**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 23**

**Episodes 2776–2867**

# Episode 2776

**Greyson**

I slammed my fist against the barrier, swearing as the pain rocketed up my arm. It was solid as stone, and I could tell I wasn’t going to be able to destroy it with force.

I couldn’t *believe* this. After everything we’d been through with the Vanguards and their twisted moon goddess—tonight and over the last few weeks—there was no way I was going to put up with this shit.

“What the hell is going on here?” I demanded, rounding on Lucian. “Did you put this barrier up?”

He looked from me to the doorway and back again. “No! I don’t know what that is,” he said, sounding startled. “I swear to you, I had nothing to do with this. I was stuck inside a statue, just like the rest of you.”

Xavier looked around, his eyes narrowed. “Are there still demons left in here? I know we killed a bunch of them, but there could be more running around.”

His theory was plausible, but the thought of more demons didn’t thrill me. I’d had enough of demons to last me for a lifetime.

“If there are still demons, I can take care of them,” Charlie said, looking around. “You’ve got a hunter in your pack; let me do my thing.”

“Don’t bother with that,” Okorie said dismissively. “I might be able to crack whatever spell this is. Stand back everyone. Some of the magic I’m going to try might bounce back, and it could get ugly if you’re not keeping your eyes open.”

I turned to Cali, my instinct to wrap my arms protectively around her, but I saw Xavier beating me to it.

Fine. Whatever. I looked away from the sight of Cali leaning into Xavier’s chest. I’d have plenty of time to comfort Cali later. I knew she was shaken up by what she’d done to Seluna. I could see it in her eyes. Killing someone—even a demon—was something that could stay with you for a long time.

Okorie stepped toward the barrier and looked at it carefully. He narrowed his eyes and murmured something.

Nothing happened.

“Shit, hang on” he muttered.

He moved his hands rapidly, and a spark shot out of them. It bounced against the barrier, and everyone flinched, but he caught it in his hands like a baseball.

“Dammit. I got this.”

The last one didn’t work either, and he looked furious.

“Fuck!” He turned around. “Whatever cast this must be really powerful. I can’t crack it. Hell, I can’t even dent it. Was it Seluna? Would her magic still hold even though she’s dead?”

I turned to Charlie. “Can you sniff out if there are any other demons still in the palace?”

Charlie nodded and had just turned to go when a small voice spoke. It was so quiet, I didn’t catch the words, and I looked around in confusion.

“What?” I asked.

Dani stepped forward timidly. “I can help.”

I frowned at her. “I didn’t know you had that kind of magic.”

“She doesn’t. Dani can’t do any magic herself,” Okorie explained. “She amplifies the magic around her. She could give mine a little boost.” He shrugged. “It might be enough to break the barrier.”

“Then do it,” I said. “Let’s give it a try.” The sooner I got everyone out of this place, the better.

Okorie took Dani’s hand, and they both stepped toward the door. I was willing to let them try, but I had a hard time believing that this shy, quiet girl had the power to do much of anything.

Then again, she *had* helped obliterate Xavier’s car.

I smiled at the memory of it. My brother had shit luck with cars.

Okorie was staring at the barrier, clearly concentrating. He murmured a spell beneath his breath, and the air around us seemed to vibrate. Sweat appeared on the warlock’s forehead, but he kept his gaze steady.

He was working hard, but I found myself getting really worried. If he couldn’t break the shield, we were going to have to go demon hunting, and I didn’t relish the thought of that.

The doorway shimmered, and Okorie took a step back, letting out a long, exhausted breath. He looked at Dani and gestured toward the door. “After you.”

Dani swallowed hard but took a tentative step forward, and—to my immense relief—she kept walking.

“Oh thank god,” Zainab said, and I fully agreed with her.

The barrier was broken. We could go home.

Zainab, Charlie, Ava, and Knox followed Dani and Okorie out the door.

I turned to Lucian. “Thanks for helping us—in the end,” I said.

Xavier glared at me, then turned on Lucian, grabbing him by the neck. “You sick son of a—”

“Enough,” I said, pulling Xavier away. “Now’s not the time for this. Let’s get Cali out of here.”

Xavier looked angry, but he stepped away from Lucian. He took Cali’s hand, and the two of them headed out the door.

I nodded to Aysel and followed them out.

In front of me, Xavier had paused on the steps. “What’s my car doing here?”

Dani shot a look at Cali.

Cali cleared her throat. “I drove it over here with Dani, but neither of us remembers doing it.”

