and I had been out? Had Aysel been a distraction?

“You heathens!” Torin’s voice echoed through the house. “Don’t eat my pierogis! Can’t you see they’re burned?”

I looked up at Greyson. He looked down at me.

“The *pierogis*,” he deadpanned.

I let out a slightly maniacal chuckle. It’d been kind of a long day.

“We’re okay,” he said, wrapping an arm around my shoulders as we headed inside. His grip on me made me feel ten times better.

When we got to the kitchen, there was a frying pan with burnt pierogis in the sink, and my dad was batting at the last of small flames on the stove with a towel.

“Greyson! Cali!” Mom said, rushing up to us. “Are you okay?”

It felt like she’d asked this a million times since I’d returned from the palace. I nodded.

“What happened here, exactly?” Greyson asked.

“It was a grease fire.” Mom sighed. “Torin used too much oil for the pierogis and didn’t realize that water would make it worse.”

Greyson eyed Dad and Torin, who were arguing about the differences between olive and canola oil. Then he turned to Mom. “Well, it looks like you guys have this handled.”

“I should help—”

“Come with me. You should rest,” Greyson said gently, cupping my face between his hands before he planted a kiss on my forehead.

When we reached my room, of course, the last thing I wanted was to rest. Helping clean up would’ve distracted me, but now I wasn’t distracted at all. I chewed on my thumbnail, starting to pace as Greyson sat on the bed.

“Shouldn’t we tell the rest of the pack what Aysel told us?” I said.

“There’s no need to alarm the pack until we have more information,” he said. “And I don’t want you to worry about this right now either, if you can help it.”

“I can’t help it!” I burst out, throwing up my hands. My chest was starting to hurt, like breathing was going to get harder at any minute. But then Greyson stood up and stepped closer to me. Gently, he stopped me from biting my nail and ran his thumbs over my knuckles. His gaze was intense but tender.

His voice was low when he spoke. “I know there’s still a lot happening, but we’ve overcome so much. We can overcome this too, as long as we’re together.”

A soothing warmth engulfed me. “You think so?” I whispered, looking up at him. I probably looked like the pleading eyes emoji, but I didn’t care.

He stroked my cheek. “I know so, love.”

I leaned into him, close, eager for the hug that he instantly gave me. The feel of him holding me was as amazing as ever, and I could instantly breathe better. I rubbed my cheek against his shirt, gripping it tightly.

“Are you okay with me not wanting Big Mac to tell us if the death curse is really gone?” I whispered.

He kissed the top of my head. “Don’t think about it, love. I understand that it’s too much to deal with right now.”

“That’s not all of it, though,” I whispered, facing him. I felt so guilty about not being able to make a choice, so I felt the need to be completely honest with him. He waited for a beat. And then I said, “If we don’t know what’s going on with the death curse, then then at least no one will fight over who I should choose.”

Greyson seemed surprised for a second. He didn’t let me go, though, and a brief moment later, understanding dawned in his eyes. Slowly, he said, “I get it. I won’t lie and say that I don’t want you to choose me eventually, but I also understand the pressure you must feel.”

“Thank you,” I murmured. “For understanding.”

Or at least he was trying to understand. Either way, combined with his soft expression, this moment made me feel much better.

“We can hold off on this, love,” he said, cupping my face. “I know you’ve been through so much lately. I don’t want to put more stress on you.”

Greyson’s empathy felt like ointment on a wound. I’d been worried about not being able to mind link with my mates all day, but in this moment, I felt as close to Greyson as ever. The connection was palpable, full of mutual understanding and respect.

When I lifted onto my toes to kiss him, he let me lead. He let me have this moment to myself with him, where our mate bond felt alive and thriving, a current surrounding our bodies. I wanted to keep feeling this.

*I want to feel* him.

I broke the kiss and took a step back only to reach for the hem of my sweater and pull it over my head. I tossed it aside. Keeping my eyes in Greyson’s, I attempted to lead him toward the bed.

He didn’t move.

“Are you sure?” he asked gruffly. “You were so worried before…”

That was *before*. Before, I’d felt insecure and shaken and a little lost. Maybe I’d feel that way again soon, because all the things that had happened with Seluna were too much to process and easier to suppress.

Right now, though, with Greyson soothing me in so many ways, I felt like I needed more of this feeling.

“I want to be with you right now…” I looked up at him, taking in a shaky breath. “Don’t you want to be with me?”

I knew the answer already. Instead of actually saying anything, though, Greyson just scooped me up in his arms. I made a little squeaky sound that had him smiling, and my heart raced. In a good way, for once.

This was good.

This was me—in my own body, uninvaded and whole—with my mate, who made me feel so protected that I was able to forget the outside world.

“Always,” Greyson whispered. “I want you always, Cali. I need you always. You’re so precious to me that it hurts right here, whenever I look at you…” He rested my hand on his chest, his pounding heart.

He helped me take the rest of my clothes off gently, slowly, and I gave him a kiss every time another garment left my body.

I lay back when we were both naked, pulling him on top of me just to feel him, skin to skin. He looked into my eyes, bracing himself on an elbow, his other hand cupping my face.

Looking into my eyes, he whispered, “Tell me what you want.”

My skin felt tingly at our every point of contact. “Just… kiss me.”

He did. I held onto him, my palms brushing up his back, his chest, his abs, his arms, everywhere I could reach, just to feel him shiver as our mouths brushed. It started slow and sweet with him whispering things like, “I’m right here,” and, “Whatever you need, I’ll give it to you,” and, “I love you so much.”

I loved him so much it overshadowed everything else.

He kissed every inch of my face, my neck too, my collarbones, my chest. After what felt like forever and the briefest of moment at the same time, my whole body vibrated for him. I kissed him harder, pulled him closer, and when he slid inside, I urged him to move—slow at first, and then a little faster.

He followed my lead and angled his hips, giving me just the right kind of friction. I was grounded, satisfied under his weight, eager and whimpering while he kept going and going, the two of us tied up together as we crashed.

The mate bond felt like fire between us, so bright I could never doubt it.

I felt more alive than I’d felt in days.

I felt like myself, in this body that could tremble and break for the man I adored.

This body that was mine.

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Afterward, as I snuggled up to Greyson’s body, his heat seeping into me like a comforting wave, I felt safe enough to drift off.

But sleep was a tricky thing.

And in that place between wakefulness and unconsciousness, I wondered how long I could stay like this—torn between my mates, avoiding the choice that could make me lose everything. My mind included. Perhaps it was only a matter of time before Big Mac revealed the status of the curse…

Or was there a chance that I’d simply go mad first?

# Episode 2721

**Xavier**

The other wolf was coming fast, so I barely had time to shift. I pushed Ava away, out of the line of fire, and jumped to the side, rolling on the ground before shifting into my wolf form.

I turned to face the stranger with a growl, grabbing a loose plank of wood in my teeth to create a distraction before I went straight for his gut. The wolf snarled just as I mind linked Ava, *Stay behind me!*

But Ava didn’t listen.

“Knox?” she asked angrily, stepping in front of me. “What the hell are you doing here?”

I peered at her, shocked. *You fucking know this guy?*

“He’s my cousin,” Ava replied.

The wolf shifted back to human, his eyes fixed on Ava. He looked like a male version of her, kind of. Same dark hair, pale white skin, and light eyes. He was also tall and muscular, and he looked like he had enough physical strength to defend himself even while human.

That didn’t mean that I couldn’t take him, though. I growled.

“Xavier,” Ava said firmly. “Knox is not a threat.”

My wolf eased up only because she urged him to. I shifted back to human, knowing full well we shouldn’t be doing this out here.

“I *am* a threat, Ava,” he snapped at her, shooting a glare at me. “What the hell are you doing here with the enemy?”

Ava sighed deeply. “A lot of things have changed since the last time you saw me. Please stop this.”

Knox scoffed. “Stop what? The Samara and Redwood packs have been enemies for a reason; that doesn’t just go away.” He peered at Ava, crossing his arms over his chest. “You should know—your stupid actions caused the feud. And now you’re cavorting with the enemy?”

“You’d better fucking watch the way you talk to her,” I snapped, pointing at the asshole. Ava shot me a surprised but grateful look.

“Are you serious?” Knox eyed me, almost laughing, like he couldn’t believe what was happening. “Have you forgotten your history?”

I’d forgotten nothing, but I wasn’t about to start a fucking debate. Ava seemed to agree.

“That’s over now,” she said. “I’m back from the dead, and our ridiculous feud is in the past.”

Knox shook his head. “Our grandfather always hated the Redwoods. And after what Xavier did to you, Nolan felt the same.” He took a few steps closer to Ava. I growled low in my chest. “Since you’re too much of a coward, Ava, *I* am going to honor his last wishes.”

Ava rolled her eyes, looking upward in exasperation. “And what would those be?”

Knox snarled. “To destroy the Redwoods.”

I could just imagine Greyson witnessing this guy’s tantrum. He’d probably tell him to chill before he popped a blood vessel and suggest they talked this out. I, on the other hand, didn’t have it in me to be quite so diplomatic.

Narrowing my eyes, I looked between Knox and the plank of wood I was still holding. Cracking his skull with it seemed like a pretty good idea. He was annoying me.

I vaguely remembered him as a child from some of our early meetings with the Samara pack. That had been during the time when things had been good with Ava and me, and the Samaras had held a barbecue. My hazy memories told me that Knox didn’t live in this area full time. He was Ava’s father’s sister’s son or something, so the Samara pack had been his grandfather’s, once upon a time.

We could be looking at an heir.

As the dude said something obnoxious to Ava, I looked at the plank of wood in my hand, then back at him. His face was still begging for me to throw it at him, but I reminded myself that I wasn’t alone. Ava could get caught in the middle of any fight I got into, which my wolf wouldn’t appreciate. Also, I wasn’t the Redwood pack’s official Alpha—yet—so I needed to take a step back.

I needed to be… diplomatic. *Fuck.*

Greyson was a horrible fucking influence.

“Look, man,” I said, hating myself for acting like my brother, “I don’t want a feud with the Samara pack. That’s in the past.”

I didn’t add that the Samara pack didn’t even exist anymore. I figured that would just set the guy off.

“There,” Ava said, pointing at me. “You heard him. Why are you even wasting your time with this?”

“I have plans,” Knox declared. “Big plans, Ava.”

God. Were we about to deal with *yet* *another* megalomaniac? Was there a factory making them around here?

“Knox, we can just work together,” Ava said patiently.

He huffed. “Not while you’re all buddy-buddy with this guy.” He pointed an angry finger at me. I had to stop myself from lunging at him and breaking it.

Channeling all my—admittedly limited—diplomatic energy, I said, “I’m sorry for the things our packs have done to each other. It was another time. Things truly have changed. If Nolan were still around, I’d say the same thing to him.”

Knox sneered. “It’s a pity you killed him, then.”

I was stunned. What the fuck? Did Knox really believe that? “I didn’t fucking kill—”

“You know what?” Knox snapped. “I’m done talking.”

“But that’s not what happened!” Ava exclaimed. “Xavier didn’t kill Nolan, it was Silas—”

“It’s the same family, what’s the difference?” Knox said bitterly. “Save it. I want to trust you, Ava, but you’re not making this easy.”

Before either of us could say another word, he shifted back into his wolf.

“Knox, wait!” Ava called, but it was too late.

He’d already run off, racing dramatically out of the clearing and into the woods. I would’ve gone after him if I’d been able to control my wolf without Ava around. But since that was debatable, I just stood there like a wimpy dickhead, watching the guy disappear.

Fuck.

“Do you think that Knox is a real threat?” I asked Ava.

She pressed her lips together, looking sheepish. “Not sure. The last time I saw him, he was just a teenager. And I wasn’t exactly thinking about whether he was Alpha material. I always thought it would be my brother.” Ava swallowed. “I have no idea what he’s capable of now.”

Oh, great. Another problem to be solved.

“Did you even know that Knox was back in town?” I asked Ava.

“I had no idea,” she said, shaking her head. “I’ve been kind of busy with this whole Vanguard situation.”

Ava looked anxious, like she was worried I’d blame her for Knox’s sudden appearance. I realized that I’d just implied that she was keeping something from me, and she’d felt bad about it. It was a mess, how we always fell into this kind of dynamic—me accusing, her defending herself—but it was hard for me trust her after everything that had gone down between us.

And now, things could change once more.

This Knox guy was back in town, and he hated me and the Redwoods. I had to wonder: could Ava have a change of heart? Could her loyalty shift yet again? We’d been through a lot, and she’d done so many things recently to prove herself to the Redwoods, but still. That didn’t mean her mind had been made up about where she wanted to belong.

It was all pretty ironic at this point, actually, considering I’d been trying to get the Samara pack back together. Lola—inevitably with Jay and Cali’s help—was supposed to be seeing to that, just so Ava could have something with which to occupy herself other than constantly fighting to reignite our mate bond.

Now that Ava’s cousin was claiming that he wanted to get the pack back together, though, I felt weirdly resistant to the idea. My wolf hated it. I told myself it had to be because Knox obviously hated my guts and was an asshole.

But as I looked at Ava, who was staring into the forest where Knox had disappeared, my wolf yearned for her. He didn’t fucking want Ava to be part of anyone else’s pack. He wanted her here, with us, always. Even if it was just to hover around and fucking torture me with our mate bond.

What kind of masochistic bullshit was this?

“I should probably…” Ava swallowed, shaking her head. “I should shift and go after Knox. I need to talk to him.”

That made sense.

But no. Just—*no*.

I didn’t want her entertaining the idea of joining another pack.

“It’s not safe with LIPS around,” I told her. Lied. If LIPS was really around, we’d already made a mess of things because of her stupid cousin. “Don’t shift.”

Ava shook her head. “I’ll make sure to stay hidden from them. I can handle myself, Xavier.”

She seemed determined, and my wolf itched and whined at the possibilities running through my head. What if Ava reconciled with Knox? What if he convinced her to join his new pack? What if he turned her against me? What if I was forced to stop seeing her, one way or another?

My wolf growled at the thought.

And when Ava reared back, ready to shift, I couldn’t stop myself from grabbing her hand.

Stopping her.

She turned to me, her eyes wide with surprise.

Before I could control my mouth, I said, “Don’t go. Stay with me.”

# Episode 2722

I was walking in the forest.

*Why am I in the forest?*

It was dark and misty, drops of water gathering on the leaves of every tree I passed. I knew these trees. I knew this path.

I was walking toward the Vanguard palace.

*Why would I go there? Why am I doing this?*

*Why the hell am I doing this?*

I felt myself starting to shake, every inch of my skin prickling with goosebumps. I didn’t want to go back to the palace—*not again, no no NO*—but it was as if an invisible force was pulling me forward.

*I don’t want this!*

A whisper of breath against my ear made me shudder. I spun around, but nobody was there.

I kept walking.

*I don’t want this…*

I kept on going.

*I don’t want this…*

The Vanguard palace came into view.

*I don’t want this, please don’t make me do this, not again, please don’t—*

Tears streamed down my cheeks. Nothing mattered. My feet kept moving, as if against my will, heading straight for the estate. I was in motion, yet trapped.

Always trapped.

“You’ll never be free,” whispered a familiar voice. Was it in my head? Was it in the air?

Was it in every inch of this fucking forest?

“I will always be part of you,” Seluna continued. “You’ll never have total control of yourself.”

“No, we’re done here!” I shouted. I could speak. And in my fear, I was so angry I could taste it. It was salty, just like my tears, and it made me shout again, my words echoing in the empty forest. “You can’t possess me anymore! I escaped!”

The demon’s voice was no longer a whisper.

Seluna’s laughter rose up out of the mist, and as the Vanguard palace’s entrance came into view, I wailed, “*NO!* I—”

I stopped talking.

My throat constricted.

My voice was cut off.

My body was no longer mine.

I fought to scream, but no sound came out.

I fought to scream, but no sound came out.

I fought to scream—

*I woke up screaming.*

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“Love, I’m right here!” Greyson’s arms wrapped around me, his voice soothing. “It was just a dream, I’m right here…”

I couldn’t stop shaking, crying, and it sounded like someone was dying—like *I* was dying. Was I dying? Could Seluna kill me?

*Is she going to kill me?*

“You’re in the pack house, everything’s okay,” Greyson whispered, wiping my tears away. “I won’t let anything hurt you—I promise, Cali. Cali, *look at me*.”

He made me face him, and once our eyes met, he became my anchor. I finally realized that I was awake. I was with Greyson. I was… okay?

*Well. Not exactly.*

“I’m here with you,” Greyson said. “Now, breathe, let’s do it together.”

I breathed with him. I calmed down. Silently, Greyson grabbed a tissue from the nightstand, wiped my cheeks. I blew my nose, and he helped me sit up, propped up with pillows. He leaned over her and grabbed a cup of water, then handed it to me.

I took a deep gulp. He watched the entire time silently. The water, the breathing, his presence made me ease up enough to speak.

“It was awful,” I said. My voice was hoarse. “I was under Seluna’s control again.”

Greyson wrapped his arms around me. I nestled closer, staring up at him. It was nice to look at him, even if he seemed extremely upset. *Extremely*. His voice stayed even, though. “It’s understandable, after what you went through. But I promise that you’re safe now.” He paused. “I hope… I hope you can find it in you to trust me about that. I know I failed you—”

I frowned, not letting him finish. “You didn’t fail me. The whole Seluna thing was out of your control.”

Greyson didn’t comment on that. “How did it play out in your dream?”

“It just—it felt so real. Like I was possessed all over again, being dragged to the Vanguard palace. It was…” My voice cracked. “It was really bad, Greyson. Do you think there’s something wrong with me?”

He kissed my cheek, my temple. “Of course not. You’re processing. After experiencing something so traumatic, it takes a while to overcome the residual effects.”

I stared at him. “How… How do you know that?”

“After I ran away from Silas,” he said quietly, “I used to have nightmares almost every night.”

“What were they about?”

“My father finding me. Him punishing me for daring to leave. They lasted for a long time. They really only went away when I came back home and found you.”

“That’s—wow.” I was taken aback. “I never would’ve expected you to have nightmares like that. You’re so strong.”

He shook his head. “It’s not about strength. It’s about being a person, really. Being strong doesn’t mean you don’t have any emotions.”

I sniffled. “What did you do to deal with the nightmares?”

“I had to learn not to be so hard on myself for being scared,” he admitted. “And…”

“What?”

“Well, killing him didn’t hurt,” he finished.

I paused. “Are you suggesting I kill Seluna?”

“No,” he said. “I’ll do that for you.”

“Greyson, you can’t just *plan* to kill someone like you’re some sort of—”

“I know you don’t like this,” he said, cutting me off. “But think of it this way: Seluna is a demon. By killing her, we’re sending her back to wherever the hell it is she belongs. We’ll be helping out a lot of other people in the process.”

There was a pause between us after he dropped that last little gem.

I stared at him.

He stared at me.

I burst out laughing—nervously, a little deliriously, because *what the fuck?* But when Greyson sharply said, “She does have to die, Cali,” it didn’t sound like a joke.

“But I don’t—I don’t want to wait for Seluna to die just to get rid of the nightmares.”

“I know, it’s—”

“No, I mean it,” I said, interrupting him. “I hate feeling like this. I don’t even know how to handle feeling so horrible. It’s like one mental breakdown after another. One during the day and one while I’m asleep.”

Greyson pressed his lips together. “I know this is hard, but you can talk to me. I’ll be there with you the whole time. I promise. On my life, Cali, I promise.”

He looked so earnest and eager to help that I was soothed a bit. He lay down with me, spooning me as I asked, “Are there, like, any supernatural therapists, you think? Like, someone I could talk to about being possessed who won’t look at me like I’m nuts?”

Greyson paused. “None that I would recommend.”

*Drat.*

I turned to stare at him. He seemed deep in thought, so I decided I would take his lead and do the same. He was holding me very tight and this was very cozy, so I felt much better. Cuddling and thinking was a smart course of action. I reminded myself it had only been a dream. That I’d gone through a lot, being possessed by a demon. It was understandable that I couldn’t just come back from that quickly.

*But I hate that I’m starting to feel afraid to fall asleep.*

Like Seluna would be waiting for me in my nightmares.

*No, I shouldn’t think that. It could manifest it.*

I changed my train of thought. I wondered what information Aysel might have. Would she really help us take care of Seluna? The thought of destroying Seluna did bring me a bit of comfort. I’d feel safer if the demon was gone for good, but I didn’t like the idea of killing… anything.

It had happened in the past—I’d hurt people in self-defense, or in the heat of battle. But the idea of *planning* to kill someone… It was like premeditated murder, wasn’t it? How could I be okay with that?

I’d always been so sure that I had a specific line that I wouldn’t cross, and cold-blooded murder was definitely part of that line. But Seluna was a demon, like Greyson had reminded me. Wouldn’t that be different? This wasn’t like Rhonda and the other humans at LIPS.

This was a demon who wanted to hurt me and everyone I loved.

A demon who had already hurt me repeatedly, who had tried to take my mate bond from me, as if I were nothing but her puppet, an object for her to toy with.

*How the hell can I* not *want to make her vanish?*

Surprising myself, I couldn’t find it in me to ignore that thought. I wondered if, perhaps, I needed to learn how to do what was best for me—whatever that may be—without feeling guilty about it. If Aysel was right, then Seluna wouldn’t be satisfied with simply taking over the Vanguard pack. She would, indeed, try to conquer the other packs in the area, and then who knew what she’d do next?

This wasn’t only about me—getting rid of Seluna would mean protecting the pack as well. It would make everybody much, much safer…

But how could we actually destroy her?

# Episode 2723

**Xavier**

*Stay with me.*

Ava looked shocked. She stared at my face, then down at my hand as it gripped hers.

I didn’t let go.

My wolf was going crazy on the inside, like the asshole believed I was finally giving him permission to be with his first mate. He was such a dramatic dick.

“What are you saying?” Ava’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Do you just want me to stay because of your shifting problems?”

I didn’t speak. Couldn’t. The answer was complicated. Part of my not wanting to let Ava go was my shifting problem. Obviously. And I wished it were only that. But I also didn’t like the idea of Ava leaving me. In general.

I didn’t want to face the risk of losing her, and it wasn’t just my wolf who felt that way.

But how the fuck could I admit any of that to her?

*Answer me, Xavier.*

Ava’s voice in my head was electrifying. It was a shock to feel the mind link with her after I’d lost it with Cali. Comparing my two mates made me feel like shit, though. It made me take a step back and drop Ava’s hand.

“Never mind,” I said. “If you need to talk to Knox, go ahead. I never should have stopped you.”

Ava frowned in confusion, crossing her arms over her chest.

*No, it’s okay*, she said. *I don’t have to go.*

Fuck, what would make her stop mind linking? Ordering her to stop would certainly make her *not* stop, so I forced myself to keep talking for real until she caught on.

“Fine, then,” I said aloud. “In that case, tell me more about this guy. Is he a threat?”

Ava raised an eyebrow. “Knox was always hot-headed, and he idolized Nolan—that’s obviously become a bit of an obsession, now that Nolan’s dead.”

“That feels like an understatement,” I said wryly. “And why does he blame Nolan’s death on me? Does he really not know about what happened with Silas, the war?”

Ava sighed, shaking her head. “No idea, but it seems he just wants to blame the Evers family no matter what.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. This was a fucking mess. I needed to figure it out and quickly, before it became a bigger problem. Because right now, it sure looked like it had the potential to cause a whole lot of trouble.

“Do you think Knox has the clout to gather the remaining Samara pack members?” I asked.

Ava’s voice lowered. There was a wistfulness to it that urged my wolf to inch closer to her. “This isn’t about Knox and his leadership abilities. It’s about the desire to be a pack again. If someone comes along and claims they can do that, then the other members might just go along with it.”

I scowled. “What’s so wrong with staying Rogue?”

“Lots of wolves don’t want to be Rogues,” Ava said. “It’s lonely.”

Was *Ava* lonely? Had she been lonely this entire time, even though she’d been staying in the same house as the pack? She was both a Rogue and not one. Just abandoned.

That train of thought was dangerous, not to mention food for my wolf, so I pushed it away. I had other things to focus on right now—to worry about right now. Knox could become a huge fucking problem, one that we definitely didn’t need. My plan to get the Samaras back together might have to happen sooner rather than later.

If I had a hand in it, then at least we’d be able to control the narrative and make sure that the Samaras didn’t rise up as yet another enemy of the Redwoods.

“Is there anyone else who’d make a better new Alpha for the pack?” I asked. “Better than Knox?”

Ava rubbed her forehead, huffing out a breath. “I’d need to talk to all of them.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” I said. It sounded like I was snapping at Ava, so my wolf snapped at me to mind my fucking manners.

This was the worst, actually.

“What do you want me to say?” Ava scoffed. “Nolan was tough, but he was a strong Alpha, so they’ll want someone like him. And unfortunately, Knox bears a lot of similarities to Nolan.”

“Really?” I rolled my eyes. “I never thought of your brother as a strong Alpha.”

Ava raised an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

I scoffed. “He was a whiny asshole who wanted to best me but couldn’t. Always doing underhanded crap to get back at the Redwoods for the pack war. A war he participated in. Always letting his anger get the best of him.”

Ava pursed her lips.

“What?” I asked, frowning.

“Nothing,” she said, pretending to zip up her mouth.

I shook my head. “No, don’t do that cute shit with me—what did you want to say?”

She smirked. “You think I’m cute?”

My wolf yelped, but I was not going to let the besotted dickhead have any part in this conversation.

“Answer my question,” I said brusquely.

“You said that Nolan let his anger get the best of him,” Ava said, shrugging coyly. “I was just thinking that that sounds like another Alpha I know…”

We looked at each other for a long beat, and then I scowled. “You mean me.”

She gave me a wide-eyed, innocent look. “What gave it away?”

I huffed, shaking my head. “Please, Nolan was an ass. At least I’m nice some of the time.”

Ava pressed her lips together. “You care about being nice, then?”

I glared at her. “Stop fucking with me.”

She giggled. My wolf was going fucking nuts. This was flirting—fucking macabre flirting at that as we danced around the reason Nolan hated me. Killing her. But my wolf didn’t care; for him this was playing, and he wanted to roll at Ava’s feet, and fucking lick them too. I groaned, rubbing my face.

“Hey, I’m just joking—”

“I know,” I said, cutting her off. I faced her, biting the inside of my cheek. “It’s fine.”

It wasn’t, but she didn’t need to know that. She just rolled her eyes at me and then sighed, as if she was used to me being myself, so nothing fazed her. “Whatever. What do you want to do about this whole Knox situation? Should I just try going after him?”

She stared at me, waiting, and she looked… She looked like she wanted me to ask her to stay again. It looked like she was craving it, actually, because it was something I hadn’t done in years. In what felt like forever.

It was what my wolf wanted—to keep her here, always near. But I knew that the best move right now would be to let Ava talk to Knox. I couldn’t believe I was the one saying this instead of goddamn Greyson, but if we could resolve this diplomatically, then that would be best. The thought almost made me laugh. Cali really had had a huge calming effect on me.

I would *never* have chosen this route a couple of months ago.

“Yeah,” I said to Ava. “Go talk to him.”

If she was disappointed by my words, she didn’t show it. “I’ll try to pick up his trail and see if he’ll talk to me. But there are no guarantees.”

“I get it,” I said. “We just have to see what’s up with him.”

Ava nodded. With one last look at the ashes of the Samara pack house, she shifted into her wolf. As graceful and fierce as ever, she bounded off into the forest. My wolf was left behind, fucking whining. He was insufferable, so I pushed him away.

I forced myself to think of Cali again, hoping it would work like before. I’d been away from her long enough—being grounded by her actual presence was always best. Sensory stuff like touching her, kissing her, smelling her, seeing her smile… It usually did the trick.

I got back into the car and was ready to drive back to the pack house. But as I pulled out of the Samara driveway, prepared to fixate on Cali so I could push through my wolf’s separation anxiety, Ava shattered the notion.

She mind linked me again. *I’ll be back at the pack house soon*. *This should be okay.*

Her voice echoing in my head remained way too intimate. It was too much of a reminder that I was still bonded to her. And now that I couldn’t mind link with Cali, it felt almost like a betrayal to use this method of communication with Ava.

I ignored my wolf’s protests and drove faster, away from Ava, determined not to let this urge—this instinct—overwhelm me. I thought of Cali’s pink mouth, her beautiful eyes, her soft, gorgeous body, the way she said my name, the way she smiled at me… I pushed down my stress, my wolf’s stress too, and forced myself to think of Cali only. I was certain that once I saw her, once I could hold her and taste her mouth, the stress would melt away.

But in the meantime, it wasn’t working.

In fact, my wolf was only getting more frantic.

The urge started from the center of my chest and spread so quickly I couldn’t control it. I watched, fucking horrified, as my hands on the steering wheel turned into paws.

*No! No no no, stop this! Fucking STOP—*

My wolf wasn’t listening.

I shifted fully with what felt like an explosion.

I lost control of both my wolf and the car, and it careened toward the road partition.

# Episode 2724

I woke up in Greyson’s arms. I was pretty sure he hadn’t moved from my side, and that had helped me sleep through the night. The pressure of him, his heat, his strength… It had all settled me down.

But not fully.

I had woken up startled for some reason that I couldn’t pinpoint.

It hadn’t been a bad dream—not like the last one. But I’d woken up with this weird sense that something was about to go wrong. It was definitely anxiety, so at least I had a name for the feeling. I checked the time on my phone, and I realized it was super early. There was no light coming from under the curtains, so the sun hadn’t risen yet.

I couldn’t get back to sleep, so I turned to look at Greyson.

*Look at him*, I thought. *Look how beautiful and sweet and kind and amazing he is. He helped me out so much last night. He’s practically perfect in every way, while I—*

I was not. I was not perfect. Even less so right now. I recalled Greyson’s concern from last night, how massive it had been, and the thought crushed any and all sleepiness I had left. The bad feeling in the pit of my stomach remained, anyway.

If Greyson’s presence couldn’t chase it away, I doubted that going downstairs for tea would, but I was too antsy to stay still.

After escaping Greyson’s death grip, I got up, got dressed, and headed down to the kitchen.

Greyson hadn’t even stirred. I guessed he’d spent most of the night wide awake, to make sure I didn’t have any more nightmares—until he’d inevitably passed out.

I refused to dwell on that, because if I did, I would feel even worse, and I…

I hated feeling like this.

Like I was less than myself. Different from myself.

*Remember what Greyson said, Cali*, I thought as I climbed down the stairs. *Don’t be hard on yourself.*

The thought made me feel just a little bit better.

When I got to the kitchen, I realized I wouldn’t be alone. Dani was heating up water, and when she met my eyes, she gave me a sad little smile. “Tea?”

“Yes, please,” I said. “Couldn’t sleep either?”

Dani shook her head. The dark circles under her eyes highlighted the fact. “I’ve been having some bad dreams…”

“Me too,” I said. It felt good to blurt it out like that. With no shame or second thoughts. Being here with Dani, in the quiet of the kitchen, felt safe. She had to be going through the same thing I was. I didn’t need to hold back with her.

“I think—I think being possessed probably messed with my brain,” I added.

Dani sighed, placing two cups of green tea on the table. She sat across from me and gave me another nod. “Yeah. I think the same goes for both of us.”

We spent a moment staring at each other. In the quiet, something else bloomed.

A sense of unity.

“It might take some time for us to get over it,” I said. “But Greyson said that nobody should ever feel guilty or be hard on themselves about feeling bad after going through something traumatic. What we’re going through is totally normal.”

Dani swallowed, her eyes wide. She was so sweet. “He said that?”

“Yeah, I mean, remember who his father is,” I said, but I didn’t want to mention Silas’s name. I wondered if Dani sometimes had nightmares about Silas kidnapping her too… “Greyson also said that being strong doesn’t mean you can’t have feelings or be sad. That it’s all part of being human.”

Dani smiled a little. “That’s good to hear. I was getting worried.”

I grinned. “Good, I’m glad. He’s like this really, *really* good-looking Yoda. *Really* good-looking. To the point where you’re like, huh, is there such a thing as being *too* hot?”

Dani giggled into her cup of tea, which made everything better. Then she asked, “What else did he say?”

*That we should probably kill Seluna if we want this to be fixed. He’s ready to do it too*, I thought.

But I decided that Dani probably didn’t need to know that yet.

“I asked him if there are any magical shrinks,” I said, “but he said no good ones. So I think… Maybe we could talk to each other about this?” Dani stared at me hopefully, so I added, “After all, no one else really understands what we both went through.”

Dani nodded right away. “That would be amazing, actually.”

She smiled wide, and I reached over to hold her hand on the table. I suddenly felt much, much better overall.

I felt more like myself.

*Pretty sure the identity crisis is just starting, though*, I thought wryly. But that notion was trampled by a different one. *No, I have to stay optimistic!*

Dani mercifully interrupted my thoughts. “Was it a nightmare that woke you up so early?”

“No, actually,” I said. “Just a general bad feeling.” The moment I mentioned the feeling, it seemed to return tenfold. My stomach twitched. “I can’t…” I frowned at the thought. “I can’t quite shake it.”

“Cali?” A sleepy voice made us both turn to the kitchen entryway. Greyson stood there in a pair of sweats, his hair still rumpled with sleep. My heart warmed at the sight of him.

“Right here,” I said.

He walked over, murmuring a good morning to Dani, who returned it with a small, shy smile. Greyson kissed the top of my head. “How come you woke up so early?”

“It feels like something bad happened. Or is about to happen,” I said honestly. I couldn’t bring myself to hide anything right now. It was like something had burst inside me last night, and my usual “let’s not worry my mates” tactics had been thrown out the window.

*This is an identity crisis, but also… growth? Could it be both?* I wondered*.*

Meanwhile, Greyson processed. “It might be residual anxiety from the whole Seluna thing,” he said. “Are you feeling physically ill?”

“No,” I admitted. “I hope it’s just that…”

He raised an eyebrow. “As opposed to?’

I scoffed. “I have no idea. Some sort of impending disaster that my radar’s picking up. Like a tsunami siren going off in my head.”

“We’re not close enough to the beach for the tsunami thing to be a threat,” Rishika said, then.

I watched as she walked into the kitchen like some sort of glowing morning goddess.

“What are you even doing awake?” I asked curiously.

“Oh, just back from my morning run,” she said, grabbing an apple. “I do this every day. You should try it.”

I was so appalled that I couldn’t even speak. I looked up at Greyson indignantly. He barked out a laugh and kissed my cheek. We *really* didn’t need to mind link for him to read my feelings. Also, it was just lovely to see him laugh after the horrible night we’d had.

“By the way, Greyson, I’m glad you’re here,” Rishika said. “I wanted to ask—have you heard from Xavier?”

My stomach dropped.

“No, why?” Greyson asked.

“It might be nothing,” Rishika said. “But I’ve been trying to keep tabs on people lately since so much crap has been going down, and I saw Xavier leave the pack house with Ava last night. Neither of them have come back.”

My stomach had dropped, and it now crashed to the floor. The anxiety instantly built up to a peak that no joking around would ease. Why, oh *why* had I told Xavier to go to the Samara pack house with Ava? Had something happened to him?

*This has to be why I woke up full of dread today.*

“Something’s wrong with Xavier,” I whispered. Then I spoke louder while looking up at Greyson. “Something’s wrong with Xavier—that’s why I woke up with this horrible feeling!”

Greyson scowled. Dani paled. Rishika rushed to reassure me. “Cali, no. I looked around the area during my run. I don’t think anything bad happened—maybe he’s patrolling, or running an errand.”

My hands were shaking. “Xavier would never leave for an entire night without telling anyone, and now they’ve… They’ve been gone all night?”

Saying the words sent my heart hammering. I felt sick to my stomach. What the fuck had Xavier and Ava been doing all night? Was the feeling of dread connected to my mate bond with Xavier? Was the bond feeling threatened because he’d spent time with Ava? Or had something bad actually happened to Xavier? And maybe Ava too?

“Greyson,” I choked out, standing up. “We have to find him!”

“We’ll go together,” he said, grabbing a set of keys. “Rishika, go get Artemis and form a second search party. Check the forest, we’ll take the road.”

The moment we got into the car, I had to swallow down tears.

“This is all my fault,” I said, my voice cracking. “I should have trusted my instincts—I knew something was wrong, but I waited too long to sound the alarm—what if Xavier’s hurt? What if—”

“Cali, Xavier is okay,” Greyson said, cutting off my stress-induced rant. “He’s strong, capable—he’ll be fine.”

I wanted to believe him.

As Greyson drove down the main road, I kept rambling under my breath. “What if Xavier decided to go after Lucian and Seluna on his own? What if he’s been captured or injured? What if—*Greyson!*” I gasped, noticing a car on the side of the road.

My heart shattered. “That’s Xavier’s car!”

Greyson pulled over without a word, and I frantically rushed out. The car was completely totaled, and I ran to the driver’s side, only to see…

It was empty.

# Episode 2725

**Greyson**

I ran to Cali’s side. She was panting, her eyes wild, unshed tears gathering as she stared at the car. It was completely destroyed. The scent of blood was thick in the air, and when I stepped closer, I saw there was a stain on the driver’s seat.

Perhaps things weren’t as simple as I’d originally thought.

I wasn’t worried about Xavier, though. He was a damn Alpha wolf, and I knew he could take care of himself.

The damn idiot had better be okay. He wasn’t allowed to do shit like this. He was supposed to be the one (annoying) steady, reliable thing in my life. The one thing I didn’t have to worry about. So where the hell was he right now?

“What happened to him?” Cali asked me. Her voice was a whisper, her eyes wide as she looked up at me. She turned to me to fix things, so I needed to fucking do it. Right now, because seeing her like this was almost as bad as seeing her sob last night.

“I’ll find him,” I told her. “It’s going to be okay.”

I reached for my phone while processing the scene—Xavier was usually a good driver. What would make him lose control like this? I eyed the vehicle suspiciously and called the pack house. Sage picked up.

“Greyson, hi! Torin’s making pancakes, did you want—”

She stopped talking when I explained what had happened.

“I need you to have the car towed to check for sabotage,” I concluded. “In the meantime, I’m going to go look for Xavier.”

Sage’s tone was grave. “On it.” She hung up.

When I turned to Cali, she looked broken up, and it was breaking my own heart. “You think… You think someone messed with the car?” She asked. Normally, I’d feel a familiar pang of jealousy over her being worried about Xavier, but not when she was so distressed.

“Probably not,” I said. “But I have to make sure.”

“We have to find him, Greyson,” she said, her voice cracking. Her expression was torn between determination and fear. “We have to—”

I pulled her into a hug before she could finish her sentence. She clung to me, and I fought to figure out if I could get her to go back to the pack house. But when I faced her once more and she firmly said, “We have to find him,” I realized that the battle was already lost.

There was no way she’d leave until we found my brother.

“Stick close to me,” I said. “I don’t want any surprises while we’re looking for him. Okay?”

She nodded firmly. “Okay.”

I grabbed her hand and headed straight for the woods. This felt like a bad idea all around, but it wasn’t like I had an abundance of choices.

“What are you thinking?” Cali whispered.

There were many answers to that question.

*I’m thinking that I need to find my brother because you love him. I’m thinking that I need to find my brother because I, unfortunately, love him too. I’m thinking that I’ve failed you because Lucian and Seluna are still alive. I’m thinking that if they’ve hurt Xavier, my decision not to go to war will look even worse. I’m thinking—*

I was done thinking about all the things that could distract me from my goal. And that was finding my brother. I peered at the forest while Cali peered at me—I could feel her eyes on me.

I could feel her expectations.

If my brother went ahead and got his ass murdered today, I was going to kill him again myself.

“Blood,” I said. I smelled it first, then I saw it. A small trail of it on the forest floor, scattered over a bunch of rocks, then over some weeds. “But this isn’t necessarily a bad thing,” I was quick to add, before Cali could freak.

“How on earth could you say that?” she asked incredulously, gripping my hand tighter.

“There are pawprints, not footprints,” I told her, gesturing at the ground. “Which might explain the crash. If Xavier’s wolf came out suddenly, then he’d have lost control.”

“That makes sense,” Cali whispered as I sniffed the air. I picked up the scent of Xavier’s wolf, held my mate’s hand, and guided her to the east.

The sun was finally rising, and I was grateful for the light. I noticed some blood on the foliage, and Cali did too. In a low voice that cracked, she said, “He’s bleeding a lot.”

If he were gravely injured, he might have not made it this far.

“It doesn’t look like he was heading back to the pack house,” I said, looking around. “His wolf is going further into the woods…” I trailed off when I picked up another scent.

I went rigid, my heart pounding. I pushed Cali behind me.

“What is it?” Cali whispered. I could feel her anxiety, her fear, and her anger. But I kept a level head, because that was what was needed from me. I couldn’t lie to soothe her, either, because that wouldn’t help either of us.

“I think Aysel is out here,” I replied, looking around the forest. There was no visible threat at the moment, but I had to remain on guard. Especially where Cali was concerned.

“What the hell does that mean?” she hissed.

I raised my head, trying to catch the scent. “It smells like Aysel and Xavier were here together,” I said.

Cali scowled, her eyes narrowing. “That doesn’t even make any sense. There’s no way that Xavier would go with Aysel if he was hurt.”

I nodded. “True. But if Xavier wasn’t conscious, he’d have no choice. What if Aysel ambushed him while he was already injured?”

That was the wrong damn thing to say.

“Oh my god!” Cali started trembling, her eyes wide. “You think he’s so badly hurt that she could trap him? That’s just—”

“Cali, no.” I turned to face my mate, gripping her shoulders. “Listen, I’ll get my brother back, no matter what. Okay? Breathe with me.”

Cali tried to breathe, in and out, in and out, but calming herself clearly wasn’t easy. The fear was rolling off her in waves. I held her hand and tried to call Rishika for backup, but my phone had no bars.

“Phone isn’t working. We’ll do a bit more reconnaissance to see what the problem really is before I go get backup,” I said. “Does that sound good?”

Cali looked like a broken baby duckling, and I wanted to break the fucking world for hurting her. But then, she stood straighter. “It does. It makes sense. And actually…” She squeezed my hand, exhaling slowly. “Thank you for treating me like a partner right now, Greyson. That helps.”

She was more than my partner. She was my mate. She was courageous despite her fear, and she was amazing.

As the scent led us onto Vanguard territory, I despised the idea that I was bringing her back to this wretched, cursed place.

This was so wildly fucking unsafe that I couldn’t even wrap my head around it.

“Would you go back to the car, get to the pack house to call for the others?” I asked. “I still have no signal.”

Cali looked at me like I was nuts. “Of course not! I’m sticking with you—”

“But, Cali—”

“Wouldn’t it be worse if we split up? What if I get caught by the Vanguards, or demons, or who *knows* what else.”

Dammit, I hated when she had a good point.

“Okay,” I said. “We’ll just see if the scent trail leads further into the compound. If it does, I’m turning back and getting Rishika and the others. You’ll stay at the house, safe, away from fucking Seluna.”

Cali, for once, didn’t argue. “Okay.”

My backup plan gave me hope.

Five minutes later, we could kind of see the outskirts of the Vanguard estate. There were guards swarming the area like piranhas.

“What on earth are they doing with those huge moving trucks?” Cali whisper-hissed. “What the hell is happening there? Is Seluna moving? Or is she bringing stuff inside? Is she doing demon interior design?” She gasped. “Wait! Maybe she’s building a temple for herself! Oh my god, I have to see that—”

“No you don’t,” I said curtly and pulled her right back. I pointed in the other direction. “That’s where the trail leads, actually.”

Cali scowled. “Where is Aysel taking him?”

Exactly. Where could Aysel be taking Xavier, if not to the house?

The answer came a moment later, when I started to recognize some of the trails. My stomach twitched. And when the small cottage came into view, my suspicions were confirmed.

Of all the places… I did *not* want to be back here. Memories of being tied up in there came back to me, and the urge to throw Aysel off a cliff felt like a goddamn field day of an idea.

“I shouldn’t have brought you here,” I whispered to Cali.

She’d recognized the cottage as well, and she shook her head. “At least it’s not the palace. At least we’re further away from there, and Seluna.”

I agreed with that. I held Cali tight, just to make sure she wouldn’t slip away.

“Are you sure they’re here, though?” Cali asked, staring at the cottage’s door as we lurked behind a bush.

I sniffed and nodded. “The scent is strongest here. Either they’re inside right now, or they just left, so—”

So I had no time to even fucking speak.

“That bitch thinks she can hurt my mates?” Cali hissed. “I’ll show her!”

In the blink of an eye, Cali ran toward the cottage and threw open the door like she was the Alpha wolf in all this. I scrambled to follow her inside, then immediately stopped dead.

My brother was laid out on the bed, and Aysel was leaning over him.

Cali stepped forward. “Get the hell away from him!”

# Episode 2726

I hadn’t been this furious since…

Well, since the last time Aysel had put a mate of mine in her bed. It was becoming a habit that I needed to extinguish, pronto.

“Get the hell away from him!” I seethed. I was ready to jump at Aysel, but then I felt Greyson’s strong arms wrap around my torso, pulling me back. “Let me go!” I shouted, lifting my hands to blast her apart.

Aysel’s eyes were wide, stunned, and for someone who kept on saying that she wasn’t afraid of the Redwood pack, she sure as hell looked afraid now.

“Cali, wait!” Greyson said, “I don’t think this is what we thought!”

Magic sparkled at my fingertips, about to burst. This creepy, disgusting monster had taken away my injured mate for whatever creepy, disgusting monster reason, and I wasn’t going to stop here. I was going to—

“Cali, no!” Aysel yelled, standing to her feet, holding up her hands. “I’m just trying to help!”

A white bandage fell from her fingers and dropped on the ground. I gaped.

*Wait… Was she bandaging one of Xavier’s wounds? What? WHAT?*

“What the hell is happening here?” I said under my breath, making a beeline for Xavier. On the way, I shoulder-checked the damn princess-y werewolf. “You’d better explain this right now, or I won’t give my mate a second chance to stop me from blasting you to hell.”

“I was just—”

Impatience took over, and I bullied past Aysel to see my mate. I practically slid onto my knees with the speed of my sprinting over. I grabbed his hand immediately. “Xavier?” I said softly. “Can you hear me?”

Xavier looked like he was sleeping. Thank *god* his breathing was even.

“You finally ready for that explanation you wanted?” Aysel asked impatiently.

I glared up at her.

She sighed. “I found Xavier passed out and naked in the woods.”

I gasped. He’d been out there for that long without anyone knowing? What in the world had happened? I squeezed Xavier’s hand, and his breathing shifted. Could he sense I was here? I sure hoped so.

“I figured I should help him before he was discovered by my brother or those annoying LIPS people,” Aysel said primly.

I glared, still. “Why wouldn’t you bring him back to the pack house?”

She scoffed. “Yeah, right, like I’d go to the Redwood pack house without an invitation. You probably would’ve just assumed that I was the one who attacked him.”

I clenched my jaw, glancing at Greyson. His arms were crossed over his chest, his gaze stern. He nodded at me, as if he knew what I was thinking.

“If you truly wanted me to believe you had good intentions, then you wouldn’t have brought him to a secret location,” I told Aysel.

Aysel shook her head. “Oh, please! Be honest with me—if I’d appeared at the Redwood pack house with an injured Xavier Evers, what would your first reaction have been? You and your Alpha barely tolerated my presence the first time! It was actually quite intimidating.”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “I thought you said you weren’t afraid of us.”

Aysel scowled, but I had to admit she had a point. I’d have immediately suspected her if I hadn’t seen the car crash with my own eyes. But I wasn’t going to tell Aysel that.

*Let her simmer.*

“Why would you even help Xavier at all?” Greyson asked coldly.

Aysel sighed. “It’s very clear that the Redwoods do not trust me and do not want to help me. I figured that if I helped Xavier, then you might realize we’re all on the same side here.”

Greyson didn’t seem happy, which was extremely relatable. I hated how much sense this was all making. But I was also having intense déjà vu from the time when Ava had pretended to be helpful and then gone off to do awful stuff to us and our pack. Though Ava had apparently turned over a new leaf…

*No, that’s a whole other mess that I’m not going to think about right now. NOPE!*

I needed to focus on Aysel and on getting my injured mate back home.

“We’ll take over with Xavier,” I told her. “We don’t need your help anymore.”

I smoothed Xavier’s hair away from his face. He was still unconscious, and I wished I could still mind link with him now more than ever. Squeezing his hand, I whispered in his ear, “Don’t worry, I’m here now. You’re going to be okay.”

When I turned to Greyson, I saw him watching Aysel carefully. “So let’s say you do have a point. Let’s say we take you seriously and we let you help us with Seluna. What then?”

I gasped. “Seriously? So what, you trust her now? After everything she’s done to you?”

Greyson shook his head. “I don’t trust her. But I can recognize desperation. If she was really still on Lucian and the Vanguards’ side, then she wouldn’t have passed up the chance to bring Lucian an easy prisoner.” He glanced over at my mate. “The brother of the Alpha of the Redwood pack, and one of your mates. That’s precious cargo.”

My fury was front and center, making me vibrate with indignation. I wanted to blast Aysel, always and forever, but I couldn’t ignore the logical part of things now that Greyson had spoken it out loud. *Unfortunately*.

Even though I wanted to ignore Aysel and never talk to her again while also imagining her dangling off the edge of a cliff, I realized that the creepy little princess could potentially be helpful when it came to taking care of Seluna.

If Aysel was *really* telling the truth about having information about Seluna, and actually wanted to get rid of her, I could—in theory, at least—set aside my bad feelings about Aysel. *If* it would help keep my mates and the pack safe from Seluna.

Did I still want to blast Aysel? Of course!

Did I still want to see her dangling off a cliff? Also of course!

But right now, it felt like I had to keep my anger in check and just move forward. I looked at Greyson, and his grim expression told me all I needed to know. We couldn’t mind link, but I knew he was feeling the same way, and it was comforting to have that kind of connection even now.

When he gave me a brief nod, I spoke up first. “If you really want to help us, Aysel,” I said, “then you should tell us what you know about what’s going on in the palace.”

Aysel pressed her lips together, flipping her hair over her shoulder. “You understand I can’t simply divulge all my pack’s secrets, right? You can’t ask that of me.”

“I think if you want any of us to trust you, you’ll answer any questions we ask,” I snapped. “You know we could just pick up Xavier and go on our merry way, right?”

Aysel scowled, crossing her arms over her chest. “Fine.”

“So?” I pressed. “Why were all of those moving vans there? Why were there so many guards?”

Aysel rolled her eyes. Hard. “Seluna has been ‘redecorating.’ She’s brought in all these gaudy statues that look awful and make the whole house look so tacky.”

I scowled, eyeing Greyson, who seemed to be sharing my sentiments. The Vanguard palace was already an over-the-top *Architectural Digest* nightmare. Now Seluna wanted to make it even tackier, but her bad taste in decorations wasn’t exactly a big deal.

“I don’t care if Seluna’s playing *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* with the palace right now, Aysel,” I said firmly. I was being super firm right now, and honestly after all I’d been through, I was quite proud of myself for it. “You’ll need to tell us something much more helpful if you want us to trust you.”