Xavier took this in, then shook his head with a sigh. “Whatever. It doesn’t matter. But I guess that means I’m driving back. Where are the keys?”

Cali’s eyes widened. “Keys?”

Xavier stared at her. “Yeah, keys. Where are they?”

Cali swallowed hard. “Okay, so, the thing is—”

“*Cali!*” Xavier sounded exasperated.

“I don’t even remember driving over here, Xavier,” Cali said. “How am I supposed to remember where I put the keys? It’s not like the palace has those little hooks by the door!”

“So how am I supposed to get the car home?”

Cali looked unsure. “Can we call Triple A or something?”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Oh, yeah, that’s a great idea. We’ll just get them up here to this fun house and explain why we’re all covered in rubble!”

While Cali and Xavier argued about the keys, I started thinking about Xavier’s threat to Lucian. My voice telling Xavier to leave it alone rang in my head, and I stepped backward, back toward the palace entrance.

Aysel was still standing at the door, and she watched me steadily as I walked back in.

“Greyson. I wanted to thank you,” she said, stepping toward me. “For keeping your word about my brother.”

“It wasn’t a favor,” I said flatly. “I did what I had to do to keep my pack safe. That’s my priority.”

I felt a prickle on the back of my neck, and I looked up to see Lucian watching us.

I turned back to Aysel. There was something else I wanted to know, now that everything seemed to be over. “Aysel, did you know that Andrei was in love with you?”

“Of course I knew,” she snapped, getting defensive. “The fool was so obvious about it, how could I not know?”

I gave her a long look. “Andrei died to save you. You might think about that.”

“He always… I—Well, I—” Aysel stammered, but I was done listening to her. I stepped past her to where Lucian stood.

He smiled up at me, shades of his old smugness on his face, despite his ragged look and the marble dust all over his hair. “Greyson Evers. Back again. Did you forget something?”

“In a way,” I said, speaking to him in a calm, quiet voice. “Before I go, I want to make something very clear to you. I am the Alpha of the Redwood pack, Lucian. Cali is my mate. And if you—or any of your pack—ever do anything to threaten or harm her or anyone in my pack ever again, I will hold you personally responsible. Do I make myself clear?”

There was a flash of fear in his eyes, and he swallowed. “Perfectly.”

“If *anything* like this ever happens again, there will be no parties, no werewolf council, no discussion. There will only be you and me, and I will kill you.”

Lucian’s mouth fell open, but he said nothing. I held his gaze for a long moment.

“I want to make sure there is no doubt in your mind that this”—I gestured around—“is over. What you put Cali and the rest of my pack through will never, *ever* happen again. You are only alive right now because of my promise to Aysel, and because she convinced us that you were acting under the spell of a demon. No other reason. I don’t like you, I don’t respect you, and I will not show an iota of mercy to you if anything—*anything*—like this ever happens again. There will not be any second chances. I will fucking kill you.”

I patted Lucian on the back and gave him a smug smile of my own.

“Got it?”

# Episode 2777

**Xavier**

I gritted my teeth and tried to push down my frustration. I couldn’t *believe* Cali had taken my car and lost my keys, but I didn’t want to argue with her. Well, I didn’t want to *keep* arguing. She’d already been through so much, it didn’t seem fair to keep pressing the issue.

“Maybe I dropped them as I was getting out of the car,” Cali suggested. “Maybe they’re nearby. Let’s go look.”

With little other choice we began searching the graveled driveway near the car. It was quiet for a moment as everyone eyed the ground.

“I found Cali’s phone,” Dani called after a moment, holding up the dusty phone.

I rolled my eyes, but over Dani’s shoulder, I saw Greyson in the doorway of the palace. He was patting Lucian on the back, a smile on his face.

What the *fuck* was I looking at? What the hell was going on? Were Greyson and Lucian best buds now? Was that why he’d stopped me from kicking the little prince’s ass? How could Greyson even look at the guy without wanting to rip his fucking throat out?

If he hadn’t stopped me, I wouldn’t have felt an ounce of remorse for killing Lucian right in the doorway of his house. Cali had almost died in there. She’s been possessed by a demon, and Lucian was responsible. Fuck the princeling, and fuck the Vanguard pack—or what was left of it.

When I was Alpha of the Redwood pack, I’d pay one last visit to the palace and take care of Lucian, once and for all.

“I saw a YouTube video once about how to jump a car,” Zainab said, her voice pulling me from my murderous thoughts. “All we have to do is break a window to get in—”

“No one is breaking anything on my car,” I snapped. “There’s been enough damage as it is.”