Greyson snorted.

“Okay, not *trust you*,” I clarified, “but, like, not completely think that you’d be a very bad ally to have.”

Aysel pouted, flipping her hair over her shoulder. “That’s not how I envisioned this going. I’m supposed to ask for something, and you’re supposed to give it to me!”

I smiled tightly. “I understand that’s how life has been for you so far, but that’s not how things work in the real world.”

Aysel glared at Greyson. “First I don’t get to have Greyson, who looks great today, by the way—”

My blood was actually boiling.

“—and now I have to give up my leverage in order for you to trust me just a little bit? I’m not sure this line of action matches who I am as a person! Nay, as a royal!”

I opened my mouth to tell her to go to literal hell, right along with her demon, but Greyson beat me to it.

“Since Aysel isn’t cooperating, we should get going,” Greyson said casually, walking over to Xavier. “I’ll carry him, Cali, make sure—”

“No, wait!” Aysel exclaimed.

Both Greyson and I turned to her.

“I’ll tell you what I know,” Aysel said grumpily. “In exchange for asylum in your extremely humble pack.”

“You will tell us what you know,” Greyson said, his eyes flashing dangerously, “just so Cali doesn’t blast the fuck out of you right now, and also if you want to gain even a small bit of our trust. How about that?”

Aysel huffed. “Fine. I overheard something, but I’m not sure what it means.” She turned to me, her voice lowering. “I can’t claim to understand it, but I heard Seluna say that your magic is still the key to… what she called ‘phase two.’”

# Episode 2727

“What does that mean? Phase two? How many new crazy schemes can a single demon even *have*?” Greyson growled.

Aysel’s jaw was set. “I can tell you everything I heard Seluna and Lucian talk about, but I’m not saying anything else until you agree to help me save my brother from Seluna.”

Her eyes were blazing with determination, and I could hear the earnestness in her voice. Gone was the haughty princess—she was for real right now. She was practically begging us. For once, this didn’t feel like a game or a scheme.

*Dammit. Now what?*

I shared a look with Greyson. His face was unreadable at the moment, so I couldn’t sense what he was thinking. He stared back, then said, “Right now, I need to get you and Xavier back to the pack house, Cali.”

“But—”

“If Seluna is after your power, I don’t want you anywhere near the palace,” Greyson said, interrupting me. His words made sense, and I finally found myself nodding. He looked relieved. Then he turned to Aysel. “If you come with us, you’ll be put under constant watch.”

Aysel shrugged. “I’m fine with that. I don’t want to stay here and have Seluna find me on the grounds after I stormed out of the castle.”

I couldn’t fucking believe that we were, indeed, about to let Aysel into the pack house. This would be the greatest disgrace Xavier’s estate would ever have to deal with, honestly.

“Careful,” I whispered as Greyson picked up Xavier. I didn’t want to let go of Xavier’s hand—my chest hurt at the sight of him injured—but I knew I had to, so that Greyson could carry him back through the woods.

The walk there was silent, and I spent it shooting glances at Aysel. She didn’t look particularly evil at the moment, but still. You could never be safe enough with her.

*How I wish I could mind link with Greyson right now…*

Seluna was all to goddamn blame. And she needed my power for “phase two”—what the hell was that supposed to mean? I continued to exist in a constant state of anger and fear. It was exhausting. But as I looked at Xavier’s face and heard his even breathing, I was at least glad that we’d found him.

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Sage stood by Xavier’s totaled car with the tow truck driver. She eyed Aysel suspiciously, but she didn’t say anything in front of the driver.

“Is Xavier okay?” she asked Greyson.

“He’ll be fine,” Greyson told her, his voice even. “Thank you for taking care of this so quickly.”

I sat in the back of Greyson’s car with Xavier, holding his head on my lap. I stroked his cheeks, pushed his hair back, muttering things like, “You’re okay,” and, “I’m right here with you.” I wished so badly that he could hear.

I wished I could be sure he was hearing me, somehow.

When we arrived at the pack house, Rishika and Artemis met us out front.

“What is *she* doing here?” Artemis asked with a glare at Aysel.

The princess huffed. “I’ll have you know that I’m a guest.”

Greyson actually scoffed at that. “A very *temporary* one, and one of convenience only.”

Rishika and Artemis carefully helped carry Xavier out of the back seat and into the living room, and then Torin rushed in. “What the heck happened?”

“Not sure,” I said. “Xavier was in a car crash, and he won’t wake up.”

I hoped it was just that, at least.

*Could him not waking up have something to do with his wolf and Ava’s absence? I sure as hell hope not!*

Torin nodded seriously. “I’ll see if I can do anything to wake him up.” He stared at me. “We’ll come get you as soon as he’s awake, okay?”

I watched, helpless and furious and scared, as Xavier was carried upstairs. I wished with everything I had that he’d be okay. No. I *knew* he would be. He had to be.

“How *quaint*,” Aysel’s nasally voice said from behind me. I turned to see her looking around the house, her nose wrinkled.

Greyson was grabbing her by the arm, as if he suspected she’d try to escape. Or make some trouble. Which, same.

“Zainab,” he said, gesturing for her as he led Aysel into one of the side rooms. “I want someone guarding this door at all times.”

Zainab nodded in agreement. I stepped forward right away, looking up at Greyson. “I need to speak with our guest first.”

Greyson frowned. “Do you have to?”

“I’ll be okay,” I said. “And I’ll call if I need any help.”

With a kiss on the cheek and a pat on the back, Greyson let me in. I gave him a grateful look and opened the door. When I stepped into the room and faced Aysel, I saw that she’d already made herself comfortable on an armchair.

“Oh,” she said. “It’s you.”

Ignoring Aysel’s disappointed tone—this asshole had probably expected Greyson—I took her in. For the first time, I realized that Aysel looked bedraggled, unlike her usual prim and proper self. Like she’d spent two days out in the woods, for real. The hems of her designer pants were stained and ripped. Her hair looked all floppy. And there was dirt and maybe some of Xavier’s blood on her cheek.

*She looks… bad, actually.* I hadn’t noticed it before, but Aysel looked far from her normally put-together self. Maybe she was telling the truth—maybe she was worried about the Vanguards just like I was.

I fought to squash whatever empathy I felt for her, but it was a little hard. Dammit.

“Do you want to take a bath?” I asked.

Aysel raised an eyebrow. “Returning the hospitality?”

I flashed back to the past few weeks—I’d been forced to take baths at the Vanguard palace before all the big ceremonies that I’d never fucking consented to. Screw feeling bad about Aysel—she was a horrible person.

“If you don’t want to clean up, then that’s fine, I just have some questions for you,” I said.

Aysel rolled her eyes. “Fine. What do you want to know?”

“What did you mean about Seluna wanting to use my power?” I asked. “What is ‘phase two’? Why won’t Seluna and Lucian just leave me the hell alone?”

All of a sudden, Aysel’s calm expression twisted into fury. “This is not Lucian’s doing!” she spat out. “Not anymore.”

Well, that had definitely touched a sore spot. I tried not to feel bad at the stressed-out look on Aysel’s face.

“What the hell do you mean by that?” I demanded. “Lucian’s treated me like I’m a thing to use this entire time—how’s what’s happening right now any different?”

“Lucian wasn’t always an obsessive madman,” Aysel said sharply. “He’d always liked the stories of the moon goddess when we were kids, but it was a normal interest, not an obsession.” She paused. “Sure, he was kind of a conceited asshole sometimes—after all, he was raised as a prince. But he was also capable of kindness, especially for me.” She pointed at her chest, her indignation obvious now. “But that all changed the moment he got the idea to bring Seluna to this world to be with him.”

I kind of wanted to laugh, now. Deliriously.

“I don’t know, Aysel,” I said. “From my perspective, it’s pretty hard to believe that Lucian was ever anything but a goddess-obsessed bastard.”

“My brother is not—”

“He’s kidnapped me more times than I can count, and kissed me without my consent,” I said angrily. “You don’t get to tell me how the hell to feel about him.”

Aysel scowled. “The way my brother has treated you is another matter. He truly loves Seluna, Cali. And I wanted him to be happy, so I supported him in bringing Seluna back to this world. After all, who wouldn’t want to see their brother happy?”

Greyson and Xavier came to mind, but I wasn’t about to mention them.

“The last couple of days, though, he’s receded into himself,” Aysel said, suddenly quiet. She looked down at her lap. “He doesn’t even seem happy now that he has his love with him. He seems like a completely different person, drained of the ability to feel anything like joy.” Aysel met my gaze again, swallowing roughly. “He just agrees with everything Seluna says, like some kind of emotionless puppet. It’s terrifying, and I’m…” Her voice cracked. She sniffled. “I’m so scared for my brother.”

I was stunned. How could someone as vibrant as Lucian become what Aysel was describing? I recognized the terror she was feeling. The fear for family. It was something that I could definitely relate to. But it was also something I’d never thought I would see in someone like Aysel.

“The way you’re describing Lucian, the fact that he’s acting like a puppet,” I said. “Do you realize that that’s what your brother did to *me*? Do you realize that that’s what you wanted to do to Greyson when you tried to force your love on him?”

Aysel looked away again. She didn’t say a word. She looked… *humiliated*.

And we both knew it was what she deserved.

I realized that perhaps I did believe Aysel. That all she wanted was to save her brother by getting rid of Seluna. If we really were after the same thing, then maybe it would be a good idea to team up.

In a moment of sympathy that would infuriate Artemis, but actually defined who I was as a person, I asked Aysel, “Would you like a mocha?”

Aysel had such a tired expression on her face. She heaved a sigh, her eyes appearing drained of all emotion before she gave a reluctant smile. She gave a small nod.

“I’d like that,” she whispered.

I opened the door, ready to leave. In that moment, I saw Dani walk down the stairs, and I felt a strange tingling at the back of my neck, just as Dani lost her footing.

*Shit!*

“Dani!” I called, rushing to her as she started to stumble down the last of the stairs. I reached for her, grabbing her to help her sit up. My heart pounded. She was panting as she looked up at me.

“Did you feel that, Cali?” she whispered shakily. “Something bad is coming.”

# Episode 2728

“Cali, what happened?” Greyson called out as he, Artemis, and Marta rushed over to me. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“Dani, are *you* okay?” I asked her quietly.

But Dani didn’t look okay. Her eyes were wide and scared, and she gripped my arm tightly. “Cali, did you feel that, too?”

“I—I don’t know,” I stammered. I could still feel a faint prickle on the back of my neck, but I tried to ignore it. “I think maybe we’re just tired, Dani. We’re both stressed out. There’s been a lot going on, and we’ve really been through it these past few days…”

“But you *did* feel something, right?” she asked again, with growing urgency.

And as much as I wanted to explain it away, she was right. I *had* felt something. Right before Dani had fallen, I’d felt a tingling sensation at the base of my neck. It wasn’t anything I’d experienced before, and I knew—though I wasn’t sure how—that it was telling me something terrible was about to happen. But… no. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe it had just been my instincts warning me that Dani had lost her footing on the stairs and was about to fall. Maybe there was another explanation.

“You both should sit down,” Marta said, looking at us warily. “You’re both looking really pale.”

She helped Dani to her feet and put an arm around her shoulders.

I followed them into the living room and sat next to Dani on the couch.

My mom walked in with a steaming cup of mocha. “I thought this might help a bit,” she said, handing the mug to Dani.

Dani accepted it with a quiet thanks, and Mom sat down on her other side.

“Okay, so I want you to take a deep breath and explain what you’re talking about,” Marta said, her face still worried. “What did you feel?”

Dani wrapped her hands around her mug and took—as Marta had suggested—a deep breath. “As I was coming down the stairs, I had this horrible feeling. I don’t know how to describe it, but it was this certainty that something awful was happening, somewhere close by. And, I don’t know why, but I felt a strange connection to Cali at that moment, too,” she added, looking over at me.

My stomach tied itself into a painful knot.

“What about you?” Marta asked me.

“The feeling I had wasn’t that strong, but there was definitely a sense of dread,” I said slowly. I’d learned that I should listen to my instincts. After all, hadn’t I known that Xavier was in trouble? “I had a weird feeling right before Dani fell. I don’t know how to explain it really. I just sort of, felt it.”

Both Marta and my mom looked troubled at this. That wasn’t very helpful.

“I don’t like the sound of this,” Marta said.

“Me neither,” Mom agreed. “Because if you two girls are connected, there’s really only one thing you have in common: being possessed by Seluna.”

Exactly what I was afraid of. Fuck.

“But why was Dani’s feeling so much stronger than Cali’s then?” Lola asked, looking confused. “Was it because she was possessed more recently?”

“Maybe,” Marta said. “Or because of her powers. Dani’s ability is to enhance or to magnify magic. Maybe her abilities are allowing her to feel these things more strongly than Cali feels them.”

“Or maybe they’re just both dealing with the after-effects of being possessed,” Artemis said. “It’s no picnic.”

“Did you feel these types of aftershocks after you were possessed by Letifer?” Greyson asked, turning to Artemis.

She frowned, thinking hard. “I didn’t, but Letifer was a warlock, so that might have made things different.”

“Yeah, and Seluna is a whole-ass demon,” Lola added.

“Maybe she’s still using her magic to connect you two.”

Everyone looked over in surprise. Aysel was standing in the doorway, looking in on the scene.

“Who let her out of her room?” Greyson growled, looking around.

“I let myself out,” she said. “I heard the commotion, and I came to see if Cali was okay. I still have my guard with me,” she added, gesturing toward Zainab, who’d just sprinted over, looking frazzled.

“*Zainab*,” Greyson started, sounding dangerous, but I cut him off.

“Hang on,” I said. “Maybe Aysel can help.”

“Cali, listen to yourself. Are you serious?” Lola asked, obviously shocked.

“I know, I know, but think about it,” I reasoned. “She’s spent the most time in Seluna’s presence, and she’s actually studied her with Lucian.”

“I just want to make it clear that I’m not fully convinced Seluna is what you think she is—some kind of demon in disguise. But she’s definitely got some strange powers for a goddess,” Aysel said. “And she’s doing something to Lucian. I don’t know how, but she’s affecting his mental well-being. He’s like that king in *Lord of the Rings* who was all old and cobwebby.”

I stared at her. “Wait, sorry, *who*?”

Lola looked shocked. “You’ve never seen *Lord of the Rings*? I thought we had a marathon once.”

“Yeah, and I fell asleep,” I said.

“I know who that is!” my dad exclaimed, looking excited. “I get that reference!”

“What I mean,” Aysel went on, rolling her eyes, “is that the king was made into this sputtering shell of a person because he was so completely possessed by this darkness.”

“And that’s what you think is happening to your brother?” I asked, trying to fit all the pieces together.

“I don’t know,” Aysel said, looking miserable, “but maybe. I mean, she possessed you, didn’t she? And Dani. If she’s capable of that, but what else is she capable of? Look what she’s doing to Lucian. And if she’s capable of getting into someone’s mind without actually possessing them, then maybe that’s what she’s doing to you two again.”

This announcement was met with silence as everyone in the room took in its implications. I was shaken by the idea. *Could* Seluna be doing something to me without my noticing? Could she be affecting my mind? I had felt something strange happen, but… maybe Artemis was right. Maybe it was just some residual effect from being possessed. Like possession PTSD.

If I had to choose, I’d rather believe Artemis’s theory. And I had reason to—after all, besides Dani, she was the only other person in the room who’d been possessed. Ravi might have some insight too, but he wasn’t around at the moment.

But then again, even Artemis had said that she hadn’t felt the intense aftershocks of possession that Dani and I were reporting. So maybe it was a different situation altogether.

“Hey all,” Torin said gravely, walking back into the room. Big Mac trailed behind him, looking very rumpled and very, very grumpy. It looked like she’d been in bed thirty seconds ago and would very much like to return. Torin must have pulled her out of bed for this—and taken his life in his hands in the process.

“I’m glad you’re here, Big Mac,” Greyson said.

“That makes one of us,” she grumbled. “What’s going on?”

“We’re not sure. Something’s going on with Cali and Dani. Given they were both possessed not too long ago, there’s some worry that Seluna is somehow still controlling them,” Greyson explained.

Big Mac heaved a gusty sigh. “I wish we could just go *one* damn day without someone in this house getting cursed or possessed or whatever else you all get up to… I would like to get one good night’s sleep.”

I tried to look apologetic, but Big Mac wasn’t paying me any attention. She was being a little dramatic, yes, but also pretty accurate. I imagined she felt a little overwhelmed by the needs of the pack, and overworked by the all the messes we managed to get ourselves into.

“Let me have a look at you both,” Big Mac said, dropping to her knees in front of the couch so she could look at Dani and me closely.

“Thank you,” I said quietly, but Big Mac shushed me irritably and closed her eyes.

She took my hand, then Dani’s hand, then lowered her head. She muttered something low and musical, almost like a song. I waited for something to happen, trying to be patient, knowing I shouldn’t interrupt.

In my peripheral vision, I eyed Dani, who was hyper-focused on Big Mac, waiting.

The room was quiet as a tomb as Big Mac spoke, her voice the only noise as everyone else looked on. I could feel the weight of their eyes on me as I sat, but I resisted the urge to look around.

Finally, after a long moment, Big Mac opened her eyes with a sigh. She hummed thoughtfully as she squinted down at Dani’s and my hands. It looked like she was trying to decide something.

My heart was thumping hard in my chest, and—as much as I knew I needed to give her time to figure it out—I couldn’t wait any longer.

“So?” I asked urgently. “Is Seluna still controlling us?”

# Episode 2729

**Greyson**

Big Mac was taking so long to answer Cali’s question that I stepped forward, ready to repeat it, but before I could, she looked up.

“Nope, you’re both fine,” she said shortly. “I can sense no other presence in either of you.”

I let out a huge sigh of relief. I’d had enough possession to last me a lifetime.

Cali smiled and glanced over at Dani. “I thought so. It must just be stress then.”

I shook my head. “But… both you and Dani felt something, didn’t you? I mean, I don’t *want* this to be anything, but it does feel like there’s some kind of connection.”

I hoped to hell I was just being paranoid—which would be understandable, after everything that had happened—but I wasn’t certain.

But Cali waved my concerns away with an airy hand. “Really, I’m fine. I don’t know that I felt anything. I think both of us,” she said, gesturing to Dani, “are just still shaken up, but I’m okay.”

She smiled at me, and I tried to smile back, but I didn’t feel as certain as Cali sounded.

“Well, it’s great that you’re not being controlled by Seluna… yet,” Aysel said from the doorway.

“Thank you?” Cali asked.

I turned, glowering at Aysel. “You need to stop trying to scare everyone. We already agreed to help you with Seluna. You don’t need to fear-monger to get people on your side.”

Aysel shrugged.

I shook my head, irritated. “Zainab, take her back to the room. And keep her there this time.”

For a moment Aysel looked like she was about to protest, but, catching sight of my glare, she shut her mouth and turned back toward the hall.

With the princess taken care of, I stepped toward Cali just as she stood from the couch.

“How are you feeling?” I asked her quietly.

“I feel fine,” she said automatically. Then she thought for a moment. “Just a little… uneasy.”

“Of course, love.”

“I don’t like that Seluna is still out there as a threat to all of us.” Cali glanced around the living room. “But at least she’s not residing in Dani or me. At least she’s not controlling anyone in the pack house.”

“That’s true,” I agreed. “We can all be grateful for that.” I leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her forehead, then wrapped my arms around her, pulling her close. “And I’m grateful that you’re here, and that you’re okay.”

“Me too,” Cali said quietly.

“Kira!” Orla said to the witch, who’d just appeared in the doorway. “How’s Xavier?”

Kira stepped into the living room. “I was just sitting with him. I think he’s going to be okay.”

Cali looked anxious. “I should go up and be with him. I want to be there when he wakes up.”

I was reluctant to let her go, but I thought of the conversation we’d had about how Cali didn’t want to be forced to choose between my brother and me. I’d told her I understood, and this was where the rubber met the road. I wanted her to know that I supported her, so I let go of her hand.

I dropped another kiss on the top of her hair. “He’s going to be all right,” I said.

She smiled at me, though it wasn’t very convincing, and headed upstairs to Xavier’s room.

I looked around with a sigh. I had Alpha duties to take care of, so I focused my mind on the pack. I needed to talk to Rishika about setting up a schedule to keep a patrol going along the perimeter of our land. And I needed to check in on what LIPS was up to. How close they were getting, and if it looked like they were planning on sticking around. And I needed to update her—and a few others—about what we’d learned about Lucian and Seluna.

I glanced out the doorway of the living room toward the stairs. I knew I needed to speak with Aysel. I needed more information—the kind that only she could provide—but I was deeply reluctant to ask for it.

But I knew I had to get it over with, so I headed into the hallway. I knocked once on the door of the side room, then pushed it open. She was sitting inside, perched primly in a wing chair, acting for all the world like the princess she believed she was, even in this unfamiliar place.

“Come in,” she said generously.

I rolled my eyes but stepped in and dropped into the other chair. “Okay. Let’s hear it.”

“Hear what?”

I gritted my teeth. “The reason you’re really here, Aysel. You’re going to tell me everything you know.”

She looked at me for a moment, then leaned toward me, a seductive smile playing on her lips. “Of course. For you, Greyson Evers, *anything*.”

“Knock it off,” I said. “I’m not interested in playing any of your games.”

“This isn’t a game to me,” she said, her eyes flashing. “It never has been.”

I frowned at this. I felt like she’d started talking in riddles. I’d assumed her come-ons and overt flirtation had been part of the bigger plan to separate me from Cali, so Seluna could possess her. Had I misjudged that?

“What do you mean?” I asked warily.

She shrugged and leaned back gracefully in her chair. “I think I’ve always been very honest with you. About how attracted I am to you.” Her eyes ranged over me, and I saw they had a possessive look in them. “That hasn’t changed, Greyson. You’re a strong Alpha who takes care of those under his care. That’s always been very attractive to me.”

I didn’t like the sound of this at all. “I’m going to ask you this one more time, Aysel, and I want you to come clean.”

“Ask me anything,” she purred.

“Do you have any ulterior motives here?”

Aysel laughed. “I’m not trying to manipulate you into leaving Cali, if that’s what you’re asking. At least,” she clarified, “not right now. What I told you was the truth. Right now, my goal is to save my brother from Seluna.”

“If that’s really the case, then you’ll tell me everything you know about Vanguard security,” I said.

Aysel frowned, looking uncertain for the first time. It was clear she hadn’t anticipated having to give up so many Vanguard secrets.

“Just because I want to save my brother, that doesn’t mean I want to betray the Vanguards. I’m still loyal to my pack.”

I shook my head. “If you’re not willing to help me understand the Vanguard palace, then we won’t be able to get rid of Seluna. Which means we won’t be of much help to you.”

Aysel thought about this. “If and when you need to get into the palace, I will help you. But I’m not going to give up any of those secrets right now.”

I took a deep breath, trying not to let my frustration overwhelm me. It was clear this was a dead end, so I moved on. “What’s phase two?”

She swallowed hard, looking uncharacteristically uncertain. “I didn’t hear much about it. Just that everything Seluna is doing to the house is apparently in preparation for it. She seems to want to gather power so she can enact whatever it is. She spends half the day meditating—or so she claims—in her room. The other half of the day, she’s bossing everyone around and rearranging every piece of furniture in the place.” Aysel’s tone took on a bitter note. “She changed the moon room completely. Decorated it with these *hideous* statues.”

I studied the woman closely. “What did you say to Seluna that pissed her off so much?”

She shrugged. “Nothing really. “I just suggested we go with a more sophisticated theme in the moon room, and move her tacky little statues to the basement crawl space, where they absolutely belong, and she freaked out! She blasted me with a fire ball!”

I tried to resist rolling my eyes. It wasn’t hard to imagine someone with Aysel’s prickly personality getting on the wrong side of a powerful demon. The most absurd part—of course—was that it had all happened over decorating.

There was a knock at the door, and I looked up, relieved. I was getting sick of listening to Aysel’s bratty whining.

“Come in,” I called.

Rishika pushed the door open and stepped into the room. “This just came.”

She held out a thick envelope of heavy linen cardstock.

“What is it?” I asked, eyeing it carefully.

“No idea. One of the Vanguards just dropped it off,” she said, her gaze sliding toward Aysel.

I took the envelope and broke the golden wax seal on the back, then slid out the thick paper inside. My eyes widened with shock as I read.

“What is it?” Rishika asked, craning to read it over my shoulder.

“It’s an invitation,” I said. “To Lucian and Seluna’s Luna ceremony.”

# Episode 2730

**Xavier**

When I woke up, it happened slowly. My body was one big ache, and I groaned a little as I opened my eyes.

My room swam into focus, which confused me even more. I was home? How had I gotten here? What had happened to me? I waited for a long moment, letting the pieces of the puzzle settle slowly into place. It came in snatches, like remembering a movie scene by scene. I’d lost control of my wolf… because I’d wanted to find Ava. I’d shifted in my car! That memory was clear as day, but I still couldn’t believe it had actually happened.

My poor car. It must have been totaled. *Another* ruined car.

“Hey,” came a soft voice.

My heart lifted as Cali leaned over me and a smile lit her beautiful face.

“You’re awake.”

“I’m awake.” I tried to sit up, but my whole body bellowed in protest.

“Hey, take it easy,” she said, putting a hand on my shoulder. “You’re still healing, Xavier. You need to go slow.”

“I’m okay,” I muttered. “I just want to get up.”

She rolled her eyes at my stubbornness, but she slipped her hands under my arms and helped me sit up, leaning me back to rest against the headboard.

When my head had stopped spinning from the pain of moving, I looked around my room in wonder. “How did I get back here?”

“We brought you back,” Cali said.

“How did you find me?” I asked, still feeling confused.

The color left Cali’s face as she answered. “Greyson and I went out looking for you. I thought we weren’t going to find you,” she said, her voice catching. “You were really hurt from the car accident. Healing, but really hurt.”

I could see the concern all over her face. “I’m going to be fine, Cali,” I said quickly, alarmed at the terrified look on her face. “You know I am. Like you said, I’m healing.”

But Cali still looked worried as she took my hand.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said, shaking her head.

I didn’t buy this. “I can tell that there’s something you’re not telling me. Even without the mind link, I can read your face.” Cali smiled weakly at this. “What happened? Tell me what’s going on.”  
 She took a deep breath. “When we found you, Xavier, you weren’t alone.”

My stomach dropped. “Was Ava with me?” I asked, trying to remember for myself.

She shook her head. “No, it wasn’t her. Ava hasn’t come back to the house yet.”

This surprised me, and my stomach twisted with worry. But as I thought it through, I supposed it made sense. She was probably still with Knox. My wolf flared up at this suggestion—protective as hell—but I pushed him back down. I didn’t have time to deal with that now. “Okay, so who was with me?”

“Aysel,” Cali said.

“*Really?*” I was shocked. “Aysel? Why?”

“She needed help. She’s here now, at the pack house.”

I stared at Cali in disbelief. “Are you kidding me?”

Cali shook her head. “She came to us. She wants help getting rid of Seluna. Seluna is really freaking her out. I don’t think Aysel thinks she’s a demon, but she does think she’s exerting some kind of control over Lucian. Aysel and Seluna got into some kind of a fight, and Seluna attacked her,” Cali explained.

“Whoa.” I could feel my mood growing dark. Aysel was here at the pack house because Seluna had freaked her out and had driven her away? That wasn’t good. At all. But, as I listened to the story of what had happened, I had to agree that my brother had made the right move, letting Aysel seek shelter with us.

“And Greyson’s talking to her about everything?” I asked.

Cali nodded.

“Everything she knows?” I asked again.

“I guess.” Cali shrugged. “That was the idea.”

“Well, that’s something. We’re going to need as much information as we can get if we’re going to have any chance to make a move against Seluna and the Vanguards. But,” I went on, “there’s another question we have to answer: can we trust Aysel to tell Greyson the truth?”

“No, I guess we can’t completely trust her,” Cali admitted. She shook her head. “But I don’t want to talk about Aysel right now. I’m just happy you’re okay, and that you’re awake.”

She reached out and ran her fingers gently down my cheek. With speed that shocked even me, I caught her hand. I turned it over, and when I kissed the center of her palm, I heard her draw in a quick breath.

“I was so scared,” she whispered. “When we found the car, and you weren’t in it.”

I looked into her eyes. “I’m sorry I scared you, but I’m here now, and I’m okay.”

She nodded and leaned toward me, wrapping her arms around me. I smiled as she hugged me—I just loved the feel of her. I pulled her closer, and she toppled forward, falling onto the bed.

“Xavier!” she protested, through laughter. “*Stop!* You’re still healing!”

“I’m feeling much better already,” I murmured, tracing a finger down the curve of her cheek, “but I’d feel even better if you were closer. I think it would make me heal even faster.”

“That can’t be true,” she said, laughing.

I felt myself smile with her. I loved the sound of her laughter.

She looked into my eyes. “It’s funny, I’ve been worried about it, but now I’m sure that our mate bond is as strong as ever, because when you were hurt, I knew it. I could feel it.”

I nodded, the smile sliding from my face. “I already knew our bond was still intact. There’s nothing that could break what’s between us, Cali. There’s no magic in the world that could do that.”

She smiled at me and leaned in to press her lips to mine. The kiss was gentle, but I eased her mouth open with mine. Feeling her against me was exactly what I needed. I felt the urge to pull her close, roll her under me, and take it a hell of a lot further.

But before I could do any of that, the door opened. We jerked apart with a start and looked at Greyson, standing in the doorway. Of fucking course.

Well, this was awkward.

Cali gave a little squeak of surprise and scrambled off the bed, her face flushing hot pink with embarrassment.

Greyson’s body was stiff with tension as he cleared his throat, and he didn’t make any eye contact as he spoke. “We got an invitation from the Vanguards.”

“An invitation? For what?” I asked, genuinely surprised. “What the hell is Lucian inviting us to this time? And how are we *still* on the guest list? Can we just return to sender?”

Greyson held out a thick envelope with a broken wax seal. “It’s for his Luna ceremony with Seluna. It’s tonight. Formal dress required.”

“Are you kidding me?” Cali demanded, grabbing the invitation and pulling the card from the envelope. She leaned over so we could both read it. “They can’t be serious,” she said, her eyes scanning the loopy calligraphy. “What the hell is this?”

“We’re obviously saying no,” I said, looking up at Greyson.

He nodded. “Obviously.”

“But what about Aysel?” Cali asked, her eyes still on the invitation.

“What about her?” I asked.

She looked up. “Wouldn’t it be weird if she didn’t go to her own brother’s Luna ceremony?”

Greyson shrugged. “I don’t know. As far as I’m aware, the Vanguards don’t know Aysel is here with us. Not yet, anyway. So that’s not an issue.”

“Look at this,” I said, tipping the envelope so a small card spilled out. It was an RSVP card, embossed with gold lettering. I read it through and gave a bark of laughter.

“What is it?” Cali asked, leaning over.

“They don’t even give an option of saying no,” I said, showing her the card. “It only has a checkbox for yes.”

Cali rolled her eyes. “They probably can’t even imagine anyone rejecting their invitation. Including ‘no’ probably didn’t even occur to them. They’re such narcissists.”

Greyson took the card from my hand and looked at it thoughtfully. “I don’t think we should even reply.”

“Really?” Cali asked. She thought about this for a moment. “I’m just worried. You know how touchy Lucian is. I just worry that they’ll take it badly if we just ignore them, and an offended Vanguard pack is not what we need right now. At all.”

I looked over the invitation again. “It’s so strange that they’d even think this could be interpreted as anything other than a threat.”

Cali looked over at me quickly, her face anxious. “What do you mean?”

I shrugged. “Think about it. It’s Lucian we’re talking about here. And look at that RSVP card. Lucian might not give us a choice. He might force us to go.”

# Episode 2731

*Lucian might not give us a choice. He might force us to go.*

A thrill of terror shivered through me at Xavier’s words. “Do you really think Lucian can force us to go to this Luna ceremony? How could he do that?”

Xavier shrugged. “I don’t know.” He looked down at the RSVP card in his hand. “I guess they could try to use force. They could bring their whole pack here, but they have to know we’d fight. They know we have more witches than they do. I wonder if he’s factored that into his thinking.”

I felt my anxiety spike. “I don’t think he has.”

Xaiver looked at me. “What do you mean? Why wouldn’t he?”

“I don’t think either of you understand how *truly* powerful Seluna is.” I thought back to the power I’d felt as she’d absorbed my *due destini* magic, and I shuddered at the memory of it.

“Still, though—” Xavier started.

“Stop, man. You’re not helping. Can’t you see you’re freaking her out?” Greyson said, stepping forward. He looked into my eyes. “We won’t let you be taken back into the palace. I promise. If we have to, we’ll send you to the Fae world to keep you safe, like we were planning on doing before.”

I nodded, my heart still pounding with fear. I trusted my mates, and I knew they’d do everything in their power to protect me, but still, I couldn’t help but feel scared. I was still recovering from being *possessed*, for crying out loud, and I remembered very clearly what it was like to be at the mercy of Seluna’s vast power. And if Seluna was able to haunt my dreams even now, just as a memory, how would I react if I were to come face-to-face with her?

I bit my lip, thinking hard. Maybe it would be best if I went to the Fae world anyway, just to be safe. Before Lucian tried anything. But even if I did try to disappear, there was no guarantee that the effects of possession would go away—especially if they were all in my head. And I didn’t want to be apart from my mates. Not now, when the mind link was so wonky and making me feel so vulnerable.

“Cali?” Greyson said quietly.

I looked up at him, forcing a smile. “I’m fine. I’ll be fine. I’m just going to go get ready for the day,” I said brightly, then hurried out of the room.

I wanted to get away from both of them, just in case I broke down. In my own room, I closed the door and headed for the bathroom. I splashed cool water on my face a took a deep breath, trying to control the rapid beat of my heart.

Somewhere above me a pipe rattled, and the sound was so loud in the quiet bathroom that I jumped. Maybe I shouldn’t be alone right now. If I let myself be alone, I’d just think of Seluna and all the horrible things she’d done, and the things she’d made me do when she’d possessed my body. No, I needed to find some company.

I hurried to Lola’s door and knocked.

Lola looked surprised when she opened it. “Hey, Cali. What’s going on? Are you okay?”

I looked over Lola’s shoulder into the room. Jay was in there lounging on the bed, but he sat up when he saw me. Jay had always been good at reading a room, and—with one look at my face—he got to his feet.

“I think I’ll go get something to eat,” he murmured, and slid out the door. But before he disappeared, he put a hand on my shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze.

“Come on in,” Lola said, standing aside.

I stepped into the room and flopped down onto Lola’s bed. I grabbed one of her pillows and hugged it tight—apparently, I needed the comfort.

Lola sat beside me, and her gaze ranged over my face. “So, what’s going on? I mean, other than demons.”

I heaved a sigh and lay back, staring at the ceiling. “I’m a mess, Lola.”

“Are you?”

I nodded. “I just feel so scared and anxious and unsure, but I don’t want to show it in front of Xavier and Greyson.”

“Yeah.” Lola sighed. “I figured you’d be dealing with a lot right now. I wanted to talk to you about it before, but I didn’t want to pressure you into talking about anything you weren’t comfortable with.”

I looked over at her, guilt washing over me. On top of everything else, had I been being a bad friend to Lola? *Again?* I thought back to the last fight we’d had, where Lola had said that she felt like we were drifting apart.

“I trust you with everything. You’re like a sister to me, Lola. You know that, right?” I asked anxiously.

Lola smiled. “Cali, I didn’t mean to make you feel bad. You don’t have to talk to me about anything. You were literally *possessed by a demon*. I’m not mad that you haven’t been making time for a one-on-one chat. You’ve had a lot going on.”

I smiled with relief and felt my shoulders relax. “Yeah, well, you know what they say: being possessed by a demon really takes a lot out of a girl.”

Lola laughed. “They do say that.”

I laughed too. It felt good. I was glad I’d come to talk to Lola. I already felt better. In a world that seemed so strange and unknowable, it felt like the most natural thing in the world to be here, talking with my best friend about life. She always knew how to get me to smile, even in the shittiest situations.

I flipped around on the bed and kicked my legs up, so they rested against the wall. “I don’t want to talk about any more weird stuff. We do enough of that as is.”

“Yeah, we do talk about a lot of weird shit,” Lola agreed. “Okay, so what *do* you want to talk about?”

“I want to focus on something else.” I looked over at her. “What’s going on with you?”

Lola looked taken aback, like my question had somehow surprised her. “Oh,” she said. “We don’t have to talk about me. I’m not important right now. Everything that’s going on with Seluna is much more important.”

Even hearing her say the name made me wince.

“No,” I said, suppressing a shudder. “I really don’t want to talk about any of that. It’s just too hard for me right now. It’s still so fresh. No, the best thing for me right now is to distract myself from all of that.”

Lola nodded, her face grave. “I get that. Okay.” She thought hard. “Well, for something *completely* different from that… I’m still dealing with all the college drama.”

“With your dads?” I asked, looking over at her.

“Yeah.” She sighed, looking worried. “They still think I’m going, and I keep dodging their questions, but I don’t know how much longer I’m going to be able to keep it up.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure when I check in with them for the holidays, they’re going to bombard me with a zillion questions about school, and I’m fairly certain it’s just a matter of time before I get caught in a lie. I mean, I’m a good liar, but I’m only human.”

I gave her a look.

“Okay, I’m *not* human, but you know what I mean!” she said. “I’m bound to make a mistake at some point. I can’t even remember if I told them I was taking sociology or psychology, and it’s not like I can just ask them which one it was. So anyway,” she said, sitting back on the pillows, “that’s a fun fight to look forward to.”

I laughed. “That sounds bad.”

“You sound really broken up about it,” Lola said sourly.

“Maybe there’s something we can do. Can we photoshop some pictures of you on campus or something?” I asked. “Maybe I could I help you—you know, back you up if your dads ask me anything.”

But Lola shook her head. “No, I don’t want to get you involved in this.”

“Lola, it’s no problem—”

“I don’t want to put any pressure on you, Cali. You have enough going on. No.” She shook her head. “I’m distracting you with my mess, but this is my mess, and I have to figure out how to deal with it. I’m not even sure how it started. I just kept making up all these lies that felt really small, but when you start piling them on top of each other, it turns out they’re actually pretty huge.”

I thought for a minute, then sat up. “Wait, I have an idea, but you have to promise to really consider it. You can’t just say no right off the bat, okay?’

Lola narrowed her eyes warily. “This setup is making me nervous.”

“It shouldn’t,” I countered.

“What’s your idea?”

“Well,” I started slowly. “Have you considered, I don’t know, maybe telling them the truth?”

# Episode 2732

**Lola**

Cali had to be shitting me.

“*What?*” I asked, staring at Cali in shock. “Are you kidding me? Tell them the *truth*? That’s an *awful* idea! What are you *thinking*?”

Cali looked taken aback by my reaction, but the only thing that made any sense right now *was* my reaction. “Lola, think about it. What’s the worst that could happen if you told them what was actually going on?”

“Cali,” I said, trying to keep my voice reasonable. “I don’t think you understand what you’re asking me right now. My dads take higher education very, *very* seriously. They both have graduate degrees. If I told them the truth, they could disown me. Like, that’s a very real possibility.”

Cali rolled her eyes and looked me, crossing her arms. “Be serious. Do you really think that’s really a risk?”

“Well I’m not going to test it out!” I said.

We both looked over when there was a knock on the door.

Jay opened the door and poked his head in. “Hey, we’re all being called downstairs for a pack meeting.” He must have sensed the tension, because he frowned and looked between us for a moment. “What’s going on in here? Is everything okay?”

“That depends on what you consider ‘okay,’” I muttered.

Cali took a deep breath. “Lola’s freaking out because I suggested she tell her dads the truth about the whole college situation—”

“Which I am absolutely *not* doing,” I said firmly. “There is *no* way. I just can’t.”

Jay’s expression went strange. Like he wanted to say something but was holding himself back.  
 “What?” I asked him. “Just say what you have to say, Jay.”

He sighed, like he was resigned to the worst. “You know your dads love you, Lola. You *could* try telling them the truth. You never know. They might surprise you and be really understanding about it.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing from both of them. They were supposed to be my friends! They were supposed to be on my side.

“Okay, that’s a nice thought, but I really don’t think so. You don’t understand. They really value education. They’re obsessed with it. It’s not like I *want* to keep lying to them,” I said miserably. “I want to tell them the truth. Life would be so much easier if I could tell them the truth, but I just don’t see how I can. There have been so many lies at this point. They’ve just all piled up. For god’s sake, they think I’m in a semester-long feud with my imaginary lab partner!”

“I still think they’ll understand,” Jay said slowly. “You should give them a chance, at least. You don’t know how they’re going to react until you actually tell them.”

I ground my teeth in frustration. “They’re going to blame *you*, you know,” I said, looking at him.

Jay shrugged. “So let them. I’m not worried. I can show them that I love you and encourage you. That I’m here for you and support you. Even if they’re mad at first, they’ll realize that about me eventually.”

I shook my head. “Okay, everyone has to stop. I don’t even know how we started on this. I don’t want to talk about this anymore.” I got to my feet. “Let’s just go to this dumb pack meeting already.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Cali and Jay exchange a speaking look, and something told me they wanted to keep talking about this, so I was relieved when they both followed me out the door without saying anything more.

I fumed as I stomped down the stairs. I couldn’t believe they’d ganged up on me like that. I knew that my issues with school and my dads seemed like small potatoes when we were also talking about a literal demon trying to possess the bodies of the living, but it didn’t mean that what was going on with me wasn’t important. I knew it wasn’t demonic possession or anything, but it was still my life, and it was important to me.

Downstairs, Jay reached for my arm, stopping me just before we got to the living room, where the pack had gathered.

“What?” I snapped, rounding on him.

“I’m sorry, babe. I didn’t mean to upset you. I just know you’ve been really stressed about this thing with your dads and all the lying, and I hate to see you like that,” he said. “I know you’re trying to ignore it and just push it down because there’s other stuff going on with the pack, but it’s a lot to deal with on your own. I’m always here for you. No matter what. You know that, right?”

I sighed, my anger evaporating in an instant. “I know,” I said quietly, and let Jay pull me into a tight hug.

“And after all,” he added, “you really only missed a semester. You could make that up, easy. You wouldn’t have any problem with that. You’re really smart, Lola.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Yeah, that’s a possibility.”

Jay leaned back and cupped my cheeks with his hands. “Your dads love you. You know they’d never actually disown you. For anything you did.”

I sighed.

Jay looked stern. “I want to hear you acknowledge that you know your dads love you.”

I rolled my eyes. “I know my dads love me.”

Jay smiled and pressed a quick kiss to my lips. It was impossible to stay annoyed with him. There was just something between us that always pulled me back. Jay understood me in a way that I didn’t even think I understood myself. I was so lucky to have him in my life.

“I know what you’re saying is right—and Cali, too, but don’t tell her that.”

Jay smiled. “Promise.”

If there was anyone who could talk me down and stop me from spiraling into a total anxiety black hole, it was Jay. With him, I always believed everything was going to work out.

I slipped my hand into his, and together we walked into the living room.

“Thanks for coming, everyone,” Greyson said. “Everyone’s here, except Zainab, and she’s still guarding the room where we’re keeping Aysel.”

“What’s going on?” Sage asked.

Greyson looked grim. “We got an invitation to Lucian and Seluna’s Luna ceremony.”

There was a dramatic gasp from someone in the back and some general murmuring, but my eyes shot to Cali. She was so jumpy about Seluna; I wondered if this had upset her. But Cali was watching Greyson with a carefully neutral expression that I suspected wasn’t completely natural. I remembered what she’d said about not wanting to break down in front of her mates, and I wondered if she was just putting on a brave face.

“Of course we won’t be going,” Greyson went on.

“That’s too bad,” Artemis added. “It might have been a good chance to infiltrate and get the jump on Seluna.”

Rishika and Sage nodded.

“And they might have had some good food,” added Ravi.

“No. We need to be smart about this,” Xavier said, stepping forward. He looked around at the pack. “If we’re going to go after Seluna, we need as much information as possible. We don’t know anything about this Luna ceremony, so we’d be going in blind. We can’t do that. It’s a recipe for disaster.”

“What are we going to do?” I asked curiously.

“We’re going to play defense for this one,” Greyson said. “We’re going to double the guard around our perimeter.”

“You think they’d really come here?” Rishika asked.

“I’m not sure,” Greyson admitted. “But we don’t want to risk them trying to attack us when we don’t show up at the ceremony. We’re going to have to do something about Seluna eventually, but my first priority is making sure everyone stays safe.”

He looked over at Cali and gave her a reassuring smile. She returned it, but her eyes stayed wide and scared.

“I’m going to remind you all again not to shift—not even when you’re on patrol.” Everyone groaned at this. “I know, I know, but in addition to the possible threat from the Vanguards, LIPS is still out there, patrolling.”

“Oh god, those LIPS people are a real pain in the ass, aren’t they?” I said.

“HEY!” came a yell from the hallway. It had to be Zainab—everyone else was in the living room.

Everyone jumped to their feet and rushed into the foyer. Zainab was at the window, peering out.

“What up?” Sage asked her.

Zainab pointed through the glass. “There’s a big group of people gathering out there in the woods.”

“Fuck,” Greyson swore, pushing through the pack to get to the window. “That must be the Vanguards.”

“What are they doing here?” Cali asked, her voice high and tight with tension.

“They must have anticipated that we’d reject their invitation,” Greyson said grimly. “That’s probably why they sent it in the first place. Just an excuse to escalate shit.”

“Well,” Xavier snapped, “if it’s a fight they want, then it’s a fucking fight they’re going to get.”

# Episode 2733

**Greyson**

I felt the tension rise as the pack started to talk among themselves.

“Is it really the Vanguards?” Ravi asked, pressing closer to the glass. “What the hell?”

“Isn’t Big Mac’s shield still up?” Sage said, sounding scared.

“I think we have to prepare for the worst—” someone started.

“Hang on, everyone,” I said loudly, before things could go off the rails even more. “Everyone needs to take a breath and get it the hell together. I’m going to head out there greet them, see what’s up. I don’t want to cause a fight if we don’t have to.”

There was some mutinous muttering in response to this—apparently there were some in the pack who were itching for a fight—and I saw Xavier scowling at me.

“I’m coming with you,” he said coldly.

I hesitated on this. “You sure?” I finally said. “You’re still recovering, right?”

His hackles rose immediately. “I’m fine, but thanks for being so concerned,” he said, his voice icy. “I’m coming. Besides, you don’t know what you’re walking into out there. You might need backup.”

“Okay,” I conceded. He had a point. I *didn’t* know what I was walking into, and I had to admit I’d feel better walking into a nest of Vanguard wolves with someone covering my back.

I turned to Cali, who looked pale and scared. “I want you stay here, okay? Rishika, keep an eye on her.”

Rishika nodded. “You got it.”

“We’re going to take care of this,” Xaiver added.

Cali nodded, but her expression was anxious. “I know,” she whispered. “Be careful.”

“Let’s go,” I muttered, and Xavier and I stepped out of the house into the cold December air. The wind bit into us, but I barely noticed.

I got a good look at the group of people at the edge of the woods as we stalked closer to them. What were they up to? They weren’t moving, which seemed strange. Why weren’t they coming any closer? Why weren’t they coming toward the house? Were they waiting for us to get closer so they could ambush us? Were there more of them in the trees?

My eyes were scanning every tiny movement around me—the wind blew the scattered leaves on the ground, and a winter bird took off from a branch above us. I felt tense and keyed up, ready to shift at a moment’s notice. Next to me, Xavier was tense and seemed primed to do the same.

“I’m not seeing anyone I recognize,” Xavier muttered.

I didn’t either, and as we drew closer, I got more confused. A few of the people were dressed in suits, which made no sense at all. I knew the Vanguard pack was bizarrely formal, but why in the world would its members be so dressed up if they’d come here for a battle?

Then one of the women stepped away from the group and toward us, and in an instant, I recognized her. It wasn’t the Vanguards. It was Rhonda from LIPS.

She raised her hand in greeting. “Hello there!” she called brightly.

I didn’t return her smile. “What are you doing on my land?”

“Well, it’s a bit complicated, that is…” Rhonda shot a nervous look at the older man beside her.

I didn’t recognize the man—who was round and pretty short with a shiny bald head—but he stepped toward me with a familiar air, as though we’d met before.

“I’m Richard Wigbert the Third, but you can call me Dick.”

Xavier snorted, but Dick ignored him. I had to restrain a derisive laugh myself.

“I don’t know if Rhonda’s mentioned me already, but I’m the head of LIPS, though I’m usually stationed at the global headquarters. But I’ve been very keen to get over here, of course, so I’m glad to have finally made it.”

“Is that right?” I said warily. “And why were you so *keen* to get here?”

His eyes widened with disbelief. “Well, of course I was interested. Who wouldn’t be, after hearing about the giant wolves reported in this area?”

I tensed as Dick held out his hand, but after a moment, I shook it cautiously.

“Okay, well, I’m still not sure what you’re doing here on my private property,” I said. I had about six inches on Dick, so I towered over him, trying to convey with my words and actions that he and his crew weren’t welcome.

But Dick didn’t seem to get the hint. He laughed jovially. “Yes, yes. I understand your family has been here for a while, so I’m sure this might be a slightly sensitive topic to broach, but we’d like to make you an offer.”

“An offer?” I repeated.

“Yes,” he said smiling. “We’d like to buy your land and turn it into a nature preserve.”

I stared at the guy, shocked into silence. When I looked over at Xaiver, I could see this had caught him by total surprise as well.

What. The. *Hell?*

“And why would we agree to that?” I asked, finally getting my voice back.

“Well, wolves the size of the ones that Rhonda and her team have been seeing haven’t existed in hundreds of years. In fact, most experts had agreed that they’d become extinct. But if they do exist in this area, then it’s our responsibility to preserve the space and do everything in our power to ensure their survival. You might not have seen a wolf up close,” he said with a laughing shake of his head, “but trust me when I tell you that these majestic creatures *need* our protection.”

Xavier cleared his throat, the sound dangerously close to a laugh, and I couldn’t fault him for that. The whole conversation was so completely absurd. These people were here to take our land, in order to protect us.

I glanced at Xavier, who raised his eyebrows. I didn’t need to mind link to know that my brother thought these people were a bunch of dumbasses.

“We’re not looking to sell our land,” I said, looking back at the group.

Dick’s smile slipped a bit, but he hitched it back into place and pulled a business card from his suit pocket. “No need to make any sudden decisions. I encourage you to think it over. And let’s keep in touch.”

I took the card, more to end the conversation than anything else. But my plan was to ignore this completely. I had a lot of other balls in the air, and I didn’t have time to deal with a real estate hustler when I was in the middle of a potential werewolf war.

“Who was it?” Cali asked the moment we walked back into the house.

“It was people from LIPS.” I looked around at the gathered pack. “We need to be extra careful with shifting now that we’ve got LIPS really up our ass. And they apparently have no problems just tromping onto our land, so we need to tighten everything up again.”

The pack groaned, and I could see that they all looked just as annoyed as I felt.

When I turned to Cali, she still looked worried.

“Did Rhonda remember anything?” she asked.

“That’s not something you have to be worried about,” I reassured her. “We just need to keep our heads, be careful out there, and not let anyone shift in the open.”

We all turned when we heard a yell and the slamming of a door. The sound was coming from the hallway, and I sprinted around the corner to see Zainab and Aysel tussling in a doorway.

“Let me out of here!” Aysel screamed. “Don’t make me hurt you!”

Zainab was focusing all her energy on keeping the door shut, and Aysel inside it. “My orders are to contain you,” she grunted.

“I am a *princess*!” Aysel growled. “No one can contain me!” And with a surge of strength, she pushed the door open.

I caught it. “Enough!”

Both women froze and looked up at me.

“Stop this, now,” I said coldly. My eyes flicked to Zainab. “I’ve got this from here. You can go rest.”

She looked relieved as hell. *Thank you*, she mouthed, and took off down the hall before I could change my mind.

“What was that all about?” I asked, turning to Aysel and crossing my arms. “I thought you agreed to stay in there for now.”

Aysel looked flushed and shook her hair away from her face. “I can’t stay locked away, Greyson. Not now!”

I rolled my eyes. I was so over her dramatics. “And what changed in the last ten minutes, since we last had this conversation?”

Her eyes flashed. “Since I heard you received an invitation to the Luna ceremony. Is it true you’re going to turn it down?”

“Of course,” I said. “Why the fuck would we go?”

“Greyson, no—”

“What does it matter?” I asked, feeling exasperated.

Her eyes went wide. “You can’t turn it down! We *have* to go to the Luna ceremony!”

# Episode 2734

I stepped out of the living room just in time to hear Aysel scream.

“You can’t turn it down! We *have* to go to the Luna ceremony!”

My heart stopped as I turned toward the commotion. “There’s absolutely no way that’s happening.”

Greyson was frowning at Aysel. “Why do we have to go?” he asked her.

What the hell? Was he *actually* considering this? Why would he agree with Aysel about going back to the Vanguard palace? It was insane! We’d all agreed that we couldn’t go anywhere near that place. And even the thought of seeing Seluna again made me shiver like I was standing in a freezing wind. There was no way Greyson would say yes to this.

I wanted to mind link with him to know what he was thinking, but even without that option, I could read his face pretty well.

Aysel looked frantic. “Please, listen to me. It’s not a matter of if you want to or not. We have to do this for the good of the packs. We can’t let my brother bond with Seluna. You’re the ones saying she’s a demon. Even if you hate Lucian, think about what that would mean. Not just for the Vanguard pack, but for every pack in the area. It would be a disaster!”

Xavier had joined me in the hallway, and he shrugged at this. “Still sounds like it’s your brother’s problem, not ours. Your brother is the one who wants to be mates with a demon. Not to mention make her the Luna to his Alpha. That’s on him.”

Aysel glared at him. “You said you’d help me. So help me! I’ve answered every damn question you’ve asked. I’m doing my part, and you have to do yours. Please!” She looked over at me, her gaze pleading.

She had clearly marked me as the one most likely to feel bad for her… and she was completely right. I didn’t like Aysel, but she was just looking out for her brother, and it was hard not to feel sympathy when someone was literally pleading with you for help.

Aysel was a piece of work, but she clearly loved her brother. I thought about how much I loved Artemis and Lola, and my parents, and I understood where she was coming from. I would go to any lengths to help them, too.

I turned to Greyson and Xavier. “Maybe we should think about this.”

Greyson looked surprised. “Really?”

“Let’s just think about it, okay?”

“*Please*,” Aysel breathed.

Greyson sighed. “We’re not going to make any final decisions yet.”

This wasn’t an answer, but it seemed to appease Aysel. “Fine. Debate your inevitable fate all you like, but you won’t decline the invitation without talking to me first, right?”

Greyson looked like he was suppressing another sigh. “Fine.”

“Good,” Aysel said, smiling. “Good.” She turned and went back into the room.

“Ravi!” Greyson called.

Ravi stuck his head out of the living room. “What’s up, chief?”

“Stand guard on this door, will you?”

“Sure thing.”

And as Ravi took his position, Greyson put his hand on the small of my back and ushered Xavier and me into the empty dining room.

“What’s going on, Cali?” Greyson asked.

I bit my lip. “I wasn’t even thinking about what would happen to Lucian if he bonded with Seluna. I mean, she’s a demon. It wouldn’t be good. If we can stop him, we should, right?”

Xavier was shaking his head. “That dude is not our responsibility. I don’t care how much Aysel cries, I don’t think we should worry about it.”

Greyson looked thoughtful. “I wonder if becoming Lucian’s Luna would give Seluna some kind of power.”

Xavier and I looked at him in surprise.

“I hadn’t even thought about that,” I said. “But I guess it would make sense. I mean, Seluna didn’t even seem to like Lucian that much. Why would she want to be his Luna if it didn’t give her something she wanted?”

Xavier took this in. “Well that sounds great,” he said wryly. He was always extra sarcastic when he was worried.

“Maybe we should at least try to warn Lucian about what we know,” I suggested.

“Again?” Greyson asked. “How many times can we tell him that his girlfriend’s a demon? He doesn’t seem to care.”

“He doesn’t even believe us,” Xavier pointed out.

That was true, and a problem. I thought about it for a moment. “What if Aysel is the one who tries to talk to him about it?”

“She says she’s tried. I don’t know if it would make that much of a difference if she tried again,” Greyson said. “And we can’t just send her out on missions. We haven’t completely vetted her.”

“I know, but her worry about her brother is real,” I said, shaking my head. “She’s going to want to stop Lucian from doing the Luna ceremony for sure.”

“You know,” Xavier said slowly, “Seluna is going to be vulnerable during the ceremony. And since we were invited, we wouldn’t have to find a way to sneak in if we wanted to get to her.”

“Meaning what?” Greyson asked.

“Meaning that this might be our best shot at killing her,” Xavier said.

That statement settled like a pall over the dining room.

Greyson ran a hand across his eyes. “We can’t get shortsighted here. If we go in thinking we can take her out and ignore just how *crazy* maneuvering inside the Vanguard palace will be, *again*, we’ll be in trouble. There are a lot of moving parts. I want to talk to the witches, make sure I get every perspective.”

“Fine,” Xavier said shortly. “I’m going to go check in with Rishika about the guard shifts.”

“Fine.”

Greyson and Xavier both turned to me.

“Are you going to be okay?” Xavier asked.

“Is all this talk about Seluna upsetting you?” said Greyson.

I gave them a smile I hoped wasn’t shaky. It was rather comforting to see them both so earnest about me. “I’m fine. Thank you both.”

They nodded and headed off. Alone, I wandered into the kitchen. There were multiple cups of mocha lined up on the counter, apparently for anyone who wanted one. I wanted one, so I took a cup with reindeer painted on the side. The mocha was a little cool, so I popped in into the microwave.

Mrs. Smith would have had an aneurysm if she’d seen me microwaving her precious mocha, but I needed the caffeine and the sugar boost, and I needed it hot. There’d already been too much excitement, and it was still very early.

And then there was the weird feeling I’d had beneath my breastbone ever since the invitation had been delivered. It was a strange, dull ache, and it made me feel like something ominous was on the horizon. It was pressure, but it was a slow build. It almost felt like I was gathering power for one of my Fae blasts, but that wasn’t what I was doing. At least, I didn’t *think* it was what I was doing. Maybe it was like ghost pains for Fae magic. Was that a thing?

Without meaning to, I thought back to Dani’s scared face right after she’d fallen, and how she’d insisted that something bad was happening close by. That she could feel it. And I could too. Was that what this was?

I hated to think of anything that awful happening—especially if I didn’t know what it was and couldn’t do anything to control it or understand it—but at this point, I knew better than to dismiss my instincts.

I gave my head a little shake. Maybe this was all just part of the residual effects of Seluna’s possession.

These were all likely possibilities, but there was another thought in my head, and it was stinging like a splinter. No matter what, every possible explanation somehow led back to Seluna.

I gritted my teeth. I hated thinking of her. Apart from the memory of her literally possessing my body, it made me think of the moment when I’d thought Xavier and Greyson were fighting to the death. I knew now that they’d planned it, and that neither of them had actually been in danger, but the memory of it was seared into my brain. And I knew it was what Seluna had wanted.

It made me feel sick to my stomach. If she got her way—if she *did* gain power from this Luna ceremony with Lucian—would she try to hurt my mates again? It was a question I couldn’t answer.

Greyson had once asked me if I’d ever kill someone if it meant protecting someone I loved. At the time I’d said yes. I’d meant it.

A strange feeling began to flow through me. It took me a moment, but I finally realized it was a sense of certainty. I’d made up my mind. And I wasn’t sure why, but I somehow just knew that in the end, it was going to have to be *me* who killed Seluna. With my own two hands.

# Episode 2735

**Xavier**

As I patrolled the perimeter of the property, I found myself glaring at the area where the LIPS people had been standing. They were gone now, of course, and the spot was empty, but I still looked at it, wondering if we should think about putting up a more permanent structure. We couldn’t always rely on Big Mac’s magical shields whenever we needed it. Maybe something like a tall, barbed-wire fence around the property with some of those really intense “KEEP OUT” signs posted every ten feet.

As long as I’d owned the house, I’d never even thought about a fence, as it had never seemed remotely useful. Fences and signs wouldn’t keep out rival packs, which had previously been my only real problem. But now that the pesky humans from LIPS were stomping around my property, maybe it was time to start thinking of options.

I was going to have to remember to talk about it with Greyson later.

A cold wind picked up, blowing around me, and I felt my wolf suddenly perk up. I was confused about what had attracted his attention, but a moment later I understood. A familiar scent traveled on the wind, and I turned to see Ava’s wolf step out of the densest growth of trees behind me.

Seeing her, I felt an immediate sense of overwhelming relief—which confused me. My wolf howled within me. He was yearning to shift and move forward, toward her. I held him back, but it took all my strength and willpower. I hadn’t mentioned it to Cali or Greyson when they’d asked, but I wasn’t fully healed from the accident, and I did still feel a little weakened. But now, with Ava walking toward me, my body felt re-energized.

I scowled. I hated the connection I still had with her, and it was impossible to deny the reality of it. It lived inside me, with or without my consent. But I also noticed that—even annoyed—I couldn’t get myself to feel the intense level of hatred I used to feel for her.

Ava shifted back to her human form and stepped toward me. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“What are you doing?” I snapped, sounding angrier than I actually felt. I was relieved to see her back safe, but also deeply uncomfortable with that feeling, and that made me mad. “The LIPS people were just here. If they see you shifting, it’s over for us.”

She gave me a long look. “I’m not an idiot, Xavier. And you know me, I’m always careful. I smelled the human scent a mile back. I scouted ahead before I came this way.”

Of course she did. Ava was good. “Well, if they come back and see you running around naked, I’m not covering for you. You’re going to have to explain it to them. We don’t want them getting suspicious about us. Don’t get us into deeper shit with these humans, Ava.”

She rolled her eyes. “God, Xavier. I shifted back because I wanted to talk to you, and I thought you’d prefer talking normally over mind linking. I’m sorry if I made you so uncomfortable. I can shift back. It’s your call.”

I gritted my teeth. She was right, and I hated it. Mind linking with a mate was a very intimate thing, and I *didn’t* want to speak to her that way. I didn’t want to be able to mind link with Ava at all, but especially not now, when I wasn’t able to mind link with Cali.

So I changed the subject. “How did your conversation with Knox go?”

She flipped her dark hair over her shoulder, sending a wave of her scent toward me. “I’d forgotten that my cousin is even more stubborn than my brother was. But it was good. It’s been a long time since we’ve seen each other. We had a lot to catch up on.”

My wolf rumbled about the idea of a new unknown wolf in the area, but I kept my face natural as I took this in. “Do you think he’s going to be a permanent resident in the area?”

She shrugged. “There’s no way I can know for sure. It’s still so early.”

My wolf didn’t like this answer. Because if Knox stayed around, would that mean that Ava was going to leave again to spend more time with him, and the other Samara wolves as they came back here to rebuild the pack? That was what I’d been hoping for, but…

But what about my shifting? I could feel my wolf pushing at me, begging to be released. I was tired and still hurting, and maybe that was why I asked my next question.

“Are you going to leave again?” I said abruptly.

Ava eyed me, her gaze curious. “Why are you asking me that? Do you want to know the answer for yourself, or for your wolf?”

“Just answer the damn question, Ava,” I snapped.

She thought for a moment. “Yeah, I am. I don’t know what my long-term plans are, but whatever I do, I’ll check in regularly. I know you’ll need me around to help deal with your shifting problem.”

I gave her a curt nod. I knew she was right, and I did need her help, but I hated that she kept bringing it up.

I tried to conjure up Cali’s beautiful face. Sometimes it helped push down my wolf’s most persistent urges.

“I know you need to figure out what’s happening with the Samara pack,” I said.

“Yeah, I do,” she said, looking over her shoulder in the direction from which she’d come. There was a wistfulness to her voice that I thought I understood.

“I know this is something that’s really important to you,” I started, and Ava turned to look at me. “I know it means a lot to you, the idea of getting your old pack back.”

Her gaze on me was steady, but I saw something like gratitude pass across her gaze. It was a rare moment of mutual understanding, and I was pretty sure we both felt it.

She nodded. “Thank you.” She turned to head back into the woods, but she stopped herself and turned. “Are you okay?”

I frowned. “Why would you ask me that?”

She shook her head. “I—I don’t know. Earlier, I got this horrible feeling. It was like a stomachache or something, but I just knew it had something to do with you. It was like you were hurt, or in some kind of trouble.”

My stomach twisted. This sounded way too similar to what Cali had said to me. It was eerie, but more than that, it was yet another reminder that my mate bond with Ava wasn’t completely gone.

“No, it was nothing,” I said airily.

She looked worried. “Wait, so something *did* happen? What was it?”

“Nothing, I got into a little car accident,” I said, trying to make it sound like nothing more than an annoying fender bender.

“And you’re okay?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” I assured her. Like I would say otherwise in front of her.

“Okay. We’ll, I’m glad you weren’t hurt,” she said. She hesitated, like she wanted to say more, but then she turned back toward the trees. She shifted fluidly and dropped to all fours.

I watched her sprint gracefully into the trees, keeping my eyes on her until she disappeared into the shadows. My wolf yearned to go with her, the desire so strong it felt like a physical ache. But the rest of me—my human, rational side—wanted to go back into the pack house and see Cali. I wanted to hold her in my arms. I wanted to talk to her and look at her and remind myself that she was my one true mate.

So I turned back toward the house—back toward Cali.

As I climbed the porch steps, I saw Jay at the top, sitting on the bench beneath the front window, holding two mugs of coffee.

When he saw me, he held one out to me, taking a sip from the other one.

“Thanks, man,” I said, gratefully taking the cup and taking a long, hot swallow.

“You look like you need it,” Jay noted.

I gave a bark of laughter. “I guess I do.”

Jay looked out at the trees. “There’s been some pretty crazy stuff happening lately, huh?”

I took another drink. “Just another day with the Redwood pack.”

Jay chuckled. “I guess so. Could stand for it to be slightly more boring though, don’t know about you.”

I dropped next to Jay on the bench and wrapped my hands around the mug. “Hey, do you remember some guy named Knox, from the Samara pack?”

Jay made a face. “Yeah, I remember him. And I’m glad as hell that guy isn’t around anymore.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

“He’d be awful to have to deal with right now, with all the other shit we have going on.”

I leaned forward, interested, but also concerned. “Why? What do you know about him?”

# Episode 2736

**Greyson**

I’d looked everywhere in the house, and I couldn’t find Big Mac. It was cold outside, and she wasn’t much for fitness, so I didn’t even bother checking the rest of the grounds. I was getting frustrated and starting to wonder if the witch was hiding from me. She’d been particularly grumpy lately—even for her—and not all that interested in helping us out. Hiding out was a real possibility.

“Hey, Greyson, there you are,” Rishika said, coming up the stairs. “I’ve been looking for you. We need some guidance here.”

“Sure, what’s up?” I asked.

She sighed. “There’s just so much freaking stuff going on. I feel like I’m trying to juggle a hundred chainsaws here. We’ve got too many fires; can you just pick one priority thing for us to handle, and then when that’s taken care of, we’ll move onto something else?”

Up close, I could see that she looked tired and stressed, and I felt bad. I realized I’d been putting a lot of pressure on Rishika as my second in command to organize the rest of the pack. I always had, but it had gotten especially intense since I’d gone to the Vanguard palace to rescue Cali.

“Yeah, we can do that,” I said. “Let’s put LIPS on the backburner. They’re a pain in the ass, but they’re not an immediate threat as long as we’re careful. They’re nosy, but they’re not going to kill anyone, so we shouldn’t worry about them right now.”

“Okay.” She nodded, looking relieved. “That’s good. What’s the plan for Seluna and the rest of the Vanguards?”

“I don’t know yet,” I admitted. “I’m still figuring out what we’re going to do about them, but when I do, you’ll be one of the first to know.”

“Terrific,” she said wryly, and she didn’t look all that pleased with the honor.

I had to admit that I knew how she felt. The Vanguard pack was a whole situation and a half. Figuring out how to deal with it was taking too much time, and I wanted a solution. Needed a solution. Now.

Rishika was a good solider, and she rallied. “I’ll try to think of what we can do too. You’re not alone in this.” She turned to go, then stopped herself and looked back at me. “You know I’ve always got your back, right, Greyson?”

“I do, and I’m grateful for your support, Rishika. You’re pulling a lot of weight around here, and I appreciate it,” I said, and I meant it.

She nodded, smiling. “Hey, also, when I was out on patrol, I saw Xavier talking to Ava out by the tree line. Just thought you should know.”

This information did surprise me. “Ava’s back?”

“Guess so,” Rishika said. “It looks like she took off again, but I overheard Xavier and Jay talking about the Samara pack while they were sitting out on the porch.” She looked grim. “I’m just hoping that’s not going to be another problem we have to deal with.”

I sighed. “Yeah. You and me both. Thanks for letting me know. And if you hear anything else, let me know, would you?”

“Of course,” she said, and disappeared back down the stairs.

I looked after her, irritation bubbling up in my chest. I was annoyed with Xavier for not telling me about Ava immediately, but what else was new with my brother? He kept things to himself, especially where that wolf was concerned.

Frustrated, I ran a hand through my hair and looked around. I needed to do something with the Vanguards and Seluna, and if I couldn’t find Big Mac, maybe I’d be able to find another witch. Like it or not, this pack was lousy with them.

Okorie came to mind, but I still wasn’t really sure about the guy. I’d tried, but I still didn’t have a proper read on him, and I wasn’t ready to trust someone I couldn’t read. So Kira was my pick, and I headed off in search of her.

I knocked on her door, and I was relieved when I heard, “Come in,” from inside.

“Hey, Kira, do you have a second?”

“Hi, Greyson, yeah, come on in. What’s up?” she said. She was sitting on her bed, and she put her book aside as I walked in.   
 “I wondered if you had a second to help me out with this whole Seluna issue,” I explained.

Kira nodded. She looked tried—everyone in the pack did—but she also seemed open to the idea.

“I’ve already started looking into that, actually,” she said, looking unexpectedly interested.

“Really?” I asked. “Can you show me what you found?”

“Sure. Take a look at this.” As Kira grabbed for the book she’d just put aside, I realized she was surrounded by stacks of books, many of them with torn bits of paper in them, marking specific pages. “I was just looking at something…” she muttered.

Watching her, I realized I’d never really spoken to Kira that much one-on-one. As Alpha, it was probably time to say something.

“Thank you for helping out with this,” I said.

She looked up in surprise. “Oh. I mean, yeah, of course.”

“I know you weren’t a huge fan of werewolves when you first got here,” I went on, “but you’ve been a big help to us.”

She shrugged, looking thoughtful. “I owed it to Xavier to help out. For all his help with my own personal vendetta.”

The reminder of the connection between her and Xavier was strange. “So, things are… okay with you two?” I asked awkwardly.

Kira raised her brows, and I got her meaning.

“Yeah, that’s not a conversation you and I are going to have,” I said.

She looked back down at her book. “Oh, yeah, here it is.”

“What is it?” I asked, stepping toward her to look closer.

“I just ran across this passage, and it jumped out at me after what happened at the palace,” she said. “I thought it might be relevant.”

I skimmed the page she was pointing at.

*In Greek mythology, Medusa (guardian, protectress), also called Gorgo, was one of the three monstrous Gorgons, generally described as winged human females living with venomous snakes in place of hair. She is most famous for the ability to use her gaze to turn men to stone.*

I felt a strange tingle on the back of my neck as I looked at the sketches of humans turned into statues. I couldn’t say why, but it felt familiar somehow.

“Why did this stand out to you?” I asked hoarsely, almost scared to hear the answer.

“There are rumors that some supernatural beings are so evil and powerful that they can’t be killed. Not easily, anyway, and not with any known magic.”

“So what do people do? How do they fight them?” I asked.

“Historically, powerful witches and warlocks and Fae would find ways to trap them,” Kira said. “If they were put into a normal prison, there was always a chance they’d find a way to free themselves. So the witches and Fae had to figure out a way to restrain both their movement and their powers.”

There was a knot in the pit of my stomach as I listened to her explanation. I didn’t quite know where this was going, but I did know that I wasn’t going to like it.

Kira looked up at me, her eyes curious. “That statue of Seluna? I’m pretty sure she was trapped in there for a reason.”

“Like a prison?” I asked quietly.

“It’s a possibility,” Kira confirmed.

“Is that kind of thing just for demons, or can anything be trapped in a statue?” I wondered out loud.

Kira thought about this. “I don’t know why not. If it could work on a demon, there’s no reason it couldn’t work on almost anything else,” she went on. “Except for a greater god. Someone with more power. Why do you ask?”

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. “I knew there was something off about Seluna bringing all those statues to the Vanguard palace.”

“Wait, hang on.” Kira held up a hand, looking suddenly pale. “Did you say *statues*? As in plural? More than one statue?”

I nodded grimly. “Yeah, according to Aysel, Seluna’s doing some redecorating around the Vanguard estate, and it starts and ends with a bunch of ugly statues.” I shook my head, fear and frustration cycling through me. “I should have known something was off. It was so absurd, like Seluna was suddenly getting all domestic. Those damn statues must be a bunch of other demons she wants to set free.”

Kira’s eyes were wide and filled with fear. I could see that her hands had started to shake, and I knew she understood before I said the words.

“Greyson,” she started, “if you’re right…”

“Then it means we need to stop her soon, or else she’s going to have a whole damn demon army.”

# Episode 2737

I stood looking into the empty coffee mug in my hand, my mind spinning as I thought about the decision I had made. I was going to have to kill Seluna. *Me*. The idea was crazy, but somehow, I knew it was right. I also knew I was going to have to tell someone about it—I would need to start strategizing—but I wasn’t quite sure how to say it. It was kind of a big announcement, and I needed to say it in a way that people would be okay with.

“Hey, how are you feeling?”

I looked up as Artemis came into the kitchen. She poured herself a glass of water and turned to me.

“I’m okay,” I said automatically. Then my stomach roiled, and I put a hand to it. “Actually, that mocha I just drank doesn’t seem to be sitting well.” That was strange, because mocha usually helped me. “I’m actually feeling kind of sick. I feel like I’ve been off ever since I got back from the Vanguard palace.”

Artemis nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

“Does it?” I asked, surprised at her response.

“Of course it does. You were just *possessed*, Cali. Like, very recently. I’m still trying to recover from what happened with Letifer.”

“Really?” I asked, shocked.

“Yeah, really. It takes time. You need to stop being so hard on yourself. You have to relax.”

“You’re one to talk,” I said, laughing.

Artemis smiled, then she laughed, too. “Hey, I’m allowed to worry about my sister.”

“And I’m grateful for that, Artemis, I really am. But I don’t have time to relax right now. Seluna and Lucian are still around, and they’re a huge threat. And Aysel is hanging out in the other room,” I said, pointing in her general direction.

My stomach lurched again, and nausea hit me like a crashing wave. I rushed toward the sink and heaved into it. Luckily, nothing came up, but I coughed and spluttered as sweat rolled down my face.

“Cali,” Artemis said, walking toward me and putting a gentle hand on my back. “Look at you. You’re making yourself sick with stress.”

“It’s nothing,” I muttered, turning on the water in the sink. I took a long drink, then let it splash over my face. “Maybe I’m just getting my period or something,” I said, standing up and wiping my face with a kitchen towel.

But Artemis didn’t look satisfied with this excuse. She took another glass from the cupboard and filled it with water.

“There are plenty of other people working on this problem—worrying about it, too. You don’t have to feel like you’re carrying this all alone. I mean, isn’t that the point of having a pack? To share the responsibilities?”

I looked at my sister, surprised at her words. “Wow,” I said. “You sure have come a long way from the lone bounty hunter I met in the Fae world.”

She gave me a wry smile. “Well, I have my sister to thank for that,” she said. “But don’t go thinking it was all you.”

I returned her smile and took a long drink of water. I already felt better.

“Maybe I could use some fresh air,” I said, putting my glass down on the counter. “We should take a walk.”

“That sounds nice,” Artemis said.

“You don’t have to come with me if you’re busy,” I said quickly.

“No, I’m not busy,” she replied. “And I’ve been wanting to take a walk.”

There was something odd going on, and I stared at my sister. “You’re guarding me, aren’t you?”

If she was embarrassed about being found out, she didn’t show it. She just shrugged instead. “Let’s just think of it as me keeping you company.”

I sighed. “I don’t need a babysitter, Artemis.”

She shrugged again.

“Fine, let’s just go,” I said, giving in. I didn’t want to ruin the nice moment we’d been having. I was still feeling queasy, but I kept it to myself. I didn’t want to worry Artemis.

Outside, the cold air felt incredible on my face, and I was glad I’d suggested a walk. Over toward the shed, I saw Marta and Dani standing with Okorie.

“I guess they’re back at their magic training,” I said, watching them for a moment. I frowned, watching Dani. I was still a little worried about her—she’d just seemed so out of it earlier—but I kept my doubts to myself. It would be hypocritical of me to mention it when I had just insisted I was fine.

We turned toward the trees bordering the property, and I stayed close to them. The weak winter sunlight was giving me a massive headache, and I wanted to stay in the shade.

I glanced over at Artemis as we walked. She was such a strong warrior. I really admired her strength.

“Was it hard for you to kill people when you were a bounty hunter?” I asked.

Artemis looked at me, understandably surprised by the question, which had come from out of the blue. “Where did *that* come from?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. We’ve just had so many threats come at us lately, I’ve just been thinking about it. I’ve been trained to fight better, but I find I still have this block when it comes to the idea of actually *killing* anyone.”

I’d done it before. I gulped. My brain had blocked those moments from my memory, but they were still deep in there. I’d had to defend myself in the heat of battle… Defend my mates. I shuddered.

Artemis looked forward. “You *should* have a block. Normal people should never be okay with killing. I’m not normal. I wasn’t raised to be. I had to survive.”

“Yeah, I get that, and I appreciate the sentiment, but it’s not helping me,” I pointed out.

She glanced over at me. “I don’t think you know what you’re asking me, Cali.” She gave me a long look. “I hope you’re not planning anything.”

I didn’t answer.

“When you’re calculated about a kill, there’s no coming back from that,” she said, and I felt my heart pound. She was giving me a knowing look, like she knew exactly what I was thinking.

I looked away. This wasn’t the time to talk about my plan. I still had to convince Xavier and Greyson, and I didn’t want Artemis to try to stop me before I even figured out what I really wanted to do.

The stress of the conversation was making my head pound, and I pressed a finger to my temple.

“Do you think we’re really going to be able to convince Lucian not to do the Luna ceremony with Seluna?” I asked, changing the subject.

Artemis sighed. “I really don’t know. Lucian doesn’t seem like a very reasonable person, so that makes things harder. I mean, if were up to me, I’d just stay the hell out of it. Let Lucian cause his own downfall. He seems pretty set on that course anyway. I think we should just keep our hands clean and watch that pack implode from afar.”

“I know what you’re saying, but that’s really not an option,” I said.

“Why not?” Artemis asked.

“Because I don’t think it’s that simple. I don’t think it’s just a Luna ceremony. I agree with Greyson—I think Seluna is up to something. We have to stop it.” The more I thought about this, the more my stomach rebelled. It was like it knew something awful was coming.

I had to do something about Seluna, and if my mates and the rest of the pack didn’t agree with me, I was going to have to start thinking of alternative plans of my own.

I looked up at the house and saw Aysel, standing framed in a window. She was looking at me steadily, as though she’d somehow sensed my mood, or even heard my thoughts. Our eyes met, and a strange sense of understanding passed between us. Almost as though Aysel knew I was on her side.

She gave me a small nod, and I returned it. It wasn’t a great option, but if worst came to worst, I knew I’d be able to ask Aysel for help. What was that saying: the enemy of my enemy is my temporary ally?

Artemis and I turned when we heard a shout from behind us, and we sprinted toward the sound.

“What’s going on?” I asked as we drew closer to the magic lesson.

“Nothing, nothing, I’m sorry I screamed,” Marta said, picking herself up off the soggy ground.

“What was it?” I asked.

“Dani’s magic just flared up, and I jumped out of the way. I lost my balance, and the magic flare knocked Dani over,” Marta explained.

When she explained it that way, it sounded like it was just a mistake. But Dani was on the ground, looking a little dazed and worse for wear. I walked over to help her to her feet, but the instant I touched her hand to pull her up, an electric current passed though me. Instantly, it filled my head with something—a vision?—and I fell to the ground too.

# Episode 2738

It was unbearably hot. The air was desert-dry, and my throat screamed for water. I got to my feet and looked around in wonder, but that quickly turned to horror. The sodden grass was alive with fire, and there were flames all around me. They licked my feet, then my knees, then the tips of my fingers. Everything was wavy and distorted from the heat. In front of me, a figure emerged from around the side of the shed and walked toward me. She looked familiar, and I squinted at her through the searing hot wind.

Was it Seluna? It had to be.

She wore a long, purple gown with a flowing train, and she walked slowly through the smoking grass, her presence regal. She was dressed like a queen and held her head high as she walked, completely unfazed by the flames and the choking heat.

She walked over to a throne I hadn’t noticed until that moment and took a seat. Behind her, Lucian appeared. He was dressed in purple as well, the king to her queen. He stepped toward her and took her hand. He kissed it, then sat upon the throne next to hers.

What was this? Where was I? And why were they here? Was I in hell? The underworld? Some kind of Vanguard volcano?

The woman looked at me, her eyes flashing. She raised a scepter with the head of a snake on it and narrowed her eyes. She muttered something that sounded like it could have been a spell, but it was in a language I didn’t recognize.

Beneath me, the ground began to shake. It rocked so hard that I stumbled, and, as I lost my footing, I nearly tumbled into a sudden burst of orange flame. I landed hard and looked around, terrified.

All around me, statues were rising from the ground. But these weren’t the chubby cherub statues of garden fountains. These statues were hideous creatures with fangs, horns, and wings. Creatures that were half-bird, half-horse, or half-human, half-lizard. They were deformed and one-eyed and utterly horrifying.

Scrambling to my feet, I backed away in panic.

Lucian stood and looked around at the statues. “Kneel, all you gathered here!” he commanded. “Kneel and pay homage to your glorious goddess, Seluna.”

With the deafening sound of cracking rock, the statues bowed, marble and stone crumbling from them as they bent their knees.

Seluna got to her feet, her purple train sweeping out behind her. “Welcome,” she said, looking around. “A very warm welcome to all my followers. I am gratified to see you here. Your loyalty will be rewarded.”

The flames around me rose higher, then higher still. They consumed the statues, and I put my hands to my ears as they began to shriek and writhe in agony. The sound was deafening, and I thought my head was going to explode with it.

Seluna’s back erupted into a pair of huge black wings—lacy, like cobwebs—and they began to beat slowly. She rose into the air, which was now filled with thick, choking smoke, and raised her scepter. She pointed it, and a blast of fire shot out the end.

I watched—transfixed—as the flame shot over my head, then I turned to see it hit the woods behind me. The trees were incinerated in an instant, and beyond the naked ground I could see the Redwood pack house.

As I stared, Xavier and Greyson rushed out onto the porch. Even from a distance, I could see that their faces were tense as they scanned the land. An instant later, the entire house exploded in a ball of fire, and I screamed. What was happening? And *why*?

When would this end?

“Cali? Cali? CALIANA!”

When I opened my eyes, I was looking up into Artemis’s terrified face. I was on the ground, cradled in her arms, and I was sweating.

“Cali, are you okay?” she asked.

I sat up so fast the world span. I looked around—the trees were fine. They hadn’t been burned. Had I just imagined that? I was breathing like I’d just run a marathon, and my heart was racing. It had all seemed so real…

“Where are Xavier and Greyson?” I asked, my tongue barely getting around the words. “Are they okay?”

Artemis looked at me with increasing worry. “They’re in the house. Why? What happened?”

*What happened?* I just saw both my mates burn to death in a fire. A Seluna-instigated fire.

But when I looked up at the house, it confirmed what I had guessed. The house was intact. What I’d seen had just been a vision.

A little ways away from me, Dani was being helped back to her feet by Marta and Okorie.

“What happened?” Artemis asked me again.

“I saw something,” I started. “It was a vision, or something. Seluna was there, and all these statues she’d brought to life. She was burning the woods, the house—*everything*.”

I looked over at Dani, wondering if she’d seen the same thing.

Dani stared at me, stunned. “Lucian was there, too. And all those horrible statues…”

Artemis looked between us. “Wait, you’re *both* having Seluna visions? That can’t be good.” She put a hand beneath my arm and helped me to my feet. “I wonder if this is more of the Seluna hangover, like we were talking about.”

“Maybe,” I muttered, but I was remembering the ominous feeling I’d had earlier. Dani had experienced the same feeling. And now we were sharing visions? “What the hell does all this mean? Could this be part of the phase two that Aysel was telling Greyson about?”

Okorie looked worried. “I don’t know, but I don’t like any of this. I don’t know if Seluna is trying to regain control over you and Dani, but I’m not just going to sit around and let her. If the witch council hears about this, this is the kind of thing that could ruin Dani’s ability to use her magic.”

“And *your* reputation,” Marta pointed out.

Okorie waved this way. “Yeah, yeah. That too.”

The porch door banged open, and Xavier and Greyson sprinted out of the house and toward us.

“What happened?” Greyson asked when they drew near.

I was so glad to see them, I couldn’t stop myself from smiling with relief. “Nothing, nothing. I fell over. I’m fine.”

Artemis gave a snort. “Sure, if you think it’s fine that you and Dani are having matching fire visions. If you think *that’s* normal, then yeah, you’re doing great.”

“What?” Greyson and Xavier snapped in unison.

“Okay, well, that’s not exactly—” I stopped myself. I didn’t want to lie. “I had a vision, and Seluna was there.”

“And Lucian. And it was like hell or something,” Dani added helpfully.

“Yeah, there was a bit of fire,” I said, trying to downplay the severity of it. I knew both of them were thinking the worst right now. “Both Dani and I saw it, and there were these statues that Seluna brought to life—”

“Hang on,” Greyson broke in. “Did you say *statues*?”

“Yeah. They were pretty awful.” I shuddered at the memory. “She was commanding them, and they moved. It was like when Seluna came to life, but worse. These were more like monsters.”

“And they all bowed down before Seluna, and she burned them all up,” Dani put in.

“*What?*” Xavier roared.

I nodded. “Yeah, and then she burned the forest, and then the pack house, and then… both of you,” I said my blood running cold as I remembered it.

Greyson shook his head. “Statues,” he mumbled to himself.

He looked deeply troubled, and I had this sneaking suspicion that there was something he wasn’t telling me.

“What’s up?” I asked him. “Why are you so distracted about the statues?”

Greyson looked grim. “I think Seluna might be building an army with them.”

“*What?*” I said, floored.

He nodded. “Kira did some research. It all adds up.”

“But an *army*?” I squeaked. “Like, a demon army, made up of those statues?”

“Looks that way,” Greyson said, his expression grave.

Fear was building within me, but I wasn’t surprised by this. How could I be? It was exactly what I’d seen in my vision. An army of stone soldiers that Seluna had praised for their loyalty.

I took a deep breath. “We can’t let her do that,” I said firmly. “We have to stop her. Now, before it’s too late.”

“I agree,” Artemis said, nodding. “And we have to act fast. Who knows how much time we have left?”

Greyson nodded and turned to Xavier. “They’re both right. It’s time we put an end to this, once and for all. It’s clear that Seluna is gaining power, and the longer we let her carry on, the harder it’s going to be to stop her when the time comes.”

“So what do we do?” Xavier asked.

Greyson turned to look at Okorie, who’d been watching us silently. “Okorie, how do you kill a demon?”

# Episode 2739

**Greyson**

“Well?” I asked Okorie. “How do you do it? How do you kill a demon?”

I was on edge as I waited for his answer. I’d wanted to avoid getting mired into all this shit with the Vanguards. I hadn’t wanted to go anywhere near this Luna ceremony, but it was looking more and more like it was going to have to happen. Which pissed me off.

“Do you know how to do it? Have you ever done it? Is it any different than taking out a vampire or anything else?” I asked urgently. The last thing I wanted was to drag a team back to the Vanguard fun house, take my damn shot at Seluna, and then have it not work because of some stupid demon technicality—like if it was impossible to kill a demon during a full moon when you hadn’t done your laundry.

Okorie looked thoughtful. “I’m not exactly sure if there’s a *specific* way to kill a demon, but it’s likely there’s some sort of witch text on the subject. Maybe different demons require different methods of extermination. I’m not sure—demons weren’t exactly my focus when I was studying magic.”

“I don’t see how killing a demon could be all that different from killing anything else,” Xavier said. “And, you know, if all else fails, we can just jump on her and rip out her throat. See if that works.”

“And if that doesn’t work, you could decapitate her,” Artemis put in. “That’s usually effective.”

Cali looked like she was going to be sick, and she gave Artemis a horrified look.

“We don’t have to get into the details right now,” I said quickly. “Look into it, let me know when you have some information. The last thing we need is for Seluna to body jump into a new victim or something if we try to kill her. But I think we were onto something, earlier—I think this Luna ceremony is going to leave Seluna vulnerable, and I think it’s our best shot. While Lucian’s putting the Luna mark on Seluna’s shoulder, that’s when I’m going to do it.”

Xavier nodded in agreement. “The question is, who’s going to go to the Vanguard palace?”

Xavier and I both looked at Cali and spoke at the same time. “You’re not going.”

Cali’s brows drew down. “*Hey!* Come on! Of course I’m going to go! I have to—”

“We can talk about it later,” I said, but I didn’t actually mean it. There wasn’t going to be a discussion. She wasn’t going. Period. I didn’t want Cali near the demon, Lucian, or the Vanguards. “Let’s get inside.”

We headed back in, and I called the rest of the pack back into the living room.

“Okay,” I said, looking around after everyone had gathered again. “So for those who don’t know, we got an invitation from the Vanguards to go to the Luna ceremony. I know I told you no one would be going, but circumstances have changed.”

“Changed how?” Sage asked, frowning.

“I’m going to have to send a small team to deal with the Seluna problem.”

There was a general mumbling, and, after a moment, everyone raised their hands.

“We’re in,” Rishika said firmly. Next to her, Artemis, Lola, Jay, Jaqueline, Charlie, Violet, Marta, Lilac, my mom, and every other pack member nodded in agreement.

For a moment, I couldn’t speak. I was so proud of how united we were as a pack, enough that everyone was willing to risk their own lives to protect each other.

“Thank you all,” I said, “but I meant what I said. This has to be a small team. We need a strike force. We have to take Seluna by surprise. We can’t give any of them any hint of what we’re up to, or any reason to be suspicious. As much as I would like to bring all of you, I only need six—at most. I don’t want to put any more people than necessary in danger.”

“I’ve got a question,” Ravi called from the doorway.

“What is it?” I asked.

“So we take out the demon—what about the prince who’s in love with her?”

Aysel appeared suddenly at his side.

“*Dammit*,” Ravi exploded. “What are you doing out here?”

He grabbed her arm and tried to pull her back to the room, but she fought against him.

I raised my eyebrows at Ravi, and his returning look was half-exasperated, half-embarrassed.

“What’s going on, Ravi?” I asked.

He looked annoyed. “I guess I let it slip about the pack meeting. Sorry about that, Alpha. I’ll take care of this.”

He grabbed Aysel’s other arm and tried to haul her back, but she planted her feet.  
 “My brother will *not* be harmed,” she hissed. “If any one of you touches him, I will make sure none of you return. Despite my exile, there are still many in the Vanguard pack who are loyal to their princess, and they will do my bidding.”

“Enough of that,” I snapped, giving Aysel a hard look. “If you want Lucian protected, then you’d better be the one doing the protecting. As long as you keep him out of our way, we’ll be fine. If it comes down to a Redwood or your brother, I’m not making you a single promise.”

Eyes flashing, Aysel finally let Ravi drag her away.

“Hey,” Xavier said, appearing at my side. “We really do need to decide who we’re going to bring.”

I ran a hand along my jaw. “I appreciate that you’re willing to go, man, but I’m not sure having you along is going to be ideal.”

Xavier bristled at this. “And why the hell not?”

I hesitated. The reason was that I didn’t want to put Xavier’s life in jeopardy. Xavier was already at a tactical disadvantage because of his shifting problem, and despite everything he’d been saying, I wasn’t convinced that he was completely healed from the accident.

“Maybe we should draw straws to see who goes,” Sage suggested.

The rest of the pack shrugged, looking around at each other.

“That sounds fair,” Jay agreed.

Seriously? I wasn’t exactly convinced this was the best way to decide anything, but why the hell not? Everyone in my pack was a worthy fighter, and I didn’t have a better method to decide. If I chose who went and who didn’t, would that have the potential to build resentment among pack members? We were at a time when we needed everyone in the pack in lockstep, and I couldn’t afford any division.

“I didn’t find any straws, but here are some wooden skewers,” Torin announced a moment later, coming in with a handful of thin wooden spikes. “I was planning on making shish kebabs.”

He offered them to me, and I took them with a sigh. I couldn’t believe it had come to this, but here we were. I took the skewers and broke them into varying lengths, making four particularly short. I was already planning on bringing Aysel. I really had no choice—her knowledge of the palace and the Vanguard members couldn’t be overlooked. Which left four open slots. I was still undecided about Xavier.

I held out the skewers, their true lengths hidden in my fist. “Okay, everyone draws one. Including you,” I said to Xavier.

One by one, each of the pack pulled out a skewer. Most of them were clearly too long, and people walked away unhappy. It was obvious everyone was hoping to be part of the team.

Xavier walked over, his face set. When he pulled out a skewer, I could see right away that it was a short one. He gave me a look of angry triumph, and I had a feeling there was a heated argument in our future, but I looked away from him. I didn’t want to have that discussion with him in front of the rest of the pack.

Okorie came next, pulling another short straw. He shrugged and stepped back.

Even though he wasn’t hugely enthusiastic, I figured it was good that he was coming. It was always good to have a witch onboard on a mission involving so much unknown magic.

Sage came next, pulling a long skewer. “Dang it,” she muttered, stepping away.

Then came my mother and Lola, who both drew long skewers.

When Cali stepped over, there were only a few left.

“What are you doing?” I asked, her pulling my hand away as she reached for a skewer.

She put her hands on her hips. “Am I or am I not part of this pack?”

“Of course you are, but—”

“Then I deserve a chance to pull a skewer,” she argued. “Besides, I could be of use. I mean, besides Dani, I’m the only one here who’s actually been possessed by Seluna. I could help! And I’ve been to the palace, too.”

And, without waiting for me to respond, she yanked a skewer from my fist. We all stared at it.

It was a short one.

# Episode 2740

I stared down at the short skewer in my hand. I couldn’t believe it. I had gotten it. The whole pack had chosen, but *I* was one of the four who’d pulled it. It was like destiny. I just knew *I* had to go.

Then a hand reached out and plucked the skewer from my grip.

“We already told you, you’re not going,” Xavier said, when I looked over at him.

“But that’s not fair,” I huffed. “I chose the short skewer, fair and square. And Greyson said whoever chooses the short one goes, so I’m going.”

“No,” Xavier said flatly.

“Why should everyone else get a chance and not me?” I demanded.

“Because I said so,” Xavier said simply. He turned to Greyson and handed him the skewer. “Have someone else draw.”

I groaned. “I’m a part of this pack, too! And I know that place; I could help you come up with a plan of attack…” I trailed off when I realized neither of them was listening to me.

It was impossible trying to make my case to them. They’d already decided that it wasn’t in my best interest to go. Which—I guess I understood. Not only did they want to protect me from getting hurt in a general way, but they also knew that Seluna seemed to be out to get me—a fact she’d demonstrated over and over.

Which was *why* I felt like I had to go. I knew they didn’t understand that. But this had progressed past simply being scary—this had become personal. But how was I supposed to convince my mates of that?

Artemis chose next, and I crossed my fingers she wouldn’t pick the short one. I didn’t want my sister—who’d already gone through the Letifer ghost possession and was still dealing with its long-term effects—to get caught up in any of this Seluna demon stuff.

And to my relief, Artemis chose a long skewer.

Charlie went next, drawing a short one. “YES!” he said happily.

He looked pumped, but over his shoulder I could see that Violet was unhappy. I could only imagine how Violet felt, knowing her mate was going off to fight a demon.

Zainab went last, drawing the final short straw.

“Are you kidding me?” Sage muttered, looking jealous.

“That’s it,” Greyson said, looking around. “Everyone’s chosen, and it’s been decided. At least for now,” he added cryptically. “Thanks again to everyone for being willing, and I want everyone with a short straw to gather back here in five minutes.”

I watched as people started to leave the living room, talking among themselves.

“Cali.”

I looked over. Both Greyson and Xavier were standing there, looking down at me.

“I hope you understand why we don’t want you to go to that place again,” Greyson said. “It’s the exact reason why they sent us that invitation to begin with. It would be giving Seluna exactly what she wants. And putting you directly in harm’s way.”

I sighed. “I guess I understand. But then why are you letting Xavier go?” I asked. “He’s been having more and more trouble with his shifting, and then there was the car accident. And I know you say you’re fine, but I don’t think you’re fully healed. I just think having Xavier go is not only risky for him, but for the rest of the team, too.”

Xaiver frowned. “What are you talking about? I’m not a risk.”

“You can’t assume that,” I pointed out.

Xavier rolled his eyes, then looked over at Greyson. “Fine, what if Ava comes with me?”

I stared at him, taken aback. “You’ll take Ava, but not me?”

“That’s not it, Cali,” Xavier protested. “With Ava along, I’ll be able to shift without any problems. And Ava’s proven herself as a fighter, so she’d be an asset. And she knows the palace well, *and* she’s been hanging around without getting herself possessed by a demon.”

I glared at this, but Greyson looked thoughtful.

“Do you trust Ava?” he asked.

Xavier ran a hand through his hair. “I trust her just enough for this.”

I stared at him. I couldn’t *believe* what he’d just said. Since when did Xavier trust Ava—at *all*? That was total news to me. I knew he’d been really struggling with the continued existence of the mate bond, and his wolf’s ongoing attraction to Ava, but he *trusted* her? I’d seen him speaking to Ava a few times lately. It had bothered me, but I trusted Xavier. But now I wondered what the hell they could’ve been talking about. What had happened to change his mind so dramatically?

I wanted to ask all these questions as they raced across my brain, but I knew now wasn’t the time. We had too much going on.

“What do you think?” Xavier asked. “Should I ask Ava to come with us?”

Greyson shook his head. “Not yet. Let me think about it.”

“Think about what—”

“I need to consider all our options and choose the best one.”

Xavier looked like he had a counter argument, but Greyson ignored him and turned to me.

“As for you, I’m sorry, but with or without Xavier, you’re not going. I’m standing firm on this one, love.”

I heaved a sigh. I was disappointed, but I understood. Still, I couldn’t shake that feeling I’d been having. It was this certainty that I was meant to be there. But I didn’t know what to do. If I went against the wishes of my mates, I might make things worse for them. I knew they’d be going in with a plan, and if I just showed up, it could put them in danger. It could throw off their plan, not to mention distract them. They’d probably be so worried—and, if I was being honest, probably angry—about me, that it might distract them enough to allow Seluna an opening to hurt them.

I trusted both of my mates—even if Xavier wanted Ava to go with him, I knew he was doing it because he didn’t want anything to happen to me, or to Dani, or to the rest of the pack. It wasn’t because of his wolf’s attraction to Ava. I knew Xavier—he didn’t let his wolf make decisions for him.

“Okay, I’ve got some stuff that needs organizing. We have a lot to do before we go,” Greyson said, then headed out of the living room.

Xavier took my hand. “I’m sorry. I hope you understand why I’m doing this,” he said. “If it weren’t for this shifting problem I’ve been having, I’d never want Ava to come with me.”

I knew all that, but it was still comforting to hear him say it out loud. “I know that,” I said quietly.

“And if it weren’t for Seluna’s hold over you or whatever is going on, I’d want to have you by my side in there,” he went on. He looked into my eyes as he spoke, making sure I was listening to him. “I know you’re strong, Cali, and I know you know how to use your magic. I trust you.” He smiled at me, then pulled me into a tight hug.

I slipped my arms around his waist and held him tight. “Thank you for trusting me,” I murmured, my voice muffled against his chest.

“Excuse me? Sorry to interrupt…”

We broke apart and looked over to see Dani standing in the living room doorway. She looked uncomfortable, and she shifted on her feet.

“What’s up, Dani?” Xavier asked.

“Could I talk to Cali for a minute?” she said in her quiet voice.

Xavier nodded and, giving me one last squeeze, let me go. “Sure thing.”

“Why don’t we go outside?” I said and walked out of the living room.

Dani followed me out onto the porch and shivered in the freezing air as I shut the door behind us.

“What’s up?” I asked, turning to look at her. The wind blew around me, and I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to keep warm.

Dani looked around, clearly still uncomfortable. When she finally turned to me, I could see that she looked anxious. “Cali, did we have the same vision?’

“Um,” I started slowly, “I’m not sure. Did we? They sounded kind of similar, but I guess there’s no real way to know for sure, is there?”

“Did you see me in the vision?” she asked.

I thought about this. I hated to do it, but I tried to remember what I had seen in the vision. “I don’t know. I guess not. I mean, I wasn’t really looking for you, of course.”

I tried to remember everything. There had been all those terrible statues—the demon army—Lucian and Seluna with the terrible wings. There had been fire and smoke, but, no—no Dani.

“No, I guess I don’t remember seeing you there,” I admitted. “Why?”

Dani’s eyes widened. “Because, Cali, I saw you.”

# Episode 2741

**Xavier**

I hoped Cali understood why I had to do what I was doing. I knew that nothing involving Ava was ever going to make Cali or me happy, but there was no way I wasn’t going to be a part of the team going to the Vanguard palace, even if that meant taking Ava along with me.