Zainab shrugged. “I’m just saying, you could do it if you wanted to get into the car. Sage taught me how.”

Okorie—who hadn’t been looking for the keys—shrugged. “I guess I could blip everyone back to the pack house. But we’d have to leave the car here.”

“Why?” I asked. I’d seen Big Mac blip cars before, so I knew it was possible.

“I’m tired, man. You think fighting demons is easy work?” Okorie said. “I don’t have the strength to blip everyone and the car.”

“Well I’m not leaving my car here,” I said. “You take the others back. I guess I’ll have to call for a tow truck.”

Cali took my hand, her eyes wide and worried. “I’m sorry about the keys, but I want you to come back with us. I don’t want you staying here longer than you have to. Not after everything.”

She was shaken, I could see it in her eyes, and my heart stirred. I pulled her into a hug.

“Okay,” I said, kissing the top of her head. “I’ll come.” My car could wait.

Greyson walked toward us. “Are we ready to go?” he asked, looking around.

“Yeah, but one thing real quick,” I snapped, grabbing him by the arm and dragging him away from the rest of the pack.

“What are you doing?” Greyson asked, looking taken aback.

“Explain to me why you were being so fucking chummy with Lucian?” I demanded. “And why the hell didn’t you let me go after him?”

Greyson looked back at the palace. “It’s taken care of,” he said cryptically.

“What does that mean—” I started, but I stopped when Greyson gave my shoulder a squeeze.

“What’s the situation with the car?” he asked, cutting me off.

I stared at him. “Tow truck. Now tell me what you and the princeling were talking about.”

If Greyson intended to answer me—which somehow, I doubted—he didn’t get the chance, because Okorie looked over at us.

“Let’s go you two. Get over here so I can do this, or I’m going to leave you both to walk home.”

Ava stepped toward me. “I’m not going back to the pack house,” she said quietly.

“What?”

“I’m going with Knox. I’ll only be gone a few days at most, but if you need to shift before then, just give me a call, okay?”

She was standing close to me, and I felt my wolf stirring as her scent washed over me, but I wasn’t going to give in. Not this time.

“Fine,” I said shortly. Then I added, “Thanks.”

She nodded. There was a beat of hesitation, then I reached out and drew her into a hug.

She seemed surprised, but she hugged me back. “Thank you for trusting me,” she murmured.

I still wasn’t sure if I *did* trust her, or if it was just desperation that had made her so important to me, so I only grunted in response.

“Ava?” Knox called, looking antsy. He glanced around nervously. “Let’s go. I want to get the fuck out of this place.”

I pulled away from Ava. “Good luck with the shrimp,” I said, loud enough for Knox to hear, and was amused when he clenched his fists.

Stepping back toward Cali and the rest of the team, I took one last look at the Vanguard palace. I fucking hated this place, but I knew I’d be back. No matter what Greyson thought, this wasn’t finished.

“Okay.” Okorie looked around at the group. “Is everyone here? Everyone ready?”

“Ready,” Zainab said, wiping a streak of dust from her face.

“Let’s do this,” Okorie said, and the air around us seemed to shimmer.

An instant later we were back at the pack house, standing on the cold, wet lawn. Behind us, every window in the house was lit, and I could see the Christmas tree through the living room windows.

Cali looked over at me with a smile. “It’s never looked better, has it?”

I returned her smile. “It does feel good to be back,” I said. And it did.

The door burst open, and I saw Sage’s face peering out at us.

“They’re back!” she shouted, and leapt down the steps, racing toward us. Behind her, the rest of the pack poured out onto the lawn, running toward us, hugging and shouting.

Tom and Orla were the last out, and they rushed through the crowd, looking frantic.

“Cali! Sweetheart!” Orla called. “Are you okay?”

“What happened, Pumpkin?” Tom asked as they drew near.

Cali threw her arms around both of them, hugging them tight, and I stepped back. I figured Cali’s parents had the right to be with their child, considering how narrow her escape had been. I hoped this was going to be the last time something like this happened. Cali had attracted trouble for as long as I’d known her, but it seemed like lately, she kept finding herself in situations where her family—or her mates—were worried for her life.

Big Mac stepped toward me. “Well?”

I sighed. I was too tired to deal with Big Mac’s shit. “Well what?”

“Did you take care of the demon?”  
 I looked over at Cali. “Actually, she did,” I said, tipping my chin toward her.

Big Mac raised a surprised brow but nodded. “Good.”