Seluna and her fucking prince boy had *attacked* Cali. My mate. And anyone who attacked my mate was going to pay the price. As far as I was concerned, Seluna was walking around with a big bullseye on her back, and I couldn’t wait to deliver the parting shot. And if Lucian happened to get in the way, that was all the better. I’d consider that two for the price of one. I knew what Aysel had said, but screw her. I had no loyalty to either of them, and she’d known that when she came to our pack house looking for help.

I didn’t give a shit about her threats to us. Nothing she said scared me. The whole Vanguard pack could still be loyal to her, but if she got in my way, *she* was going to be the one who didn’t return.

I was fired up and ready to go, so I went looking for Ava so I could tell her the plan. Upstairs, I knocked on her door, but there was no answer, and when I pushed the door open, the room was empty. I headed downstairs, but I didn’t see her. Not in the kitchen, not in the living room, and not in the den.

“Hey, Sage, have you seen Ava?” I asked.

Sage looked up from her phone. “No.”

Annoyed, I headed into the hall. I knew she wasn’t in there, but I checked the small office next to the front door, then looked out on the porch. I knew she’d gone back to deal with Knox. She must not have come back yet.

Why was it that she was always underfoot when I didn’t want her around, but as soon as I needed her for something, she was nowhere to be found?

I glanced at a clock on the wall. I only had until the Luna ceremony tonight to find her.

Also, I had to consider the possibility that she would refuse to help me. Though, given the way she’d been doing everything she could to help me—and our mate bond—I somehow doubted she’d turn me down now.

I thought about what I was going to say to her, but nothing came to mind. I hated to admit that I needed her. It was never good for an Alpha to have to rely on someone else, but until my wolf problem was resolved, I didn’t see that I had much choice in the matter. And how long that was going to take, I had no idea.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket. My only real option was to call her.

Shit.

I headed upstairs to my room, where I could at least have some privacy. I didn’t want anyone to overhear, especially not Cali. I didn’t want to rub this situation in her face. She might understand why I was calling Ava, but she wasn’t going to want to hear it.

As the phone rang, part of me hoped she wouldn’t pick up.

But she answered after the third ring.

“X? Everyone all right?”

I could feel my wolf reacting to her familiar voice, but I heard a strange false casualness in her tone. Was she trying to play it cool?

“Fine. I was just wondering when you were coming back here.”

“Why?” she asked quickly. “Do you need me for something?”

For fuck’s sake.

I hated to answer the question. Of course I needed her. Why the hell else would I be calling her? I took a deep breath. It was never a good idea to snap at someone when you were asking them for a favor.

“I need you to come to the Vanguard palace with me tonight.”

There was a surprised silence. “Really? Why are you going back there?”

“We were invited to Lucian and Seluna’s Luna ceremony,” I explained.

Ava laughed. “Wait, hang on. You’re going because you were invited to a party? Are we being voluntarily social with the prince? What a change.” She giggled again. “I have to say, I didn’t see this coming. Should I be worried you’ve been possessed?”

“Of course not,” I scoffed. Why would she even joke about that? But I didn’t want to go into a lot of detail, so I kept it vague. “We’re not going there to be part of the ceremony—we’re going to put an end to Seluna.”

Ava made a startled noise.

“What?” I demanded.

“Nothing. That’s just very ambitious. Taking on a demon is no small feat,” she said.

“I suppose it can’t be much worse than any of the other things we’ve had to deal with lately,” I said irritably. I didn’t need her to tell me it was a big deal to take on a demon.

“So why are you calling me? You need me to hold your hand through it?” I could hear the laughter in her voice.

I clenched my teeth as anger surged within me. “Just tell me, can I count on you or not?”

She sighed. “I told you, you can always count on me.”

“So you’re coming back?” I asked, hoping to get a promise.

“I’ll head back right now. Be there soon. Bye, X.”

I looked down at my phone as she ended the call. My wolf was stirring, and I growled, feeling frustrated—in more ways than one. Ava always had to add that little extra… *whatever*, that got my wolf going.

I thought back on what she’d said. Was she telling the truth? *Could* I always count on her? It was an odd question—one that I’d never thought I would ask myself. I hadn’t ever thought so—not since she’d come back to life—but lately, things had felt different. Things were changing, and I wasn’t sure how I felt about it.

One way or another, I hoped my shifting problem would be resolved soon. It felt like that would make a lot of things a hell of a lot easier to figure out.

Plus, I just needed my full capabilities to deal with whatever might pop up. It was always *something*, and the newest something was Knox’s return. I needed to find time to talk to Jay again about it; we’d been interrupted by Cali’s and Dani’s weird vision ordeal before Jay could tell me anything he knew about Ava’s cousin.

I shook the thought away. One thing at a time. The crew who’d drawn short straws were supposed to be gathering in the living room, so I slipped my phone into my pocket and headed downstairs.

Greyson was there, and Aysel—of course—along with Okorie, Zainab, and Charlie. I was relieved to see that Cali hadn’t tried to join us, mainly because I wouldn’t have to say what I had to say in front of her.

Greyson was there, obviously, and I’d have preferred not to say it in front of him either, but there was no getting around that.

“You can count me in,” I said, looking over at him. “Ava’s agreed to come along. She’ll be here soon.”

I knew Cali wasn’t going to be happy about this, but when it came time to say goodbye to her, I’d reassure her that this was just a logistical concern, and that she was the one I loved.

“Then it’s decided,” Greyson said, looking around. “This is the team. I don’t want to downplay the danger we’re going to be facing in there. None of us have any experience fighting a demon, so if you have any qualms about doing this, you can take off. There’s no shame in backing out now. But if you agree to come along, know that we’ll all be counting on each other once we get in there.”

I glanced at everyone silently. It didn’t surprise me that no one made any move to leave.

I was glad to see Charlie with the group. His face was set, and he looked determined. He was young—and not as experienced as Greyson or me—but having a hunter along could be useful when fighting a demon. They were trained to fight and kill all sorts of supernatural beings.

“Okay, good,” Greyson said, nodding. “So, we’re going in a little blind, and we’re going to have play it by ear. We all know what a Luna ceremony involves, but we don’t know what exactly Lucian has planned for this one. Knowing that dramatic bastard, we should expect the unexpected. But, regardless, when I feel like the time is right, we’re going to make our move. Everyone needs to keep their eyes open and their wits about them.” He looked around. “Any questions?”

Charlie’s hand shot up.

Greyson rolled his eyes. “This isn’t math class, man. You don’t have to raise your hand to talk.”

Charlie’s face flushed, and he looked a little embarrassed. “Sorry. So who gets to do it?”

“Who gets to do what?” Greyson asked.

Charlie raised his eyebrows, like his question was the most obvious thing in the world. “Who gets to kill Seluna?”

# Episode 2742

I stared at Dani, trying to make sense of what she’d just said. “What do you mean? You saw *me* in your vision? Really? How? What was I doing?” I asked uncertainly.

Dani shook her head. “There was so much fire,” she said quietly.

“*That* I remember,” I muttered.

“And then the ground started shaking, and the statues started popping up. I’d never felt something like that before. It was terrifying,” Dani said.

“Yeah, that’s how I remember it, too,” I said. A cool wind blew onto the porch, but I didn’t think it had anything to do with the shiver that shuddered through me. The cold I felt seemed to be coming from deep inside me. “And Lucian and Seluna were there, too, right? On those thrones?”

The blood drained from Dani’s face. “Yeah, that’s right. But, Cali, they weren’t alone.”

I frowned. “What do you mean? I didn’t see anyone else with them. Just them and the statues. I didn’t even see you there—”

“That’s where I saw you. You were with them, Cali. Standing with them as they sat on their thrones. You were talking to them quietly.” Dani shifted her shoulders, looking uncomfortable. “It looked like you were giving them advice or something.”

“*What?*” I asked, floored by this revelation. “I was *with* them? Giving them advice? That’s—that’s insane! I would never do that!” I said to Dani. “Trust me, if I was really that close to Seluna, I would’ve blasted her with all the magic I could generate.”

“I know, I know,” Dani said shakily. “And I would’ve helped you amplify that magic.”

My mind raced, trying to make sense of what Dani had just told me. What did her vision mean? And if I hadn’t had the same vision—which clearly I hadn’t—then why were they different? What did Seluna have planned for me? Was she going to force me to help her and Lucian, somehow?

Well, that would happen over my dead body. I’d rather die than help her gain more power.

I grabbed Dani’s arm to pull her back into the house. “We have to tell Xavier and Greyson about this. It might affect the mission tonight.”

Dani hesitated, looking unsure. “You’re not planning on going tonight, are you?”

“It’s pretty clear that neither of my mates wants me there,” I said sourly. “And I guess it makes sense that I stay far away. Especially if it seems like Seluna has something planned for me.”

She looked relieved. “That’s good. I mean, we’ve both had these bad feelings about Seluna. And now this vision…” She shook her head. “I’m worried that if you go to the palace tonight, it’ll only help Seluna somehow.”

“Don’t worry,” I assured her, “I have no intention of going.”

Dani smiled. “Good.”

As we headed back into the warmth of the house, I thought back to my own vision, trying to replay it in my head. It had the flames and the earthquakes and the statues, just like Dani had described, but I was sure I hadn’t seen myself in my vision the way Dani had described it. In my vision, I hadn’t been helping Seluna and Lucian. I hadn’t even been speaking to them. I had been too busy being freaked out and trying not to get burned by all the demon flames.

“Who gets to kill Seluna?”

I stopped in the doorway of the living room just as Charlie asked the question. I felt myself stiffen with apprehension. *Me!* I thought to myself. *No one else gets to kill that bitch but me.*

I knew I wasn’t going tonight, but I still felt like I was meant to be the one to kill her. I also knew it wouldn’t do any good to argue that. All I had was a feeling about it—if I was going to convince my mates of anything, first I needed some good, hard, solid proof.

“I’m the Alpha,” Greyson said gravely. “I’ll be the one to kill Seluna. If for any reason I fail, or get blocked from doing it, then we’ll need to have a hierarchy of who will do it.”

“*Fail?*” I swallowed nervously. “What do you mean, fail? How would you fail?’

Greyson looked over at me. “There could be lots of reasons, Cali. Not all of them lethal,” he added, which didn’t make me feel any better. “But if I’m unable to get to her, we set up a hierarchy so there’s someone else who can do it.”

“We’ll have six other people there, Cali,” Xavier said soothingly. “There’s nothing to be worried about.”

I looked around the room. “Six others?”

“Yeah, seven total,” Greyson clarified. “Including Ava.”

I gritted my teeth as a sharp spike of jealousy shot through me. That meant that Ava had agreed to go with Xavier. Which was good… But that didn’t mean I had to like it.

“That means we’ll have seven chances to kill Seluna and get this done,” Greyson said. He looked at Aysel. “Is killing Seluna something we can count on you to do?”

Aysel didn’t answer right away, and I wondered how she was feeling about all this. It had to be hard for her—she’d worshipped Seluna for so long, and now to find out that she was just some lying demon, trying to trap Aysel’s brother into who knows what… It had to be complicated for her.

But, then again, maybe not, since Aysel seemed to care about Lucian more than anyone else. Again and again, she’d made that perfectly clear.

I watched her face as she considered Greyson’s question. I wondered if she still believed Seluna was a goddess, or if she’d finally come around to the idea that she was something else entirely.

Aysel lifted her chin and looked at Greyson. “Yes. I’ll do it. But if anyone dares to harm my brother in the process, I will step in, and no one here will like it when I bite.”

“Stand down, Aysel,” Greyson growled. “We already told you no one will attack Lucian outright. That’s not why we’re going in there. What happens if he retaliates remains to be seen. But you should be prepared for that possibility, too. Lucian’s clearly not in his right mind.”

Aysel’s expression darkened at that, and I felt my stomach knot with worry. I’d seen Lucian in action, and he was fierce. He was no one to be trifled with, and if he fought against us, he would be a formidable enemy. Although, technically he was pretty much already our enemy. Xavier and Greyson certainly saw it that way. But things could still get a whole lot worse. Especially if the goddess he loved wound up dead.

I stepped toward Greyson. “Listen, I know I can’t go with you all, but I do still want to help. Is there anything I can do?’

“Unless you know how to slay a demon, probably not,” Xavier said.

I frowned at him, annoyed. “Of course I don’t know how to do that. But neither do you, and you’re going.”

“Relax, both of you. We’re not going in totally blind. I’ve got Kira looking into some methods,” Greyson said. “I’m going to check in with her to see if she’s come up with anything. And Big Mac, too, if I can find her.”

“I’ll go with you,” Xavier said. “I’d like to hear what Kira’s found.”

As Greyson and Xavier, along with the rest of the crew, headed out to find Big Mac and Kira, I got an idea. I knew how I could help them.

I booked it upstairs to my room and slammed the door shut. Then I opened my laptop and rifled through my sock drawer until I found what I was looking for.

“*Aha!*” I declared, holding up my library card. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of this sooner. If anyone could find a documented way to slay a demon, it was Steinar.

I got into the library’s website and clicked onto the librarian chat.

*Steinar? It’s me, Cali!*

Typing bubbles appeared below my message.

*Cali! It’s so good to hear from you. I was afraid the co-Alpha concept you asked me about had gone sour and the Redwood pack had torn itself apart and you were all dead.*

I shook my head. *Nope, we’re all still alive.*

*Good to hear! I’d been wondering.*

*Listen, I’m coming to you with another question today.*

The typing bubbles appeared, then disappeared. They did it once more, and I wondered what he was typing and deleting. I was just about to type out my question when his chat popped up.

*Okay, what can I help you with now?*

*How do you kill a demon?*

There was a beat of stillness, then:

*???*

*Come on, Steinar*, I went on, hoping he could imagine my plaintive tone. *I need to know how you kill a demon.*

There was a long pause this time, before his next message.

*You can’t.*

# Episode 2743

And just like that, my hopes crashed and burned around me.

“What do you mean you can’t kill a demon?” I asked, as if Steinar could hear me.

*That can’t be true, can it?* I typed. *Everything can be killed… At least that’s what I always thought. If we can’t kill the demon, what does that mean? That we have no choice but to sit back and wait for Seluna to storm our pack house with her demonic army? That can’t be right.*

*WHAT I MEAN IS THAT I WON’T LET YOU DO IT*, Steinar replied in all caps.

I paused, taken aback. I wasn’t aware that I needed a librarian’s permission to kill a demon. That literally made no sense.

*Um… Why is that?* I typed.

*Because the last time I tried to help you, I thought you’d been killed! I’m not putting myself through that again.*

I hesitated, trying to find the right response.

*Thanks for caring, Steinar, and I assure you that I’ll be safe… But just to clarify—there* is *a way to kill a demon, right?*

Steinar didn’t reply right away, and I stared at the bubbles on the screen.

*I really need to know, Steinar. If we don’t stop this demon, the entire pack could be in danger.*

Not to mention the entire world. It stood to reason that Seluna wouldn’t stop with the Redwood pack. She would probably go on to wipe out every other pack, and then she’d move on to the world at large. I didn’t pretend to know a demon’s end game, but I was certain that the Redwoods weren’t the only folks in her sights.

*Messing with demons isn’t child’s play.* This was quickly followed by the skull and crossbones emoji.

*I’m well aware of that. So, are you going to tell me how to do it, or not?*

Another string of bubbles. Another pause. More bubbles. Finally, Steinar’s reply came through.

*Check your email. And as a warning, you have to follow the directions carefully—there are no shortcuts when it comes to slaying demons. Be safe, and be smart, Cali.*

*Thank you, Steinar! I’ll follow the directions closely, and yes, I promise I’ll be safe.*

I logged off and checked my email. I was surprised and pleased to see that Steinar had already sent it over. I opened Steinar’s email to find a link, which I clicked, that lead to an article: “witchiHow: Demon Slaying 101”. It was step-by-step instructions, complete with graphics and pictures. I scanned through it quickly before scrolling back up to the top. It was a lot shorter than I’d thought it would be. I hoped that meant killing a demon was a piece of cake, though I couldn’t imagine that a demon, of all things, would be easy to destroy.

I took a deep breath and then settled in and started reading.

***Step 1:*** *Identify that you are, in fact, dealing with a demon. Common mistakes in classification include: Fae, vampires, narcissists, etc.*

***Step 2:*** *Capture your demon. It won’t be happy! Research shows that chain link nets, bear traps, and honey pot lures are best, but nothing is foolproof. Demons are crafty buggers!*

***Step 3:*** *Choose your method of dispatch. When it comes to demon slaying, there are a lot of choices available. Choose what you’re most comfortable with and what you think will be the most successful. Popular methods include: fire, knives, and less commonly, decapitation. Be sure to pick whatever method aligns with your skill level, and watch out for their magic! Warning: please be aware that decapitating a demon is extremely difficult unless you have a serrated blade, and even then, many demon slayers find that decapitation gets them too close for comfort. Only the most seasoned demon slayers should rely on beheading their demon prey.*

***Step 4: (****Optional). Catch & Release. Don’t want to kill your demon? There are more pacifistic approaches, such as sending the demon back to the hell from whence it came. Although referenced often in pop culture, demons are not actually from hell, but the demon underworld. However, please note that sending your demon back could incur the wrath of other demons along the way, in which case you should return to Step 3.*

***Step 5:*** *Clean up. Demon slaying is a messy, slimy, goopy business. Be considerate of your surroundings when slaying, as demon blood will stain any fabric it comes into contact with, and there’s absolutely NO way to get the stains out. Trust us on that.*

I sat back in my seat, disappointed. It didn’t actually explain *how* to kill a demon, just that I should choose my preferred method. Did I even have a preferred method? Did my magic count? Xavier and Artemis both seemed to have it right—rip the demon’s throat out or cut off its head—though Steinar’s link certainly had a lot of warnings about the latter. That didn’t mean that I couldn’t try my magic and blast Seluna to pieces, or at least stun her so that Xavier and Greyson could finish her off.

I was picturing all the ways I could throw my magic at Seluna when I remembered that I’d already agreed that I wouldn’t go to the Vanguard palace.

*Well, the least I can do is give them instructions.* I turned on the dusty printer. Was it even functional? I couldn’t remember ever having used it. To my surprise, it churned out the instructions, and I made few extra copies just in case.

I rushed downstairs with the instructions in hand and ran smack into Greyson. I waved the pages in his face. “Guess what? I talked to Steinar, and he sent me a link with a bunch of demon slaying instructions.”

I handed him the printouts.

Greyson stared at them for a few moments with his brow furrowed before he looked back up at me. “I hope you weren’t planning on using these instructions yourself.”

I shook my head quickly, thinking about how I’d fantasized about doing just that. “No, I told you and Xavier that I’m not going, and I meant it. I understand that it would be super risky if I did, and I don’t want to blow the mission. I figured they’d be helpful for you. Look, they even have fun illustrations.”

Despite what I was telling Greyson, I still couldn’t shake the feeling that I needed to be the one to kill Seluna. Not only would it feel damn good, but it would give me yet another opportunity to show Greyson and Xavier how formidable I could be when faced with a powerful enemy.

Greyson looked surprised, and pleased, that I was being so agreeable. He was probably still shocked that I hadn’t put up more of a fight. He turned his attention to the instructions and read them over before wrinkling his brow. “Is this all?”

“Yeah, it’s a little bare bones, I know, but it should help a little, right?”

Greyson smiled. “Well, if nothing else, it supports the idea that we *can* kill a demon. If it’s like any other supernatural, then we should be able to handle it.”

“I don’t doubt it. You’ve got this. Is there anything else I can do? I really don’t like letting everyone else do all the work and take all the risks.”

Once they left, I knew I’d be consumed with wondering how they were doing and hoping that they were safe. I wasn’t going to be able to relax even a little, though I planned to try.

“The best thing you can do right now is stay safe. I know that sounds patronizing, but I can’t overstate how much I don’t want you anywhere near Seluna—especially after that vision you had. It’s just way too risky. If anything happened to you, if Seluna came after you… I’d never forgive myself.”

I hugged him. “I know. I’ll stay safe, and I’ll send you good vibes from here at the pack house. I know you’re going to kick ass like you always do.” The only solace I had was that my mates were totally badass—and so were the others accompanying them. Seluna and Lucian and the rest of the Vanguards were pretty hardcore, but so was the Redwood pack.

“Thanks, Cali. Your confidence in me means everything.” He brushed a tendril of hair out of my face, and I leaned into his touch. “And don’t worry, I’ll be careful. I’m going to come back to you in one piece—and we’ll have one less threat to worry about, too.”

Greyson leaned in and pressed his warm, soft lips to mine.

I leaned into the kiss and wrapped my arms around his neck, pressing close. I didn’t want him to go—especially without me—but I had to count on the fact that he and Xavier and the others were more than capable of taking Seluna down, and I couldn’t wait to be free of her.

I heard a gasp, and Greyson and I turned to look.

It was Aysel, her jaw dropped in shock. “Since when could you two *kiss*?”

# Episode 2744

**Greyson**

Aysel looked about as startled as I felt by her intrusion.

*I have to be careful with Aysel. No matter how much I’d like to rip her a new one for interrupting us, I need her. She’s going to be a great asset once we get to the palace, and she could make things really difficult for us if she turns on me.*

Cali looked up at me, clearly at a loss about what to say. I started to mind link with her before I remembered that wasn’t an option. *Fuck.* I turned back to Aysel, whose surprise had slowly given way to suspicion.

“How’s this possible? I paid good money for that curse.” She’d crossed her arms and was tapping her foot, waiting for an explanation that she didn’t actually deserve. It burned me up to have to answer to her, but, the situation being as it was, I didn’t have a choice.

“To be fair, you shouldn’t have cursed us in the first place,” Cali said. “And furthermore—”

I squeezed Cali’s hand, and she took the hint, thankfully. I didn’t want them to get into a full-fledged argument. It wouldn’t end well, that much was for sure. I needed to find a middle ground—and fast.

“We have witches in the Redwood pack,” I said nonchalantly. “It wasn’t difficult to break the curse.” *Except it was. It was so hard that I’m still in shock that we managed to pull it off.*

“I was told that curse was practically unbreakable! Oh, now that *really* burns me up. You can’t even find good witch help these days!” Aysel threw up her hands and stormed off.

I started to go after her, then stopped. I wasn’t sure what I could even say. A spike of renewed hate for the Vanguards rushed through me. They had encroached on every aspect of our lives, and now I was being forced to smooth over an issue that *they* hadcaused.

“Want me to talk to her?” Cali offered. “I can try to make her see reason—she needs to realize that she shouldn’t have cursed us in the first place. Why should we feel bad? Is she so self-absorbed that she… Never mind, I already know the answer to that question.”

Cali sighed, and we both stood in silence for a moment, still a bit thrown that we’d been caught in the act in our own pack house. It didn’t feel great.

“I agree with you, Cali, you know I do, but we have to be really careful with Aysel. This entire situation is precarious enough as it is, and we need her help.” I cursed under my breath, wishing that my luck had been better. “If only she could’ve found out after tonight. The timing couldn’t be worse.”

“Tell me about it. I’d completely forgotten that she still thought we were cursed. It’s a wonder that she didn’t catch us before now.”

“True.” I gave Cali a quick peck on the lips, thoroughly miffed that I had to sneak around to kiss my own mate. I knew the damage was already done, but it was best to not rub it in. I held up the instructions Cali had printed out for me. “Thanks for these. Now I’d better go talk to Aysel to make sure we stay on her good side. For now. We can’t have her turning on us when it matters most.”

Aysel, like her brother, was unpredictable and passionate. I didn’t know her all that well, but there was no doubt in my mind that she wasn’t going to take being spurned very well—no one ever did. It wasn’t a good feeling.

I followed after Aysel, not looking forward to the conversation and still not exactly sure what I was going to say to her. I didn’t want to over promise anything, and I was done with the whole fake seduction thing. I didn’t like doing it, and I knew that Cali hated it—even though she’d been completely cool about it. Not to mention that faking being into Aysel wasn’t really fair to her—though I didn’t care all that much about that. She and her brother hadn’t been fair to us from the beginning. I did quick mental inventory of every messed-up thing the Vanguards had done to us, starting with damn near imprisoning us in the palace for their little moon ceremony, up until now, unleashing a body-hopping demon on us.

*I don’t think I’ve ever encountered a more irritating werewolf pack in my life.*

I found Aysel staring out the window, her phone in hand. I tapped her on the shoulder, startling her. “Hey, I just wanted to explain—Cali’s my mate, and—”

“Save it. I know you’ve been stringing me along this entire time.” Her eyes were cold and hard as she looked me up and down, waiting for an explanation.

I couldn’t help but notice that she was looking at me like I was something that she needed to scrape off the bottom of her shoe. *The feeling is mutual, believe me.* “What do you want me to say? It’s not like you put me in an easy position here. You forced me to play along—you put a curse on me. What choice did I have?”

Aysel’s eyes were glistening. “Did you ever feel anything for me? Or was it all just a fun game for you?” The hurt in her voice was obvious, though it was clear that she was trying to hide it.

“There was nothing fun about it. I got no pleasure out of… Listen, Cali’s my mate, and you’re a werewolf. You know better than anyone what that means. Did you really think that putting a revulsion curse on us was going to change that?”

“Oh, give me a break with the mate crap. There’s always a choice. If you’d given us a chance, you would’ve seen that. But you didn’t give us the smallest chance, did you? You just played me long enough to get what you wanted—you and Cali were probably laughing behind my back the whole time!”

“That’s not how it was. And if we’re being honest here, you didn’t give *me* a chance! You cursed me, hoping that I would somehow give up on Cali—but you know as well as I do that mate bonds don’t work like that, no matter how much you wish that they did.” I was doing my absolute best to not call her a spoiled brat. I wanted to scream, “You can’t have everything and everyone that you want!” but I kept that to myself. I could only imagine how it would go over.

“So, did we ever have a shot?” There was a catch in her voice as she spoke.

*No. Not a shot in hell.* I wished I could just say that, but I needed to be honest without being cruel—though she needed to hear some hard truths. I saw the tremble in her lips as she waited for me to respond, and I hoped to hell that she wasn’t about to start crying. I wasn’t her biggest fan by any stretch, but I wasn’t interested in making her cry.

“If things were different and I was still a Rogue and unmated, who knows? You’re an incredibly beautiful, enticing woman. But I’m not a Rogue anymore, and I’m not a single man. Our timing was off, I’m afraid. Besides, a woman like you shouldn’t need a curse to attract someone. Look at you! I’m sure you’re going to be all right.” I watched her closely, wondering if she was going to accept—“Ow!”

*She fucking slapped me!*

“Save it! I can’t believe I was so stupid!” Aysel hissed.

I stood there, trying to ignore the sharp sting in my cheek. She’d put some fire behind that strike. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t seen it coming.

*Shit! Is she going to build on her anger now and refuse to help? If she does that, we’re fucked!*

Aysel turned back to stare out of the window. “I really thought it was going to be you. Everybody thinks that being a princess is so great, but it’s not what everyone makes it out to be.”

I rubbed my cheek and shifted my jaw around. She’d nearly knocked me flat, but I kind of felt sorry for her. She might have been a spoiled royal, but she wasn’t all that different from any other person who felt lonely, and I knew what it was like to feel alone. If I hadn’t been drawn into the fight against my father and come back to protect my brothers, if I hadn’t met Cali… So many ifs. If things had gone differently, I might have hooked up with Aysel, easy. I couldn’t deny that she was the type I might have wanted for a night… But that was before. I wasn’t that Alpha anymore. I was the prime example of a changed man.

Aysel turned back to face me. “Don’t come crawling back to me if she doesn’t pick you.”

She started to walk away.

“Wait, Aysel.” I knew she was mad as hell, but this whole drama between us had been born out of her own designs, and there was something far more important at stake. If she used her anger to pull out of the plan now… “Are you still going to help us?”

# Episode 2745

**Xavier**

“Is this real?” I flipped the paper over in my hands, wondering if there was more on the back, since the front had seemed to barely scratch the surface. Cali had just handed me a list of instructions for killing a demon from a website called *witchiHow*, which was the first red flag. “Did someone actually spend time writing this? And not much time, at that.”

“It’s not like some kid from grade school gave me this!” Cali said, defensive. “It’s from the Obaltarion.”

“It says *witchiHow*.”

“Yeah, well, it’s affiliated, okay?” Cali said. “If you don’t want it, I’ll just take it back!” She reached for it.

I held it just out of her reach and smiled. “Well, that makes it legit, I guess? At least now I know that a demon can die, just like everything else.”

“That’s exactly what Greyson said.” Cali looked deflated.

“Listen, I didn’t mean to insult your research. It’s helpful, really. Thank you for looking into it. Still, it doesn’t really alter my original plan—which is to kill the demon by any means necessary… Except now I know that I should wear an outfit that I don’t like very much, since apparently demon blood stains.”

“Ha. I love your confidence, you know I do, but Seluna has magic—who knows how she’ll use it against you all?”

“Lucky for us, we have the element of surprise on our side. And we also have our own magic. Okorie’s coming with us, remember?” I folded the instructions and put them in my pocket. “I’ll be careful—and I’ll make sure that nothing happens to me. Seluna’s going to pay for all the shit she’s done, and I don’t plan on giving her a chance to see what’s coming.”

“I’m counting on that, but you shouldn’t underestimate Seluna. Look what she did to me. To Dani. And if Aysel is telling the truth, even Lucian’s under her spell.”

“Cali, Lucian’s a dolt, of course she got to him. But we’re smarter and stronger than Lucian, and we have the advantage of being able to see right through Seluna.” Despite my assurances, I could see that Cali was getting worked up, and that was the last thing I wanted. I pulled her into a hug. “I’ll be so careful, Cali, and I’ll watch everyone else’s backs, as well.”

*Even Greyson’s.*

“Okay,” she said slowly.

“We have a plan, and I’ll be with Greyson every step of the way. I know you’re worried about my whole shifting thing, but that’s why Ava’s tagging along, so I won’t have any problems in that area. Seluna doesn’t have a chance, if you ask me.”

I sighed as Cali leaned into me. There was literally nothing I loved more in the world than having her with me.

“Everything you’re saying, I believe,” she said. “But it’s not going to be easy to stay behind twiddling my thumbs while you and the others are off fighting a demon. Nobody in the pack house has experience fighting demons. Not even Okorie.”

I pulled out the instructions. “Killing a demon is just like killing anything else. I know you don’t want to hear it, but I have a lot of experience killing things.” I glanced down at the instructions. “See, I already knew that decapitation is easier with a sharp blade, demon or not. I got this. I doubt I’ll even break a sweat—and we’ll be back before you know it, so you won’t have much thumb-twiddling time at all. I’m deadly, Cali, as Seluna’s about to discover.”

Cali turned away. “I know…”

“Don’t worry. I’m a killing dynamo, if anything.”

“This isn’t a joke, Xavier!”

“I know, I know.” I lifted her chin. “I love you, Cali, you know that, right? That’s all that matters.”

Killing Seluna would bring Cali the relief she deserved, and that alone gave me all the incentive I needed to make sure that we didn’t fail. If we didn’t take Seluna out, if we fell in battle, Cali would be exposed. There was no way in hell I was going to let that happen.

Cali nodded, but she still looked uncertain.

“Do you still trust me?” I asked.

“I do.”

“Then I’m asking you to have some faith. We will kill Seluna.”

“I know. Everything you’ve told me makes sense, and I know you love me…”

“I hear a ‘but’ in there somewhere. What?”

“But I told you about my premonition, when Dani fell on the stairs. I don’t know how, I don’t know why, but I think you and Greyson are making a mistake in not bringing me along.”

I paused. *Is she really trying to talk me into letting her come right now? I’m not agreeing to that, no matter what she says.* “Why do you think that?”

“I don’t know. It’s just a feeling—one that I can’t shake. I feel like I’m supposed to be the one to kill Seluna.”

I cocked a brow. “Oh? So what, are you saying you’re, like, ‘The Chosen One’ or something?”

I stifled a laugh. Cali wasn’t in the mood to joke around, but I couldn’t help myself. She was really pulling out all the stops to make us go back on our decision to leave her behind—and safe—at the pack house.

“No, nothing like that. It’s just a feeling I have. It’s frustrating because I can’t really find the right way to describe it. I just know that I should be there, and that I should give the killing blow.”

“Oh, that’s all? Give the killing blow? Now you sound like a seasoned killer.”

“Xavier! Stop teasing me! It’s not funny.” She was trying hard to hide her smile, but then it went away completely as she continued. “It’s like something’s telling me that I need to reclaim my control by killing her.”

I was surprised to hear that. “That’s funny, coming from someone who’s always arguing against killing. Even when it’s justified.”

I thought about Rhonda and LIPS and how much less stressed I’d be if we’d just been able to get rid of them. We had enough to worry about without having to keep an eye out for the overzealous conservationists who always seemed to pop up when we least expected it. Unsettling didn’t begin to describe how it felt to have humans running rampant on my property.

“I know that it doesn’t make sense and that it’s not on brand or whatever, but this is a demon we’re talking about—not a bunch of nosy humans,” she said, as if reading my mind. “Demons aren’t good for anything—and killing them is doing the world a solid. I don’t know, Xavier. I know it sounds completely crazy, but I just feel like I need to do it.”

“How about you leave the killing to me? I know you’re having all these feelings about it and all, but I just really don’t want you to have to deal with this. I’ll do it. I’ll protect you—I always will.” There was nothing I wouldn’t do for her, and I wished that she could rely on that enough to allow herself to relax and let us take care of things.

Cali leaned against me and laid her head against my chest. “I just want all this to be over.”

“Me too,” I said, stroking her hair.

I wished that there was something more I could say to make her feel better, but I knew that the only thing she wanted to hear right now was that I wanted her by my side at the Vanguard palace, and there was no way in hell I was going to say that. I really just wished that Seluna had possessed me instead—that way I could’ve carried the burden and dealt with all the aftershocks. *Why Cali?*

It broke my heart that I couldn’t really comfort her, that I couldn’t take away the feelings she was having. I pulled away from her and looked her in the eye, drinking her in. Even now, afraid and frustrated and troubled, she was so damn beautiful.

My wolf stirred within me, our mate bond tingling. I kissed her deeply, wasting no time sliding my tongue into the warm cavern of her mouth. I ran my hands down her back, and, unable to help myself, I slipped my hands under her shirt, needing to feel her skin. Cali moaned against my lips and linked her arms around my neck, pushing her soft, perfect breasts against me. I walked her back against the wall and pressed her against it, tunneling my tongue deeper and increasing the intensity.

Having her this close to me was all I ever wanted, every moment of every day. There was no way I would ever let anyone keep me from her—and that included the demon that had no idea what was coming for it.

*Fuck the Vanguards, and fuck Seluna for making my mate feel this way.*

“Cali,” I said between kisses, picking her up while keeping my lips pressed against hers.

“Hmm,” she moaned, her legs wrapped tightly around my waist.

“Let me show you just how much I love you.”

# Episode 2746

I clung to Xavier like I never wanted to let him go. He was my mate, and I loved him so much. I needed him. I only wished that I could keep him with me, right by my side, and that the problems with Seluna and Lucian would just go away on their own.

*But of course they won’t. That’s not how life works.*

Xavier carried me over to the wall, and I leaned against it, shivering as he pushed my shirt up over my breasts without removing it completely. He pressed his lips to my collarbone and then dragged them down to the tops of my breasts and then up to my ear, which he nibbled playfully.

I couldn’t help myself from giggling, but it quickly turned into a gasp as he continued to tease me. He smiled and then brought his lips back to mine, and I ran my hands through his hair, not wanting to think that this could potentially be the last time we were together. As we explored each other’s mouths, I forced myself to think positive.

Xavier would come back to me unharmed. He had to. There was no other option. There was no other way for this to end. I loved him so much, and I knew that he was doing everything in his power to comfort me at a time when everything was so uncertain. We’d been in so many high-stakes situations before, but something about this felt different—and exceedingly more dangerous.

*I just have to trust that the right people are accompanying Xavier and Greyson, and they’ll have their backs.*

I couldn’t help but think of Ava in that moment, but I knew that even though she was going along with the group, Xavier would be coming back to *me*. Not her. No matter how much he needed her, she was only a utility, a means to an end. She would never be more than that to Xavier, and I trusted that wholeheartedly.

I kissed Xavier back, matching his intensity and relishing the feel of his lips sliding against mine. Our tongues met and tangled, and both of us panted as we let our hands roam over each other’s bodies like it was the first time. *Or the last.*

“I love you so much,” Xavier whispered against my lips. He braced one hand on the wall while he held me up with the other, the weight of his body keeping me pinned.

I wrapped my legs tighter around his waist, pulling him even closer. “I love you too, Xavier.”

I tunneled my hands under his T-shirt, turned on by how the rippled plane of his chest and the taut, smooth skin of his abdomen felt against my fingertips. Finally, I reached the bulge in his pants and lingered there, awash in memories of how good it felt to have Xavier inside me.

Xavier groaned and pressed me back against the wall while he wove his fingers through my hair. I threw my head back, and, without delay, he covered my neck in kisses. I dropped my hands down to my sides, allowing him to take the lead and enjoying the feel of being consumed by him. I wanted him so badly, and I knew that he could tell by the way I arched against him, offering myself up to him.

A commotion rose up in the hallway, and we both broke apart, immediately at attention.

“What now?” Xavier groaned, absently straightening his clothes. I did the same, and then we both crept over to the door and peeked out into the hallway to see Zainab standing there, looking distressed.

Seeing us, she let out a sigh of relief and ran over to us. “Xavier! So glad I found you. Um… What are we supposed to wear?” She looked a little sheepish, and I could tell that she’d had to work up her nerve to even ask.

Xavier scrunched up his brow. “Wear to what?”

“To the Luna ceremony! Charlie’s getting all dressed up, and… Is it a formal event?”

I sensed that Zainab was more nervous about going at all than she was about what she was going to wear. I knew better than anyone that anxiety and fear tended to manifest themselves in different ways. I also knew that worrying about outfits and logistical details was the perfect way to keep your mind off the matter at hand—especially when the matter at hand was evil and otherworldly.

“I really don’t think it matters what you wear to a demon slaying,” Xavier said. I could hear the incredulity in his voice, but he was doing a good job of hiding it from Zainab. “Just wear something practical and comfortable. Something you can move around in—something you don’t care about ruining when you shift because odds are, we’re all going to have to shift.”

I looked at Xavier, not entirely convinced that he was taking the right approach. It wasn’t the first time he’d failed to read between the lines. I looked back at Zainab, who was looking even more distressed than before. She gazed down at her simple black T-shirt and leggings, as if gauging whether they might be appropriate.

“Zainab, are you sure you want to go? You know you’re allowed to back out if you don’t feel comfortable doing this,” I said.

I couldn’t imagine the pressure that she had to be feeling, but my mates were understanding and really cared about their pack, so I knew that they wouldn’t hold it against Zainab if she decided to back out.

Zainab shot a glance at Xavier, like she was trying to gauge his reaction, then she looked back at me. “I’ll admit I’m scared. I’ve never faced down a demon before, but there’s no way I’m stepping down. I’m a Redwood werewolf, ‘nough said.” She looked at Xavier proudly as she puffed out her chest.

“Then don’t worry about what to wear,” Xavier replied.

“Okay, got it.” She turned to go, but then stopped and turned back. “What time are we leaving?”

“Good question,” Xavier replied. “It must say on the invite. I’m going to go find Greyson.”

I followed Xavier downstairs, wondering why I hadn’t thought to ask the same thing.

“I assumed because it’s a Luna ceremony it would take place at night,” I said to Xavier. Suddenly, I was unable to shake off memories of the first time we’d “partied” with the Vanguards. I only hoped that Xavier, Greyson, and the others would have better luck getting the upper hand tonight. “Didn’t Joss’s ceremony take place at night? It seems very werewolf-like to have a nighttime Luna ceremony.”

Xavier shrugged. “Not necessarily. It can happen at any time—it’s usually up to the Alpha.”

I recalled that the Luna marking was a painful process. If it got that far tonight, I wished the utmost agony on Seluna for what she was putting all of us through. I didn’t think I’d ever hated anyone as much as I hated Seluna. I’d despised Silas, sure, and I certainly wasn’t a big fan of LIPS or any of the vampires I’d had the displeasure of going up against, but there was something about Seluna that really got under my skin—and maybe it was the fact that she had, quite literally, gotten under my skin.

We found Greyson downstairs in the den with Mrs. Smith. They were talking quietly, and it warmed my heart to see them together at a time like this. I hated to interrupt them, especially when it was clear that Mrs. Smith was very worried about her son, but Xavier clearly didn’t have the same misgivings.

“Where’s that invitation?” Xavier asked as soon as we came through the door.

“I think I put it upstairs. Why?” Greyson replied.

“Did you bother to check what time we’re supposed to be at this demon Luna shindig? We don’t want to be late—and the sooner we can get this whole thing over with, the better.”

“I’ll catch up with you before we leave, okay?” Greyson said to his mother before leading us upstairs. “I think I put it in a drawer in my room.”

“What happened with Aysel?” I blurted out, unable to help myself.

Greyson flashed a look over his shoulder at Xavier, then at me. “She’s going to help. Nothing’s changed. Her only sticking point is that we do our best to keep Lucian out of the line of fire. I told her that we would try—but again, I didn’t make any promises.”

“Especially when in the line of fire is exactly where I want him,” Xavier grumbled.

I squeezed Xavier’s hand. “Careful, she might hear you.”

“I don’t care,” Xavier said. “He deserves what he has coming to him, and then some.”

“That may be true, but we need to do what we can to honor Aysel’s wishes and keep her on our side—unless it puts any of the pack in danger,” Greyson replied.

I couldn’t help but wonder if Greyson had been forced to promise Aysel something else in exchange.

*Hopefully it’s not more dates, and no more of him pretending to be into her. I don’t think I can handle that again.*

I doubted that Greyson would agree to anything like that, but who knew what Aysel would ask of him now that she knew that we needed her?

Greyson led us to his room and yanked open one of his desk drawers. He pulled out the invitation and read it. His face fell. “Fuck. We’re already late.”

# Episode 2747

**Greyson**

I was beyond pissed at myself as I raced to my room to get ready for our Vanguard attack. Why hadn’t I paid attention to the time on the invitation?It was rare for me to miss such an important detail. I chalked it up to how stressed I was about Cali and her safety.

Still, I should have caught it. We had to do everything exactly right. Our lives were on the line. Cali had mentioned that she thought the ceremony was going to take place at night—and I’d assumed the same. That was my mistake. In my experience, Luna ceremonies had always taken place on the late side—but it was clear that Seluna was doing things her own way.

I put on my tie and took one last look at my reflection in the mirror—only to see Cali appear in my doorway. Her face was riddled with worry.

*Seluna will pay for putting Cali through this.*

She walked into the room, wringing her hands as she approached.

I knew exactly how she felt. Whenever Cali was in danger, I was gripped with fear and anxiety—which was undoubtedly exactly what she was going through. Except in her case, it wasn’t just me she was worried about. She had Xavier to think about, too, as well as everyone else who was coming along. It had to be tearing her up inside that she wasn’t coming with us, but there was no way I’d be able to function with her and Seluna in the same room—and I needed to be on my A-game tonight.

I turned to face her, and she straightened my tie.

“Do you think Seluna will approve?” I joked, trying to cut through the tension.

“Don’t make light of this, Greyson. I’m going to be on the edge of my seat all night.” Cali’s voice was barely above a whisper, and the tremor in her words was unmistakable.

“I know you’re going to be worried, Cali, but I’m coming back to you.” I reflected on the course of our relationship, and how destiny had bound us together. “Our story will not end in the halls of the Vanguard palace. I promise you that.”

I pressed my forehead against hers, and we locked eyes. Nothing else needed to be said. I took her hands and squeezed them.

*Remember how she feels. Remember this moment. You love her. There’s nothing that can keep you away from her. Nothing.*

With tremendous difficulty, I pulled away from Cali and went downstairs, where Xavier had pulled the rest of the team together. I could feel the nervous energy in the air—which was all the more reason to put my game face on. As Alpha, it was my job to set the example, to instill confidence in my pack when theirs was on shaky ground—no matter how I felt inside.

“It’s time for us to go.” I looked at each and every face staring back at me. “I want you all to know that I’m counting on you. I know that you’ll lay your lives down for the pack, but I hope that won’t be necessary. I don’t want anyone to be a hero. We’re a team, and we’re in this together.”

I locked eyes with Aysel, and a chill worked its way down my spine. She’d said that she would help out, and I hoped that I could really count on her to do that. If she defected to the other side during the battle, we’d be screwed. I thought back to our conversation earlier, after she’d seen Cali and me kissing. It had seemed like she intended to take the high road, but like I’d said time and time again, the Vanguard pack was nothing if not unpredictable.

“You drive,” Xavier said, breaking me out of my thoughts.

“Fine by me,” I said, happy for the distraction it would bring.

I took one last long look at Cali before I led everyone out of the house. We piled into the large SUV that Rishika had pulled around to the front, everyone so silent you could’ve heard a pin drop. I jumped behind the wheel, and everyone squeezed in together. Once they all settled, I pulled out onto the road.

I glanced at Aysel in the rearview mirror, wondering what she was going to do once we were in the thick of things. We’d promised her that we would do our best to not hurt her asshole brother, but the situation we were walking into was complicated, and it could turn chaotic at the drop of a dime.

*What will Aysel do if Lucian is killed? Take it out on me, most likely. Or worse—Cali.*

I had to do my absolute best to keep Lucian out of it. Aysel was right; the princeling had been seduced, brainwashed. He wasn’t aware of the danger he’d put himself—and everyone else—in, and now we had to clean up his mess or suffer the consequences.

But I was getting ahead of myself. Lucian would be taken care of, in time. The only thing I needed to focus on right now was how we were going to take Seluna down without suffering any casualties. I didn’t plan on losing any of my pack tonight. We needed to get in, carry out our mission, and get out. There could only be one outcome—the one that brought me back home to Cali where I belonged, and that brought my pack home safely as well.

I looked around at the familiar landscape leading to the Vanguard grounds. After we’d rescued Cali from the palace last time, I’d never thought we’d be back again, and definitely not under these circumstances. I only hoped that this would be the last time that we’d ever have to lay our eyes on the Vanguards and their gaudy palace. It would end here, tonight.

I rolled to stop. The palace was just ahead. I took a deep breath. “Is everyone ready?”

Nearly everyone responded with solemn nods. Zainab looked the most nervous of all—and I couldn’t blame her. Demon killing wasn’t something any of us had ever thought we’d have to do. I considered giving them a quick pep talk, just to let everyone know that I couldn’t imagine going up against such a tough threat with anyone else by side, but in the end, I decided against it. I’d already done that back at the pack house, and I didn’t want them to think that our situation was so dire that it required another one. I sighed and turned back to face the palace. It was now or never.

I drove up to the gate—which they’d done a good job of repairing. A guard stopped us and asked for our invitation. I reached a hand into my suit jacket to get it, but Aysel put her hand on my arm, stopping me.

“Really, don’t you know who I am?” she snapped.

“Oh… Yes, of course, princess.” The guard turned on his heel and immediately opened the gate.

I pulled ahead, stopping at the palace entrance. As we all piled out of the car, I turned to Xavier. “Remember, if I fail—”

“Don’t worry,” Xavier said quickly. “If you fuck up, I’ll kill Seluna myself.”

I smiled. “But don’t get your hopes up—I don’t plan to fuck up.” I gestured to Aysel. “Once we’re with Lucian, keep an eye on her.”

We gave each other one last meaningful glance, then we all went inside, Aysel leading the charge.

As soon as we walked through the door, an attendant ran up and bowed to Aysel, but as he straightened, I could see that he was a little puzzled by Aysel’s current less than princess-y appearance. “Uh—the prince has been expecting you. Please follow me.”

As we moved through the palace, I couldn’t help but notice how right Aysel had been about Seluna’s redecoration efforts. The place looked like it had been through a tornado. There were broken statues strewn all over the place and dust and dirt all over the floors, and the Vanguard family portraits had all been removed from the walls. I’d never particularly liked the place or its over-the-top décor, but at the very least, it had looked manicured and well put together. The palace was now a far cry from what it had been, and that said enough about Lucian’s mental state. The old Lucian would never have allowed anyone to see his home this way. He was way too vain.

*Lucian was really into showing off his so-called royal blood, and now there isn’t a trace of that anywhere. Seluna must have really twisted his brain.*

I could only imagine how upset Aysel had to be, seeing her home in such disrepair at the hand of a demon that had her fingers buried deep in her brother’s brain. I turned to see how she was reacting to all of this… But she was no longer beside me.

Aysel was gone.

# Episode 2748

**Greyson**

Now that I’d realized Aysel was gone, I took a quick inventory of everyone around me, hoping that I’d just missed her by mistake.

*I’m not stupid. She’s not here. She abandoned us the first chance she got.* I swore under my breath, not wanting to worry the others but barely able to contain my anger. *What did I expect? Of course she would fucking betray us the second we got here. I should’ve known that this would happen.*

I felt like a fool, and I couldn’t help but wonder if Aysel running off was a bad omen. To be fair, though, this whole mission was a bad omen, with or without Aysel.

“Wow, this place is huge,” Charlie said, twisting around to take it all in. “What do you think the mortgage runs on a place like this—unless they’re renting? They’re not renting, right?”

“I sincerely doubt that,” Xavier said.

“We could fit like ten of the pack house in here,” Zainab said. “It’s so beautiful.”

“I don’t know about that part,” Charlie remarked with a frown.

“I’ve seen better. One of the witch dignitaries I know has an entire lake in the middle of her house, and chandeliers for days. This is child’s play next to that,” Okorie said. “Plus it’s dirty as hell. It looks like a statue hoarder who secretly hates statues lives here… Why are they all broken and thrown about everywhere?”

“I don’t know, rich people do strange things sometimes. Maybe they break them for sport?” Zainab said. “If I were rich and bored, I’d have a bunch of weird hobbies and talents, and I’d dare anyone to judge me.”

“Well, if I were rich, I’d have a statue breaking room for those sorts of activities,” Okorie said with distaste. “Or should I say, *when* I’m rich. Rich and famous, of course.”

“Of course,” Charlie said with an eyeroll.

Happy that the crew had found something of interest to take their minds off the total madness we were most likely walking into, I pulled Xavier off to the side. “Aysel’s gone.”

Xavier looked alarmed for a split second before he got his expression under control. “What? Where the hell did she go?” He took a stiff look around, trying not to be obvious.

“I’m not sure. I tried to pick up her scent, but it’s no use since there are so many werewolves in here. I did catch another scent in the air, as well. It’s like incense or something, and it’s muddying up my senses.”

“Do you think this might have been Aysel’s plan all along? To lure us back here using the invitation and then leave us hanging and vulnerable?” I could tell by the look on my brother’s face that he was as pissed as I was.

“That crossed my mind,” I said. I still felt so foolish. I’d thought her concern about her brother was genuine—maybe one of the only genuine emotions I’d really ever seen her have. Maybe she’d just been too good an actress and played off my own relationship with my brother—though she had no idea that Xavier would never admit to caring about me, only Colton, and that we were far from the model family.

“What about Ava?”

Xavier shrugged. “Coming.”

*How helpful*.

I was just about to tell Xavier to tell the others to be on high alert when Andrei came walking over. I narrowed my eyes at the giant werewolf, the hairs on the back of my neck rising.

*Where there’s an Aysel problem, Andrei is sure to follow.* For all I knew, Andrei was in on Aysel’s little plan. *I need to figure out their angle—fast.*

Andrei flashed me a cold smile. “Welcome to the Vanguard Luna ceremony. I have to be honest; I didn’t think the Redwood Alpha was going make it on time.”

Xavier and I exchanged a look.

“Well, the invitation wasn’t exactly prompt, either,” I said tightly. “So I guess it *is* a surprise that we managed to make it here without a hitch.”

“Well despite the short notice, you all managed just fine, didn’t you? Anyway, you’re late as it is—let’s get you to the cocktail hour. The ceremony will begin soon.” Andrei walked off, waving for us to follow.

After a moment’s hesitation, I followed, the others trailing behind me. I was still keeping an eye out for Aysel, and still attempting to sniff out her scent, but I wasn’t having any luck so far. I’d expected her to cross us, but not the moment we walked into the palace. I’d thought she’d at least wait until the actual fight was underway. *Maybe it’s better this way.*

As we made our way down the long hallway, we passed by a set of double doors that had been flung wide open to reveal a courtyard filled with flowers, a wedding arch standing in the center of it all. I had to admit that I was impressed by the arch, which was made of white wood and encrusted with pearls, opals, and moonstones. It was the very definition of extravagance—not that I would’ve expected anything less from the Vanguards.

Then something else caught my eye. I hadn’t been to a lot of weddings, but I knew that typically, there was one side of the aisle designated for one partner, and one side for the other. On one side of the arch was a bunch of statues, set up as if they were waiting to watch the ceremony. I nudged Xavier, who nodded slowly, his eyes wide.

“That’s not something you see every day,” he muttered. “Not to mention one of the creepiest things I’ve ever seen.”

“That’s an understatement,” I said distractedly, unable to tear my gaze away from the statues. There were a lot of them, and I didn’t like the feeling I got in my stomach as I looked at them. This wasn’t good. I remembered what Kira had said about demons lying in wait. But how were we supposed to know if it was a regular statue or a demon? It wasn’t like I’d ever been faced with anything like this before—which only added to my uncertainty.

I tore my gaze away from the courtyard and continued to follow Andrei, who led us into the grand hall, where the cocktail hour was taking place. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was being watched, almost as if all the statues from the courtyard still had their eyes on me.

“Here we are,” Andrei said with a flourish. “Get a drink, loosen up, enjoy yourselves.”

An attendant came up to Andrei and whispered something in his ear.

“Please excuse me,” he said, and then he was gone.

I turned to face the group, who were now taking in the extravagance of the great hall and the classy setup.

“No drinks, no food,” I said. “Just blend in and keep your heads on a swivel.”

I scanned the crowd for any sign of Aysel, but she was nowhere to be found. Neither were Lucian or Seluna, which was just as well, since I was still trying to figure out what our approach would be.

“But wouldn’t blending in involve eating some of the food?” Zainab asked, eyeing a massive tower of cupcakes sitting on a platter held by a statue. “Just playing devil’s advocate,” she added quickly. “We want to look natural, right? What could be more natural than enjoying what the cocktail hour has to offer?”

I sighed. “Just take some and fake it. Don’t eat or drink *anything*. We don’t know if Lucian’s slipped anything into the food or drinks this time around. We all need to be sharp.”

“Got it,” everyone said in near unison, though no one but Zainab moved off to partake. Everyone else stayed huddled close, trying to get a read on the place and the people.

Xavier and I sidled up to Okorie, who narrowed his gaze at us as we approached.

“What?” he asked. “You don’t have to tell me twice not to drink—I’m pretty picky.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s Aysel. You must have noticed that she’s gone,” I said. “Do you have a way to find out where she went?”

Just as I finished my sentence, a set of doors at the far end of the hall opened, and Aysel walked in.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I muttered.

“Did she just leave to go change her clothes?” Xavier asked, incredulous.

“Seems that way.” I was annoyed but relieved. Aysel’s newest getup was elegant but also dramatic.

I was about to go to her when I heard a yelp. Everyone turned to look at Zainab, who had a cupcake in her hand. She quickly scurried back over to join us, her eyes wide.

“Greyson!” she gasped loudly, garnering even more stares.

“What?”

Her eyes were full of alarm, and then she quickly changed demeanor. Zainab laughed casually for a moment, as if I’d said something hilarious. Then once the other guests had turned away and all gone back to their conversations, Zainab leaned close and lowered her voice. “The statues—I think they’re alive!”

# Episode 2749

**Xavier**

I didn’t want to believe that what Zainab was saying was true, but it tracked with what Kira had said about the statues possibly being demons. And now here Zainab was, all but confirming it.Though, no one else had seen it. Somehow, I’d thought we’d have a bit more time before all hell broke loose—literally. I’d at least hoped to get to the ceremony before we had to worry about the statue thing.

I looked around the room, and unease settled into the pit of my stomach. There were a whole fucking lot of statues here.I clenched my fists, readying myself for a fight. Would we be able to take them on if they decided to ambush us?I wasn’t sure. I didn’t even want to think about how many statues there might be that weren’t in this room. Lucian and Seluna might have an entire army of them, for all we knew.

“Can you elaborate?” Greyson asked, casting me a look. “What exactly did you see?”

Zainab took a look around, making sure that none of the other guests were listening in. “I had my eye on those cupcakes from the moment I entered the room, so of course once you gave the all clear, I rushed over to get one. And then, just as I picked up the cupcake, I looked up, and the statue was looking right at me. Of course, I thought I’d imagined it, so I blinked my eyes a few times thinking it was just my imagination, but then it held my gaze before the eyes turned back to stone. It was so scary.” She held the cupcake and examined it closely. “This thing doesn’t look worth nearly having a heart attack.”

“I don’t know, maybe it was just a trick of the light?” I offered, not wanting to believe that the strange shit had already started. If the statues were already staring people down, that meant that things could get real far faster than I’d anticipated.

“Yeah, my mom has a statue at home, and its eyes always seem to follow me wherever I go. Statues are always kind of freaky like that,” Charlie added, obviously trying to be helpful. “I’ve asked her to get rid of it multiple times, but she loves that thing.”

“Is it possible that you’re just a little on edge about everything?” I asked.

Zainab shook her head. “No, seriously, I just had a staring contest with a statue—what part aren’t you getting?”

I was surprised that she was sticking to her story—which meant that maybe there was something to it after all. I’d had a pretty uneasy feeling when we’d passed that courtyard, myself—and it had been almost entirely due to the creepy statues arranged like wedding guests.

*But there’s a lot to be uneasy about right now. Not only are we about to witness a Luna ceremony between an Alpha and a demon, but we still have to face Lucian at some point.*

At the thought of Lucian and Seluna, I took a quick glance around the room. I did not want them to catch me by surprise. I needed to see them coming.

“Okay, okay. Try to calm down. Just play it cool. If anything else happens, make sure to let me know.” Greyson turned to the others. “And I advise the rest of you to do the same. Just keep a cool head, no matter what. I hate to say this, but there will probably be plenty of weirdness at this party.”

“You can say that again,” I grumbled. I’d never come to the Vanguard palace and *not* had something extremely weird happen.

“So be on your toes, and don’t let your guard down for a second—even when you’re grabbing a snack,” Greyson said, trying unsuccessfully to lighten the mood.

“Sure, we’ll be careful,” Charlie said. “Though I think I’ll be skipping the baked goods. I’m not interested in being stared down by a statue.”

“I wouldn’t mind it, as long as it’s not tampering with the food,” Okorie said with a shrug.

A set of doors opened, and I caught a familiar scent that took precedence over all of the other sensory overloading aromas in the room. *Ava.* She’d finally showed up.

She walked through the doors, and my wolf leapt up inside me. I took in a sharp breath as my wolf reacted more intensely than ever before. It almost felt like it was slamming against my ribcage, forcing me to stop and catch my breath, making me work overtime to keep my cool, like Greyson had suggested—though for a very different reason.

Ava looked damn good—anyone with eyes would’ve been able to see that—and she’d changed into a dress that absolutely jolted me. It looked identical to one I remembered from long ago, when we’d hooked up in the bathroom at a restaurant. My wolf raged as I recalled running my hands up and down her body, filling her mouth with my tongue and lifting the dress up over her hips to get at the warmth of her center. I’d been completely lost in her that day, and now I licked my lips like I was tasting her again right now.

I shook my head, working overtime to pull my attention out of the past and back into the present. Ava’s gaze combed the room, and when her eyes caught mine, my wolf growled in appreciation. It took everything I had to stay put and not run to her side.

*This isn’t why you’re here. Keep it together, Xavier.*

Ava’s wide eyes stayed rooted to mine until she turned away and gestured to someone who was on the other side of the door.

*What, did she come with someone? She didn’t tell me that she was bringing anyone with her.*

My wolf growled again, but this time in anger. I wished that I could swallow the possessive feeling rising in my chest, but I couldn’t—it had taken me over. Rather than waiting for her to come to me, I was the one who went to her.

“Xavier. Sorry I’m a little late to the party,” Ava said with a half-smile.

“Who the hell—” My words died in my throat as Knox walked in.

Of course. I should’ve known.

“Long time no see, Xavier,” Knox said smugly.

I looked between Ava and Knox, renewed anger bubbling up inside me. I didn’t have time to keep an eye this guy with everything else that was going on.

Ava’s mind link came through in a sudden rush. *I couldn’t stop him. He was asking all these questions about where I was going, but I didn’t give him any details about what’s going on.*

I nodded, slightly comforted by her explanation. I thought back to when Greyson had asked me if I trusted Ava. I was surprised that she was sort of coming through on everything she’d promised, but there was still a bit of doubt there.

“You clean up well, Xavier,” Knox said. “You have decent fashion sense—for a murderer.”

“Excuse me?” *See, this is exactly what I don’t need.*

“I know you’re the one who killed my cousin,” he said, putting a protective arm around Ava’s shoulders. “And no thanks to you, Ava’s back among the living, where she always should have been.”

I looked at Ava, who, if anything, looked awkward.

“That’s enough, Knox,” she said. “I didn’t bring you here to make waves. We’re here representing the Samara pack for the Vanguard Luna ceremony, and that’s it. Don’t make a scene.”

Knox shrugged, his eyes still on me.

My wolf rose up within me, wanting to go at Knox with everything we had. *You need to teach him a lesson in respect, Xavier.*

I didn’t disagree with my wolf—it was clear that Knox was trying to start something that I would have no problem finishing… under different circumstances. Ava had told me that Knox took after Nolan, and so far, that seemed to be true. He’d apparently even taken up Nolan’s vendetta against me for killing Ava—even though it had been more than justified. But this wasn’t the time to get into any of that, and I could tell by the look on Ava’s face that she wasn’t interested in travelling down that well-worn and bumpy road, either.

Ava looked between Knox and me, and then turned to her cousin. “Let’s play nice tonight. You have a lot of people to meet, Knox.”

Knox shrugged and grabbed a flute of champagne from a passing tray held by one of the few non-statue waitstaff. He threw back the entire flute and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Are you even old enough to drink?” I asked. He truly seemed like some punk kid, and I wasn’t going to let him get away with much more—despite the precarious nature of our situation.

Knox flashed his smug grin again. “Don’t worry about it. In fact, you should be more worried about yourself and what might happen to you when we leave this place later tonight.”

# Episode 2750

I was scrolling through a listicle looking for Christmas present ideas for Greyson and Xavier in an attempt to distract myself from reality, but my heart wasn’t exactly in it. How could it be? No matter how many “fun gift ideas” I read about, all I could think about was how my mates had gone off to the Vanguard palace for the zillionth time in such a short period. They’d been put in danger so many times because of me, though to be fair, this particular incident was completely demon-inflicted.

*Thanks a lot, Seluna.*

I just hoped that they’d be okay and that if everything went well, all of this would end tonight. I couldn’t wait to feel safe again without worrying that Lucian, Aysel, or—worst of all—Seluna might pop up on our doorstep at any moment. No matter how much I understood why I had to stay behind, I just couldn’t shake the feeling that I should be with my mates at the palace—and be the one to kill Seluna.

It would give me much-needed closure—and it would probably do the same for Dani, too. Just to see for myself that Seluna was gone for good would be a relief. It wasn’t that I didn’t think that Xavier and Greyson were capable of eliminating Seluna, I just had the overwhelming desire to put her out of her misery myself.

I sighed and turned back to the massive list of gift ideas on the screen in front of me. It had everything, from plants to bathrobes to candles to bubble bath sets.

*Hundreds and hundreds of items, and I can’t choose one.* I scrolled through nearly the entire list before I clicked all the way back up to the bathrobe. *Monogrammed? Does Greyson even need a bathrobe? Does he even get cold? Not really.*

I sighed and moved on to something else. I stopped on a robotic vacuum cleaner.

*Is this something Xavier needs? Or would it suggest that I don’t think he’s very clean?*

The entire pack house would probably benefit from it, come to think of it. I couldn’t remember the last time anyone had vacuumed, and there were still pine needles on the floor from when Jay and Ravi had brought the Christmas tree in. I’d been stabbed in the foot by enough of those pine needles to know that we needed to get a little better about our housekeeping habits. I scrolled a bit more until the screen started to go a bit blurry. I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose, feeling the slight tug of a headache. Maybe I was overdoing it.

I closed the laptop and groaned as I laid my forehead down on top of it.

*How am I supposed to be in the holiday spirit right now when I just watched my mates run head first into danger?*

I lifted my head up just as Lola came walking in with two mugs of hot chocolate topped with mounds of mini marshmallows.

“Wait!” Lola squealed. “I thought we were gift shopping? What happened to, ‘Lola, I need to find my mates a gift! If I don’t get something soon, I won’t have anything!’?”

“That’s still true,” I admitted. “Not to mention that I have no clue when Torin’s going to want to bring the whole Secret Santa thing into action. Do you think it’ll be on Christmas or before?”

Lola shrugged. “I have no idea. Knowing Torin, he’ll want to spring it on everyone so that it’s a surprise.”

“Ugh. Lola, this is the worst! I just don’t know how I’m supposed to be thinking about ordering a puzzle with my mates’ faces on it when Lucian could be forcing them into a demon ritual as we speak.”

I’d tried my best not to picture Xavier and Greyson facing off against the Vanguards, but whenever I closed my eyes, all I could see was Seluna’s leering face and a dumb, lovestruck Lucian standing beside her as they pelted Xavier and Greyson with fiery magic.

Lola winced. “Yeah, that’s pretty bad. Here, have some hot chocolate.” She shoved one of the mugs at me. “Chocolate fixes everything, right?”

“Let’s hope so.” I took the mug from Lola and slurped a puff of marshmallow off the top. “So, what did you get for Jay?” I asked. I wanted to talk about anything that would distract me from fixating on the boys. Maybe getting a dose of normalcy from Lola would help clear my mind.

Lola brightened as she chewed on some marshmallow. “I got these custom mugs off Etsy from that same person who made those cute pink elephant teacups I liked. It’s two mugs that when you clink them together, they form a heart with Jay’s and my initials. It’s super cheesy, but Jay loves that kind of stuff.”

“Wow, that’s a great gift idea.”

*That’s such a romantic and thoughtful gift for Jay. It’s the type of gift I should’ve been able to come up with for Xavier and Greyson, but my head’s just not in the game.* It made me feel like I didn’t know them well enough—though that wasn’t the case at all. It was just a lot of pressure, and, paired with my current mental state, I was just having a really hard time.

I sighed and looked up at Lola, deciding to rely on my friend in my time of need. *That’s what friends are for, right?* “So… I’m having a little trouble picking gifts for Xavier and Greyson because, well, despite the current issue of their possible looming death, I don’t want to get one of them a seemingly more romantic gift than the other.”

I could only imagine them comparing notes after I gave them their gifts, and all the conclusions that they would draw before they would inevitably decide whose gift was more meaningful. The thought of that alone was enough to give me nightmares, and I didn’t need any more of those.

“Hmm, that is quite a pickle. What if you get them the same thing but in different colors or something?”

I shook my head, my mouth full of marshmallows. “That would be way worse. Getting them the same thing would be so insulting. I value and love them both, but it’s so hard to figure out a gift for that, which was why I was considering a frickin’ vacuum, or a mac and cheese cookbook.”

Lola frowned. “Sorry, but I would hate it if Jay got me a mac and cheese cookbook.”

My face fell.

“But I understand where you’re coming from!” Lola added quickly. “You want to get them something thoughtful that doesn’t indicate any kind of choice or preference, right?”

I nodded, washing down another swallow of marshmallows with hot chocolate. Lola was a lifesaver—the marshmallow-filled hot chocolate was really hitting the spot. Not only that, but it was helping to take the edge off the residual stress from when Seluna had tried to force me to choose between Xavier and Greyson, and then finding out that Big Mac knew whether or not the death curse had been broken… It was all a lot to process. The last way I’d want to choose between my mates was through a stupid gift. I would never forgive myself.

I got up from the bed with my cup in hand. “I need more marshmallow therapy.”

Lola laughed while firing up my laptop up again. “That sounds like a good idea. Bring me a few to top mine off, too, if you don’t mind. In the meantime, I’ll get some ideas together. We’re going to figure this gift thing out.”

“Thanks, Lola,” I said, truly thankful for my best friend in that moment. She really had a way of bringing me right back down to reality when I needed it most.

I felt just a bit lighter as I left my room and headed for the kitchen. As I turned the corner, I nearly ran into Dani. We spent a few awkward moments trying to pass each other, but we only managed to keep getting in each other’s way. Finally, I stopped and laughed it off awkwardly. “I guess we’re not meant to pass each other.”

“I guess not,” Dani said in a decidedly more serious voice than mine.

“How… how are you after everything that happened earlier?”

Dani paused to consider the question. “Honestly, I’ve been feeling a little off. I was going to lie down and try to sleep off whatever this is.”

“Okay, well you do that. Let me know if you need anything.” I gave her a small smile, and we moved to pass each other, but as we did, my world started to get hazy again—just like it had while I’d been looking at gifts a few moments ago. The edges of my vision blurred completely, and my legs went wobbly. My hot chocolate crashed to the ground as everything went black.

The next thing I knew, I opened my eyes to see that I was standing in front of the Vanguard palace.

*WTF just happened?!*

# Episode 2751

I felt completely disoriented as I spun around, taking in the familiar sight of the expansive Vanguard grounds all around me. If I hadn’t been absolutely certain that I was awake, I would’ve thought I was dreaming again.

*But no, this isn’t a dream. I’m here. I’m really here. But how the hell did I get here?*

I didn’t remember leaving the pack house… I didn’t think I’d even made it downstairs to get more marshmallows. So how exactly had I gone from standing in the pack house hallway with Dani to lurking around in front of the Vanguard palace? I closed my eyes tightly and thought hard, trying my best to retrace my steps. I could just make out the foggiest memory of getting into the car and driving here… But why on Earth would I do that?

I nearly jumped out of my skin at the sound of another voice.

“What the hell?” It was Dani!

“You’re here, too?!” I said as we locked eyes.

“Is this… We’re at the Vanguard palace?”

“Yeah… but I have no idea why—or how.”

“What’s going on here?” Dani said, more to herself than to me, her voice shrill with panic. She was still looking around and blinking a lot, just like I’d been doing only few seconds earlier.

“I have no idea! Do you have *any* idea how we got here?”

“All I remember is that one of us, or maybe both of us, suddenly said that we needed to get in the car, and we both agreed… And then you drove us here.”

My gut twisted with confusion. “I don’t remember any of that…”

But somehow, I believed her.

We both turned to look back at the palace, where we could hear music playing, then we looked back at each other and said, “We need to get out of here.”

I turned and looked around, hoping to see the car parked nearby, but there was nothing. Nothing but the massive Vanguard property with its daring landscaping and numerous fountains and that strange music blaring from inside the house.

*Okay, all we need is the car I apparently drove us in, then we’ll drive away and pretend like none of this ever happened.*

“Dani, you don’t happen to remember where we parked the car, do you?” I dug my hands into my pockets and felt around for my keys, but I didn’t have them. “What the fuck? Where did the keys go?”I checked out the ground. “Maybe I dropped them somewhere?”

“Forget the car,” Dani said. “We need to go, now. We’ll run back on foot if we have to.”

“Good idea.”

It’d be much easier if we had a werewolf with us, since they would make quick work of getting us back home, but Dani and I would just have to make do. Top priority for me was getting as far away from the palace as possible before my mates realized I was nearby—I’d promised them that I wouldn’t come to the palace, and that was a promise I planned to keep.

*I guess I’ve already broken that promise by standing here on the Vanguard front lawn, but this is hardly my fault.*

It seemed strange that there was absolutely no one around. It was typical to see a few guards milling about, or to spot an attendant or two tending the grounds—anything—but the entire area was eerily quiet and deserted, which made the reality of what had happened to us even more unsettling.

Clearly something—or someone—had led us here, and Seluna’s name was at the top of my list. Who else would have had the ability, let alone the motive, to lure us back to the Vanguard palace against our will?

*I’m probably not going to be able to get to the bottom of it right now, so there’s no use getting fixated on it.*

“Seluna’s behind this,” I said. “She has to be.”

“Yeah. Let’s not stick around to find out why,” Dani said.

“Agreed.”

Dani and I started back toward the main gate, and I noticed a footprint in the mud—from my own shoe!

“Look, Dani, there’s a footprint. I think we came in this way!”

The momentary win was fleeting as fear rippled through me. It was so scary to realize that I’d lost control of my body—again. At least when I’d been possessed by Seluna, I’d been generally lucid and known what was happening, even if I hadn’t been in direct control the entire time—but this? This was a blackout—which was way scarier to me than my Seluna experience.

We were just about to push through the gates when I spotted a phone on the ground.

*Wait a second, that’s my phone.*

I picked it up and saw that I had a bunch of missed calls from Lola and Jay. I stared at it, dumbfounded, wondering if I’d lost anything else during our little blackout excursion. “Do you have your phone, Dani? We should call someone from the pack house to let them know we’re here.”

“Good idea,” Dani said, pulling out her own phone. Oh thank god she had it.

I tried to swipe my screen to call Lola back, but then my vision blurred again and I couldn’t see the screen—or anything else, for that matter. This time, though, I registered that I wasn’t unlocking my phone to call Lola back. No, instead, I pulled my arm back and flung my phone into the forest.

“What the hell?” Dani yelled as my vision cleared. “Why did you do that?”

I had no answer. “I—I have no idea. Something just came over me. I’m not sure what.”

I stood there, feeling dizzy and fighting against the urge to collapse to the ground. It was then that I realized I was facing the palace again, even though I’d been looking at the gate moments before.

Dani shook her head and looked down at her phone. “I’m going to call Marta; maybe she can come and pick us up.” Then Dani’s eyes glazed over, and she threw her phone into the forest, too. She turned to me with that strange, dull look in her eyes. “We should go inside.”

“Go inside? No, that’s the opposite of what we should do! We’re trying to leave, remember?”

Despite my protests, my feet began to march me right back toward the palace. *Why is this happening to me? Why can’t I stop?* I used every ounce of strength I had to struggle against it, but there was no use. Dani was marching right beside me, and I tried to call her name to get her to stop, but nothing came out.

*All right, Cali, focus!* *This is Seluna! A fucking crazy demon lady! She’s doing something with the residual magic in both of us, but why? She has her original body back, isn’t that enough?*

My vision started to get fuzzy again, and I realized that we were now inside the palace. I could hear the bustle of a party in one of the rooms nearby, and music was playing. If I wasn’t mistaken, it was the same music that I’d heard outside… When had that been? Minutes ago? Were we following the music or something?

“Caliana!”

My vision cleared, and suddenly I was looking at a familiar face. Andrei.

“Caliana? Can you hear me? What are you doing here? I thought the Redwood party had already arrived.”

“I’m so sorry, Andrei, there’s been some sort of mistake… Dani and I can’t stay.” I turned to look at Dani, who still had the glazed look in her eyes and was swaying ever so slightly on her feet. An idea occurred to me. “Andrei, do you think I could trouble you to call a car for us? We need to get back to the Redwood pack house as soon as possible. We would so appreciate it.”

Andrei started to answer, but then a door opened behind him and a few guests hurried out and scurried down the hall, probably in search of a bathroom. They left the door partially open, and the loud music spilled out, filling my senses and taking my breath away. My heart skipped a beat. I could see Xavier and Greyson just beyond the doors, and my worry increased.

I didn’t know why Seluna had brought us here, nor was I convinced that she was even aware she’d done it. If my last interaction with Seluna was any indication, she was through with me and Dani and considered us complete non-factors. So why were we here? All I knew was that I needed to keep my mates safe, and that meant that I needed to do everything in my power to *not* jeopardize the plan.

*Which means that I need to get the hell out of here!*

I turned back to Andrei and put on the most pleasant smile that I could manage. “So, Andrei, about that car…”

Andrei shook his head. “I’m sorry, ladies, I really am, but no one can leave the grounds tonight.”

# Episode 2752

**Greyson**

Once Zainab had calmed down enough to be left alone, I made a beeline for Aysel. I had no clue what Aysel had been thinking, or why she hadn’t at least warned us that she was slipping away. A simple, “Hey, I’m going to get changed,” could have saved us a lot of stress, but I shouldn’t have been surprised that Aysel hadn’t thought about anyone but herself. I was certain that she’d never learned to stop and consider other people, so why would she start now?

I glanced back over my shoulder, keeping my eye on Xavier, who was talking with Ava and some other guy that I didn’t recognize.

*At least Ava made it. Now I don’t have to worry about Xavier’s wolf flipping out on top of everything else.* I knew Xavier well enough to know when he was tense, and the exchange between Xavier and the stranger Ava had brought along was definitely that. *My brother can handle himself. I need to focus on feeling Aysel out.*

“Greyson, hi,” Aysel said, practically preening as I went up to her.

“Hi, Aysel. Wow, don’t you look different.” I could admit, objectively, that she looked ravishing. Her long, silky hair had been washed and styled in ringlets that trailed down her back and pooled in her cleavage, and her makeup was impeccable and understated. I’d seen more than a few admirers look her way as she’d entered the room. *Little do they know, she’s a fucking handful.*

Aysel beamed at me and gave a partial twirl, the delicate beads on her elegant dress clattering as she did so. “What, this old thing?”

“Cut the shit. Why didn’t you tell me where you were going?”

Aysel rolled her eyes. “Did you really think I would come to a party of this caliber—a party for my brother, no less—in those old rags I was wearing? Please. You should know me better by now.”

Aysel seemed bored with me, and she glanced around the room—not unlike someone searching for a more entertaining party guest to talk to.

I was happy not to be the apple of her eye anymore, and this was all normal behavior for Aysel. I was still a little frustrated with her, but I was also relieved. *At least it doesn’t seem like she’s bailing on the plan.* “How about next time you need a wardrobe change—”

“There could be, if you help,” Aysel interrupted with a coy smile.

I gritted my teeth and continued. “Next time, you need to tell me.”

Aysel put a hand on my cheek. “Don’t worry your pretty little head about it, Greyson. I’m still with you—but now I’m with you in one of my best getups. How lucky you are!” Aysel’s gaze flitted around the room again before it came back to rest on me. “So, did you notice all the new—and dreadfully different—décor? Isn’t it exactly how I described? Awful.”

I looked around the room, taking in the decorations, but also focusing on all the statues as I remembered what Zainab had said about being stared down by the statue holding the cupcakes. Funnily enough, just as I thought about it, Zainab cautiously approached the cupcake statue once again. She snatched a cupcake without even looking at the statue and then rushed off to rejoin the others.

And who could forget all the statues arranged like undead guests in the courtyard?I couldn’t help but wonder if what Kira had read in her book was true. Could each and every one of the statues be a trapped demon? And if they were, where the hell had Seluna even gotten them from?Seluna needed to be killed—there was no question about that now. A demon army was the last thing we needed. We’d already gone up against so much, and we needed to nip whatever this was in the bud before it got out of hand. I didn’t care if we hurt Lucian’s precious feelings in the process.

*Hell, maybe once it’s all said and done—and if he survives—he’ll thank us for showing him the truth about his beloved moon goddess.* But at this point, that seemed like wishful thinking.

Still, even though Lucian made my skin crawl, he didn’t seem like a complete idiot, so maybe there was still hope for him.

“Stick close to the group,” I said to Aysel. “If you have to pretend that I’m your date, fine, but don’t take any liberties.”

Aysel flashed me a fake smile. “That won’t be necessary. Our conversation cleared everything up well enough earlier.”

I remembered the slap—and how much it had stung. Worth it. “I’m glad. Where’s your brother, by the way? This is his party, after all.”

Aysel sighed. “Lucian’s likely going to make an entrance, like he always does.”

I was surprised by the hint of worry I detected in her voice. “Don’t worry, we have a plan, but if you can convince your brother that Seluna is a demon, then it would be great to have another strong ally.”

Aysel seemed to think it over. “I don’t know… I tried that.”

“Think about it, Aysel. You’re the only person who can truly convince him. You have to try again.”

Aysel smiled a bit, but she still seemed unsure.

I understood her hesitation. I wasn’t at all certain that Lucian could actually be convinced. He seemed too far gone for that. Seluna’s BS had reeled him in, hook, line, and sinker.

Xavier approached as Aysel flashed a winning smile and waved at someone across the room—now in her full social butterfly princess glory. It was a far cry from the frightened and overwhelmed Aysel who’d come to us in the middle of the night seeking our help against Lucian’s new love.

“I’d better make the rounds—appearances to keep up, and all that,” she said.

“Don’t go too far,” I warned her.

Aysel turned to look at me. “Yes, Alpha,” she said in a tone I couldn’t quite read before sashaying off into the crowd.

I stared after her, hoping that she really was still committed to the plan. If she was actually against it or having any doubts about whose side she was truly on, this would be the perfect time for her to break away from the rest of us.

“How’d that go?” Xavier asked.

“Not great. It seems like she’s on board, but you know how it is with her. Who can really know for sure?” I gestured to where Ava was talking to the guy she’d brought with her. They were chatting away while inspecting the food table. “How’d that go?”

“Not great.” Xavier sighed and rocked back on his heels. I could sense his lingering annoyance.

“Who’s that kid she has with her?”

“Her cousin, Knox,” Xavier grumbled. “And yes, he’s a total asshole—if you couldn’t tell by that douchey too-tight suit, and the self-important smirk he constantly has on his face.”

“And here I thought you’d give him a chance,” I joked.

Xavier scowled and shook his head, his eyes still on Ava and Knox.

“So, his winning personality aside, is he someone we should be worried about?”

“Nah, I don’t think so. He’s just a stupid kid, and Ava didn’t tell him anything about our plan. He’s basically just trying to play Alpha for the Samara pack. Thinks he has what it takes to lead the them into their next era—which could be true, provided their next era is total ruin.”

I nodded, vaguely remembering a whiny kid at some pack meetup when I was younger, though I wasn’t sure I was even remembering the right person. I hoped that we weren’t now dealing with *two* major wildcards tonight—Aysel was bad enough without someone unexpected coming in and gumming up the works.

There was a collective gasp followed by light applause. Xavier and I turned to see Lucian enter the room with a patented flourish.

“He does like his entrances, doesn’t he?”I said quietly to Xavier.

“Loves them,” Xavier replied. “He probably does the same thing even when he’s not having a party.”

Lucian spotted us immediately and wasted no time coming over to us. “Oh, if it isn’t the Evers brothers, in the flesh. I have to admit, I didn’t think you were going to show—what with how strained things were last we spoke.” Lucian gave us a stiff, if not unpleasant, smile.

Xavier and I exchanged a look.

“Same,” I said curtly, deciding to leave it at that.

Lucian took a quick look around the room, and when his gaze returned to rest on us, I couldn’t help but notice that his eyes seemed slightly glazed over… But I wasn’t sure if I was reading too much into it. I was on hyper alert now that he’d entered the room, and my mind was focused on looking for anything out of the ordinary.

“Didn’t you bring your mate?” Lucian said. “You should have learned by now to keep her close. You never know what might happen.”

# Episode 2753

I stared Andrei down, hoping I’d misheard him.

*This has to be a joke. He isn’t really doing this again, is he? We’ve already seen this episode, and we hated it the first time.*

“Did you really just say that no one can leave? What is with this place? You’re constantly throwing parties and holding events and not letting anyone leave. That’s not a sign of a very good host, now, is it?” I was fuming, but I was working hard to keep my voice low so that my mates wouldn’t hear me. I just wanted to get Dani and me out of there, whatever it took.

Andrei rolled his eyes. “Look, it’s not my call. It’s an order from above. Unless you’d like me to escort you to Lucian and Seluna to get it sorted out…?” He crossed his arms and looked down at me, waiting for my reply.

Even the sound of Seluna’s name gave me goosebumps.

“No!” I said quickly. “There must be something we can work out without getting them involved.”

I was in no state to go up against Seluna and Lucian, and for all I knew, Seluna already knew we were here, since *somebody* had forced us to stumble back into this Venus flytrap disguised as a house.

“Look at us, Andrei. We’re not even dressed for the occasion,” I said, motioning to Dani. “If you let us in, you’ll probably lose your job. Surely we’re violating the dress code. That has to be a big no-no, even for someone like Seluna.”

Andrei shrugged. “That’s fine. We have plenty of clothing here. You can change, no problem. The only thing you can’t do is leave.”

He stood there with his stony face, as if to say without words how immovable he was on the subject.

I disliked Andrei more today than I ever had, which was a surprising realization. He was standing in the way of me avoiding my mates, and therefore standing in the way of me assuring their safety by keeping my presence under wraps, and it was burning me up inside. I flexed my fists open and closed as I toyed with the idea of blasting Andrei with my magic to get him to back off, but that would cause way too much of a scene, and that was the last thing we needed. Not only would it make things difficult for my mates, but then they would definitely find out that I hadn’t stayed away as promised. I really wanted to prove to them that I was a team player and that I wasn’t in the business of putting my friends and loved ones in danger just because I couldn’t sit still.

“Come on, Andrei, we just want to go home. Show some understanding. *Please.*” Maybe he had a heart in there somewhere? A shred of empathy?

“Sorry,” Andrei said, shaking his head, his expression blank. “I was told that once a guest is in, they’re in for the night. No exceptions. If you didn’t want to be here, you shouldn’t have come. Simple as that. I still don’t get why you’re even here if you didn’t even want to be, but it’s not my job to figure that out—it’s my job to make sure you stay put, and that’s what I’m going to do.”

*Fuck.*

I wished that I had Artemis by my side to use her Fae persuasion on him—even if her magic wasn’t at full strength yet. Andrei was just dumb muscle, he probably wouldn’t even require full strength magic to twist his mind in whatever direction we wanted.

*If only Artemis had pulled one of the short straws. Even without her magic, she probably could’ve bullied Andrei into letting us go.*

I glanced at the door, wondering if we could make a break for it—as long as our bodies cooperated.

“Don’t even think about it,” Andrei said, clearly picking up on my intentions.

Apparently he wasn’t as dumb as he looked.I was about to try another angle when I realized that Dani was walking past me and heading into the party.

*Shit! Where is she going?*

I was in full control of my body at the moment, and I wasn’t having any issues with the blurry vision, either, but maybe Dani was still being affected. It sure seemed like it.

“Shit,” I said. I didn’t want Xavier or Greyson to see Dani—or for Seluna to see her, for that matter. I had to do something fast.

I pushed past Andrei and hurried into the party. Dani had just cleared the threshold and was heading for a group of giggling guests with champagne in their hands. I hurried forward to grab her by the shirt, since I didn’t want to risk touching her skin and setting off another unexpected event—weird things seemed to happen whenever we made contact.

I pulled Dani aside, out of the view of the partygoers—and more importantly, Xavier and Greyson.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

Dani didn’t answer, and when she finally lifted her head to look at me, I gasped. The whites of her eyes had gone completely black. I let go of her shirt and backed up against the wall, afraid. Dani blinked a few times, and then, just like that, her eyes were back to normal.

*What. The hell. Was. That?*

“Dani… Are you feeling all right?”

She nodded, looking a little dazed. “How… How did I get in here?”

“I’m not exactly sure, but something is very, very wrong.” I took Dani’s hand and tried to lead her back toward the door as discretely as I could, all the while hoping that I wouldn’t fall back into a trance.

I kept repeating a mantra in my head that I hoped would keep it clear long enough for me to get us out of the party and somehow past Andrei.

*Just be yourself, Cali. Be yourself. Just be yourself, don’t black out, don’t lose yourself, and you’ll get the hell out of here. Xavier and Greyson will never know you were here, and they’ll kill Seluna, and everything will be okay.*

As we neared the door, Andrei came walking in, and I quickly tried to reroute, only to run us right into a statue holding a platter of savory-looking puffs. The entire thing clattered to the ground, and puffs flew everywhere. I froze, horrified. I didn’t even want to look up. I could already feel every eye in the room right on me, and to say it was unsettling was an understatement. I didn’t know what to do, but leaving was going to be pretty hard now.

“Way to go,” Andrei said with a chuckle as he passed by.

I took a deep breath and finally raised my head… and looked directly into Xavier’s eyes.

*Shit.*

Time seemed to slow down. I wished more than ever in that moment that we could mind link. He had to be thinking about all the conversations where he’d all but begged, pleaded, demanded that I stay away from the Vanguard palace. Now here I was: Classic Cali, once again ignoring everyone’s suggestions and requests that I stay at home.

*Except it isn’t* really *like that this time, I only hope he’ll believe me.*

I had a major stubborn streak, that was for sure, but something supernatural had brought me and Dani here, and I’d had no control over the matter.

Xavier made his way over to me, weaving quickly through the guests as he crossed the room. By now, the puffs were being cleaned up by a flurry of attendants and everyone was back to mingling and partying—everyone except Xavier, who was looking me right in the eye, his jaw set.

I was speechless as Xavier took me by the arm and led me away from the scene of the crime. My mind was racing as I tried to gather my thoughts enough that I’d be able to convince him that I’d had absolutely nothing to do with Dani’s and my presence here.

“What are you doing here, Cali?” His voice was low and steady—and I knew he meant business.

“It wasn’t my fault, Xavier! I was at home, and then…”

“And then?” he pressed, arching an eyebrow.

“And then, I was suddenly here. Dani and I were led here.”

Xavier simply stared at me, clearly hit by my words and processing what I’d said.

I hazarded a glance at Dani, who was now standing with Okorie, Zainab, and Charlie. She was looking normal right now—no black eyes or glazed look—but I knew that could change at any moment. I hoped I wouldn’t suffer the same fate while trying to explain myself to Xavier.

I looked back at Xavier to see that his expression had softened. “What do you mean?”

I was about to explain when Greyson appeared at my side.

“Cali, you good?” he asked. “What are you doing here? What’s going on?”

I was trying to gather my words when the jarring sound of a gong rang through the air, jolting everyone to attention.

# Episode 2754

**Xavier**

The loud sound snapped the entire party’s attention to a dais, where an attendant stood holding a mallet poised in front of the gong. The attendant looked startled himself, as if he hadn’t expected the gong to be so loud.

The attendant cleared his throat and pasted on a smile. “Attention everyone! Please make your way out to the courtyard and find your seats! The ceremony will begin in the next few minutes!”

I put a protective hand on Cali’s shoulder while scanning the crowd for Lucian. Had he planned to get Cali here somehow?I thought back to his cryptic comment about how we needed to keep Cali close. Greyson and I had been miffed by his remark, but honestly it wasn’t an out-of-the-ordinary statement for Lucian—or any Vanguard, for that matter. I looked back down at Cali. She was scared. It was written all over her face.

“I don’t know how we got here, Greyson. Me and Dani—we’re both as confused about it as you probably are to see us after we agreed to stay back.”

Our group was huddled together around Cali and Dani in the center of the hall as the others began to filter out and make their way to the courtyard. I wasn’t quite ready to go back into that creepy scene with its statues positioned like guests, so I was more than happy to stall while we got to the bottom of what had happened with Cali.

“Is what Cali’s saying true, Dani?” Okorie asked. “Do you remember anything about what happened?”

“Some… One minute we were chatting in the hallway, and the next, Cali and I were driving here. It’s all a little blurry… It’s like, I remember driving, and then the next thing I remember is standing outside the palace with Cali, both of us trying to figure out what the hell happened.”

“This has to be Seluna’s doing,” Greyson said, his jaw tight.

“Obviously,” Okorie said.

“We need to execute the plan. If Seluna somehow brought Cali and Dani here, there’s really no telling what she might do next.” I cupped Cali’s face between my hands. “It’s okay, Cali. This isn’t your fault, and you don’t have to be afraid. You’re with us, and I don’t care what happens—we’re not going to let anything happen to you.”

“You believe me, then?” Cali asked me, her voice thick with emotion.

I nodded. “Yes, of course I believe you. We don’t know exactly how or why you’re here, but what I do know is that we’re going to keep you and Dani safe now that you are.”

“Excuse me.” It was the attendant who’d banged the gong. “Please start to make your way to the courtyard. We don’t want to keep the guests of honor waiting, do we?”

He flashed a cold smile and then returned to his post near the door, his eyes glued to us.

*Even the Vanguard help is weird. Shit! This ceremony can’t happen, not right now. We can’t let Dani or Cali get near Seluna.*

I turned to the group. “What we really need to be doing is getting Cali and Dani out of here.”

“Agreed,” Greyson said.

Greyson and I planted ourselves on either side of Cali, and then I looked back at Zainab. “You grab Dani. Let’s get them to the front door, and then Zainab, you’ll take them both home. Got it?”

“Got it!” Zainab said quickly.

We all gathered around Dani and Cali and moved toward the exit, but as soon as we were about a foot away from the door, Cali dug her heels in and wouldn’t move another step.

“Cali, what are you doing. Come on!” I said, taking her by the hand and urging her gently toward the door.

“It’s not me! This is what I was talking about! It’s happening again,” Cali whimpered. “My feet won’t let me keep going!”

“What do you mean? You really can’t move your legs?” Greyson asked.

“No, it’s like they’re glued to the floor.”

“Same here,” Dani added.

*Shit. This is bad. We have to get Cali out of here. There’s no way I want her here during the ceremony.*

It was a no-brainer that Cali had to go. After everything she’d been through the last two times we’d come to this damn place, I wanted her out of here and safe at home, not watching Lucian and Seluna do creepy evil shit in the courtyard in front of their army of statues.

“Okay, so your legs won’t move, but are you okay otherwise? Are you in any pain? How about you, Dani?” Greyson asked.

“I’m not in pain, but I can’t go any further. Something’s stopping me,” Cali said.

“Me too. No pain or anything, but it’s like I have absolutely no control over my own body.” Dani looked panicked, and rightly so. She’d just been through hell with Seluna, and now, like Cali, she was apparently in for another round of weirdness.

“Okay, then it’s time for plan B,” I said. I turned to Okorie. “If Zainab isn’t going to be able to get them out of here the normal way, then maybe you can blip them back to the pack house.”

“That’s a good idea,” Greyson admitted.

“Not quite. If I do that, then my magic will be weakened. I’ve done a hell of a lot of blipping over the last few days, and my reserves are running low. If you want my magic to be strong enough to deal with whatever the Vanguards are up to, I can’t do it.”

“I don’t think it’ll work anyway,” Cali said. “I have a feeling that if he blipped us back, we’d just show up here again.”

I was starting to get frustrated. Greyson heaved a loud sigh, clearly feeling as pressed as I was.

“We might not be able to do anything about this.” Greyson said. “We’re too far in, and I don’t want to lose time with the plan either.”

“And if Cali winds up hurt because of this?” I pressed, not liking where his line of reasoning was headed.

Greyson’s eyes were turbulent as he spoke. “Don’t, Xavier. Not right now.”

*Seriously? Fuck you.* I was furious, and images of me ripping Greyson’s head off danced through my head.

Cali jumped in, finally finding her voice. “Andrei said that no one gets to leave the grounds, anyway. We could run into trouble if we try to force our way out. I feel okay now. I have my magic, after all. I’m sorry that this happened this way, but I can defend myself if I have to. I want the plan to succeed more than anyone.”

Charlie cleared his throat. “Um, we’d better start moving to the courtyard. We’re the last ones left, and that attendant looks like he wants to strangle us.”

“Shit, you’re right.” I looped my arm around Cali. “Stay close to me.”

Cali nodded, and we all made our way out to the courtyard.

Ava was waiting for me just outside the doors to the courtyard, and her eyes went wide when she saw Cali, though she didn’t say anything out loud.

*How the hell did she get here?* Ava mind linked.

*Don’t ask*, I replied. *Just get ready for the plan.*

Tense and silent, we all filed out into the courtyard. I felt uneasy as we walked past the group of statues on the left side. If it weren’t for them, I might have actually appreciated the beauty of the space. It was pretty lavish, befitting a Vanguard shindig. There were what looked like hundreds of golden candelabras placed all around the room, holding snow white, long-stemmed candles that flickered and shimmered against the coming evening. Shimmering opals and moonstones hung from brilliant golden mesh suspended above the guest chairs, casting colored refractions across every surface. Bright white flowers lined the aisles, and ivy snaked around every surface in sight, including some of the statues.

Despite the obvious beauty of our surroundings, there was a strange heaviness in the air that had me on high alert.

*I don’t like this at all. If we all make it through this in one piece, I’m going to rip my brother a new one for putting Cali in this situation.*

“Let’s all go to the third row,” Greyson said.

He stood on the end of the row while everyone else filed in. I put Cali on my right side as we moved into the row so that she was as far away from where the ceremony was taking place as possible. Ava squeezed past us, her eyes flickering up to meet mine before she moved to sit next to Zainab, further down.

“I know you’re pissed, but this isn’t what I wanted, either. You know I want to protect Cali as much as you do,”Greyson said in a low voice as I passed him.

“I don’t want to hear it,” I replied.

Lucian appeared and walked under the arch, and then there was a flourish of music and we all turned to see Seluna walking down the aisle, looking every bit the blushing demon-future-Luna she was.

I took a deep breath and steeled myself. *It’s go time.*

# Episode 2755

**Greyson**

I readied myself as Seluna appeared at the open courtyard doors. She was wearing a flowing, ethereal dress and looked every bit the moon goddess she claimed to be. But we knew the truth of what she was.

*This is all a lie*, I thought as I glanced around at the enamored faces of the other guests. I couldn’t blame them for being impressed by Seluna. They didn’t know that she was a demon, and how could they? Seluna hid her real self well, and to the untrained and unknowing eye, she was the Luna moon goddess of their dreams—the woman who would further elevate the station of the Vanguard pack in the eyes of their peers.

No one was more besotted than Lucian, who was gazing at Seluna like she was the sun, the moon, and everything in between. I hoped never to be like Lucian, so lost in love that I couldn’t even see that the person standing in front of me was the very personification of evil. Cali would never be that way. Cali was the epitome of what was good—someone with empathy, who thought of others, who loved so deeply.

Of course, the guests had no clue about the type of “person” Seluna truly was, but Lucian had seen the malice she was capable of with his own two eyes, and so there was no excuse for him to be so oblivious.The princeling was completely gone, his eyes wide as saucers as Seluna slowly made her way down the aisle. *He’s so far gone.*

I snuck a look at Cali. I wished that she wasn’t here, for her sake. Xavier still had his arm draped protectively over her shoulders, and I couldn’t help but grit my teeth as I recalled our earlier exchange.

*It’s just like Xavier to act like I wouldn’t do everything in my power to keep Cali safe.* *I would’ve given anything for her not to be here for this; he has to know that.*

It was a risk to have kept her here, but I hadn’t been able to come up with a better option. It wasn’t what I wanted, but with the circumstances what they were—that Cali didn’t seem to be able to leave—I would rather keep her close. I didn’t want to have to worry about what she was dealing with out there while we were trying to deal with what we had to do in here. My hands were tied.

If Xavier had thought of something I hadn’t, he should’ve said something instead of being divisive.

*I hope I’m not making a huge mistake, but at least this way I can actually protect Cali from whatever forced her here in the first place.*

I turned my attention back to Seluna and Lucian, the reason we were here. We had a mission to execute, and each second that passed was bringing us closer to the moment when we would have to put our plan into action. *Operation eliminate Seluna is underway.*

All sorts of thoughts and worries were circling through my mind as Seluna glided slowly down the aisle toward a destiny she would never see coming. I was worried that with Cali here, my attention would be divided—which was never a good thing in a situation as precarious as this one. I only hoped we wouldn’t fail because of a possible error in my own judgment. It was the same issue rearing its ugly head once again—my attention being divided between two very important things: being the Redwood Alpha, and being Cali’s mate. I was frustrated that I’d fallen into the same old trap at a time when I needed to be more focused than ever.

Seluna was about halfway down the aisle when someone tried to get my attention by poking me hard in the arm. I jumped in surprise and tried to cover it with a cough. I whirled around, wondering who it was and ready to react.

“Psst!” It was Aysel.

“Where the hell were you?” I asked.

“Oh, come off it, Greyson, I told you I had to keep up appearances.” Her gaze flicked over to Cali. “What’s your mate doing here? I thought there was a whole ‘Cali can’t come’ petition signed back at the Redwood pack house?” Aysel chuckled silently, apparently quite pleased with her little joke.

I wasn’t in the mood for what she thought passed as a joke.“That’s none of your business. Just focus on what we have to do.”

Even as I said that, I wondered if she was capable of that in this kind of setting—she was completely in her element, flexing her princess muscles. I doubted that she was going to be very amenable to anything I asked of her. Regret suddenly washed over me. Yet another potential bad Alpha move—trusting one of the pillars of the most untrustworthy pack I’d ever come across. Aysel was a valid worry, as was my split attention now that Cali was here—but I had to shake all of that off. There was no time to get mired in what I should and shouldn’t have done, not right now, when our lives were on the line.

The reality was that Cali was here, and I had to do whatever it took to protect her. That much Xavier and I agreed on. I wished that I could mind link with her and explain everything, reassure her and let her know that we’d do what we could to deal with this latest curve ball, but I couldn’t. My love had to be enough.

After what felt like an eternity, Seluna reached the front of the courtyard, and Lucian extended a hand to her. Above them, the not quite full moon shone.

*I have to admit. It all really looks the part.*

My Luna ceremony with Joss in Thor’s Well hadn’t been quite like this, though there had been one similar theme. I’d lied to everyone. Not quite how Seluna was right now, but I’d still lied. I’d lied about who I wanted as my Luna. It had been so difficult not to choose Cali as my Luna during the ceremony, but ultimately, I’d done what I had to do. Even though I knew Cali was my mate, I had to do what I had to do to keep her safe.

*Just like I will tonight.*

Seluna took Lucian’s hand, then turned to the statues and werewolves in attendance. I wasn’t sure, but I thought I saw her eyes find Cali as well. I felt taut and cagey, ready to pounce at any moment. I tapped my foot soundlessly on the ground, awaiting the moment when all hell would break loose.