Violet was hugging Charlie tightly. Mrs. Smith hurried toward Greyson, and I was amused to see my brother hugging his mother. That had been a long thaw, but the two seemed closer now.

“Well look at you,” Jay said, walking over to me with a smile. “I’m glad you made it out alive, man.”

“Thanks. Me too,” I admitted.

“Even I have to admit I was a bit worried. Mostly because I didn’t want to have to go in there and rescue you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks, Jay.” I rubbed a hand across my eyes. I was exhausted, but I wanted to make sure Cali was all right before I headed inside.

When I looked over at her, she was smiling and speaking to her parents and Lola. She looked all right, but I couldn’t help but wonder if her happy face was just an act. She didn’t like to worry anyone—that was just her nature—but I knew what she’d been through at the Vanguard mansion, and I knew it had to be weighing on her. She’d killed Seluna, and that was no small thing.

“Let’s get inside,” Greyson called over the heads of the chattering pack. “Everyone’s exhausted and probably needs showers. We can answer all the questions you have tomorrow.”

There was a general murmur of assent, and the pack started moving toward the front door, but Greyson faltered as he went to climb them.

“Greyson?” Cali said quickly, moving to his side. “Are you okay?”

Greyson clutched at his chest, his face twisted with pain. “I don’t know.”

He pulled his hand away, and Cali gasped. It wasn’t hard to see why—his hand was covered with blood. The knife wound in his chest had reopened, and blood was pouring out of it.

“*Greyson!*” Cali screamed as Greyson collapsed to the ground.

# Episode 2778

I cradled Greyson in my arms as blood poured out of the newly opened wound in his chest.

“Someone, help us!” I screamed. His blood was everywhere—spreading across his chest and onto my clothes, my skin. I thought the inside of my mind might be stained with it too, as terror and horror froze me in place.

*What do I do? What do I do?* The words ran through my mind on a loop, but all I could seem to actually do was hold onto my mate as panic continued to rush through me.

Greyson’s eyes fluttered open. “M’ fine, love,” he mumbled, then tried to sit up. Pain flashed across his face, and I held onto him even tighter.

“Stop! You’re hurt. Moving might just make things worse.”

Xavier and Jay rushed over, and I watched them register their Alpha’s bloodied form.

“Can you carry him inside?” I asked.

I knew I wasn’t anywhere near strong enough to lift hundreds of pounds of muscle. At least, not without hurting him even more.

“Careful, he’s losing blood,” I said as Xavier and Jay carefully lifted Greyson into their arms and carried him inside. I followed behind them, guilt twisting my stomach as I carefully avoided the trail of blood they left in their wake.

I couldn’t shake the idea that this was somehow my fault. I didn’t know how, exactly, but I did know I’d failed Greyson. I should have taken better care of him. I should have checked his wound when he’d pulled the knife out. Could it have been a silver knife? I didn’t think a werewolf could be hurt by silver without knowing it, but I also wouldn’t put it past Seluna to have used some sort of spellwork that cloaked silver from those who were most vulnerable to it.

If it was a silver knife, Greyson could be poisoned. And it could explain why the wound wasn’t healing correctly. I should have used my blood on the wound. What was I thinking?

Lola raced up as I stepped into the pack house. “What happened to Greyson?”

Emotion caught in my throat, and I swallowed it down. “Seluna stabbed him,” I explained, my voice rough. “But we thought it had healed. I… I don’t know what’s wrong. Could it have been a silver blade?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

I followed the others as they laid Greyson down on the couch. I could tell Xavier and Jay were trying to be gentle, but Greyson still winced. Blood dripped from his saturated shirt onto the couch and carpet below.

Outside in the hallway, I heard Lola calling for Torin.

I stumbled closer and knelt down next to Greyson so I could get a better look at the wound.

*If it’s silver poisoning, then it doesn’t look like any of the other silver wounds I’ve seen.* There were no black marks staining Greyson’s skin. That was a good sign, right?

But a chilling thought occurred to me. *Is there such a thing demon silver? Does it have some kind of delay? Or does it not show up the same way regular silver does?*

Torin came in, his eyes widening when he saw the state Greyson was in. To his credit, he recovered quickly. “I need everyone to step aside.”

Xavier and Jay jumped back, but I stayed where I was. I wouldn’t get in Torin’s way, but I wasn’t leaving Greyson’s side.

Greyson tried again to sit up. “It’s not that bad. Look, I’m feeling better.” He grimaced at the pain, and it seemed like a fresh wave of blood slid down his front. His face was ashen.