Seluna put on a wild pageant smile as she addressed the crowd. “Thank you all for coming to my Luna ceremony. It’s long overdue. I want to let you all know that as your goddess, I will, by my prince’s side”—she gave Lucian a loving look—“lead the Vanguards into a brighter future. Together, we will move werewolves into their next phase of greatness.”

I wanted to snort with laughter over how ridiculous this all was, and I wanted to snort again when I heard Xavier actually do it. I nudged him with my elbow, and Xavier nudged me back, hard.

“Come, my love,” Lucian said. “Let us begin.”

The two joined together under the arch, just as attendants appeared and placed ancient, expensive-looking crowns on their heads. They really did look like royalty in that moment.

I had my eye on the demon, and I knew exactly when I was going to strike. No matter how different this ceremony was from my own—different look, different feel, different vibe, a gang of statues waiting in the wings—the one thing that always happened at each and every Luna ceremony was the use of the silver liquid to carve the Luna mark into the future Luna’s skin. As soon as that happened, I would make my move and kill Seluna.

If I failed, Xavier would finish the job for me. And if not… I didn’t want to think about what would happen. There wasn’t much that shook me to my core, but the thought of Cali seeing me—or Xavier—cut down was too much to take, and a wave of dread coursed through me before dissolving in the pit of my stomach.

I tensed as an attendant brought out the goblet of liquid silver.

Lucian caressed Seluna’s face. “I cannot wait to have you by my side forever, my queen, my Luna.”

Lucian gave Seluna a loving smile, then shifted his hand into a wolf paw and dipped a claw into the silver.

At the same moment, I stood up, feeling the adrenaline course through me. I was ready to strike. I was ready to end this once and for all.

In a flash, Aysel stepped out in front of me, her hands outstretched toward Lucian. “Brother, stop!”

# Episode 2756

The fear that had risen within me at the sight of Seluna and Lucian joining together under the arch had somewhat subsided—even though I’d seen Greyson start to rise up from his seat, sending a fresh wave of anxiety coursing through me. He’d stood down quickly once Aysel had jumped up in front of him.

*What the hell is she doing?*

Now, my attention was locked on the Vanguard princess, and I had to be honest that I was relieved that Greyson wasn’t going to make his move just yet. He was safe, for at least a few minutes more. The thought of him up against Seluna had my stomach in knots before Aysel had stepped forward.

*Is that part of the plan? Is objecting to someone becoming a Luna even something that you can do?*

I knew objections were mostly a wedding thing, but even that felt like something out of the movies. It didn’t seem like something that happened in real life, and this wasn’t exactly a wedding. It was a union of sorts, but Lucian’s invitation hadn’t indicated a wedding, and it wasn’t like we’d been asked by an officiant if anyone objected.

“Werewolves are so dramatic,” Okorie whispered to Charlie with an eyeroll. “I should have brought popcorn.”

If I’d known that I could’ve objected during Greyson and Joss’s Luna ceremony, would I have taken advantage of it?My emotions about Greyson had been so complicated at the time—not to mention confusing and overwhelming. Could I have been impulsive enough to say something? *I guess I’ll never know.*

All eyes were on Aysel now where she stood in the middle of the aisle, panting, her arms outstretched. Lucian had an unreadable look on his face, while Seluna simply watched Aysel with interest, probably sizing her up. I had to stop myself from telling her to get out of the way. It felt like Seluna might try to melt her from her gaze alone.

“Sister, what’s the meaning of this? *Stop?*” Lucian seemed confused.

Oh no. This wasn’t going to go well, was it?

Aysel advanced down the aisle as both Greyson and Xavier watched her closely. They exchanged a look, and Xavier looked angrier at the interruption than even Lucian or Seluna.

“Aysel’s going off script,” he whispered to me. “But we should’ve expected that.”

“Yeah,”I replied. “It’s not like Aysel follows anyone’s rules but her own…”

“You can’t bond with Seluna like this, brother,” Aysel said breathlessly.

Lucian looked completely baffled. “Are you saying that you don’t want this?”

“She’s going to get us all killed,” Xavier muttered.

I swallowed roughly. I didn’t think that Aysel had quite thought this whole thing through, either. I knew more than anyone that Seluna didn’t take well to being crossed, and I didn’t know how much more someone could cross her than by ruining her Luna ceremony.

“It’s not that I don’t want it to happen, Lucian, but I think it might be too soon. After all, Seluna just achieved her physical form again, and she’s a goddess! Who are we as mere werewolves to bond with a goddess in this way? What if it’s not the right move to make?”

“This will be a blessed union,” Seluna said, a smile pasted onto her face. She was good at being diplomatic when she had to be, I’d give her that. There was no way she was pleased with what Aysel was doing, but she certainly wasn’t showing it. “And as such, I choose Lucian as mine. This is not a trick, princess, I assure you.”

Lucian’s eyes narrowed on Aysel and he wiped the silver off of his claw using a towel presented to him by a nervous attendant. My heart raced as Lucian approached his sister. Aysel had been so worried about something happening to her brother—especially at Seluna’s hand—but was Lucian capable of doing something to Aysel? Would he kill her because she dared to object to his joining with his precious moon goddess?

I didn’t know, and I was afraid to find out. Lucian was one of the few people I still couldn’t get a good read on. He was a sadistic asshole, I knew that much, but there sometimes seemed to be a method to his madness. Other times, though, there was none.

Lucian came to a stop in front of Aysel, and it was so quiet that you could have heard a pin drop as everyone waited to see how this was going to unfold.

Lucian smiled slowly. “Dear Aysel. I never took you as insecure about your place in this family. You don’t need to be afraid. You’re not losing a brother, after all, you’re gaining a sister. Another leader. A *queen*. This is what we’ve been working so hard for, all this time. This is the Vanguard pack’s destiny. Don’t you see that?” He took Aysel’s hand in his as his smile grew. “Don’t worry. Everything will be as it should, in the end.”

Aysel watched Lucian closely, but she didn’t respond right away. I couldn’t tell if she was taking in what he’d said or if she was waiting for something else, some kind of promise that she wouldn’t be pushed out by Seluna.

I looked between Greyson and Xavier, noting the looks on their faces. I knew them well. They were worried about how this whole thing was going to play out, and how it would affect what they had up their sleeves. I could only imagine the thoughts going through their heads.

*Is Aysel going to believe her brother? Was her alliance with the Redwood pack just a fluke?*

I released a breath as Aysel finally spoke—and everyone else did, too.

“Of course, brother.” She ducked her head in apology. “I’m sorry, Lucian, for interrupting.” Aysel squeezed Lucian’s hand and held it to her cheek for a moment before releasing it.

“No need to apologize, sister. I should have talked to you sooner. I know this is a lot of change in a very short time, and I know that it’s really always just been you and me against the world, but I promise that this new chapter will be better than the last. Enjoy the ceremony, dear sister. There will be so much more to celebrate later on.”

With that, Lucian left Aysel and returned to his place under the arch beside Seluna.

Xavier leaned toward me, his voice hot in my ear as he spoke. “When things start to happen, if it starts to go south, you need to just get out of here. Use your magic, do whatever you need to do, just don’t stick around if things start to get out of control. I’ll be right behind you as soon as I can be. Don’t worry, this will all end today. I promise.”

Xavier took my hand and squeezed it.

His words sent a shiver down my spine, but I believed everything he said. Confidence swelled in my belly. *He’s going to be okay. I know it. All of us will.*

“Now, where were we?” Lucian said lightly. Seluna simply smiled, waiting. Lucian dipped his claw into the liquid silver once again, and I watched Seluna turn so that she was facing Lucian at a better angle.

I cowered in my seat. *There’s something there when I look at her, something comes over me… Does she have some sort of control over Dani and me, even now? If she sees me, will it ignite? Will I lose control again?*

The next moments happened so fast. Lucian carved the mark into Seluna’s skin, and the blood-tinged silver dripped down her arm. Seluna winced a bit, but if it hurt more than that, she certainly didn’t let on. I blinked, and if I’d blinked even a second earlier, I might have missed the entire thing. Lucian wiped the bloody silver off his claw again, a pleased look on his face.

I snuck a glance at my mates. I could sense Greyson’s hesitation. He was probably waiting to see what would happen next before he struck. This was new territory for all of us, and I could tell that he was trying to be as careful as he could after Aysel’s outburst.

*What will getting the Luna mark do to a demon?* I’d always been told that the Luna ceremony would probably kill me. But, to be fair, that had been back when everyone, including me, had thought that I was human. Would I survive it, being half Fae?I felt like maybe I would. Right?

Quickly, I put the idea of being either of my mates’ Luna on the backburner again. I needed to stay alert to see what was going to happen next, to make sure I did what Xavier had told me to do. His words played again in my head. *If it starts to go south, you need to just get out of here.*

I directed my attention back to the ceremony as another attendant appeared with an herbal mixture for Seluna and Lucian to drink. Greyson slowly rose to his feet again, his face set in concentration as he moved. My stomach clenched once more. I watched as his hand partially shifted. He was ready to strike.

Suddenly, Seluna dropped the herbal mixture to the ground—to Lucian’s complete and utter surprise and confusion. He opened his mouth to say something, but before he could, Seluna spoke instead.

“The ceremony will not continue. It is over.”

# Episode 2757

**Xavier**

Lucian was getting rejected.

I had to admit, I hadn’t seen it coming. But part of me found it fucking hilarious. There was something so fulfilling about the reality of it that I almost didn’t believe it was happening. We’d been telling the guy Seluna wasn’t what she seemed to be. He hadn’t even listened to his sister moments ago when she tried to get him out of this.

*Karma’s a bitch*, I thought. But so was Seluna. *Let’s just get this over with and kill her already.*

Lucian stood silent, the rest of us following suit. We could’ve heard a pin drop. I looked to my brother, not sure what his move was going to be.

Despite my momentary glee at Lucian’s rejection, I understood Seluna even less now than I had when we’d entered the palace today. I’d thought the whole point of her getting her physical body back was to do this whole ruling the Vanguard pack as “goddess” thing with Lucian, for whatever reason. But clearly, she had other plans.

Glancing back at my brother, I was frustrated that he hadn’t moved yet. What was he waiting for? Another fucking invitation? Moments ago, he’d looked like he was going to strike, and I thought he would’ve made his move by now—especially with all the stops and starts. We only had a small window to make our move, and that window was quickly closing.

Leaning over, I grabbed onto his shirt and pulled him toward me. “What are you waiting for?” I whispered through gritted teeth. “Make your move already.”

Greyson’s eyes flashed. “I’ve been trying to.”

“You trying to go at a snail’s pace?” I asked. “Make your move, or I will.”

Greyson pulled away, but he didn’t say anything else. If he didn’t have what it took to act as Alpha and finish this, then I would do it for him. Happily. He’d probably been caught off-guard like the rest of us with Seluna’s declaration and everything leading up to it, but he was the Alpha, wasn’t he? That’s what he was always reminding me about, wasn’t he?

I looked over at Cali, preparing to tell her to leave as soon as Greyson actually fucking *moved*. Greyson never should have let her stay. At least I knew that I’d do whatever it took to keep her safe.

Suddenly, Lucian’s voice tore through the air.

“*What?*” He sounded like a pissed-off prep school kid. “What are you talking about? It’s not over yet, by any means! I just gave you the Luna mark. That marks our *bond together*. This is the beginning of the ceremony—it’s not done.” He was angry, but there was also a pleading look in his eyes as he looked at Seluna.

Seluna turned to face him head-on. “Oh, yes it is,” she said, her voice ice-cold. “You’ve given me everything I need, and now I no longer have any use for you, or your stupid ceremony.”

Sounds of shock erupted from the guests. I had to stifle a snort. If Seluna wasn’t a demon terrorizing my mate and my entire pack, I would’ve reveled in this moment. I’d actually thought that Lucian and Seluna’s whole reign of terror had begun because they were madly in love with each other—though I’d never understood it. Clearly, that wasn’t the case.

Lucian reared back like Seluna had slapped him. “What? I don’t—what are you talking about?!”

Seluna stepped forward with a calmness that sent a shiver down my spine. The game was over. It was time to act. I wanted to tell Greyson to do it now, that it was now or never, but there was no time. Seluna’s voice thundered through the air.

“I never liked you, Lucian. I used you. I only needed you so that I could regain my corporeal form. Now that I have it, you’re useless to me.”

Aysel gasped. “You *bitch*!”

Seluna had used Lucian, she’d used Dani, and she’d used Cali. As far as I was concerned, she needed to go—now.

Seluna reached out to caress Lucian’s cheek, and he flinched away in disgust. This was all getting to be a bit much, and I couldn’t help but be glad that it wasn’t me standing there in Lucian’s place.

“You’ve been a good soldier, Lucian. A good minion for me.”

“But… But you don’t *love* me? I thought—”

Seluna laughed, cutting him off. “Love you? No, not even close. I can barely stomach you. You’re not a real prince. Who could love someone so insignificant?”

I was on edge and about to urge Greyson on again when I realized that Greyson had already made his move. He was on his feet and racing toward the altar. Mid-run, he shifted into his wolf, snarling as he went directly for Seluna. There was a split second when relief rose up within me. But just as Greyson was about to dig his teeth into Seluna, Lucian shifted and jumped into his path.

*Seriously? The woman just embarrassed you and dumped you in front of everyone, and you’re still defending her?*

I didn’t waste time dwelling on another dumb move by the dunce prince. Chaos began to unfold as the Vanguard wolves shifted and made their way toward the fight developing between Lucian and Greyson.

I locked eyes with Charlie, Zainab, and Okorie. Ava nodded and shot up from her seat, already starting to shift. Everyone else followed suit and took off toward Seluna.

Before I shifted, I turned to Cali. “Get out of here, now!”

To my shock and horror, she was moving toward Seluna. I didn’t hesitate. I grabbed her, ready to drag her out of there myself if I had to, but the second I touched her skin, it scalded me like I’d stuck my hand on a boiling pot.

“Fuck!” I pulled my hand back immediately, only to see that it was smoking. *What the hell?*

I reached for her once more, but again, merely touching her singed my skin. I waved my hands as smoke rolled off them, pain reverberating from my hands to every inch of my body. I couldn’t stop her. She was moving toward the fight, and Dani was doing the same.

*This is Seluna at work. I know it. How is she doing this?*

There was a loud pop, and suddenly the sky lit up with fire emanating from the tips of Seluna’s fingers as Charlie lunged at her, his jaws open and ready. Zainab was right behind him, and Okorie was hard at work redirecting Seluna’s wild column of fire away from Ava, saving her in the nick of time. My wolf leapt up inside me, grateful that Ava was safe, but both of our attention immediately returned to Cali.

The entire courtyard was crawling with snarling wolves. I fought through them, barreling through them in my human form and shouting Cali’s name over and over again. She didn’t even turn to look at me. I reached out to grab her again, bracing myself to be burned by the blistering heat of her skin. I didn’t care. Just touching her, knowing I’d make contact and could get her to safety was all I needed.

But before I could touch her, I was tackled to the ground by a huge Vanguard wolf. I managed to shift before the wolf’s powerful jaws closed around my neck, and I twisted until I was able to wrestle the wolf off me. I grabbed him by the leg and flung him away from me, then I scanned the jumble of bodies for Cali. I looked and looked, but it was too late. She was standing right next to Seluna, with Dani right by her side.

I called out to Cali through our mate bond, hoping that she would feel me and wake up from whatever trance she was in.

*This is exactly what I didn’t want. This is why I wanted her to stay away!*

I had no idea what Seluna was planning to do to the love of my life, and I couldn’t just stand there and wait for her to do it. I tapped into our mate bond again and reached out to Cali via mind link.

*Cali, stop!*

I didn’t know if she’d heard me, but for a moment, Cali broke away from Seluna and Dani and ran toward me. “Xavier, run!”

Seluna’s voice echoed through the courtyard, coming from every corner and seeming to meld with the air, until I could almost feel it on my skin.

“My reign begins now!” She grabbed Cali and Dani, just as a strong wind kicked up and swirled through the courtyard, bringing ash and rain with it.

There was another loud crack that seemed to come from the sky itself, and then I realized that it hadn’t come from the sky at all—it was coming from all around me. The ground rumbled as blocks of stone crumbled to the ground.

And then every statue in the courtyard started to come to life.

# Episode 2758

I looked around the courtyard, fear shooting through me.

*It’s all fun and games until there’s a literal demon army to fight, right?*

There was no fun and no games, and I had no more ridiculous jokes left to downplay the chaos. I fought to yank my arm away, but Seluna’s grip was bruising. Unwavering. Her statues were coming to life one after the other, breaking free of their stone exteriors. Some were beautiful like Seluna, but others were hideous, their monstrous faces matching what they truly were.

Beasts from hell.

Seluna stared at them and smiled, emanating power. Her hold on me felt draining. I was certain that this was why she’d called me to her side in the first place—Seluna was somehow channeling my magic to free her creatures.

She was using me *again*, and my fury pierced through the fear, shaking me up. It was useless, though. When I opened my mouth, I couldn’t scream; when I raised my free hand to conjure magic and blast her, it flickered before dying out.

I wasn’t in control of myself.

Yet again, my body wasn’t my own.

“Stop trying to free yourself, child,” Seluna said, laughing at me. “It’s pathetic!”

*Cali!*

Someone said my name, and then I heard Xavier’s howl. His eyes met mine in the chaos, which had turned into a full-blown battle. He lunged forward to get to me, but then a Vanguard wolf slammed onto him, blocking his path.

Xavier had been able to mind link with me earlier—something I hadn’t managed to do with either of my mates since the possession. I had no idea how it had happened, but having our connection back, even for a moment, filled me with hope.

It didn’t last.

“No!” Dani screamed. Her voice sliced through the haze Seluna had pulled over me. Dani was here, on Seluna’s other side. “Let us go!”

Dani was crying.

She was just as trapped as I was, this poor girl who’d never harmed anyone, and the urge to help her shoved me into action. I fought to blast Seluna again, but the demon yanked us both closer, snarling.

“You idiotic girls! Stop wasting your magic!” She glared at me, her eyes wide and wild. “Why won’t you join me? Why won’t everyone join me—instead of fighting each other, we can unite! Together, *nothing* can stop us.”

“You’re fucking delusional!” My voice was an outraged shout, and Seluna’s iron grip made my skin burn. “Why the hell would I join you after all the horrible things you’ve done to me?”

Seluna’s pretty face twisted into a grimace that reminded me of a shark about to attack. She pulled me forward, her face inches away from mine now, all the darkness she carried reflected in her gaze. “Because I’ll kill you, all of you—every single one of you will die if you don’t obey, you pathetic little Fae. I’ll kill your mates and make you *watch*,” she hissed, her voice an echo that vibrated through me.

*I’ll kill your mates and make you watch.*

*I’ll kill your mates and make you watch.*

*I’ll kill your mates…*

No. Not if I killed her first.

“Go to hell!” was what I said, and what I did—

What I did was rear back and use my free hand to slap her right across her face.

Seluna gasped and choked in shock, her grip around my arm loosened, and my eyes met Dani’s.

“RUN!” I screamed, and a sobbing Dani yanked herself free, racing away.

I didn’t have the time to follow.

When the demon latched onto me, all I could think was, *At least Dani got away. At least one of us is free*.

Seluna grabbed me by the nape and lifted me off my feet, like I was already lifeless. Her eyes were full of hatred, her snarl pulsating through me while I gasped in terror.

*Is this it? After all the supernatural bullshit, is this how I die?*

Fuck. *That*.

“Honestly, why won’t you just LEAVE US ALONE?” I shouted, trying to kick Seluna in the chest. But I couldn’t get a solid shot in, and I was punished for it.

Seluna clasped both her hands around my neck.

“You ungrateful, useless *child*.” She shook me up, squeezing my windpipe until black spots flooded my vision. My lungs ached with the effort to breathe, until breathing didn’t seem like an option.

I was trapped.

Seluna had trapped me again.

The only difference was that this time, it felt like the end.

The battle faded away, all my power slowly drained, and nothing was going to stop this demon from killing me, not a single—

*NO!*

That was Xavier’s voice, somewhere, somehow. Suddenly, my greying vision was spotted with red. Then there was Xavier, his jaws crimson, blood dripping from his mouth, his massive body flying through the air.

And straight at Seluna and me.

All three of us crashed to the floor, my head and heart and body jolted into a jumble.

*Xavier!*

I rested on my hands and knees, wheezing, struggling to breathe again as I looked around. Xavier was on top of Seluna, snapping at her. His mind link was faint, wavering in and out.

*Get out… Cali… GET OUT!*

Seluna wasn’t leeching power from me any fucking longer—perhaps I could use my magic to blast her, save Xavier like he’d saved me. The thought gave me the determination needed to get to my feet. My head cleared with every inhale and exhale.

*I’m not leaving you!* I repeated in my head, over and over again, hoping Xavier would hear. *There’s no way—*

A familiar howl cut me off. I turned to see Greyson fighting with Lucian, Lucian clawing at him, and I—

*What the fuck am I supposed to do? Should I help Xavier? Greyson? What should I—*

There was a sudden blast of heat, and Xavier’s yelp cut off my thoughts. I had to cover my eyes, my nose to mask the scent of burned fur. Seluna had scorched Xavier, and my choice was made.

My rage was enough.

“Keep your hands off my mate!” Energy burst through my fingertips and straight at Seluna, hitting her right in the chest.

She stumbled backward, and I couldn’t believe my eyes.

*Could it be so easy? Could I just defeat this beast?*

My hope died when Seluna stood, locking eyes with me, a sinister smile on her face. “Nice try, half-Fae. But you’re no match for me.”

She flicked her wrist toward me, and a bolt of scorching energy struck me to the core. The wind was knocked out of me all over again, my knees buckling as the ground shook under my feet. I clutched at my chest—it felt like it was on fire, like I was burning from the inside out as the battle raged all around me.

Werewolves fighting demons, werewolves fighting werewolves, flashes of magic bursting through in my peripheral vision—but I was forced to remain on my knees and stare at Seluna. My body was frozen, my insides were ablaze, and all I could do was wish and pray that Xavier and Greyson were okay.

Seluna sneered as she marched toward me. “So nice to see you begging for mercy, Caliana. You useless little—”

Xavier’s roar drowned out Seluna’s voice. A second later, he charged at her from the side, his teeth digging into her leg. She let out a snarl, fire shooting from her hands and straight at Xavier.

“Xavier!” I screamed, the nauseating scent of burned flesh jarring me out of Seluna’s painful trance. His wolf tumbled back, fur scorched. Seluna’s thigh was bleeding, the wound from Xavier’s teeth gaping. She waved a hand to heal herself, and I felt the mate bond between Xavier and me throb as my eyes fell on the whimpering wolf.

My rage was bigger than all the fear in the world.

“I’m the one you want!” I screamed. “Leave Xavier out of this!”

Seluna scoffed, closing the distance between us, a predator prowling toward me as I fought to stand. “It’s not my fault your mates keep getting in the way! It’s just—”

Greyson’s roar didn’t let her finish her sentence. He lunged right in and tore into Seluna.

*Greyson!* I mind linked, desperately hoping he could hear. *Watch out for her fire magic!*

I didn’t know if he could hear, but the element of surprise was on his side, and Seluna fell to the floor. The momentary relief I felt let me tear my eyes away from him and look to Xavier. He was still on the ground, panting, his eyes closed.

*NO!*

Greyson’s attack had weakened Seluna’s magic, and I could stand again. I ran to Xavier, shaking him. “Xavier! Can you hear me?”

When our eyes met, he sucked in a relieved breath.

*You gotta get out, Cali*, he said. *Greyson and I will deal with Seluna. It’s the only way.*

It wasn’t the only way, though. The thought that I had to be the one to end this demon was still vivid in my head. I knew that the longer I stayed, the more Greyson and Xavier would risk to protect me, but—

“I can’t leave you, Xavier! I won’t!” I rasped. “This isn’t your battle to fight—I’m the one she’s after!” I looked over at my other mate. He was still standing strong against Seluna’s fire magic, but how much longer would that last?

“I can’t let her do this to the people I love. *I* need to be the one to kill her. I can *feel it*, Xavier.” The words were out of my mouth, and then it felt like I was on autopilot. I got to my feet, ready to get a shot in at Seluna.

*NO!* Xavier’s wolf snarled. My view of Greyson’s fight with the demon was suddenly blocked by Xavier’s massive form. *Get on my back right now*, he mind linked. *We’re getting out of here—I’m done letting you endanger yourself!*

Xavier’s fury was so palpable that it stunned me long enough for both of us to notice Lucian. He raced toward Seluna, in human form now. “I’m coming, my goddess! I’ll save you from this beast!”

The surrealism of it all made me feel like laughing. Hysterically. The adrenaline and fear and anger were probably driving me nuts, but Xavier was done with the bullshit. He shoved me onto his back with his snout, no nonsense, not even pausing when I shouted, “But Greyson! We can’t leave him—”

*He’ll be fine! Zainab’s helping him!* Xavier said, before starting to run for one of the exits. I gasped, grabbing onto him before looking over my shoulder. Zainab had indeed joined Greyson, just as Lucian shifted mid-air and attacked.

Greyson would be okay, but I felt like crying.

*Hold on to me!* Xavier mind linked, and I followed his orders. My heart raced as his wolf raced forward, weaving through Vanguard wolves and demons like a bullet. The exit was visible, coming closer and closer and closer, until—

Xavier slammed head first into thin air.

*A barrier… There’s a barrier!*

Dread flooded me.

“We can’t leave,” I choked out. “We’re trapped!”

# Episode 2759

**Greyson**

*I’m getting Cali out of here!* Xavier mind linked.

A moment later, she was on his back, the two of them racing toward one of the exits. Relief shot through me like adrenaline, giving me the courage to keep fighting. With a roar, I slammed down onto Seluna, paws on her chest, claws digging in her skin, trapping both her hands.

She’d burned me several times using her magic, the scent of charred flesh so potent it made my eyes water. Forcing her hands away to keep her from using fire magic had been step number one.

The second step would be to bite her fucking head off.

I was pretty sure not even a demon would survive being headless.

*You’re finished*, I snarled in my head, growling, opening my jaws and close them around her skull. Her eyes widened as if she knew what was coming, as if she’d heard every word of my threat.

And then, she squealed. “Lucian! Save me, my love!”

Lucian slammed into me, pushing me off her.

*Greyson!* Zainab shouted, snapping at Lucian to protect me as I found my footing.

*Go cover for Xavier*, I seethed. *Make sure he gets Cali out!*

The moment I was on my feet, Zainab ran after Xavier and Cali.

*You’re a fool!* I snarled at Lucian. *Can’t you see how she’s using you?*

Lucian’s wolf growled*. It only looks that way; Seluna loves me!* He looked over his shoulder, where Seluna was fighting to heal herself from the gaping wound I’d left in her chest. She was having difficulty. I had just bought myself a bit of time, and I had to at least try to deal with this madman.

*She’ll kill you the moment she no longer needs you*, I said to Lucian. *Why don’t you fight her instead of us? Together we can defeat her!*

Lucian charged at me. I evaded his teeth just as he screamed, *Seluna will never be defeated! She’s a goddess!*

*She’s a fucking demon!* My wolf roared, shoving Lucian backward. *What about your sister? Do you think Seluna is going to want to share power with you* and *your sister? She’ll kill Aysel!*

Lucian panted, faltering. *Seluna would never harm her followers. She’d never hurt the faithful!*

Something in his voice didn’t sound totally convinced, but that didn’t stop him from attacking. He went for my shoulder, letting out a furious roar as he snapped his jaws. I ducked and clawed at his stomach, drawing blood. He mimicked my move to a T, catching me by surprise, his claws digging into my flank.

“Kill him, Lucian!” Seluna screeched, magic glowing at her fingertips as she fought to mend her chest wound. “Kill the Redwood Alpha for me!”

*Lucian, stop fighting me!* I shouted. *Help me kill Seluna before it’s too late*!

Lucian’s laugh throbbed inside my head. *I will die defending my goddess!*

I was running out of time. Seluna would fully heal in a matter of seconds, and Lucian was too far gone. If, after all this, he still believed Seluna was a goddess, there was little chance I could win him over. He had a death wish.

He wanted me to kill him.

Which was fine and dandy, because I fucking wanted to kill him too. The only problem was that the son of a bitch was a great fighter, and Seluna was even better, and I was all alone against the two of them.

*Fuck.*

But I held onto a shred of hope—even if I failed, even if I died today, Xavier had taken Cali to safety. The thought soothed and energized me, and as Seluna’s healing magic glowed in the background, I stopped wasting time.

*You’ve made your choice, Lucian*, I mind linked, and lunged at him, digging my teeth into the spot where his neck met his shoulder.

He howled, falling backward, just as Xavier’s voice echoed in my head.

*We can’t get out*, my brother said. *They’ve blocked the exits with some kind of magic.*

My hope crashed and burned.

This was Seluna’s doing. I had no idea what she needed my mate for, but I wasn’t about to give her the opportunity to show me. I wasn’t gonna fail Cali again.

I’d rather die trying.

*You’re done for*, I thought, and Seluna looked up as if she could hear me.

“You’re too late, Alpha,” she said in a low, hissing voice, a grimace of a smile on her face. Magic glowed from her hand to her chest. Her wound was rapidly mending itself, and my window of opportunity was closing. I growled and leapt at her, going straight for the jugular—

*BANG!*

Lucian plowed into me, sending both of us crashing into a demon statue. The impact left me dizzy, but before I could get my bearings, a massive burst of flames illuminated the courtyard. A ball of fire so grand and explosive that everybody stopped fighting to cover their eyes, protect themselves from what looked like a blazing sun.

A sun set to destroy.

Seluna, now fully healed, emanated power.

Her slave of a prince had saved her, and I’d missed my chance to kill.

*Get Cali out of here!* I told Xavier. *Do whatever the hell it takes!*

My brother howled his agreement.

“Cease fighting and listen to me!” Seluna’s voice was monstrous, distorted as it echoed through the room. The flames trailing from her hands rose up to blacken the ceiling, and everyone was frozen, forced to listen to her.

“I thank the brave soldiers who are fighting to defend me, their goddess,” Seluna said, pointing at Lucian with a smile. He’d shifted back to human. Panting and bloodied, the fucking fool fought to stand as Seluna went on. “I sense there are some who’ve lost their faith and doubt me, though. To them, I say this: join me, or *else*.”

She sharply turned to a demon whose rotting flesh was dripping slime. The creature attacked one of the Vanguards, wrapping itself around the wolf as it howled, shriveling as if drained of life.

A second later, it collapsed to the ground.

A collective gasp echoed through the room.

*See?* I said to Lucian. *She just murdered one of your own. What more do you need?*

Lucian winced, panting. His eyes were downcast as Seluna looked around.

“I may not be what you expected,” she said. “Goddesses rarely are, you see. I was trapped for wanting only what I deserved. Now that you have helped me escape from the in-between, I shall never return to that dreadful place. This is where I belong, among my followers.”

I wanted to have a word with the person—or supernatural entity—who’d trapped Seluna in the first place. It was obvious that they should’ve saved everyone all this fucking trouble and just killed her. I couldn’t afford to make that same mistake again.

Seluna needed to be extinguished.

“The choice is yours now,” Seluna continued, sending more flames toward the perimeter. “Either you accept me…” Orange ropes of fire slithered across the floor. “Or you die. Who shall be brave enough to follow my new world order?”

A beat passed.

Then a large number of Vanguard pack members stumbled toward the dais, where Seluna stood. But there were over a dozen who backed away, teeth bared at her.

She laughed. “Are you sure this is how you want to play this game?” Her fire slithered toward them lazily, as if she were toying with her food, just as Aysel rushed up to Lucian.

“Lucian,” she panted, shaking her brother. “She’s using you. She’s turning the pack against itself!”

“Imagine all the power you shall have if you join me,” Seluna said, but the Vanguards who’d rejected her came to stand by Lucian’s side.

One of them bellowed, “Lucian is the only Alpha we recognize!”

Seluna was *stunned*.

Lucian seemed… *torn*?

Was Aysel getting through to him? Finally? I couldn’t fucking worry about either one of those imbeciles right now, though—I had to wait for the right moment, for Seluna to be distracted. Once I made my move, I wouldn’t be able to turn back.

*Xavier?* I mind linked. *Is Cali still in the palace?*

Xavier’s end was silent, and I hoped—god, I fucking hoped so hard—that that meant they’d managed to escape.

“Brother,” Aysel said desperately, cutting off my thoughts as she reached for Lucian’s hand. “We can do this—we can all leave together—”

Lucian’s hesitation vanished. “I shall not leave my beloved!” he shouted, taking a step back from Aysel and toward Seluna.

“But what about me?” Aysel pointed at her chest. “What about our pack?” She gestured at the Vanguards who stood by her side. “These people believe in *you*, Lucian, not in some goddess who wants to exploit you!”

Seluna snarled at Aysel’s words. “You lying lowlife! You *never* believed in me!”

Aysel shifted just as Seluna blasted her with fire. Her wolf yipped in pain, the scent of burned fur bursting through the air as she leapt back to avoid the flames.

“You cannot escape me!” Seluna laughed, raising her hands to throw more fire at Aysel. I saw my angle, my opportunity—now that Seluna was distracted, I’d attack, I would—

“We have been deceived!” Andrei shouted, redirecting Seluna’s attention toward him—and, by proximity, me. *Fuck*. He stood between Aysel and Seluna, in human form, effectively protecting Aysel. “Don’t you see?” he told the pack members who’d walked over to Seluna’s side. “Seluna is a demon who fooled us all!”

What came out of Seluna’s mouth was a screeching cacophony that hurt my ears. It was a war cry.

It was a signal that made her demon army burst into action.

All hell broke loose.

The Vanguard wolves—shifted and human—rushed toward the exits, but all I could hear was pounding in the distance and windows locking all over the estate, the sounds of doors slamming shut fortifying the chaos.

*Tell me they’re not here*, I mind linked everyone from the Redwood team, looking around frantically. *Someone fucking tell me that Xavier managed to get Cali out of here!*

*Greyson?*

Cali’s voice was in my head. Dread made me feel cold all over, even though Seluna’s fire scorched the room.

*Greyson, I found a way out!* she mind linked. I turned in the direction of the eastern corridor, and then there was Cali, still on Xavier’s back, charred and bleeding and beautiful as she waved for me.

“There’s a way out! Over there—it’s not protected!” Andrei screamed, obviously coming to the same realization as Cali. A second later, everyone turned in her direction and charged toward the sole exit, the way to salvation from Seluna’s fire and demons.

A massive group of Vanguards ran toward her, and Cali screamed. I roared, racing to catch her, protect her, but the rush turned into a stampede. A stampede of giant wolves, blocking my path to my mate, sweeping me away.

# Episode 2760

**Xavier**

*Cali!* I mind linked. In the rush, she’d been pushed off my back and into the sea of wolves and demons. *Where are you? I’m coming to get you!*

There was no reply. Radio silence while a full-blown war went on. I looked around, fighting to pick up her scent, but it was impossible. The demons, no longer statues, reeked of something rotten, and they were killing indiscriminately. And at the heart of it all, Seluna sat back on a makeshift throne made of flames, watching with a pleased smile on her face.

*Cali!* I mind linked again. *Greyson, I fucking lost her!*

I couldn’t see my brother either, which didn’t help with the frantic energy building in me. I couldn’t leave this castle without them. The thought made me sick. I was grabbed from behind, then, and I snarled, desperate and furious, ready to attack.

*Oy, Xavier! It’s us!* Zainab mind linked. She was with Charlie. They were clinging to the walls, fighting not to get drawn into the stream. They were injured but alive—thank god.

*Have you seen Cali?* I asked right away.

*I saw her get knocked off your back*, Zainab said. *I tried to get to her, but a demon almost nabbed me.*

Well, fuck.

*Did she get swept out of the room?* Charlie asked. *I’ll go look for her!*

*Where’s Cali?* Greyson’s voice burst into my head, frantic*. I can’t see her! Did they push her outside?*

This was all fucking Andrei’s fault. Typical. The second he’d warned the Vanguards, everyone had scrambled toward the one exit that wasn’t blocked. Perhaps Cali had gotten out with them, but knowing her, I wasn’t so sure. She wouldn’t leave Greyson and me, and she’d also told me that she felt *she* had to be the one to kill Seluna.

She wouldn’t be plotting to do just that… Would she?

Just, no.

*You two keep looking for Cali*, I told Zainab and Charlie. *I’ll deal with the fucking demon!*

I basically had to kill Seluna before Cali even got a chance to try. She was stubborn as hell and scrappy, so at this point I had no idea what the fuck she’d do. I didn’t want her to get hurt. That was all I could think about. I was terrified of losing her.

*Greyson!* I mind linked, rushing into the main hall, against the wave of the battle. *Let’s close in on Seluna before she goddamn—*

A demon jumped on my back, interrupting my train of thought. I growled and fought to shake it off, but its talons had pierced my skin, digging deep. Pain spread through my flesh. A weird kind of pain, sharp enough that my wolf yipped, stumbling.

I could *feel* the venom coursing through me almost immediately. There was no way it could have been anything else. I was immediately weakened, and even the thought of saving Cali couldn’t distract me from the excruciating pain that spread through my body.

My pride wouldn’t fucking allow me to go like this. I had to kill this thing before the venom drained my strength, or I was gonna die. Thankfully, there weren’t any specific ways of killing demons—I wasn’t a “follow the process” kind of guy, anyway. I always just did what worked.

And what worked right now was to run toward a wall and spin around to slam the demon against it.

The thing shrieked and fell to the ground, belly up.

My wolf’s instincts kicked in, spurring me into action at the first sign of weakness. I snarled, burying my teeth into its leathery neck. The texture and the sour demonic blood made me gag as I ripped its throat out. The demon screeched in a way that made my fur stand on end before I spat out the blood.

The demon collapsed, making more of those nightmarish, shrieking sounds.

My victory was short-lived, though. The venom was already in my bloodstream; I could feel it. Through the pain, I could feel every inch of me going numb. I took a few faltering steps forward, toward the fray, but then I stumbled.

I fell.

My vision blurred.

My power was sapped from me, and I was forced to shift back to human. I couldn’t fight Seluna, not like this, but I needed to at least make sure Cali was safe. I had to mind link with Greyson, let him know what Cali had said about killing Seluna, tell him to help her since I was growing so weak and useless.

I had failed my mate.

The pain turned into agony, and it I realized it wasn’t just the demon venom that was killing me—it was the mate bond throbbing, demanding, my wolf jarred by the realization that I’d had Cali on my back and she’d been snatched away.

This was all my fault.

I crawled a few more feet, fighting to mind link with Greyson and failing while the room flashed with multicolored lights. Was this Seluna’s fire, or was I hallucinating now? There were screams in my ears, then ringing, and I wasn’t going to last long, I wasn’t going to, I…

I was grabbed by the scruff of my neck.

Someone jerked me around as if I weighed nothing, and suddenly, a beautiful woman hovered over me. She looked down, smiling like an angel.

I was definitely fucking hallucinating.

Either that, or I was dying.

Before I could call this creature an angel again, though, her eyes grew dark, veins springing up, trembling beneath her pale skin. When she opened her mouth, it was to reveal fangs as long as fingers, and for the first time in what felt like forever, the acidic taste of fear burst into my mouth.

I wasn’t going to go like this.

Not like this.

My wolf hissed as I fought to scramble backward, to get away, but my strength was rapidly leaving me. The demon laughed, grabbed me by the shoulders, and—before I could take another breath—she bit down on my neck, her fangs piercing all the way through my flesh.

The howl I let out was unlike any sound I’d ever heard myself make.

*Is this it, then? Is this how I goddamn die?*

Her teeth were lodged inside me, deep, draining my blood, draining my strength. Draining all that was left of me.

*Cali*, I thought. *Cali, I’m so sorry…*

I opened my mouth to say her name, but all that came out was blood.

“Sweet,” the demon hissed after pulling back, red dripping down her chin as she looked down at me. She laughed when I shivered. “So, so *sweet*…”

She opened her mouth wide, about to bite down again. My vision was spotty—

A figure appeared behind the demon.

Ava’s scent filled my senses, and my wolf stirred, waking up from what felt like a deep sleep. The demon’s dark eyes widened, and it turned around, but it was too late.

Ava didn’t hesitate.

She leapt onto the demon’s back, knocking it off me with a growl. She was vicious, unhinged as she fought the demon. I lay there, frozen, my neck throbbing, blood sticking to my fur. Had I shifted back to my wolf? I had—I could feel it. Ava’s presence had urged me into a shift, and I was grateful to her for that.

At least she’d tried to save me.

The demon was powerful, though—she threw Ava back, slamming her into a wall. I fought to snarl, to threaten, to trip the demon before it advanced on Ava, but my strength was still absent.

The demon made an otherworldly sound that made me shiver, but Ava wasn’t fazed. When the demon leapt, Ava dodged, howling before she reared back and attacked. She bit the demon hard on the nape, her teeth clenching around the bone with a loud *crack.*

The demon’s shrieks were nightmarish, but they quickly died out.

It was over.

*Xavier!* Ava mind linked. She spat out flesh, blood, and bone and rushed over to me.

I struggled to get to my feet.

*Let me help you*, she urged. *I gotta get you out of here!*

I shook my head. *I’m not leaving Cali.*

Her wolf huffed. *Don’t be an idiot. You can’t help anyone when you’re like this! Try to rest your weight on me, okay?*

I didn’t reply—couldn’t—and she dragged me out of the corridor and into a smaller, dimly lit side room. At least it didn’t smell like fire and death—not as much. Ava shifted back to human, and I did too. My wolf was so severely attuned to her that it would’ve been fucking laughable if I hadn’t felt like I was goddamn dying.

Ava locked the door quickly, turning to face me.

“It’s poison,” I rasped from the floor. “That demon… fucking *poisoned* me…”

“Shh,” Ava said, and got on her knees next to me. “You have to save your strength—you need to focus your energy on healing until the poison works its way out of your system.”

I shook my head, grunting in pain as I pressed a hand over my bloodied throat. “I—I can’t wait that long. Cali needs me, the pack needs me, Seluna has to be… to be *stopped*,” I choked the words out.

Ava’s face twisted with what had to be concern. Or exasperation. Or something in between and a million times more intense. Her jaw clenched as she nodded, gingerly removing my hand from my neck. She stared at the wound, swallowing audibly. Her face paled as she whispered, “It’s not healing as quickly as it should, Xavier… I’ve never seen you so badly injured.”

Her eyes were watering. She sniffled.

My voice cracked from the pain. “A-Are you fucking *crying* right now?”

Without a word, she shifted back into her wolf. My breath caught. She hovered over me. *You helped me heal once, so now it’s my turn to help you*,she said. *Don’t refuse this.*

I couldn’t. I knew what was coming, and my wolf had gone wild at the thought. At the first swipe of Ava’s tongue over my wound, both he and I groaned with relief.

I held onto her fur, my eyes closed. The image of her bare body, her gorgeous face had need coursing through me, so intense it made my wolf howl. I didn’t have time to process any of it, though.

Through half-lidded eyes, I saw something move in the corner, emerging from the shadows.

# Episode 2761

**Charlie**

I ran through one of the million hallways in the Vanguard palace, looking for Cali. There were demons and werewolves fighting everywhere. The scene reminded me of the battle with the revenants, kind of. The biggest difference now was that I wasn’t sure which side some of the Vanguard wolves were on. And that made this whole battle ten times more dangerous.

Thankfully, though, when a demon that looked like a tarantula came sailing toward me, a random Vanguard wolf snapped one of its feet off before tearing the thing apart.

Well, I could be pretty sure of this particular guy’s allegiances, at least.

*Thank you*, I said to the wolf, who looked at me funny before literally running away. Alrighty then.

*I hate spiders!* Zainab’s voice squeaked inside my head. She popped up next to me all of a sudden, freaking out. *What are we supposed to do now? How are we gonna escape from this damn maze? The hallways all look the same to me.*

*Not sure*, I replied. *But we have to follow Xavier’s orders—either try to find Cali and then get out, or kill Seluna. Maybe both, if things go right.*

Zainab blinked at me. *You think that* you and I *will be the ones to kill Seluna after both Xavier and Greyson failed? You can’t be serious.*

My wolf huffed. *You have to believe in yourself, Zainab! Stay optimistic!*

*I think we should go find Cali before we attempt any Seluna shenanigans*, Zainab said seriously.

I did agree with that—Cali was our priority—so we picked up our pace through the castle, trying to catch her scent.

I’d never fought demons before—who had?—but there was something deep within me that said I could do this. My hunter instincts were tingling. I’d been able to excel at hunter camp, after all… But could I continue that success here?

*Wait, is that Cali?* I asked Zainab, but *nope*. That was just one of the demons—a headless one—moving down the hall. Floating, really. Zainab gestured for us to change direction, and I didn’t argue.

I was glad Violet wasn’t here. I could only imagine what Xavier was going through, not knowing where his mate was, worrying about her, fearing the worst. I hated the idea of Xavier suffering like that—we needed to find Cali. And if I happened to get a crack at Seluna on the way, all the better.

Yes, I did prefer to stay confident.

*Did you see that thing without a head?* Zainab asked as we ran down yet another hallway in search of Cali’s scent. *It left slime behind! Why does everything have to be so creepy? I didn’t sign up for slime and spiders, dammit!*

I felt protective of Zainab. Even though she’d been a werewolf far longer than me, I got the sense that she wasn’t as self-assured about demon slaying as I was. She was pretty young too—or at least she looked young, so—

*How dare you?* A random-ass Vanguard wolf blocked our way, snarling. *How dare you turn against our goddess?*

I growled and was about to lunge at him when Zainab jumped forward, leaping over the wolf before attacking from the back, her teeth digging into his shoulders before she crunched down on his neck.

In seconds, the Vanguard guy collapsed.

*Damn.*

I blinked up at Zainab. Maybe I’d underestimated her—she was very fast, and this vicious side of her? Surprising. It was like watching a bunny turn into a panther.

*No wonder you’re always put on patrols*, I mind linked.

*Hey, I can handle myself, spiders and slimy demon-y things be damned*, she said casually. *Anyway, I thought I heard something coming from that way!*

We were racing toward the west wing when I picked up Cali’s scent.

*It’s her!* Zainab exclaimed.

*We don’t know if the trail is recent, though*, I said.

*But it’s all we have*, Zainab said.

I agreed, and we followed the smell. At the same time, we made sure to evade three sets of Vanguard wolves fighting one another.

*Let them do the work and kill each other*, Zainab said. *That way, we save our strength.*

So, Zainab was both a formidable fighter and a strategic mastermind. I was learning all sorts of new things tonight. *Who taught you—*

Cali’s scream cut me off and startled us both. Zainab and I locked eyes before running faster than ever, bursting into a large room that had a fountain in the middle.

“Get out of here, you feathered asshole, shoo!” Cali shouted before diving underwater to get away from a large flying demon that was flapping its wings right above her. I lunged toward the thing instinctively, snapping at its clawed feet, only missing by an inch.

The demon shrieked and caught me by the nape, its claws sinking into my flesh, digging through fur and breaking skin as it dragged me over the ground. I fought to claw at it or bite, but I couldn’t reach it.

*I’m right here, Charlie!* Zainab said, circling below. *I’m gonna catch this SOB!*

She jumped, fighting to reach and attack it just as Cali shouted, “Charlie!”

She rolled out of the fountain and onto her back on the floor, raising her hands. Her expression dark, she twisted her palms together in a circle, making a rolling motion to create a ball of magic that she shot straight at the demon.

It was kind of badass, not gonna lie.

The demon’s body shook with the impact—it squealed and hissed, releasing me. I fell, but as I did, I snapped at the thing’s leg, dragging the screaming creature down with me into the fountain. I took a deep breath before going underwater, but the demon wasn’t prepared. It flailed around, screaming, and I bit harder, determined to drown this horrible creature.

I bit so hard that the water turned a dark, nightmarish red.

The demon kept fighting, but not for too long. Seconds later, its thrashing wings came to a stop. It collapsed in a heap, and that was my cue. I spat out the nasty-tasting blood and stumbled out of the fountain.

“That was great, Charlie!” Zainab clapped enthusiastically. She’d shifted back to human. I did the same so I could talk to Cali, who nodded seriously and said, “I don’t even care that it’s technically murder, I enjoyed that too.”

“Thank you for your help,” I told Cali. “Are you okay?”

Cali was a mess. There were smudges of smoke on her cheeks and scratches on her arms, her clothes were wet, and her eyes were puffy like she’d been crying. Like, sobbing. But what she told me was, “Who, me? Pfft, I’m totally fine! Never been better!”

Zainab and I locked eyes.

“Xavier said—”

“You’ve seen him?” Cali asked urgently, interrupting me. “Where is he? Is he all right? I’ve been looking for him and Greyson.”

“It doesn’t matter where they are,” I replied. “Xavier told us to get you out of here.”

Cali shook her head adamantly. “No, I can’t. I’m not leaving my mates.”

I nodded. “I get that—I’d do the same for Violet—but Xavier is the Alpha’s brother, so I consider his request an order.”

Zainab winced a little. “Hate to point out the obvious, but Cali doesn’t do well with orders.”

“She’s right,” Cali declared, pointing to Zainab.

“But I can’t argue with Xavier!” I exclaimed. “He wants you safe, and so do the rest of us. I’ll shift back, then you can grab on and we can get you the hell out of here.”

“Look, Charlie, I know you’re doing what Xavier asked you to do,” Cali said, “but I’m not leaving—not without my mates, and not before Seluna is dead.”

I looked at Zainab, and she shrugged.

“Cali, please,” I started again. She really could be so stubborn! “I can’t just leave the castle without you.”

“You don’t have to leave,” Cali said. “You and Zainab can stay and help me.”

I opened my mouth. Closed it. That took too long—Cali turned her back on me, and without another word, she marched out of the fountain room. *Shit*. I hoped Xavier wouldn’t be mad at me. I was still kind of the new guy in the pack.

“Cali, wait up!” Zainab said, and we both ran to follow her, still in human form.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“The room where the ceremony was going to be held,” Cali said, her expression dark. “Seluna must be there. Greyson and Xavier are probably still fighting her.”

I was alarmed—the last thing Xavier would want was for Cali to go back to the source of all this chaos. If this were Violet, and she was in danger the way that Cali was right now, I wouldn’t let her go anywhere near Seluna. Ever.

Cali was a ways ahead of us, and I whispered to Zainab, “We can’t let her do this. We have to get Cali out of here!”

Zainab raised her eyebrows. “You really think you can talk sense into Cali? After both Xavier and Greyson failed? For real?”

What was with Zainab being all *realistic*? I needed to at least try, here.

“Cali,” I said, jogging to catch up with her, “I’m gonna have to insist; you can’t just—”

I was about to block her way when I stopped talking altogether.

A person appeared in front of us, emerging from the shadows. I gaped when I saw who it was.