“Enough!” I snapped. “You’re not fooling anyone. And if you don’t stop moving so we can help you I’ll ask Xavier to strap you down.”

I wasn’t bluffing either, and as scared as I was, I was also pissed at him for acting like this was just some run-of-the-mill injury. For my own part, I knew I’d never forget seeing that knife sticking out of his chest.

Mrs. Smith appeared at my other side and took Greyson’s hand. “Let Torin heal you.”

Torin held both of his hands over the wound, and they gave off that all too familiar bluish glow. How many times had I watched him heal someone important to me? How many times had we almost lost a pack member?

*Too many.*

Still, I watched, my heart in my throat as the wound knitted itself back together. The sight sent a flutter of relief through me, but I still wasn’t entirely comforted. Was it really healed? We’d all thought it was before, but then it had opened up and Greyson had nearly bled out all over again. What if the wound opened up a third time? How could we make sure Greyson was well and truly okay?

“Love.” He took my bloodstained hand in his. “I really feel fine. I promise. I’m sorry for worrying you.”

I leaned in with a sob, pressing my forehead against his. “Don’t be sorry.” I forced a teary smile. “I’m always going to worry about you.”

Behind me, I heard Mrs. Smith say, “MacKenzie, do you know what’s happened here? Why did Greyson’s chest open up like that after it had healed?”

The witches must have heard the commotion. Another flutter of relief eased its way through my chest. Surely they’d know what to do.

I looked away from Greyson as Kira stepped up. “I’ve been researching demons, and sometimes there’s an aftereffect to their magic.”

Alarm bells went off in my head. “What do you mean an aftereffect? Like, the blade isn’t done? It’s still attacking Greyson even though he pulled it out?”

“More or less.” She grimaced. “Some demon weapons have more than one way of inflicting damage. Many of them do their worst damage after the initial cut is made. It’s possible Seluna’s knife was laced with a spell to not only cut, but to open the wound again even if it’s healed.” She gulped. “If Greyson wasn’t a werewolf, that wound would have killed him.”

I shuddered.

“But,” Kira added, “hopefully with Torin’s healing powers, that won’t be an issue anymore.”

I wanted more than anything to believe that we were past this terrifying situation, but I couldn’t stop worrying. Demons were uncharted territory for us. Seluna had seemed capable of almost anything. Who knew what kind of demonic magic might have been in that knife? Was it powerful enough to trump whatever Fae magic Torin threw at it?

Greyson caught my attention by stroking my cheek. “Look.” He pointed down at his chest, where the only evidence of the wound was a thin white line that was still fading. Soon enough, it would be invisible.

*If it doesn’t open up again.*

“It’s stopped bleeding,” he said, “and I feel much better now.”

He sat up, and I grabbed his shoulders. “You should rest. Just lie down for a while longer—”

“I think *you* need to lie down,” he said gently. “You look exhausted.”

Before I could argue, he scooped me up into his arms.

“See?” he said. “I’m fine.”

I realized suddenly that Xavier was *right there*. I looked back at him, and he nodded. He wasn’t going to hold this against me. Maybe he even realized how much I needed to be comforted by Greyson’s presence right now.

Either way, I appreciated his understanding.

I leaned back into Greyson as he carried me upstairs. Now that he wasn’t bleeding out in front of me—he really did seem totally fine—I felt the weight of the day pressing down on me.

*Greyson was right. I* am *exhausted.*

I kept my arms looped tight around his neck as he carried me up to my room, and I couldn’t stop stealing glances at his chest. Just to make sure he was truly healed this time and the wound wasn’t going to surprise me again.

He caught me looking and smiled. “I really do feel much better. I think the worst is over. Why don’t you take a hot shower and get some rest?”

That sounded amazing—except for the part where Greyson left me alone. I wasn’t ready to leave his side.

“Will you stay?” I asked him shyly.

He set me down on my bedroom floor. “I’ll be right here when you get back.”

He kissed me before I could argue, and I reluctantly headed to the bathroom. I showered on autopilot, and a few minutes later, I stepped back into my bedroom. Greyson was as good as his word. He was sitting on the edge of my mattress, waiting for me.

He smiled. “Feel better?”

“Mostly.” I’d washed off the surface dirt from the day, but I couldn’t help but feel there were still layers of filth that I couldn’t quite get rid of. “I’m so tired.”

“Let’s get you in bed, then.” He pulled back the covers and beckoned me closer.