“*Violet?*”

# Episode 2762

Okay, but why did Charlie and Zainab just stop? Also, why on earth did Charlie just say Violet’s name? I was about to ask what the hell was going on when Zainab stepped forward.

Frowning, she eyed the demon in front of us. “Sage? What are you doing here?”

My apprehension had just evolved to full-blown confusion. The demon didn’t look like Violet or Sage, obviously. It was this grotesque, tall, green-black thing—like a mash-up of an evil alien and Ursula’s eels from *The Little Mermaid*. It had this haze about it that was alarming, so I looked away immediately.

*I don’t have time for this bullshit, dammit!*

I had to keep moving—either to kill Seluna, or to get to my mates and help them do it. Hanging out with an evil eel wasn’t going to accomplish either of those things.

“Guys,” I hissed at Charlie and Zainab. “We have to go.”

The two of them just stood there, staring at the demon, totally transfixed.

“What the hell is happening right now?” I exclaimed, pushing Charlie.

That made him flinch, but instead of answering, he turned to Zainab and scowled. “That’s exactly what I was thinking! What the hell are you talking about? This is Violet.” He gestured at the demon, who looked completely unimpressed. “Not Sage. Obviously!” He then turned to the creepy eel, lowered his voice tenderly, and said, “Sunshine, what are you doing here?”

Zainab grabbed Charlie’s arm, shaking him. “Have you lost your mind? This is Sage!” She turned to the creepy eel. “Babe, what are you doing here? Were you worried about me?”

We so did not have time for this.

I shook the madness off and snapped my fingers at Charlie and Zainab. “Guys! I’m sorry to bear this news, but this isn’t Sage or Violet—they’re back at the pack house! This is a demon trying to trick us!”

Charlie sighed dreamily. “Violet would never trick me.”

Zainab sniffled. “Sage has the most beautiful eyes.”

The eel demon didn’t even have any eyeballs, just holes in the place of eyes, which was far from pleasant. Since the kids were clearly out of it, I guessed I had to take matters into my own hands. Annoyed—I was going to choose annoyance right now instead of a breakdown, thanks—I turned to the demon and glared at it.

“It’s time for you to go,” I declared, and raised my hands to attack.

But suddenly, the demon’s face started to morph.

“Shit!” I gasped. “Stop doing that!”

I could just feel it—the demon was trying to do to me whatever it was that it had done to Charlie and Zainab. I needed to resist.

“Stay away from me, you creepy-crawly!” I shouted, blasting magic toward it. The thing casually dodged and kept walking—sliding—toward me while I stepped back, fighting to focus.

But it was no use.

Suddenly, I heard Xavier’s voice.

*Cali…*

Was he using our mind link? Or was he really here?

*Cali, it’s me, love…*

Wait, was that Greyson’s voice? I rubbed at my eyes as I kept scrambling backward, fighting to gather myself. But when I opened my eyes again, the demon was gone. The only person walking toward me was a man with dark blond hair.

He was tall and shirtless, with wide shoulders and abs for days, so incredibly good-looking that it got a little… weird. I sometimes joked about Greyson and Xavier being too hot, but this wasn’t that. There was something unsettling about the way this man smiled at me, the way he moved, the way he stared at me.

“Oh. *Shit*,” I breathed as the realization settled in.

This guy was like a blend of both my mates. I could see it—Greyson’s hair, Xavier’s eyes, Greyson’s jawline, Xavier’s cheekbones, Greyson’s lips, Xavier’s smile. This person was an intense, bizarrely gorgeous mash-up that could’ve been my mates’ long-lost brother.

*As far as I know, though, Colton is their only brother!* I screamed inside my head. *And this is definitely* not *Colton!*

Nevertheless, the realization didn’t stop me from entering an odd, daydreaming sort of state. It felt almost like a meet-cute, and I had to know this man’s name. Was it Xavson? Or Greyiere, kinda like the cheese?

*Because this definitely feels cheesy!*

“Beautiful Caliana,” Xavson said, smiling. “Isn’t this what you’ve always wanted? The best of both worlds?”

I froze as he approached, taken aback. The sound of his voice was jarring—Xavier’s rasp with Greyson’s depth, as if my mates were talking to me at once.

Still smiling, Xavson held out his hand. “Come with us, baby love. We’re what you want. Everything’s going to be okay.”

“Okay,” I echoed, giggling a little as I reached for his hand, unable to resist the pull. I felt my former anxiety melt away little by little as I drew closer.

Before our fingers could brush, though, he broke eye contact, and there was a strange ripple in the air. For a split second, the gorgeous man looked like a fucking eel, and I was dragged back to reality.

*Oh my god! This isn’t Xavson! This is a DEMON!*

“Nope!” I snapped, jumping back. “You’re not what I want at all!”

I loved Greyson and Xavier for who they were, not what they looked like. And this… whatever it was could only imitate the both of them superficially.

“What are you talking about, Cali?” Xavson continued with his lies, reaching out to touch me. “I’m here for you, you should—”

“Don’t listen to it—it’s trying to trick us!” I yelled at Charlie and Zainab, but both of them seemed dazed. “Stand back!”

But I didn’t have the time to follow my own advice. Xavson closed the distance between us with one quick movement, putting a hand on my cheek. But instead of feeling warm and tingly, I was cold all over, like death was coming for me. My teeth chattered.

Xavson smiled again. “Oh, baby love. Don’t you see? Now you don’t have to choose.”

I slapped his hand away. “You’re the last thing anyone would ever choose.”

I jumped back and blasted the thing with my magic, pissed off that it thought it could trick me.

The demon screeched at the impact, shedding its disguise, its real, nightmarish face returning. It screamed in agony as my magic kept crashing against it, but then it turned to face me and stopped. There was a huge, sinister smile on its face.

“Nice try,” it hissed, and slid toward me.

I stumbled backward, right into Charlie and Zainab.

“You guys have to snap out of it and help me!” I screamed.

Charlie flinched, as if the trance had been broken, and pulled me to the side in a protective gesture. Zainab growled, pointing at the demon. “You’re not Sage, you lying creeper!”

Both Zainab and Charlie shifted in the blink of an eye. Before I could ready another blast, the two of them attacked the demon in unison, tearing it to pieces. I shuddered at the sight, at the torn-up pieces of disgusting flesh, but at least it was gone.

*The world is a better place with one less demon around*, I thought. *Especially one who faked being my mates!*

“I have to find my mates,” I said under my breath, eyes fixed forward. “They might still be in the courtyard.”

Zainab, who had shifted back, frowned at me. “I thought that was the great hall? Like, there’s a ceiling to some of it, right?”

“Oh my god!” I huffed. “I don’t care what the hell it’s called, Ms. *Architectural Digest*! I have to get—”

Charlie blocked my way and shifted back. “I can’t let you go there, Cali.”

His face was serious, and I felt like crying. Or screaming. Or blasting everything in sight. I’d been high on such a toxic cocktail of emotions for so long that I was *this* close to snapping.

“I don’t want to fight with you, Charlie,” I said, “but you’ve got to understand!”

Zainab howled, interrupting us. She’d shifted again, so a threat had to be nearby. Sure enough, more demons were coming toward us, and Charlie and Zainab threw themselves into the fight. I focused on my powers, on helping them, and when I spotted a winged demon, I aimed straight at it.

I missed.

*Not good*, I thought as the thing circled once again.

I gasped when the thing swooped toward me. *Definitely not good.* I broke into a run, fighting not to scream. Its talons looked pretty dangerous—and venomous—so I wasn’t about to get caught.

*Run, Cali, RUN!*

I raced down the hall but wasn’t looking down, so I tripped and fell. One of the moves Artemis had taught me kicked in instinctively, and I rolled onto my back, looking upward just as the demon was about to attack.

At such close range, I couldn’t miss.

The demon shrieked when I blasted it, wailing in pain as I sent it into a tailspin.

*I did it! Ha!*

I jumped up, running back to go help Charlie and Zainab. I opened my mouth to shout their names when, suddenly, I felt a hand grabbing my arm from behind, spinning me around with such intense force that I gasped.

My eyes widened when I came face-to-face with Seluna.

“Did you really think you could get away from me, little *due destini* mate?”

# Episode 2763

**Greyson**

After being swept out of the courtyard by an actual fucking stampede of werewolves and demons, I was fighting my way back inside. That was where I’d last seen Cali.

That was where I’d last seen Seluna.

*Find Cali, kill Seluna* was a mantra, playing on a loop in my head as I raced down the hall. A demon blocked my way. The beast had decided that flickering between looking like a massive cockroach and a swimsuit model was a valid aesthetic choice, but who was I to judge? I got rid of the thing with quick movements, tearing its head off when it charged at me, spitting out the disgusting blood.

Finally, a few moments later, I burst back into the courtyard. It was far less hectic than it had been earlier. Fights were still going on, but the fires had turned into smoldering embers, and there was no Seluna.

No Cali.

*Cali? Cali, where are you?!*

There was no reply to my mind link. I had to think fast—I couldn’t just stand here when neither Cali nor Seluna was in the vicinity. My pack was nowhere to be seen, either. Xavier had vanished, Charlie and Zainab were gone, and Okorie… I really hoped he’d spotted Dani and was looking out for her. The girl had been sobbing after Seluna’s abuse.

Growling at the thought, I turned around and started running, heading deeper into the palace. I scented the air for traces of either Cali or Seluna. My rage was so massive I was struggling to prioritize. Did I make sure Cali was safe first, and then finish off Seluna? Or should I take care of Seluna first?

Wouldn’t ripping Seluna’s head off automatically ensure Cali’s safety?

There was no way Seluna had evacuated the building—she wasn’t the type to abandon anything, so chances were, she was after my mate. The demon was after Cali now that I’d failed to protect her, and if I failed again tonight—

If I failed tonight, and Seluna didn’t vanish, and she managed to drain the life and power out of my mate, I didn’t know what I’d do. What would be the point of living without Cali? I had a responsibility to the pack, yes, but what about my responsibility to my mate?

How could I go on after repeatedly failing her?

The thought made the taste of sour demon blood intensify in my mouth, and I fought not to gag. The scents in the air were all over the place, and they were mostly horrible. How the hell was I supposed to find anyone? This place was so damn massive that my fury was only getting irrationally worse.

And then, of course, a bunch of Vanguard wolves turned up to block my way.

Were these assholes about to challenge me, or had they aligned themselves with Andrei? Either way, I was done with the diplomatic bullshit.

*If you’re here to stop me*, I mind linked, *you’re all going to die.* *If you’re here to help, just get out of my goddamn way.*

The wolf at the front shook his head, stepping forward. *We’re looking for Lucian.*

*Well, I don’t know where he is*, I snapped, and brushed past them.

*We want to help!* the wolf called from behind me.

I paused in surprise, turning to face him. *Is this a common enemy thing, or should I expect you to backstab me the moment Seluna comes into view?*

*We need to protect Lucian*, the wolf said, speaking for the group. *He’s still our prince. If we can see that Seluna is a demon, Lucian must know it as well.*

I had to laugh. *I wouldn’t bet on that, but good luck with it.*

The wolf growled. *Our prince is wise!*

The universe needed to give me the strength not to go on a rampage today, because I was *this* close to losing my shit.

*Prince or not*, I snapped, *Lucian is a lost cause. He’s enamored with Seluna. You’ll be lucky if he doesn’t tear you all apart just for calling her a demon.*

*We will help him see. It’s our job to protect him, even if he can’t protect himself*, the wolf declared. *We will kill her.*

I stepped forward. *If you want to help, so be it. But I’m the one ending Seluna. Got it?*

The wolf looked at his group, and they all nodded at me. I led the way, running down yet another hall in this massive estate once more. The scents were still disgusting and dizzying. I had no idea which direction to go—no idea where to find Cali or Xavier or goddamn Seluna. The stampede had been so insane that I couldn’t even imagine where everyone had ended up.

*Xavier?* I mind linked into the void like a moron. *Xavier, are you with Cali? We have to find her! I swear to god, if anything happens to her I’m going to—*

A loud howl interrupted my thoughts. The moment I turned the corner, Lucian appeared. There was a large group of Vanguard wolves with him, twice the number of the Vanguard wolves by my side.

*This is treason!* Lucian’s snarl was full of fury. He glared at the wolf who’d spoken to me before. *How dare you follow the Redwood Alpha? Seluna will punish you—that is, if I don’t kill you first!*

*This isn’t right, my prince*, said the wolf behind me, anger seeping into his tone. *Seluna is an imposter! She has tricked you! A demon!*

There was foam in Lucian’s mouth. *I forbid you to speak of her this way! You had all better bow down, or I shall strike you down!*

This was all fine and dandy, and I’d have run for popcorn under any other circumstances, but right now this whole situation was only intensifying my urge to eradicate everything in my path.

*You’re delusional, Lucian!* I barked. *Can’t you see that your own pack is turning against you?*

Lucian’s wolf growled. *That’s because of the lies you’ve told them about Seluna being a demon!*

He lunged for me, but I was ready for the motherfucker. I’d told Aysel that I would avoid hurting her brother, but since Lucian was begging for it, it wouldn’t be my fault if I slit his throat. It would serve him right after all he’d done to Cali, anyway.

I braced myself, ready to evade and attack, but then a wolf came barreling in, slamming into Lucian before he could reach me.

Andrei.

For someone who was usually the worst, I was shocked to see Andrei doing something useful. He tackled Lucian, pinning him to the ground. A second later, Aysel’s white wolf raced in, helping Andrei to hold Lucian down. Her voice pierced through my head, so I knew that everybody had to be hearing her mind link.

*Lucian!* she urged. *Stop this madness. She’s gotten into your head. She’s a demon, not a goddess. We’ve all been played for fools!*

Lucian’s wolf snarled and struggled against Aysel and Andrei, but he couldn’t escape.

*You have to come back to us*, Aysel said. *You have to help your pack. We have to stop her.*

*Seluna is my one true love*, Lucian hissed. *A gift from above! If anyone is a fool, it’s you for believing what the Redwoods have been telling you!*

He snapped at Andrei, nipping through the flesh of his paw hard enough to free himself. But I was ready for him—I leapt and slammed Lucian to the ground, howling into his ears so loudly that he recoiled, my claws digging into his chest.

*I don’t have time for your sick bullshit!* I roared. *For Cali’s sake, just because I know she doesn’t want me fucking killing anyone, I’m giving you one more chance.* I pressed my paw against Lucian’s windpipe. He yelped, but I was too far gone to give a shit*. If you don’t listen to your sister, if you keep attacking me, then I will have to kill you.*

Aysel’s wolf gasped. *Greyson! Don’t—*

I ignored her, pressing down once more, growling. *If you give in to Seluna, you’ll be endangering your entire pack, and you won’t be fit to be Alpha. You’re nothing but a fool. Do you understand?*

Lucian’s wolf was panting, struggling, glaring up at me. *If what you say is true*, he mind linked, *then Seluna made a fool of me. I don’t like being a fool.*

*She’s a demon*, I said. *They can make fools of anyone. But if you want to secure your position as the Vanguard Alpha, it’s not too late. Fight her. Show her you are not a pawn.*

Aysel’s wolf whined. *Lucian, please listen to Greyson. Think about our legacy!*

Lucian stopped struggling. Finally. But was he pretending, to throw us off?

*Stop this*, Aysel said, nudging me. *Let my brother go.*

I snapped at him, and Aysel snapped at me.

*Let my brother go!* she repeated.

I let the motherfucker go, glaring at Aysel. *If you want to deal with your twisted brother, I’m not going to stand in the way—you’ve already wasted enough of my time.* I turned to Lucian, who rose to his feet. With a growl, I told him, *Seluna hurt my mate, and I’m going to kill her. This is not a debate. I dare any one of you to try and stop me.*

I was about to run down the hallway when Lucian blocked my path.

*Either help me*, I snarled, *or I’ll make you get out of my way. Which will it be?*

# Episode 2764

**Xavier**

My vision was going in and out, pain assaulting my senses. When I tried to refocus, the man-shaped shadow was gone. I had to be hallucinating again, because the only thing in my line of sight right now was Ava.

She licked my wound once more, the flat of her tongue brushing up against my broken skin. Her scent overwhelmed my nose, and the mate bond between us electrified. My wolf felt *unhinged*. Even more so than usual—this felt stronger somehow—but the pleasure didn’t last.

The wave of pain was sudden, but sharp, and it forced me to grip my stomach. There was a lesser wound there, nothing in comparison to the one at my throat, but it still ached like a son of a bitch. I looked down at myself, at the blood covering my body. I could feel my injuries closing up, but the venom was still burning me up from the inside out.

“What is it?” Ava asked. She’d shifted back to human. “What’s happening?”

“The v-venom,” I choked out.

Her touch soft, she placed her hands on my cheeks while I gritted my teeth against the pain. “Breathe through this, Xavier.”

I growled, glaring up at her. I didn’t want her tender touches or her sweet looks or the way she—the way she *worried* about me.

But she just powered through. “No, Xavier,” she said sternly. “You *need* to breathe through this.”

This was all wrong. I wasn’t supposed to be here with Ava—she wasn’t supposed to be licking my wounds, nursing me back to health. It was meant to be Cali, but Cali…

Cali wasn’t here.

Only Ava.

Ava, for years now.

*Always Ava.*

I ignored my wolf’s thought. I tried to get up again, run away from it. But I didn’t have the strength, and she knew. Her voice was low as she muttered, “Xavier, *please*. You need to rest. Give your healing a chance.”

I finally lay back, feeling exhausted. She swept my hair back while I tried to rest, tried to relax, follow instructions.

I needed to follow her instructions.

I could feel my skin mending. I closed my eyes just as she said, “It’s okay. I’m not going anywhere—I’ve got you. Just make sure you heal…”

Her words, her touch made me relax enough that I felt myself drifting off, exhausted from the pain, from the battle. I couldn’t let that happen, though—I hadn’t come here to sleep. I wasn’t *allowed*, not when danger still lurked at every corner.

Forcing my eyes open, I looked up at Ava. She eyed my wound, the one on my stomach, her expression focused. Still concerned, still worried, still so fucking hard to ignore. She caught me staring and smiled softly. When she spoke, it sent a chill down my spine.

“You’re healing,” she murmured.

I tried to sit up, just to break the weird reverie that seemed to have come over me at her nearness. But Ava pushed me back.

“Don’t rush it,” she soothed, placing a hand on my bare chest. Her skin felt warm, so good that I couldn’t help but swallow roughly.

My wolf was loving every second of this.

And the worst part was that I couldn’t even blame the asshole this time.

Ava had changed—she was genuinely worried about me, and she’d just risked her life to save me. Perhaps she couldn’t be fully trusted, but she’d proven herself time and time again. At this point, refusing to accept her loyalty seemed foolish, and I didn’t want to call myself a fool.

I didn’t want to call myself a fool for believing in her, either, but my wolf was already crawling at her feet, begging for a taste.

“All your wounds are getting better,” she said quietly, “apart from this one. Seems to be where the demon first injected the venom…” She trailed off, leaning over to my throat. She paused. “There we go,” she said, then, holding my head tightly as the skin healed. “How are you feeling?”

Her lips brushed my neck. My breath caught. My whole body jolted, both hands coming up to grip her arms. To stop her from—whatever the fuck this was.

“I’m fine,” I said. My voice cracked. My insides burned, but this time, it wasn’t because of the venom. It was *her*.

Ava pulled back slightly, facing me. “I just want to make sure you’re healing correctly. You really freaked me out back there.”

Our eyes locked. She was naked—I was too—and my wolf howled. It felt like every second of this was amplified, somehow becoming more and more intense in a way I couldn’t pinpoint or understand.

It was too much.

All of it—Ava’s scent, her worry, her skin, her eyes, the way she stared at me, the way she licked her lips and said, “Xavier, if anything ever happened to you, I don’t know what I’d—”

I didn’t know what the fuck I was doing either, but it was too late now. No thoughts, just need, just my hand reaching for the back of her nape to pull her in for a kiss. Our lips met, and she opened up for me instantly, moaning into it, her tongue brushing up against mine as I licked into her mouth, the feeling so raw and intense it hurt.

This hurt.

This felt like a disease spreading, my skin alight everywhere she touched, her breasts brushing against my forearm, her palms on my chest, my hands, the kiss so hard it could only be bruising. She liked it that way, though—she liked it when I tugged at her hair and pulled her on top of me to straddle my healed stomach. Her thighs spread at the spot beneath my navel, skin on skin, the feel of how wet she was so hot we both shuddered at the contact, breaking the kiss with a gasp.

This was animal.

This was me losing a bit of my mind while my wolf roared in satisfaction and the room vibrated all around me and the shadows—

The shadows moved again.

Behind Ava, the shadows moved, but why should I care? Why the fuck should I care when Ava was on top of me, willing and mad and so eager to be fucked?

My mate, all mine, begging for my claim.

“What’s wrong?” Ava panted, dazed, as she pulled my face around to meet her gaze.

“Nothing,” I rasped, and that was a lie.

Everything was wrong.

The way I twisted her hair into a ponytail to pull her back into the kiss, the way her thighs quivered as she writhed on top of me, the spot between her legs rubbing up against my hipbone, the way she whimpered and moaned, the thought that I needed to make her come just like this, just from the friction.

Everything was wrong, because this felt *too* good.

This felt like losing myself, like breaking down piece by piece, like a spreading sickness. I knew had to push her away, but the more I kissed her, the longer I felt her naked hot body against mine, the more my resolve drained. I knew I had to rest after being attacked, but nothing mattered right now.

Just Ava.

Ava and her open mouth and her trembling flesh and how she was so crazed and needy for me, how I could pin her down and fuck her till I came inside and claimed what was rightfully mine. *Mine*—I must’ve said the word out loud, because she moaned when I flipped us over. I rolled on top of her, my hard-on brushing against her stomach, her legs spread for me, the insides of her thighs glistening, and *fuck*.

*Fuck fuck fuck.*

She wrapped her arms around me, arching her hips, begging for it as she said, “Xavier…”

She said my name, and something cracked inside my brain.

Something echoed with *everything is wrong.*

This wasn’t right. Even if somewhere in my head my wolf was reminding me this was my mate. It was right. If I wanted it to be.

My mate bond with Ava throbbed viciously.

*The only woman allowed to whisper my name like that is Cali*, I thought, and then a sort of dread washed all over me. Ava winced all of a sudden, as if she could feel it too, as if there was a crack in our lusty bubble. I rolled off her, panting, the mate bond between us hurting, my wolf howling yet disoriented. Even *he* was disoriented.

“What’s happening?” Ava whispered, shaking. “There’s something off.”

“You felt the strangeness too?”

Before Ava could reply, I saw the shadows shifting again. Was I imagining this? Was it real? Could it be the venom?

But then a tall man stepped forward, emerging from the shadows. Growling, I put a protective arm around Ava, pulling her back. Was he from the Vanguard pack? Why was his face still shadowed? What the fuck was happening right now?

“No, don’t worry,” the shadowy man murmured in a soft voice. “You two are drawn to each other. You should continue…” Something glistened in the dark. His teeth, forming a sharp smile. “In fact, I insist on it.”

Ava shuddered.

“Who the hell are you?” I demanded.

The man turned to Ava. “Poor girl. You want him. You should have what you want.” He flicked his wrist subtly, and I was struck by an overwhelming, sudden urge to have Ava.

To fuck her. Right here, right now, in front of this stranger.

She gasped when I grabbed her arm and pulled her to me, but before our lips could meet—

The door burst open.

“Xavier Evers!” Knox roared, marching in. He grabbed me by the arm, growling. “Get the hell away from my cousin!”

# Episode 2765

For a second, I froze. I felt like an animal, caught by the same predator for the hundredth time. I told myself to move, to attack, to use my magic, but Seluna was too quick.

She grabbed me harder, searing my left arm with her fire. I screamed, the pain making my whole body jolt. Seluna sneered, grabbing my chin and forcing me to look at her. “Be good now, Caliana. I marked you once, I’ll do it again.”

I was in so much pain I could only choke as she dragged me away from the fight. I looked behind me, opening my mouth to call out to Charlie and Zainab for help. They were both getting swarmed by demons—some looked like people, others looked like monsters, and they all seemed ready to murder.

*How will I ever forgive myself if Charlie and Zainab get killed today?* I wondered, shivering at the possibility. *How will I ever face Violet and Sage? These are their mates.*

I had no answer to those questions, but the searing pain in my arm had subsided enough for more feelings to come surging in. They were the same emotional visitors I’d been seeing a lot lately—blistering rage and the kind of fear that made your head go numb.

“What the hell do you want from me?” I demanded, struggling against Seluna’s grip when I realized she was dragging me back toward the courtyard.

“Oh, so many things!” Seluna said in a sing-song voice. “Really, where do I even begin?”

Her non-answer was infuriating. I struggled once more, but her grip got hard enough that I had to smother a scream of hurt.

She turned to glare at me. “One wrong move, child, and you *are* going to lose your entire arm.”

The threat left me breathless. I fell silent, terrified, but still—*still*—I couldn’t just let this demon drag me around like a puppet. I couldn’t give up, not when I had people to protect, not when I didn’t even know where my mates were.

“I’m not quite sure why you’re still resisting,” Seluna said. “I thought you would’ve realized by now how important it is to help me. I would’ve thought you’d come around—after all, you did show up to my Luna ceremony.”

“I only came because you made me,” I snapped. “You did something to both Dani and me. None of this was our *choice*!”

Seluna kept walking, still dragging me, her expression calm. “But perhaps it was, dear little half-Fae. I certainly didn’t force you to come here. That’s absurd.”

Arguing with Seluna was pointless. She was lying to me—as if a demon would ever tell the truth—and I had to figure out a way to get away from her. And fast. But my magic seemed to have no real effect on her, and I had no other kind of power to—

Wait.

*Wait.*

My shield was a different kind of magic altogether. I’d never tried that on Seluna. It was harder to conjure, but it was worth a shot if there was any chance that it could help me. Still, channeling a shield required a certain amount of focus—of calm, almost—and I felt anything but calm right now.

*I have to at least try, though! Xavier and Greyson aren’t here, and I can’t rely on anyone showing up to save me*, I thought, taking a deep breath. *I need to save myself, dammit!*

Seluna rounded the corner, pulling me with her as I focused on my magic. I had to center it within myself to create the shield. I was so grateful that Seluna couldn’t hear my thoughts. But then she suddenly said, “Caliana? Are you listening?”

Oops. Seluna had been ranting the entire time I’d been plotting. And here I’d thought her villain’s monologue was over, but no. I realized I had to exploit the fact that she adored listening to herself talk.

Unfortunately, though, my plan died the second I thought of it.

Seluna had realized that I’d been ignoring her, and she got all up in my face. “You ungrateful little girl!” she hissed. “Don’t you understand I’m being kind in *not* killing you?”

I actually couldn’t believe my ears. Yeah, it was nice when someone didn’t kill you, but you know what was even fucking nicer? Not continuously kidnapping and torturing people!

She was a monster.

My anger was so massive I couldn’t control my mouth. “Is this a joke? Are you seriously expecting a *thank you* right now?”

Seluna flipped her hair over her shoulder. “But of course.”

I gritted my teeth. “Right. Thank you then, for keeping me and my mates hostage in this house. Thank you for using my *due destini* power to put dozens of people’s lives in danger. Thank you for treating everyone as if they’re inferior.”

Seluna gasped, offended. “How dare you speak to me in such a way?”

I wagged my finger in her face. “You know what? If anyone should be thanked, it’s *me*, for helping you get your stupid body back. And now that you have it, you could show some appreciation by letting us go!”

“What an absurd notion.” Seluna scoffed, shaking her head. “Of course I’m not letting you go! There’s so much to do, and we’ve only just begun!” Her fiery grip burned deep on my arm, making me yelp. At the same time, her voice dropped to a chilling whisper. “If you think *this* hurts, you have no idea how much pain I can bring to you, Caliana. Be sure to watch your tongue around me if you want to survive today.”

The pain intensified into a massive throbbing that started from our point of contact and spread all over my body. My knees buckled from the agony, but I clenched my teeth and shut the hell up. I wouldn’t scream, because I refused—

*I fucking refuse to give her the satisfaction!*

At this point, though, it was obvious that mouthing off wasn’t going to help me. I went back to my earlier plan—I needed to keep Seluna talking. It had to be her favorite pastime, apart from torturing me. If I could keep her distracted, she’d ease the pain, and I might be able to build up my shield.

“Why do you even need me, though?” I asked, panting, wincing through the pain. “You have your body now, so why would someone as powerful as you need someone as average as me?”

Seluna’s grip eased. Something as simple as flattery had gotten to her, and I thanked my lucky stars for finally figuring out how to be a good liar when the situation called for it.

“That is an interesting question,” Seluna said, humming. “Perhaps I enjoy having you around, like a pet. But humans have a strong attraction to their pets, and I *despise* you. If I didn't need you, I would have killed you long ago.”

*Oh, wow, asshole*, I thought, clenching my jaw.

Good thing I wanted to kill this monster too—or at least, I felt like I was supposed to. Seluna made that seem like the only logical solution to all my problems when she knelt down in front of me.

“But, for the time being, I plan on keeping you around,” she murmured. “Like a pet, only one that I feel sorry for.”

“But why?” I asked. The pain was less now, finally. I kept asking questions to keep her occupied, keep her eyes on my face, as I brought my palms together in front of me to conjure the shield magic.

“For some reason, of all the people in the world, you had to be the one with the *due destini* power,” she said. “So I’m stuck with you. For now.”

I focused on my hands, remembering what Grandpa Innes had taught me. It was like making a snowball with magic, right? I needed more time, though, so I had to ask more questions to keep the monster distracted.

“But why’s the *due destini* so important?” I asked. “I don’t understand.”

Seluna sneered. “Of course you don’t. You’re ignorant. You never managed to see the bigger picture. You’re always obsessing over your mates, so much so that you never considered the force that has bound the three of you together.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. My palms were tingling, my grandfather’s instructions echoing in my head as I repeated them to myself.

*It’s like making a magical snowball*, I thought, the spark in my fingertips spreading, the feeling pleasant, almost euphoric as it overcame any leftover pain. *You can do this, Cali!*

“What I mean, little girl,” Seluna went on, a wicked smile on her face, “is that the power of the *due destini* is infinite. And it will be mine.” Seluna sighed. “It’s what I’ve always wanted. What I *deserve*.”

That didn’t actually help illuminate anything, but it was that faraway, dreamy look in her eyes that I’d been waiting for. Magic surged through the very heart of me, pulsating through every inch as it surged toward my fingertips. A different kind of magic, steady and heavy, ready to protect and attack in one.

And in this very moment, I felt like myself for the first time in ages.

“What you deserve,” I whispered, “is to go back to hell, where you belong.”

Seluna’s eyes widened, but it was too late. I raised my hands, and power burst out of me in a flash of blinding white light, a shield conjured like a cloud of electricity.

The demon screamed as she was sent flying.

# Episode 2766

**Greyson**

I had a demon to slay, and Lucian was standing in the goddamn way. But even though I hated to admit it—despised and loathed it, really—I knew it would be better for my pack if Lucian and the Vanguards stood with us instead of against us.

Lucian was a strong, massive werewolf. Fighting him right now would mean draining my strength when I had bigger fish to fry. Fish of the demonic variety. I would defeat Lucian—I’d come close to killing him many times before—but the time and effort it would take? I could barely afford that right now.

*Lucian!* Aysel’s wolf mind linked. *Don’t be stupid—Greyson’s offering you a chance to defeat the demon! Take it and take back your pack.*

Andrei moved forward, standing next to Aysel. *We can do this, Lucian. Just lead us to victory.*

*I don’t need to be led by anyone*, I snapped. *I’m going to take out Seluna either way, with Lucian or without.*

Lucian stared at me and, surprisingly, didn’t attack. Slowly, he turned his head toward Aysel. *I understand, Aysel*, he mind linked.

*You do?* Aysel asked hopefully, theatrical gasp and all.

I couldn’t *believe* I was hanging out with these morons when there was a horde of demons on the loose.

*I am no longer in the grip of the demonic goddess to whom I devoted most of my life*,Lucian said gravely. *I’m the Vanguard Alpha, your prince, and I shall lead you to victory.*

Aysel’s wolf yipped as the rest of them howled in enthusiasm. I felt like banging my head against the wall. I’d seen this movie so many times before that I was sick of it.

*Less cheering, more fighting*, I said*. Let’s go!*

*Let me give my orders!* Lucian said. *I have a plan.*

The man had a death wish if he thought that *I* was going to listen to *his* orders. As he gathered Andrei and the others around, I ignored him and ran off down the hall.

*Greyson!* Aysel rushed up to me, keeping up easily. *Thank you for giving my brother a chance.*

*You wouldn’t be thanking me if Lucian had made the wrong choice*, I replied. *I told you I’d try not to harm your brother, but we’re not out of this yet.*

Aysel frowned. *What do you mean?*

*Lucian’s rejection of Seluna could be jeopardized if she gets a chance to sway him the other way*, I said. *He’s easily manipulated, Aysel.*

Aysel shook her head vehemently. *That’s not going to happen. And I promise that if anything happens to you and you don’t manage to kill the demon, I will.*

I ignored Aysel’s grand statements. I still had no idea if I could trust her fully.

I slowed down to sniff the air again. Only death and the scent of a fire. No traces of Seluna. Where on earth was Okorie? He could’ve tracked her. I really hoped he was alive and well and with Dani, at least.

*Greyson!* Lucian had caught up. *I will gather the Vanguard wolves who haven’t been seduced by Seluna, and we will take out the demons she has summoned. I shall also join you in tracking down Seluna.*

I eyed the wolf. Yeah, Lucian would be a good fighter to have on my side, but I preferred to do my own thing. Mostly because Lucian was easily susceptible to Seluna’s manipulation, and I’d been a Rogue for years, doing just fine without backup.

*Stay in your lane*, I told Lucian. *I don’t need a buddy tagging along.*

Lucian frowned. *That’s rude. I thought you were the polite one and Xavier was the brute.*

Before I could tell Lucian that my patience wasn’t infinite and he was lucky he was alive, there was a commotion down the hall. I crouched instantly, followed by Aysel and Lucian. If this was that gigantic spider demon I’d seen earlier, I would—

*Cali!*

“Greyson!” she shouted, rushing to me with wide eyes.

The mate bond throbbed and thrashed inside me. *Cali*. She was here, she was alive, breathing, walking, running toward me. I raced to her, shifting back to human so I could hold her in my arms.

She looked up at me, shaking, panting, her eyes watery, her cheeks smudged with ash. The mere sight of her devastated me, my heart pounding so hard that my chest ached. I’d had no idea relief could hurt so much.

“Cali,” I breathed. “Are you okay, love?”

She shook her head, out of breath. “I blasted Seluna with a shield, but she’s coming for me.”

My eyes fell from her face to her body, down her left arm. It had a red mark on it, and I felt gut-punched.

“Seluna did this,” I said. It wasn’t a question.

Cali nodded slowly, her forehead resting on my chest. I wrapped my arms around her again, kissing the top of her head. I wanted the rest of the world to fade away, for the two of us to stay like this forever. She didn’t make a sound, but I could feel her shivering, could feel her rage and her fear, and it just fueled my own.

My mate needed to leave this place.

Seluna… Who knew what she’d do to Cali next if given the opportunity? When she no longer deemed Cali useable? Would she drain Cali’s life, her power? Could I leave right now to escort Cali home, though, when I didn’t trust the princeling and Princess Bullshit over there to take up the task of destroying Seluna?

Where the *fuck* was Xavier?

“Where’s Xavier?” Cali whispered, as if she could hear my thoughts.

“Haven’t seen him since the courtyard,” I replied. He could’ve taken Cali home, but someone else would have to do. “What about Charlie? Zainab? Okorie?” I asked. “Where are they?”

“I haven’t seen Okorie, but Charlie and Zainab are fighting demons,” Cali said. “We should go help them, but…”

“What?” I asked.

Her gaze was serious. Angry. “Seluna is standing between us and the spot where I left them.”

I stared at Cali. I knew that face. It was her no-nonsense expression, the one that said that she didn’t give a fuck if she was terrified—she’d cut a bitch and walk straight into battle if it meant helping the people she loved.

I admired her for it. I adored her for it, but I couldn’t let her do it. And with nobody around to help, with Xavier gone, I had to turn to the most unfortunate ally of all time.

“Aysel, I need a favor!” I called, looking over my shoulder. The silver-white wolf strode over, shifting back to human.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Cali said, eyes narrowed as she looked between Aysel and me. “What’s going on?”

“Aysel and Lucian want to get rid of Seluna as well. Lucian’s finally seen the light, at least in theory,” I explained to Cali. Then I turned to Aysel again. “I’ll deal with the demons. I’ll rid the Vanguard palace of the hellfire Seluna has brought, but I need something from you too.”

Aysel was intrigued, but Cali scowled. “What could you possibly want from *her*?”

“I want you to take Cali out of here,” I told Aysel. “Take her back to the Redwood pack house. I know that’s a lot to ask, but I trust you a hell of a lot more than Lucian.”

Both Aysel and Cali were stunned. Aysel broke the silence first. “Okay.”

Cali’s shocked expression twisted into incredulous anger. She broke my embrace and flicked my chest. “Have you lost your mind, Greyson?” she asked. “Me? Go with *Aysel*? After all she’s done to us? How the hell do you know she won’t throw me in a ditch just out of jealous spite?”

I spoke to Cali but kept my eyes on Aysel. “Aysel knows my patience with the Vanguards has run out. I’ll kill both her and her brother if she does anything to harm you.”

Aysel glared back. “No need to be dramatic.”

Cali shook her head. “I’m not going anywhere, much less with Aysel, so—”

“You weren’t supposed to be here in the first place.” I kept my voice low, fighting to make Cali see that it wasn’t like a I had a choice here. She needed to be safe. Period. “I’m only trying to protect you—”

“It isn’t my fault that I’m here!” Cali said. “Seluna forced me!”

I shook my head. “I’m not blaming you. But you leaving is our best bet—if we get to Seluna now, she won’t have a chance to use your powers against us.”

Cali’s chest heaved. She looked both outraged and desperate. When she spoke, her voice cracked. “I don’t want to run, Greyson. I don’t want to be a coward.”

I wrapped my arms around her, kissed her cheek. I whispered, “You’re not a coward. You’re far from it, and that’s why Seluna wants your power. I can’t let you stay—do you understand?”

Cali fell silent. I hated to pull the Alpha card, but if she kept resisting, I didn’t know if I’d be able to hold back.

“I won’t harm you, Caliana,” Aysel said before Cali could speak. “Not because I don’t want to, but because I know it’s in my best interest not to.”

Cali scoffed, letting me go. At least she looked less numb now. “Gee. Thanks for the honesty.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I’m totally going to blast you if you do anything fishy,” Cali told Aysel. “And we both know you hated it the last time I did it.”

Aysel huffed, not admitting anything. “Let’s just go before Seluna catches up.” She shifted into her wolf, lowering herself down so Cali could get on.

“Promise me,” Cali said, grabbing my hand. “Promise me you’ll come back with Xavier and the others.”

“Of course I will,” I said, stroking her cheek. She gave me one last tight hug before turning to Aysel. But just as she was about to climb on her back, she clutched at her forearm and screamed in agony.

*What the hell is happening?*

“Cali!” I rushed to hold her, soothe her, but Lucian’s growl was so loud it covered her wail. I spun around to see Seluna, glowing, marching toward us.

She laughed mockingly. “Oh, Redwood Alpha. You always fight to protect your mate.” She tilted her head to the side. “And yet, you always fail.”

I growled, ready to shift and tear her apart—

The sound of a blade flying through the air was followed by excruciating pain.

Seluna had whipped a dagger at me, striking me directly in the chest.

# Episode 2767

**Dani**

I had no idea where I was. The Vanguard palace was an endless maze that I’d fallen into after Cali had screamed at me to run. There was no way I would’ve escaped Seluna’s burning grip without her help.

The demon’s touch had felt like a leech, feeding off my amplifying magic. I’d tried to turn off my powers—to do what Okorie kept trying to teach me—but then, the demons’ clay and marble exteriors had cracked, and they’d all come alive.

They were still alive, their screeching and manic laughter echoing behind me as the sounds of battle raged on. I was running away from it like a coward, because that was what I was. That was all that was left of me today.

Only fear.

Only Seluna’s bruising grip on my skin, sucking the life out of me. My cheeks were wet, my heart was racing, aching like it was about to break when I stumbled. I tripped over a rug, the impact of falling shaking me up.

I quickly scrambled upright, wishing I could find someone from the pack—anyone. *Okorie*. Okorie would know what to do. The last time I’d been in this place, I’d spent ninety percent of my time in the dungeon, shaking in the corner, so I had no idea how to get out now.

*BANG!*

A loud cracking sound made my teeth chatter, and then realization hit me. Since I couldn’t escape this place, I needed to hide. I ducked into a room, away from the sound. My chest throbbed, breaths coming out harsh and broken, and I was—

I was in a giant walk-in closet.

Dimly lit, a million pieces of clothing everywhere, a tall ceiling… I shouldn’t have felt so claustrophobic, but I did. I wished I could become invisible, fade away until Seluna could no longer take over and break down whatever was left of me.

There was no other exit to this room. I had to hide.

I was rushing through the rows of clothes, fighting to find just the right spot to conceal myself, when I heard the door open with a soft *click.*

It echoed in my head like a grenade going off. I covered my mouth with both hands to stop myself from hyperventilating. I was trapped in here, and I was no longer alone. Who was this? Could it be someone who was trying to hide as well?

Maybe it was Cali.

Maybe Cali had found me, because that was what Cali did. Cali cared, and she helped people, always, even if they were quiet and seemed insignificant.

Deep down, though, I knew the truth.

This wasn’t Cali. It couldn’t be.

But I just hoped…

I just hoped it wasn’t Seluna, or one of her demons.

My hands still covering my mouth, I made my way through the rows of clothes that concealed me from whoever had just entered. This entity was completely quiet, so I fought to be the same. I prayed that it was all in my imagination—that I was all alone in here, and the door had never opened. Breathing through my nose, ignoring the way my head pounded like it was about to crack in half, I spotted a giant rack of clothes.

It was as good a hiding spot as any.

I felt like a smaller version of myself, suddenly, a child hiding from my sister, just for fun, at a store underneath the clothing racks. Tabitha would always find me, always, and then we’d start giggling, and everything…

Everything had been better back then.

I had to get out of this—if not for me, then for Tabitha. I’d worked too hard and been through way too much not to survive now. I had to reunite with my sister and try to build a shiny new life with her—try to build *something*.

Just to justify remaining alive when Cali was out there, fighting, whereas my first urge had been to hide.

*Be quiet*, I told myself. *Focus on your breathing. Try to be brave, just like Cali.*

Try to be brave.

And then the floor creaked.

The weight of a person, a demon, or a wolf made the sound as they walked down the row. Down *my* row, where I was hiding. I held my breath—I couldn’t be heard, I couldn’t be seen, because if I did, it would all be over.

I was trembling, shaking beyond my control, and I held my breath like it was my last one. In here, in the shadows, where all I could see was the dark and all I could smell was freshly ironed clothes and the lingering scent of blood, I hoped for Tabitha to be okay, for Cali to stay safe, for myself to be just a little bit brave.

Because if I survived this horror, if my eyes kept seeing and my heart kept beating, I promised myself that I’d do something.

Anything.

Anything to help others like Cali had helped me tonight.

The floor creaked again, and the steps stopped in front of me.

Whatever it was, I couldn’t see their feet. I could see nothing but the shadows all around me, in this cocoon made of wool and silk that suddenly became suffocating. I reminded myself of my promise, though.

For Tabitha, for Cali, I wouldn’t go down without a fight.

I had no idea how to use my magic on the offensive, but there was an empty hanger to my right—maybe I could use that as a distraction before escaping.

The floor creaked again.

The sound was magnified in my ears, pounding right along with my pulse, coursing through my quivering insides. But I wouldn’t give up. I *refused*.

The moment the clothing separated in front of me, I forced my eyes open—

Grabbed the hanger—

Swung it at the monster’s face—

The monster who *squealed*.

“What the hell!” Okorie gasped. “You could have messed up my face!”

I stood there, frozen, my heart still going nuts, blinking rapidly as Okorie patted down his cheeks and forehead. Then, he let out a sigh of relief. “Thank god you didn’t break the skin, Dani. Warn a guy, geez.”

Oh.

My.

God.

“Okorie! Oh my god!” I grabbed him, my entire body shaking with relief. “I thought you were a demon! Or one of the Vanguards!”

“No way!” Okorie said. “I am me, and I was just trying to find you and help you out!”

I burst out crying, dropped the hanger, and pulled him into a hug. He hugged me back tight, mumbling things like, “You’re kind of annoying, did you know that?” and, “Why am I such a good mentor, though?”

I wiped my eyes and chuckled a little. I could breathe again.

The room was dark, but it was no longer suffocating.

“Where are the others?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I just followed you after Seluna used your amplifying magic. I knew I needed to keep you away from that demon, and I don’t trust a werewolf to do a warlock’s job.”

“Thank you, Okorie,” I said quietly.

He offered a curt nod that didn’t match his usual pompous attitude, so I knew he felt my gratitude. He gestured at the door. “Let’s get out of this closet.”

I followed, finally feeling hopeful, lighter. Much less afraid. With him in the lead, we walked out and headed back into the hallway. Fighting still echoed in the distance, roars and howling from the werewolves, then the demons’ evil laughter and shrieks.

“This way,” Okorie whispered. He marched forward, and we turned down the hallway.

It was the wrong turn.

The demon looked like a Greek god, only his eyes were ruby red. His tongue slithered out, like a snake’s, and he charged straight at us.

“Dani, stay back!” Okorie yelled and raised his hands, blasting the thing. I ducked behind Okorie while magic burst from his fingertips non-stop. He attacked the demon over and over again, but as much as the thing faltered, it kept coming back at us.

Its eyes were focused on my face, and when it made a swipe at me, I gasped.

Okorie shouted, “No way!”

He said something under his breath, and the brand new spell turned the demon into ice. Its hand froze just inches away from my arm.

Somehow, though, my fear felt like an echo.

“Fuck,” Okorie grumbled. “That thing wouldn’t quit!”

With a flick of his wrist, he blasted the ice statue, spraying demon ice bits everywhere.

I stood there, panting. “That was both terrifying and disgusting…”

“Yeah, it’s bad all over,” Okorie agreed matter-of-factly. He reached for my hand, helped me up from the floor. “This place isn’t for you, Dani. I should get you back to the pack house—as your amazing mentor, I need to keep you safe.”

He made a move to pull me forward, but I paused.

“Wait,” I said, my eyes dropping on the floor. The demon ice bits were everywhere on the ground. Okorie’s magic was very powerful, and it gave me an idea. “We can’t just leave,” I said. “Cali—she just saved me back there. We should stay and help.”

Okorie shook his head. “Dani, you don’t know how to turn off or use your power, and Seluna—”

“What if I don’t need to turn it off?” I said, interrupting him. “Is there a way to combine my amplifying magic with *your* magic?”

# Episode 2768

**Xavier**

Knox grabbed my shoulders and pushed, sending me flying into the wall. I crashed against the wood paneling, then slid down, seeing stars. But I’d taken harder hits. I was quick to absorb the pain, letting it roll off of me as I gave my head a slight shake and got to my feet.

“You’re going to want to back the fuck off, man,” I hissed, glaring at Knox. I turned to Ava. “You need to get this little shrimp in line before he does something he’s going to regret.”

If he knew what was good for him, he’d stop before he got in over his head, but I also had to admit how fucked up it must have looked to him—seeing his cousin and me hooking up with some shadowy stranger watching us. It was weird, there was no getting around it. And—on some level—I owed him a thanks for coming in when he did. If Knox hadn’t interrupted us, with the way I was feeling, there was no telling how far I would have let things go with Ava.

So, I guessed I was grateful—not that I was about to tell him that. That little fucking punk.

Ava turned to her cousin. “Knox, listen to me, I know this looks weird, but what you have to understand…”

I tuned her out as I turned to face the stranger, who hissed at me.

That startled me, and I stared at him. Who the hell *hissed*? Cats did that, not people. What kind of batshit reaction was that?

I stepped toward him, edgy and ready to shift if I needed to, but the stranger backed up, like he didn’t want me to get too close.

“You should return to your mate,” he said, his voice strange in my ears. “Pick up where you left off. Let the feelings between you two grow.”

Okay, that was weird. I thought of the incredibly strong physical and emotional reaction I’d had to Ava when she’d healed me. I could still feel it, but now that we’d been interrupted—thank you, Knox—the feelings were more manageable. They weren’t consuming me the way they had before. I realized that the stranger—who now looked smaller, almost weakened—must have been feeding off the sexual energy between Ava and me.

I’d heard of demonic creatures like that. The stranger had to be an incubus. Which added a whole new level of creepy to all this.

“Go back to your mate,” he hissed again.

“I don’t think so.” I shook my head. “You’ve got the wrong mate, pal.” Then I punched the incubus square in the face, sending him crashing into the wall just behind him.

Blood seeped from his nose as he glared up at me, and I was just about to advance and finish him off when I turned quickly, suddenly worried about Ava.

Behind me, Knox had her by the arm, and though she was trying to pull away, he was leading her out of the room.

“Hey!” I bellowed. “Leave her alone!”

I sprinted across the room and pulled Ava from Knox’s grip. “Are you okay?”

But grabbing her arm turned out to be a mistake, because the instant I touched her, I felt a sudden rush of lust. It was like a wave crashing over me, and I tumbled in the surf. I *wanted* her. Again. But this time it was even stronger.

I glared over my shoulder at the incubus. This feeling couldn’t be real. It had to be the demon, trying to gain control over me.

And it was doing a damn good job.

Knox—his face twisted with anger—took a swing at me, but it was a wild blow and missed by a mile.

“Try that again, and you’re dead,” I growled.

I was fighting my wolf—who was going wild for all things Ava—and trying to deal with a demonic incubus. I didn’t need Knox making things harder.

I turned back to the demon. “Playtime’s over.”

I shifted and leapt.

The demon tried to scramble away, but it was too slow. I tore into it, but the flesh felt strange in my mouth, and instead of bleeding as I ripped it to pieces, the incubus fell sizzling to the floor and melted into a sick, greenish-brown goo.

I shifted back and spat, trying to rid my mouth of the disgusting residue.

Knox stared slack-jawed at the goo still bubbling on the floor. “What the hell *is* that thing?”

“Dead,” I said simply.

With the spell broken, my head was starting to clear. The worst of the venom had moved through me, and as I looked at her, I could tell my feelings for Ava were at a slow simmer again.

I shook my head. Now that I was back in control, I needed to find Cali.

“We have to get going,” I said to Ava, heading for the door.

But Knox stepped into the doorframe, blocking my path. “She’s not going with you,” he said defiantly.

Irritated, I sighed and cast a look at Ava. “I told you to get the shrimp in line.”

“Stop calling me that,” Knox snapped, bristling.

“Get out of the way, Knox,” Ava said. “This doesn’t concern you.”