“Are you planning on staying the night?” I asked as I climbed beneath the blanket.

He tucked me in. “If you want me to stay, I will.”

“I do. Thank you.”

He brushed a kiss over my mouth, and I could still smell the metallic scent of blood clinging to him. “Oh!” I pulled away from his mouth. “You probably want to take a shower.”

“I am looking forward to it,” he conceded.

“And you’re sure you’re all right?” I pressed.

He nodded. “I promise.”

I smiled weakly. “Okay.”

He left my room, and I lay back and closed my eyes. I was exhausted beyond belief, but I wasn’t sure I’d be able to sleep. The events of the day kept playing on a loop in my mind: the demon Luna ceremony, all the fighting and the terrifying demon creatures, Greyson getting stabbed, and then that awful moment when I’d killed Seluna.

Another shudder rocked through me. I knew I had to do it, that everyone’s life had depended on me killing her, but I couldn’t stop thinking about it.

I rolled over, squinting at the light that shone across my bed from the bathroom. I must have forgotten to turn it off.

*But that’s weird. I swear I* did *turn it off.*

I got out of bed and padded over to the bathroom, and as I reached for the switch, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror and let out a scream.

Seluna was glaring back at me from the mirror, blood dripping from her dark eyes and down her hollowed, sunken face.

# Episode 2779

I stumbled back with a cry, staring in horror at the image of Seluna in my mirror. She looked like more of a demon zombie now than the powerful creature we’d all fought earlier today. But mirror zombie or not, she was fast, and before I could stop her, she reached through the mirror and grabbed me tightly by the throat.

“Look at me,” she rasped, showing off a rotting dark hole of a mouth. “Look at what you’ve done.”

I clawed at her grip on my neck and tried to turn away, tried to break free, but I couldn’t. Her grip was like cold iron—as deadly as it was unforgiving.

All I could do was stand there, fighting uselessly, as thick, slimy worms emerged from Seluna’s mouth and nose.

*Oh my god! I’m going to be sick.*

Bile rose in my throat, and I slammed my eyes shut. This couldn’t be happening, right? Seluna was dead. I’d killed her. She was dead and gone and couldn’t hurt me anymore.

The ice-cold fingers wrapped tight around my throat *squeezed*, and then I couldn’t breathe. My eyes shot open, and I gasped and gagged and thrashed in her grip.

Seluna’s eyes glazed over as she hissed, “You think you’ve killed me, but you’re the one who bears a dead soul.”

As she spoke, the worms fell from her mouth and landed at my feet. They were cold and slimy, and I wanted to scream, but I couldn’t pull air into my lungs. I clumsily slapped Seluna’s rotting face, and she released me. I stumbled backward until I hit the wall, several feet away from Seluna. I still couldn’t breathe. Something was blocking my throat!

I reached into my mouth and found something thick and wriggling at the back of my throat. Gagging and gasping, my heart slamming into overtime, my lungs burning for air, my stomach heaving, I grasped the slick, wriggling thing and pulled it out of my mouth. It kept going and going until, finally, when what I’d pulled out was the length of my arm, my throat cleared and something popped out of my mouth, wriggling and hissing.

It was a snake. I’d just pulled an entire snake out of my throat.

I threw it across the bathroom with a horrified scream, where it hit the wall. My voice was rough and raw, and I gagged again, this time doubling forward, my stomach heaving as thick, bubbling goo shot out of my mouth. It smelled like sulfur and tasted like death, rotting and necrotic.

The dark, bubbling vomit only made me panic more. Tears tracked down my face as I braced myself against the wall, heaving and vomiting more of that sulfurous goo that splattered around my feet.

This was beyond my worst nightmare. This was everything I’d never even thought to fear, all come to life. It took everything I had not to collapse into the puddle of dark vomit at my feet.

Shuddering and sobbing and gasping, I wiped at my mouth and tried not to look at the dark smear it left on my hand. Tried not to think about the worms now burrowing through the pile of vomit, or the snake hissing nearby.

When I looked up, I found Xavier and Greyson standing next to the mirror, staring at me.

“Greyson?” I rasped. “Xavier?”

They both pointed at me “Guilty,” they chanted in unison.

Behind them, Seluna and a horde of demons standing behind her in the mirror joined in on the chant.

“*Guilty! Guilty! Guilty!*”

I reached for the doorknob, but it crumbled to dust in my hand. I was trapped. I turned back to my mates.

“Please, help me!” I sobbed.

They ignored me, continuing to chant.

“Please!” I screamed, so loud it filled the air, so loud it blocked out their screams, so loud I felt my vocal cords tear right before the mirror shattered outward and shards of glass ripped into my skin—

I lurched upright in bed, my chest heaving, my body shaking, and big, deep sobs racking my lungs. I thrashed, trying to break away from the snakes that had wrapped around my legs.

*THUNK.*

I hit my bedroom floor so hard the air was knocked out of my lungs. My sheets tumbled onto me before pooling on the floor. And then I realized there were no snakes. It was just a dream.

My chest heaved as I tried to right myself, tried to relax long enough for my lungs to crack open and allow in even the smallest sip of air.

I didn’t know how long I lay on the floor, gasping and shuddering and quietly sobbing, before my strength returned and I could breathe deeply. I could *think* around the panic that threatened to smother me.

*It was just a dream*, I realized. *A nightmare.*

But… it had felt so real. Never in my life had I experienced such a visceral nightmare. And I’d had a few. Even now, as I climbed back into my bed, clutching my comforter to my chest, I could still feel Seluna’s unforgiving grip on my throat. I could still smell that sulfurous vomit.

Could it be possible that Seluna was here? Incorporeal, but clearly still powerful?

Slowly, my heart hammering in my throat, I slid out of bed and padded to the bathroom. My hand shook as I turned on the light.

The bathroom was empty, quiet. Still a little humid from my shower. It smelled like my fruity shampoo. There were no snakes. No demons.

*It was definitely just a dream.*

A potent mix of relief and horror slammed into me and made my knees go weak. I grabbed onto the doorframe to steady myself. My heart was still pounding as I turned away from the clean, quiet bathroom. The images from my nightmare were still so fresh—Xavier and Greyson accusing me, calling me guilty, and Seluna’s rotting demon corpse come back to life. How could I forget any of it?

Even knowing that my bathroom was safe, that it had been some kind of dream, I still wasn’t ready to write the whole thing off as a nightmare. There was something terribly insidious about the dream and about my body’s inability to tell the difference between reality and that horrible nightmare.

*If Seluna is dead, is she going to visit me every night? Is this going to be the rest of my life now?*

I glanced back at my bed. Exhaustion was pressing into me again, but I didn’t want to go back to that dream. If it truly *was* a dream.

*Will I ever be able to sleep again?*

I didn’t know what to do. It was the middle of the night. I was exhausted.

I pulled in a deep breath. Repeating to myself that it had only been a bad dream, that it wasn’t real.

After what I’d gone through today, it wasn’t unreasonable to have a nightmare, right? I remade the bed and climbed back in, sinking into my pillows. It took a few minutes of deep and conscious breathing, but I finally felt my muscles unclench as I drifted off again.

When I woke up again, it was still dark outside. My mouth was dry—I needed water.

I rolled over, toward the edge of my bed, and was met with something solid and cold. There was someone in my bed with me! I screamed and scrambled back, pulling the sheets away with me to reveal Seluna’s rotting corpse.

The demon snarled and grabbed for me, and I was rolling away to escape those ice-cold hands when somebody grabbed me from behind.

I let out another scream. “Let go of me! Please, let go!”

They didn’t let go. And Xavier’s voice filtered through my awareness. “Cali, it’s okay.”

But it wasn’t okay. Nothing had ever been *less* okay than this. I scrambled back, pressing myself into him. “It’s Seluna! Get out! We have to run!”

He kept holding me tightly and eventually turned me in his arms so he could see my face.

“Cali, open your eyes.”

My eyes snapped open on a gasp. Predawn light was beginning to filter in through the windows—it was still night, but not for much longer. And Xavier… He was here. Holding me against his chest.

It was just the two of us. No Seluna. No snakes or worms or living nightmares.

“Xavier?” My voice broke on a sob.

He pulled me against his chest and stroked my hair. “Hey, you were having a nightmare. You’re okay now.”

“W-What are you doing here?”

“I heard you screaming, and I came to check on you.” His voice was low and soft, soothing. “Then I realized you were having a nightmare. I helped you calm down, and when I went to leave, you asked me to stay.”

I had no recollection of any of that, but I was glad he was here. It was easier to tell the difference between nightmare and reality when he was by my side. I snuggled into him, and he kept stroking my hair.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked.

“I want to purge it from my mind. It was… horrible.”

“Tell me about it. Maybe it will help.”

I didn’t know how to explain it. I could tell him what I’d dreamt, sure, but how could I convey that visceral horror? I swallowed. “Seluna was in my mirror, and then I thought you were her in my bed.”