But Knox shook his head. “You do realize that you’re defending the man who *murdered* you, right?” He turned to me. “The only reason she’s with you and the Redwood pack is because the Samara pack is gone. She just needed somewhere to go—she needed to survive. And she has. She used you, and now she doesn’t need you anymore—”

Ava grabbed his shoulder and pushed him against the doorframe. “Shut up!”

He pushed her off. “You know it’s true,” he spat angrily.

I looked between them for a moment, wondering if Knox was right and there was any truth in what he was saying. But then my better sense took over, and I shook my head. “Please. You don’t know shit, kid. Open your eyes. Ava’s been hanging around because she’s in love with me.” That wasn’t cockiness talking—that was just the truth. “And you, Knox, have chosen the *exact* wrong day to cross me. If you really want to help Ava, you’ll stay the hell out of our way.”

“But—”

“If she wants to go, she’ll go because she wants to, not because you want her to,” I said.

Ava looked at her cousin. “And I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“What—Ava, what are you saying? How can you—do you even know…” Knox stammered.

Ava and I ignored him.

I was a little thrown by her admission of loyalty. “You don’t need to stay,” I told her. “You’ve done enough. No sense in continuing to risk your life.”

“Shut up, I already said I was staying,” she said plainly.

I ran a hand through my hair with a sigh. “Ava…” I pointed at the puddle of demon goo on the floor. “You realize that was an incubus, right? That’s what was making all that happen between us. What we felt wasn’t real.”

“I know what it was,” she said, her gaze not leaving my face, “but I also know it wasn’t working in a vacuum.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“An incubus feeds off *existing* feelings, X. It can’t manufacture them.”

I looked down at the goo. There was probably some truth in that, but I didn’t have the time to deal with it at the moment.

“You should go,” I said, looking back up at Ava. “And take your fucking cousin with you before I kick his ass.”

“What?” Knox grunted, trying to step toward me. He was trying for a tough attitude, but he wasn’t really pulling it off, and I ignored him.

“You need me,” Ava reminded me. “You need me to stick around, X. You can’t safely shift without me.”

Dammit. She was right. Whether I liked it or not, I *did* need her to stick around.

“It’s up to you,” I said, trying to play down her importance in my life. “Stay or leave, that’s your call. I’m going to find Cali and kill Seluna, with or without you.” I glared at Knox. “I’ve wasted enough time already.”

“I don’t trust you,” Knox huffed. “So I’m going with you.”

“It’s impossible for me to care less about whether or not you trust me,” I said scathingly. “You do whatever the hell you want, just stay out of my way. You hear me? I have no intention of playing battle babysitter today.”

I moved toward the door, then stopped. Whatever was going on between Ava and me—with my wolf, and with our mate bond—it was getting in the way. It was too distracting. I’d left the battle because I hadn’t been able to stop myself from making out with Ava.

I turned to Ava. “When this is done, you need to go be with the Samara pack.”

“X?” she asked, surprised.

“For good.”

# Episode 2769

As Seluna’s knife disappeared into the flesh of Greyson’s chest, I let out a scream that felt like it was ripped from my soul. My whole body flinched, like *I* was the one who’d been stabbed. I ran toward him. But I felt slow, like I was trying to move through molasses. I was pushing against the force so hard, sweat was pouring down my face, but I just couldn’t move fast enough—the burning pain in my forearm was almost overwhelming.

Aysel—still in her wolf form—lunged at Seluna. The pure white wolf slammed into the demon, and they both crashed into the wall, making the whole room shake with the impact.

Released, Greyson stumbled back, Seluna’s knife sticking weirdly from his chest.

Ignoring the pain spiking through my body, I reached Greyson. His eyes went from me to the knife. He looked confused, and his frown deepened as he watched blood seep from around the blade with every beat of his heart.

My hand hovered over the knife, but I didn’t touch it. I was horrified to see it, but unsure what to do about it. Should I leave it in? Take it out? I wasn’t a doctor, and I had no idea what I could do to help him.

Greyson solved that immediate problem by gripping the handle of the knife. He grimaced and grunted, then pulled it from his chest. Behind it, there was a gaping, bloody wound that revealed a frighteningly deep puncture.

I gasped and put my hand over my mouth. What if the knife was silver? Greyson could be dying!

“You should sit,” I said, putting my hand gingerly on his shoulder. “Let me use my blood to heal you—”

But Greyson was shaking his head. “No, it’s okay, love.”

“It’s *not* okay,” I argued, nearly in tears. My mate had a very serious-looking knife wound in his chest, which might have been inflicted with silver, the demon who’d given it to him was still standing, and he was trying to tell me he was *okay*? Why the hell couldn’t he admit that he needed help?

But then, to my absolute surprise, the skin around the injury began to move—the gaping wound began to knit itself back together. He was healing.

Behind us, Aysel let out a piteous howl, and we whipped around.

Seluna was trying to burn her with her magic fire, which was forcing Aysel to back off. Aysel’s white fur was smoldering, and she was whimpering in pain.

Lucian lunged for Seluna next, but she blasted him back with a flick of her hand.

“How quickly you’ve turned against me, beloved,” she scoffed. “Your so-called goddess. That’s why I always detested you, Lucian. I knew you were too weak to deserve someone like me.”

Greyson dropped the knife to the floor. “Take Cali and get out of here,” he said, turning to Aysel.

I bent and grabbed the knife. It was what Artemis would do. She wouldn’t let herself be caught unarmed. Besides, I didn’t want to leave it behind to let Seluna use it against Greyson again.

“No.”

Greyson looked over at me. “What?”

I shook my head. “I’m not going.”

“Cali—”

“I’m not about to leave you to face Seluna alone,” I said. Lucian would be fighting with him, but who knew if he could truly be trusted?

“There’s no time to argue,” he said, turning back to Seluna. “Just go!”

He shifted just as Seluna sent a blast of fire my way. His body stopped the flames from reaching me, and his fur began to burn.

“*Greyson!*”

Aysel came up behind me and—using her nose—nudged me toward the door, but I couldn’t move. I couldn’t leave Greyson. I’d used my magic against Seluna before, and I could do it again now.

Seluna looked around, a twisted smile on her face. “I’m so pleased you’ve all gathered here together. This makes things so much easier for me.” Her voice dropped to a threatening hiss. “Now I can punish you all at once.”

But I wasn’t about to let that happen. Not on my fucking watch.

“If anyone’s going to be punished,” I started, glaring at the demon, “it’s you!”

Seluna laughed. “Such tough talk for such a little girl. But how do you plan to back it up? What would you think if I started with your precious mate, Caliana? How would you like to see him burn, just a little?”

Greyson and Lucian both growled and pawed at the ground. They were injured, but they looked ready to pounce.

I focused my energy inward, concentrating on conjuring up my magic. Seluna raised her hand, and—as her fire shot out—I sent up my shield. It held, and when it deflected the flame, the fire went shooting away in all directions.

The ancient tapestries in the hall burst into flame. The fire spread along the walls, consuming the oil paintings in their gilded frames.

Lucian threw back his head and howled. He looked around desperately as his precious art burned.

My arms started to shake as I fought to maintain the integrity of the shield. I wished I’d practiced more, had built up more magical endurance. I could feel my energy starting to fade, and I didn’t know how much longer I could do this.

But then I spied the knife still clutched in my hand. Seluna’s knife. I pictured the knife plunging into Greyson’s chest, opening up that bloody wound. This image helped, and I was able to summon even more strength. This demon had *stabbed* my mate, and there was no way I was going to let her get away with that.

Enraged at my defense, Seluna sent another blast of flames—bigger this time—which struck my shield and ricocheted back at her.

Her wrathful scream echoed through the room as she was immediately engulfed in the flames, disappearing from view as the fire rose up all around her, consuming her.

Slowly, cautiously, I let down my shield, then coughed as a wave of smoke blew into my face. I shielded my eyes from the heat and smoke and looked around. The fight had been disorienting, and I had to get a sense of what was going on. But what the hell was that awful smell? It was almost sweet, like rotting garbage mixed with decomposing flesh. My stomach roiled. Was that what burning demons smelled like?

Before I could think on that more, Greyson was at my side. He nudged me none too gently onto his back. He backed toward the door as Seluna’s shrieks grew louder, then began to die away, replaced with a barely audible, rattling cry.

Greyson led the way, and Aysel and Lucian followed, carefully trying to avoid the flames. I looked around in wonder. I couldn’t believe what had just happened. Had I really just killed Seluna? Had I really just used the demon’s own magic against her?

But… shouldn’t I be *feeling* something? If Seluna had kept some sort of control over me before, shouldn’t I be feeling something now that she was dead? Didn’t it track that I’d feel a kind of release? But I felt nothing.

When I looked up, I could see the demon. She was still burning.

As we rounded a corner, I heard footsteps. A Vanguard pack member was running toward us in human form.

I could feel Greyson’s muscles tense, and I knew he was wondering the same thing I was: Was this a friend or a foe?

But as the Vanguard member drew closer, I recognized him. It was Andrei, and his face was uncharacteristically anxious.

“Aysel! Lucian! There you are! I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

“What is it?” I asked.

Andrei’s gaze flickered to me, then back to Lucian and Aysel. “The doors of the palace are completely blocked. We can’t get out.”

My heart pounded. Was it some kind of demonic magic blocking the doors? Could the whole damn place be infected?

The panic I was trying so hard to fight down came roaring back in full force, and I held on tight to Greyson’s fur.

Lucian and Aysel shifted back to human and looked around.

“There has to be a way out,” I said desperately. “This place is huge.”

“My wolves are searching for an escape route,” Andrei said, “but they’re having a hard time. This place is crawling with demons.”

Then, as if to prove his point, a door in our hallway burst open. A demon stepped into the hallway, looking around with his small, yellow eyes. A moment later, six of his fellows joined him. I didn’t know what kind of creatures they were supposed to be, but they all walked sideways, like crabs, and they started toward us.

I took a deep breath. I knew what I needed to do, but did I have enough strength left to blast these demons all at once?

# Episode 2770

**Greyson**

Seeing the look of terrified shock on Cali’s face, I turned and followed her gaze. There was a knot of yellow-eyed crab demons charging toward us, and in an instant, I understood the fear on her face.

There was no time to get Cali way from this place, so I stepped in front of her as Andrei, Aysel, and Lucian all shifted back to their wolf forms.

“Stay back,” I shouted before shifting, though even as I spoke, I suspected Cali wouldn’t listen to me.

She’d been able to use her magic to take care of Seluna in the last room—maybe she could use it here, too. But only if the four werewolves couldn’t take care of business.

I looked up as a winged demon soared over our heads. It reached down with its talons and grabbed up Aysel. She screamed, and Andrei leapt up, biting the thing, dragging it down until it dropped Aysel. But even then, we weren’t satisfied, and we all dropped onto it, ripping into it, tearing it to shreds.

But it wasn’t easy. I could barely steady my breath as we fought the thing. I’d told Cali that the wound Seluna had given me was healing on its own—and it was, albeit slowly—but the pain was still sharp. I hadn’t wanted to let her know how much it was affecting me. In an ideal world, I would rest until I was fully healed, but nothing about this situation was ideal. And as long as I had the strength to keep fighting, to keep Cali safe, I was going to do everything I could.

For once, I found myself grateful to see Andrei, and to have him on our side.

Lucian gave a roar and charged a two-headed demon that looked like a tiger merged with a rhino. The demon screamed and fought back, trying to stab the princeling with its razor-sharp talons.

But when Cali screamed, I whipped around. There were two demons charging toward us, one from my right, one from my left. The one on my left was a demon with scales like a snake. It lashed out with a freaky-long, forked tongue, which latched onto Cali. It dragged her back, toward the thing, reeling her in like a fish on a line.

She screamed, and—heart pounding—I snarled and lunged after her.

Then pain exploded as something I couldn’t see cut into my back. An instant later, my feet were yanked from the floor.

I twisted and turned, trying desperately to bite the demon ripping into my flesh. I wanted to kill the thing—whatever it was—but more than anything else, I wanted to get myself free so I could get to Cali. I craned around, getting just enough leverage to bite the thing in the leg.

The creature was black as night and had huge, horrible moth wings sprouting from its back. It shrieked with pain as I bit into it and stumbled, falling backward until we both crashed to the ground. It had let go of me during the fall, and I stood and ripped into it. It screamed like a banshee, but it slowly went still.

Chest heaving with effort, I’d just turned back toward Cali when the demon sprang back to life and reached out for me, biting into my leg.

*Cali!* I yelled internally, falling to the ground. I *had* to get to her. I *had* to save her. I could see that the snake demon was holding her tight, and as I watched, it sank its claws into both of her shoulders.

She screamed in pain, but wrenched free, twisted around, and thrust a knife into the demon’s throat. The thing let her go, its yellow eyes going wide as it gurgled and foamed blood from its mouth. I watched—amazed—as the thing crumbled to the ground.

But I was punished for my moment of stillness when the winged demon grabbed me again. My strength was flagging, but I struggled against its grasp, trying to fight back.

Cali’s demon still had her in a death grip, but she struggled against its weakening grasp and freed herself, then sprinted toward me.

I lost sight of her when the winged demon dragged me up and flipped me onto my back, so I was looking up at its twisted face. It reared back to bite—showing rows and rows of razor-sharp teeth—and I had just braced for the pain when Lucian jumped onto the demon’s back, snapping its neck with one bite.

The demon was dead before it could scream, and I felt its grip on me go slack as the life drained from it.

Lucian let the creature go, then spat out the vile black blood in disgust.

My heart was pounding, and I nodded at Lucian in thanks. I couldn’t believe he’d actually done that—risked himself to save me. What the hell did that mean? Was it possible the Vanguard and Redwood packs could become allies?

Maybe it was just the heat of battle, but it felt like the possibility might be worth exploring. *If* we got of here alive, that was. I still couldn’t forget that the Vanguards were the reason we were in this mess in the first place, after all.

Cali dropped down next to me. “Greyson,” she panted. “Are you okay?”

Her face was splattered with greenish demon blood, and her eyes were wide with fear.

I looked down. My leg wound was already healing itself, and I felt better just having her near me. But I scrambled to my feet. There were more demons closing in.

I was desperate to get Cali out of this place, but I didn’t see how I could. We were outnumbered and trapped. Things didn’t look great.

Cali looked at me, and it was like she could read my thoughts. “I can hold my own, Greyson. I have my magic.”

I knew she could. I’d seen her. And killing that demon with the knife had been pretty badass.

Cali—dirty and panting and panicked—smiled at me.

“We should all attack at one point,” Lucian said, shifting to his human form and peering into the oncoming crush of demons. “Maybe we’ll be able to fight our way through and get away.”

I followed his gaze toward the demons. There were beings of all shapes and sizes, and they all looked menacing as hell. They were coming from all directions, and I figured Lucian’s idea had its merits. And, more importantly, it was at least a plan.

“I think we should start with that one,” Andrei—who had also shifted—said, jutting his chin toward a fanged being near the middle of a pack that was coming toward us from the west doorway. It was smaller than some of the others and didn’t have wings. It was lizard-like, but thin, like a cross between a Gila monster and a flamingo.

I was down with that. If this group had a weak link, it was that guy. I looked over my shoulder, locking gazes with Cali.

She was looking at me, and though her face was pale and there was fear in her eyes, there was also determination. Her jaw was set, and her fists were balled—she was ready to fight.

I loved this woman, and I wanted to tell her. The connection I felt with her was so real, I felt like I could reach out and touch the cord that connected us to each other. Our mate bond had never wavered—not once, despite all the shit we’d gone through. If anything, it just seemed to get stronger and stronger.

I wanted to tell her all this, but I didn’t want to speak out loud—not in front of this crowd. But the demons were closing in, so I tried to mind link with her, before it was too late.

*I love you*, I said, but I struggled, trying to find the right frequency. Then, to my absolute surprise, Cali smiled.

“I love you, too,” she said quietly. When she saw my surprised face, she nodded. “It’s not as crystal clear as it should be, but it works.”

Her words were like a current of electricity, re-energizing my body. I needed to hear that, and I needed to know she could hear me. I didn’t know how it had happened—maybe the strength of our love and our mate bond had been enough—but we were able to connect.

*I will get you out of here*, I promised.

She winked. “Or *I’ll* get *you* out of here.”

Lucian, back in his wolf form, howled. It was time.

The fanged lizard demon was closing in, snarling as it approached. It looked worse closer up—a lot more dangerous than a flamingo—and my body tensed, ready for whatever this fight was going to bring. I crouched low, ready to pounce, when a rush of icy air suddenly blew through the room.

We all looked around in confusion, squinting hard against the freezing blast. Then, one by one, the demons began to freeze on the spot.

# Episode 2771

**Xavier**

I sprinted through the labyrinthine hallways of the Vanguard palace with Ava at my side and Knox trailing behind us. The palace was huge, so I had a lot of time to think about how annoying it was that we couldn’t lose him. Apparently, he didn’t want to leave the dear cousin he hadn’t seen in years.

Whatever. I knew my best bet was just to keep ignoring him and doing whatever I had to do to find Cali, find Greyson, and end all this shit with Seluna once and for all. Tonight.

There was a commotion up ahead of us, and I rounded a corner to see Charlie and Zainab. They were pinned against a wall, but they seemed to be holding their own against a knot of demons.

As we drew closer, I saw Charlie landing a good bite on a weird, winged rat-looking demon with a long neck. The rat drew back, hissing, but Charlie’s victory was short-lived. As we got closer to them, a door opened, and another four demons poured out, joining the fight against Charlie and Zainab.

I plowed into the group of demons without a thought, and between the five of us—Ava, Knox, Charlie, Zainab, and me—we made quick work of the demonic gang.

When the winged rat demon was reduced to goo, Charlie shifted back to human and bent over, bracing himself on his knees, breathing hard.

“Thanks, Xavier,” Zainab said, shifting back and pushing her hair out of her face. “You saved our asses.”

“You were doing okay,” I said, shifting back and spitting out the residual taste of demon blood.

She shook her head. “We were in over our heads there. From where I was standing, it wasn’t looking too good.”

“Have you seen Cali?” I asked, getting to the point. “And Greyson? Who have you seen?”

“We had Cali,” Charlie said, standing again. “But she was taken.”

“*What?*” I snapped.

“It’s not Charlie’s fault,” Zainab added quickly. “And we haven’t even seen Greyson. No idea where he is.”

“I saw something.”

I turned around to look at Knox. I didn’t want to give this kid the time of day, but I was desperate. “What? What did you see?”

Knox shrugged. “I saw a group of Vanguard wolves heading that way.” He pointed his chin down a hallway going east. “When I was on my way to find Ava. One of them was that Andrei guy.”

That rang a bell for me. I knew Andrei would do anything for Aysel, so she must have been his destination. And even if she wasn’t, if Andrei and the Vanguards were moving toward something, it had to be to either help Aysel or Seluna. Either way, it was worth checking out. It might help me find Cali.

I shifted to my wolf form once again.

*Let’s go*, I commanded, leading Ava, Knox, Charlie, and Zainab down the hallway going east.

I glanced over at Ava. She hadn’t said much since we’d left the incubus behind. It was hard to read her face, but I wondered if she wished we’d gone further—if she wished more had happened. She’d said that what happened between us hadn’t just been because of the incubus. That the demon couldn’t make people feel something they didn’t already feel, and it had just fed off what we already felt for each other. My wolf seemed to feed off those feelings too, but I knew I couldn’t give in to that, no matter how much those feelings pulled at me.

I wanted *Cali*, and I’d meant what I’d said to Ava before—after all of this was over and we were safe, she needed to leave the Redwood pack. I didn’t wish her any harm—which surprised me—but I needed her gone. Out of my hair once and for all. I wanted her to find some peace with her pack, and her little shrimp of a cousin. I wanted her to leave me alone and let me be with Cali without the mindfuck of our lingering mate bond.

She looked over at me. *Is it getting colder?*

It took me a moment to realize, but she was right. It *had* gotten colder, and the temperature kept dropping the farther we ran. Looking around, I could see everyone’s breath in the frosty air.

What the hell was going on?

I was about to tell everyone to stop when we rounded a corner and almost bowled into Okorie and Dani.

I was surprised to see them. I’d thought they had managed to escape earlier, when the chaos had just started and before the demons had sealed everything off.

Okorie barely even glanced at us as we approached. He was walking slowly, fully focused and holding his hands up as though he were doing some kind of magic. And around him, I saw a cast of frozen demons. *Literally* frozen. And in the midst of the icy demon garden, Greyson, Lucian, Aysel, and Andrei were snapping the demons like hellish icicles. I watched as they broke off fangs and wings and long, thin, taloned fingers, then threw them to the ground where the body parts shattered like glass.

I rushed toward Greyson, taking out a row of frozen demons as I did so, and screeched to a stop in front of my brother.

*Where’s Cali?*

Greyson nodded over his shoulder, and I turned. There was Cali, blasting the frozen demons, shattering them with her magic.

My heart pounded as I rushed toward her, shifting back to human form as I ran. I swept her into my arms and held her close.

“Are you okay?” I asked breathlessly.

“I’m so glad to see you,” she said, hugging me tight. “I’m okay. Are you okay?”

I could feel the mate bond between us react. I had to protect her. I had to get her out of this hellhole. I had to make sure she was safe.

She leaned against me, breathing me in. “Xavier,” she murmured.

“Are you okay?” I asked again.

“I’m tired,” she said, and I could feel it in her. She was leaning all her weight on me, like it was too much to keep standing. “I’m not used to doing so much magic all at once. It’s very draining.”

Before I could respond to this, there was a strange, high-pitched screech that made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. Pulling away from me, Cali’s eyes went wide, and her mouth opened in horror.

I whipped around and saw what looked like a giant phoenix flying toward us. In its talons was a member of the Vanguard pack in his wolf form, and the phoenix was ripping the wolf apart as it approached us.

“It’s her,” Cali gasped. “Oh god, it’s her.”

“Who?” I asked, baffled.

“It’s Seluna!” Cali wailed. “I can’t believe it. I thought I killed her!”

As it drew closer, I could see fire flowing from the bird’s wings. The fire reached down like a finger, touching a Vanguard wolf who screamed and fell to the ground, trying to put out the flames.

As the bird closed in, I turned to Cali. “Get the hell out of here.”

She shook her head. “No, I can’t. I have to help. I can help—”

“You *have* helped, Cali. You’ve given all you can, but it took it all out of you.” She was too weak to fight. She knew it too. I could see the fear in her eyes. “Let your pack take care of this.”

Cali hesitated. “I don’t want to leave you.”

I kissed her, drinking her in, trying to imprint the feel of her mouth into my memory. “Go. *Please*.”

She glanced away from me, toward Greyson, then—with a nod—sprinted down the hall. I watched her for a moment, making sure she was getting far enough away, then turned to join the others.

Seluna was bearing down on us, and she easily dodged a blast of magic Okorie sent her way. She swooped low and sank her claws into Aysel’s shoulders, who howled in pain and fear as Seluna swooped upward. Her talons were deep in Aysel’s flesh, and I could see her fur start to smoke.

Andrei snarled with fury and leapt up, catching Seluna’s wing and sinking his teeth into it. This pulled her down, and all three of them crashed heavily to the floor.

As she untangled herself, Seluna transformed back into her human form and sent a blast of searing fire toward Aysel. Aysel screamed in terror, but the blast was intercepted by Andrei, who jumped in front of it. He caught the full force of Seluna’s magic, and he threw back his head, screaming as the fire consumed him, burning him alive. There was no way he would make it out.

Seluna watched him for a moment, then turned to the rest of us, her black eyes gleaming with malice. And when she spoke, her voice echoed off the high ceiling of the Vanguard palace. “So? Who’s next?”

# Episode 2772

The sound of an anguished howl reached me as I sprinted down the hallway. It jolted through me like an electric shock, but I knew I couldn’t look back. I knew the second I did, I was going to turn right around and go running back to Xavier and Greyson.

Running way from them was breaking my heart—it felt like I was turning my back on them when they needed me most.

But I *knew* this was what they wanted me to do.

They wanted me to get away, they wanted me to be safe. Being there would only make things more difficult for my mates. I couldn’t really be of any use to them at this point—I’d lost too much strength to use my magic effectively. I would only be a vulnerable target, and make them vulnerable trying to protect me.

I needed to get somewhere safe so I could rest and recharge, if only for a few minutes. Then I’d be able to go back and fight side by side with my mates.

I dropped my head and ran as hard as I could, though my heart was thumping painfully against my ribs. Xavier had told me to let my pack deal with Seluna. I smiled to myself, despite the situation. I loved that he’d called the Redwoods *my* pack. When I’d first joined up with the pack, I’d felt like an outsider, and that feeling had lasted for a long time. But it was gone now. I’d been accepted. I could feel it—I was one of them.

I looked around, confused. I had no idea where I was, or how far I’d run. I forced myself to slow down. My breath was coming in short, painful gasps. The palace was so damn huge. I needed to rest. Sprinting down one hallway after another wasn’t how I was going to regain my strength.

The beat of my pulse was loud in my ears, but as it slowed, I listened hard. The howling and screeching I’d heard earlier was gone—thank god—but it had been replaced by a weird, eerie quiet. I looked around anxiously. It was *too* quiet, and it felt spooky. Something wasn’t right.

Turning in a circle, I looked around. The hallway was empty.

What was happening? I hated being alone. I’d told Xavier that I would leave, but now I felt a strange, cold fear that I couldn’t seem to shake. It was as though Seluna had gripped my heart again, only instead of fire, I felt a bone-chilling, grave-like cold wrapping around me.

I turned and started back the way I’d come. I didn’t know what I was going to do when I got back, but if I had any magic left, I had to use it wisely.

I knew Xavier and Greyson would be angry to see me again, but I couldn’t worry about that. Not now. Let them yell. It didn’t matter—all that mattered was that they were safe, and until I could see them again with my own eyes, I didn’t know if they were.

My thoughts went to Seluna as I walked the empty halls of the palace. I thought I’d killed the demon with my magic. I’d been so sure. I’d watched her burn like a log in a bonfire, but there she was, back from the dead.

I ran a hand across my weary eyes. What the hell was it going to take to kill this demon?

It was my fault. I shouldn’t have walked away. I should have checked to make sure she was really dead. I should have blasted her with magic while she was burning.

Maybe she hadn’t burned at all. Maybe it was just a demonic trick she used to get out of tight corners. But the flames had *felt* real. Was it even possible for a demon to die by fire?

Apparently not, if the evidence was to be believed. So what affect had the fire had on her? Had it made her stronger?

Regardless, I wasn’t going to make that mistake again. If I got the chance, I was going to use everything I had to blast that demon back to wherever the hell she’d come from. And I wasn’t going to stop until I saw her last breath leave her body.

I wondered if Seluna had used her powers to make Dani and me come here. Or had that not been Seluna at all? Was it just my desire to get revenge that had driven me here?

Suddenly freezing, I shivered. The temperature had dropped, which meant I had to be getting close to where Seluna had attacked us.

I was buzzing with nerves as I walked, keeping my eyes open for any movement. There was a strange smell in the air as I drew closer, and when I reached the hall, I knew why. It was empty and silent, but there was a smoldering pile of fur and bone in the middle of the room. It was the remains of a large wolf, and I had to swallow hard to keep from throwing up at the sight of it. It was Andrei; I could tell from the color of the fur.

But where the hell were Xavier and Greyson?

*Greyson? Xavier? Where are you? Can you hear me?*

I reached out with the mind link, praying I could make a connection, but there was no reply. Panic was starting to build inside me. I had to find them.

“Xavier! Greyson! Where are you?”

But the only answering call was the sound of my own voice, echoing as it bounced through the cavernous hallways of the palace.

I couldn’t stay here, so I turned on my heel and started running. “Xavier! Greyson! Can you hear me?”

This felt like a nightmare. I knew they were here—they wouldn’t have left without me—but I couldn’t find them anywhere. I looked into rooms as I passed, but they were all empty.

When I reached the rotunda where the explosion had happened what felt like months ago, I paused to catch my breath. The place was still in shambles. There was some scaffolding, and it appeared that a part of the far curve had been repaired, but it was still a long way from being restored to the way I remembered it.

I looked all around the cavernous space. “Greyson! Xavier!”

There was no answer, but there was a sound. I listened hard, trying to figure it out. It was music, of all things. A strange, low melody that seemed to rise and fall in concert with the cool breeze sweeping through the rotunda. It was a haunting sound—in a minor key—but I felt drawn to it.

I moved toward the sound, following it out of the rotunda, down another long hallway. The hallway opened onto a large foyer with heavy wooden doors. I’d never seen this place before, and I stepped forward to read the plaque on the door.

*Vanguard Royal Gallery*

The music was louder now, and definitely coming from *inside* the gallery. My heart was beating hard, but I pushed open the door. The room was dark when I stepped in, and as I looked around, I saw the shadowy forms of large figures, but the details were obscured by the white sheets thrown over them. There were decorative suites of armor arranged along one long wall, each with a helmet and holding a spear or a sword or a lance. There were paintings hung, all in the heavy golden frames the Vanguards favored, and as I looked around, I wondered why Lucian had never shown this to me. He loved to show off, and this room seemed specially designed for showing off.

And why were the statues shrouded in sheets?

Before I could even start to answer these questions, the music stopped. The gallery was completely silent. My footsteps were the only sound, and they reverberated around the massive space.

“Xaiver?” I called, my pulse hammering in my ears. “Greyson? Is anyone here?” I shook my head. I was being ridiculous. “There’s no one here,” I said aloud.

“You’re wrong about that,” a voice said quietly. “You need to look to see.”

I whipped around, expecting to see Seluna coming at me. I raised my hands instinctively, ready to blast her back, but the room was empty. And when my breath stopped coming so fast, it was silent again.

What the hell did that mean? I had to look to see *what*?

My eyes went to the shrouded statues. *You need to look to see.*

My hand was shaking as I reached up for a corner of the sheet, and when I pulled the dusty cover off, I screamed.

The statue above me stood tall and impressive, the figure perfectly formed. He was heavily muscled, with a sharp jaw and a searing look in his marble eyes. It was a look I’d seen thousands of times, because the statue was *Xavier*.

It was so lifelike that I stared at it for a long time, half-expecting it to speak to me. I felt sick to my stomach as I grabbed the next sheet. Underneath it was Greyson, perfectly captured in stone.

# Episode 2773

I couldn’t believe my eyes. Had Lucian had these statues of Greyson and Xavier made? But *why*? Why in the world would he have done that? He was a giant weirdo, there was no getting around that, but this was a whole other level. This was deeply creepy. It was like a wax museum of my mates.

Even as I thought it, I knew it wasn’t true.

My stomach twisted with anxiety, and my breath shook. A big part of me wanted to just run for it, but I gritted my teeth and pulled back the rest of the sheets. Underneath them were Charlie, Zainab, Okorie, Ava, Dani, Lucian, Aysel, and more Vanguard pack members I didn’t recognize. Fear caught in my throat as tears started to trickle down my cheeks.

What the *hell* was I looking at?

My mind spun, trying to make sense of this terrifying gallery. Then, like a punch to the gut, I finally let myself acknowledge what I was seeing. I knew what I was looking at. My mates. My friends. They’d been preserved as statues. They’d been fighting Seluna only minutes ago, and now they were all here. That couldn’t be a coincidence.

I rushed back to Greyson and Xavier.

“What happened?” I demanded at no one directly, looking at their cold stone faces. “Did Seluna do this?”

I knew the answer. But *why*? Why was she doing this? Was she trying to scare me? To show me something horrible? To break me fully, finally?

“Hello?” I cried, looking around desperately. “*Hello?*”

There was no answer. The strange voice I’d heard earlier didn’t respond. I was shaking, but I couldn’t stop myself from looking at the statues. I had no idea how to explain any of this. I was getting that feeling again, where I was awake, but everything felt like a nightmare.

*Greyson, can you hear me? Xavier? Please say something!*

But there was no answer from the mind link. Worse, it felt like I was speaking to a brick wall. It felt as though I had been completely cut off. I couldn’t feel my mate bonds, somehow, like they’d been weakened.

I backed away, my heart hammering, but then I noticed Xavier’s eyes. I peered at them closely. Were they… *following me*?

No, I had to be imagining it. Just a trick of the dim light. It was like the *Mona Lisa*, whose eyes were supposed to follow you wherever you moved.

But… *Had* they followed me? Experimentally I moved to the left—and Xavier’s eyes definitely moved with me. It wasn’t an illusion.

I rushed toward him. “Xavier, are you *in* there?”

But when I touched the statue, the marble was cold and lifeless.

But I knew those eyes. They were Xavier’s eyes. The eyes of the man I loved. But if he *was* in there, how the hell was I supposed to get him out?

“Xavier,” I whispered, leaning close, “I don’t know if you can hear me, but I’m here. I’m not going to leave you.”

I stepped away from Xavier and moved toward Greyson. With a gasp, I realized his eyes were moving with me, too. They were all trapped.

I needed to help everyone in the gallery. But *how*?

I looked around again. There were the people I recognized, of course, and my mates, but I looked hard at the Vanguard wolves I didn’t know. They had been there too, fighting alongside the Redwood pack. I wanted to save them all.

Then my eyes rested on the last covered statue. It was farther back, and I hadn’t noticed it at first. It stood in the shadows of the dim room, cloaked in darkness. Thinking it was another Vanguard wolf, I walked toward it and was about to pull the sheet off when the whole thing burst into flames.

I leapt backward with a scream of terror, and, as the sheet burned away, I found myself facing Seluna.

I stumbled backward as Seluna smiled at me. The expression was terrifying on her face, twisted with malice.

“Hello, Caliana,” she said silkily. “I’m so glad to welcome you to my sculpture garden. I hope you approve of my collection.”

Without waiting for me to respond, she slid down from her pedestal and stood before me, fixing me with a glare like flint. “Now, the question is, what do I do with *you*? You are both a pest and a necessary evil.”

I was barely listening to her. I was deep inside myself, trying to gauge how much magic I could summon.

“What happened?” I demanded. “What did you do to them?”

She looked around fondly. “I tried to capture their true essence. And I think I was successful. Don’t you?” She strode to Xavier. “Both your mates look as beautiful in stone as they do in life. Maybe even better. Their rock-hard abs really resonate when they’re real rocks, don’t you think?” she added.

“What have you *done*?” I snapped. I could barely get my tongue around the words. “Have you killed them? Are they dying?”

I thought back to the strange disconnect I’d felt when I’d tried to mind link with them. Was that why I couldn’t hear or feel them?

Seluna took a deep breath. “That’s the wonderful thing about me—when you’re both a demon and an artist, you can breathe life into your work.” Her smile grew into a truly wicked grin. “Or you can take it away.”

I tried to process this. “So, they *are* alive?”

Part of me was deeply relieved, but part of me was horrified. If they were alive, but turned into rocks, could they hear me? See me? Sense me? I looked around quickly.

“Oh yes,” Seluna said. “They’re very much alive. For now.”

Anger spiked through me. For a moment, I forgot that I was tired and that my magic was flagging. I forgot that I was speaking to a demon with unspeakable powers and evil. I forgot that I was alone with this force of evil. All I felt was white-hot anger.

“If you want me, *fine*,” I snapped. “But leave my mates and the others alone. They have nothing to do with this.”

She shook her head. “Oh, sweet Caliana. That’s just not how I work.”

“And how do you work?”  
 She shrugged her narrow shoulders. “I’m more of a ‘have my cake and eat it too’ type of demon.”

I could feel my magic beginning to build within me, but I needed more time. I needed to keep Seluna talking. “What did you do to them?”

She looked around the gallery. “Even I have to admit, what I did is pretty amazing. Only a few demons have the power to do this.”

“What?”

“To not only bring statues back from the dead—which I excel at, of course—but also turn the living into statues,” she said proudly.

I narrowed my eyes. “Lucian is here. So are a lot of other Vanguard wolves. Have you turned on your own followers? On those who were loyal to you?”

Seluna rolled her eyes. “Turn on them? How crass. No, I simply like to preserve my followers, so I can bring them back when I need them. Why would I turn on them? They’re too useful. Willing minds I can mold as I see fit.” Her eyes began to burn with hunger. “But this is just the beginning.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, with a sinking stomach.

She turned her hungry gaze on me. “With your *due destini* power, my abilities will only increase.”

Fury washed over me. “I would rather die than let the *due destini* be used like that by someone like you.”

Seluna didn’t look worried about this pronouncement. “That would be very unfortunate. I’ve waited a very long time to get to someone like you.”

“Well you’re going to have to keep waiting,” I growled. “Because I’m not going to help you.”

Seluna heaved a theatrical sigh. “Well, I’m sorry to hear that. It’s such a shame…”

“What is?” I asked cautiously.

“Having to smash all these wonderful statues. I have grown fond of them.” She walked toward Greyson and looked him over critically. “Should I start at the top or the bottom?”

My head was ready to blast Seluna into kingdom come, but I knew I didn’t have the power for it.

“Stop!” I called out, pleading. “Don’t hurt them, please.”

Seluna looked at me curiously. “You must really love both of them.”

“Of course I do,” I snapped angrily, unable to stop the hot tears from my eyes.

She seemed to think about that for a moment. “Perhaps I can offer you a deal.”

“What kind of deal?” I asked, skeptical that anything she could suggest would be in my best interest.

“Fight me,” she said simply.

“You want to *fight me*?” I asked incredulously.

She nodded. “And if you defeat me, I’ll release all of them. But if you fail, you will be mine for all eternity, and I will use the power of the *due destini* as I wish.” She gave me a long stare. “Do we have a deal?”

# Episode 2774

I hesitated for a long moment. Could I make a deal with a demon? How did that even work? Did demons keep their word? Somehow, I doubted that. But… Did I have a choice?

It wasn’t like I could just blast Seluna and then try to carry the statues out. I was exhausted, and even if I wasn’t, there was no way I was strong enough to do that. And even if I could get them out of this place, how the hell was I supposed to free them?

“I’m not a patient being, Caliana,” Seluna said, her voice a warning. “Do we have a deal or not?”

I glared at her. “I’m going to need a guarantee.”

“Excuse me?” she said.

“What guarantee do I have that you’re going to keep your word?” I demanded.

Seluna laughed. “You don’t have one,” she said simply. “You just have to take a chance. The only chance you have. And the only chance I’ll be offering.”

Shit.

I knew I was in a tough spot, but I had to do *something*. And this was going to give me a chance to fight the demon. I knew my magic wasn’t at a hundred percent right now, but I needed to act. I couldn’t just hand over Xavier and Greyson—not to mention the others—to this demon. My mates were worth fighting for—and dying for, if it came to that.

But was it going to work? Did I have what it took to win?

My mind reeled back to the conversation I’d had with Steinar about killing demons. *Find your preferred method*, he’d said. So what *was* my method? My magic was the only method I had, and I was still feeling drained from using it earlier. Maybe I should have kept the knife I’d used on that scaly snake demon. That had worked well enough, and it might have come in handy again.

I jumped back as Seluna sent a blast of fire directed right at my feet.

“Come on,” she taunted. “Caliana, stop being so coy. Let’s see what your Fae magic is made of.”

I looked over at Xavier’s statue. He was still, of course, but there was something in his eyes that made me pause. Like he was imploring me not to do this. A look at Greyson told me his eyes were asking the same. Beyond them, I could see Dani’s face, and it looked terrified. She must have been so scared when she was turned into a statue.

Steeling myself, I turned to the demon. “I accept your challenge.”

She grinned at me. “Of course you do. What else could you do, Caliana? I told you that you have no choice.”

I gritted my teeth and looked around, my anxiety managing to spike even more. If I used my shield magic like I had before, Seluna’s magic could bounce and end up blasting one of my mates, or one of my friends. Beyond that, using the shield charm was so freaking draining. I hadn’t been able to rest since the last time I’d used it, and I wasn’t even sure I had enough strength to make a shield again. And—hauntingly—the last time I’d used it, the deflected magic hadn’t been enough to stop Seluna.

I was going to have to think of a new strategy. Maybe just blasting her directly was the best plan. Attack before she burned me, like she’d burned Andrei.

Laughing, Seluna fired another blast at my feet. I jumped back, but my eyes started to water from the searing heat of it.

I stumbled farther back, trying to get away, but I tripped. I was able to catch myself, but I accidentally fired a jolt of magic. I hadn’t aimed, and it hit the carved ceiling, sending debris and dust raining down on Seluna.

She brushed it off, looking annoyed, and sent out another lick of fire. This time she directed it not at me, but toward Greyson’s immobile statue.

“STOP!” I screamed, and used my shield to deflect the fire.

The fire bounced away, striking one of the Vanguard statues, knocking off one of its arms.

She sent another blast my way, and I had to roll to avoid it. But this time I was able to aim, and I sent a blast of my own magic back at the demon. She sidestepped it easily, and my magic blasted a huge chunk from the wall behind her.

Seluna looked behind her, eyeing the hole I’d just blasted in the wall, and though I couldn’t see her face, I sensed I’d surprised her. When she turned back to me, she looked vindictive. She moved purposefully forward, occasionally firing licks of flames at me, and at the statues crowded into the gallery.

She was starting to piss me off. She wasn’t even trying to harm me at that point, just torturing me and the rest of the crew for her own sadistic pleasure. I had to do something. I *had* to stop her.

I jumped to my feet and charged her. My magic felt frayed and distracted, but I didn’t care. If my magic couldn’t stop her, maybe some good old-fashioned ass whooping would.

It was clear this wasn’t anything she’d expected to happen, and she looked shocked as I slammed into her. My inertia drove her into one of the Vanguard statues. It wobbled on its plinth before it toppled over, smashing on the ground.

Taking advantage of this distraction, I leapt onto Seluna—who was lying on the ground—and tried to pin down her arms. I was using my knees and my head and every available appendage I had to rain blows down on her. But Seluna recovered from her surprise and yanked her arms from my grasp. We grappled, rolling across the gallery floor, which was now littered with broken ceiling, wall, and smashed statue. My anger was building as we fought—somehow wrestling on the ground took my fear away, giving my fury more room to grow.

My whole body was coiled like a spring, and when she turned her face for an instant, I pulled back and took a swing. But it was too wide, and I smashed my hand against the base of a stone pedestal.

“Shit!” I screamed as pain jolted through my arm.

Seluna threw me off, and I tumbled backward. But I kept my wits about me and grabbed the severed stone arm. I swung it like a baseball bat and caught Seluna in the lower back, making her gasp. It didn’t seem to have any lasting effect, but it drove her back a few steps as she fought for breath.

Encouraged, I charged forward, raising the arm over my head to strike what I desperately hoped would be a final blow, but then Seluna hit me with a fiery blast.

The fire exploded on my chest, and I shrieked as the heat seared my skin. I dropped the stone arm and fell backward, right onto my ass.

Seluna moved toward me, a satisfied smile on her face. “Well, I have to admit, you put up a good fight, Caliana, but the time has come. You must admit defeat.”

I stared up at her, my heart pounding painfully hard. My breath came in gasps, and I could taste blood.

“I want what I bargained for,” she said, coming ever closer to me. “I want the power of the *due destini*.” Her eyes blazed down at me, like there was fire burning behind them.

Terrified, I scrambled backward, fighting down the waves of pain that threatened to overwhelm me. I knew I couldn’t give her what she wanted. The power of the *due destini* belonged to *me*, not to some demonic nightmare. But what the hell was I supposed to do? I was running out of options. I was exhausted and drained of magic, with no backup and nowhere to go.

I got to my feet. I was still backing away from Seluna, but I didn’t want to go down while cowering on the floor. I kept backing up until I hit the wall. Or I thought I hit the wall. But something behind me clanked. A quick glance over my shoulder told me I’d hit one of the suits of armor.

Seluna was coming closer and closer, and I pressed back into the armor. Something jabbed against my hip, and I reached out to feel the handle of a sword. I wrapped my hand around it, wondering if I even had the strength to lift the thing, but when Seluna raised her hand, ready to burn me again, my body acted of its own accord.

I whipped the sword out with a feral cry. The burns on my chest and arms were agony, but I thought of my mates and how desperately I wanted to see them again. I thought of how much I loved them.

“NO!” I screamed, and thrust the sword into Seluna.

# Episode 2775

Seluna stopped, her brow furrowed with confusion. She looked down at the sword, which was still clenched in my hand. She clutched my hand, trying to loosen my grip on the sword. My hand grew hot beneath her grasp. It started to burn, but I clenched my teeth and hung on tight.

She gave a shriek of fury as she began to tremble. Smoke rose from her, and I could see tendrils of flame licking around her ears.

My hands were burning, and, unable to hold on any longer, I released my grip on the sword and stepped back, tears streaming from the pain.

Without my support, Seluna staggered a few steps. Still looking baffled, she reached for the sword piercing her abdomen.

This was it. I knew I couldn’t give her another chance. I had to see this through, no matter what. Last time had been a disaster. I’d thought I’d killed her, and that mistake had allowed Seluna the opportunity to turn my mates and my friends into statues.

But there was still one thing I needed from the demon.

Seluna’s hands scrabbled at the sword, trying to pull it out, but I reached for it. My hands were stinging like they’d been bathed in acid, but I wasn’t going to let this opportunity pass me by. This had to end here and now.

I held the sword in place. “I will pull this out, if you hold up your end of the deal and release everyone.”

“Of course,” Seluna gasped. Then she wrapped her hand around mine, her touch burning my flesh.

I screamed with pain and shoved the sword further into her. “*Fuck. You.*”

Dark, thick blood spilled onto my hands as Seluna staggered backward.

“It hurts worse when it’s your own body, doesn’t it?” I hissed, stepping closer to her. She opened and closed her mouth a few times, but she couldn’t seem to get any words out. That was fine by me. Rearing back, I kicked her with the very last bit of strength I had.

She stumbled back, tripping over her own feet, and slammed into Greyson’s statue before she crumpled to the floor. The smoke coming from her had grown thicker, almost obscuring her from view, and then suddenly, she burst into flames. The fire leapt upward, hissing and emitting a foul, sick smell.

I turned away as the smoke wafted over me. My lungs felt like they were closing up, trying to protect themselves from the choking smoke. My eyes were tearing up, though this had less to do with the smoke and more to do with the horror of it all. I looked down at Seluna’s crumpled form. Had I really just *killed* a demon?

I hadn’t even really known what I was doing. I’d been so *angry*, and so afraid for my mates, that I’d lost myself. But I had no regrets, and I would do it again in a heartbeat, but—as I looked down at Seluna rattling out her last breaths—I had to admit that it was hard to watch someone die. Even someone as evil as this demon.

But, even with that guilt, there was also relief. A *lot* of it. This time I was sure I’d done it. Seluna wasn’t going to be haunting me or Dani or anyone else ever again. I’d done it. I hadn’t been sure I could, but I’d slayed the demon.

I’d fucking done it.

I started to smile, but as I looked around the gallery, the smile slid from my face. Seluna’s death hadn’t broken the spell she’d used to turn everyone into statues. The stone figures remained just that—stone figures. I looked up into Greyson’s face. His eyes were fixed on me, but he wasn’t moving. I turned to Xavier, but he too was still frozen in place.

I looked past my mates, at the rest of the statues. They’d watched me fight Seluna, and now that she was dead, they’d all realized what I’d realized. Seluna couldn’t release them now. Now they were still trapped, but despairing, knowing I’d failed to free them.

Overwhelmed, I dropped to my knees and sobbed, my hands over my face. I didn’t know what to do next. I had no idea how to help them.

Beneath me, the ground began to rumble. I looked up, startled. Was that an earthquake? The elaborate chandelier over my head swayed. I got to my feet, struggling to keep my balance as the floor gave another sickening jerk. Cracks began to show in the plaster walls as the shaking continued, racing each other up toward the ceiling.

Above me there was a crack like a gunshot, and I looked up to see a chunk of ceiling explode. Hunks of plaster landed hard, cracking the wood floor and narrowly missing Xavier’s frozen form.

Horror began to mount within me as I realized that if this shaking continued, the palace could collapse.

I stared around, terrified. If I was a witch and could blip, I’d be able to get us all out of here. But I wasn’t, so I couldn’t. How the hell was I supposed to get everyone out? How was I supposed to protect them?

I looked at the door across the room, wondering if there were any remaining Vanguard pack members who could help me.

Turning toward the door, I stepped carefully around a large chunk of plaster from the ceiling, but I stopped when I heard the sound of cracking, grinding rocks.

I turned just in time to see the statues begin to crumble, debris falling to the floor.

My heart sank like a stone. I was too late. Xavier and Greyson were falling apart—crumbling to dust. Tears began to stream from my eyes.

But then I saw something moving beneath the crumbling stone. The statues weren’t falling apart—it was just the façade of the statues, giving way to the flesh and blood forms of my mates and my friends!

Greyson was the first to free himself from the stone, and he stumbled toward me, coughing and spitting dust. I rushed over and threw my arms around him.

“*Greyson*,” I murmured, my heart hammering.

Then I saw Xavier take a stumbling step forward, away from the stone that had held him captive. I broke away from Greyson and rushed toward him.

“Are you all right?” I asked breathlessly. “Xavier?”

He looked shell-shocked and opened his mouth to speak, but he could only cough. He pulled me into his arms and held me tight.

“Cali,” he whispered, his voice hoarse.

I held him tight, relief flooding through me.

“You did it,” he said quietly. “You really did it.”

Behind us, the others broke free of the stone and stepped cautiously away. They coughed and rubbed dust from their eyes, but they looked very much alive.

“My arm!” a Vanguard pack member shouted, looking down at where his arm used to be.

A handful of Vanguard wolves rushed over to him, looking around for the missing arm.

Greyson stepped toward me. He was smiling.

“You saved us, love,” he said, his eyes shining.

I didn’t know what to say to this. “I thought I was going to lose you all,” I admitted.

Zainab spat on the ground and wiped marble dust from her mouth. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

“Absolutely,” Ava said, her gaze flitting around nervously.

Greyson turned to Lucian, who was staring around his gallery, a baffled look on his face.

“It’s been fun, man, but we’re fucking out of here. Thanks for the invitation,” Greyson said sourly.

“Oh.” Lucian looked surprised. “Perhaps you should stay,” he said, following us as we headed for the door. “I realize this has all been a bit… upsetting, but I would like to make amends.”

I glanced up at Greyson. I had no intention of spending another second in this place, and I hoped he felt the same.

He did, apparently, and shook his head. “I don’t think so. We’ll talk about what happened another time. We’re leaving.”

“I can show you the way out,” Lucian said, hurrying forward to lead us through the doorway.

As we walked through the twisting hallways and down the grand staircases of the Vanguard palace, I was hit again by that strange, dream-like feeling. Some hallways were filled with smoke, evidence of our battle and Seluna’s power over the Vanguard pack, but some were untouched. The paintings hung on the walls as though nothing strange had happened at all. It was surreal.

When we reached the main entrance and Lucian pulled the door open, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been so happy to see the night sky. It was velvet black, studded with stars. It looked like a jewel box scattered with diamonds, and tears sprang to my eyes at the sight of it.

I took Xavier’s hand in my right and Greyson’s in my left, and we stepped out the doorway—only to be stopped by some invisible barrier.

My heart started to pound. We were still trapped!