In the dim light, I could just make out his smile. “Do I look like Seluna? Does she have these abs?”

A laugh huffed out of my chest. It felt good. Really good. “Of course not.”

“It’s good to see you laugh.”

“It felt so real,” I whispered.

“It couldn’t be. You killed Seluna, remember?”

I didn’t think I’d ever forget it. But I wasn’t quite so ready to believe she was gone. I swallowed again as a gnawing terror built inside me. “Xavier, what if Seluna didn’t die?”

# Episode 2780

**Xavier**

I hated the look of complete terror on Cali’s face.

“I was there—even as a statue,” I gently reminded her. “But I know what I saw. Seluna is definitely dead, and you’re the one who killed her. You saved us all.”

I was hoping this would ease some of her fears, but instead she looked even more distraught, like my words pained her. Clearly, she was more affected by everything that had happened yesterday than she’d let on. She was probably traumatized. And I couldn’t say I blamed her.

Cali wasn’t a killer, she was a survivor. She wasn’t made from the same stuff as the rest of us, and I couldn’t imagine that killing Seluna in the manner she had—as justified as it was—would sit right with her. After all, Cali was always the one who tried to find a way to avoid killing. She’d spoken up about killing Tony, and she’d gone out of her way to keep Phil and Rhonda safe. Surviving in the heat of battle the way she had in the past was one thing, but this was different for her. I could tell.

So even though Seluna was a demon, even though she’d made Cali’s and Dani’s lives hell, even though she was unredeemable and, in my opinion, deserved to die a million more horrible, painful deaths—killing was still killing. Not everyone was made for it. Not everyone could carry that weight.

Kira, for instance, was more like Cali. She couldn’t make that call, couldn’t be the one to snuff out someone else’s life.

But, then again, she wasn’t Cali. Because when push came to shove, Cali *had* made the call. She’d chosen to carry the weight to save everyone’s lives.

“Does it bother you?” I asked.

She didn’t have to ask what I meant. She nodded. “It was so strange. I went to the palace somehow knowing I would be the one to kill Seluna. I didn’t *want* to be that person, but I still had this… this sense that it was going to be me.”

“I remember.” I didn’t think it was possible for me to forget. And I hated that she’d been the one to make that call, even though I was so, so proud of her for being so brave and selfless. “But remember, if it wasn’t for you, we might have all died. You saved the pack—you saved me.”

“I know,” she said quickly. “I guess I just wonder… Did Seluna know I didn’t want to kill her? That I abhor killing in general? Did she set me up for this so I would be forced to kill her? Like, she wanted to make sure she went down swinging if she failed? Am I going to be haunted now because of it?”

I ran a hand over her hair, stopping at her neck and cradling the tense muscles there. “You did a very hard thing. And even if it was the right thing, that doesn’t make it any less hard. Give yourself some time to process all of this. I’m sure the nightmares will fade with time. You won’t feel like this forever.”

“Shouldn’t I?” she asked. “I know she was evil, and I know I didn’t have a choice. But… I killed her, Xavier. I took her life. If I stop feeling this way, does that mean I’ve changed?”

“Hey.” I lifted her chin so she met my eyes in the semi-darkness. “You’re still a good person, Cali. Allowing yourself to move on from this when the time is right won’t change that. If I could go back and change what happened, I would. But I want you to know that what you did was right. It was justified. And it was very brave. You shouldn’t beat yourself up—you should feel proud. I always knew you were special, but you’ve truly outdone yourself. You’re in an elite group. Not everyone can claim to have killed a demon.” I dropped a sweet kiss onto her waiting lips. “Hell, you probably saved the world. Who knows?”

She gave me a weak smile. “Thank you.”

“Do you feel better?”

She hesitated. “Talking about it has helped. You were right.”

So better wasn’t on the table just yet.

I kissed her again. “Do you want to try to get some more sleep?”

She nodded, and we snuggled back down.

I pulled the blankets up around us and hugged her close. “I’ve got you. Try to get some rest. If you have any more nightmares, know that I’ll be here to take care of you, okay?”

“Thank you.” She kissed my jaw before snuggling against my chest.

Her breathing evened out quickly, and she fell asleep. I took a little longer to follow her, and while I waited for sleep to claim me, I watched her face. Drank in her peaceful expression in the predawn light. I wished she could look like this all the time, not just when she was experiencing a dreamless sleep. I wished I could take away all the pain, the guilt, the suffering she was experiencing. That demon bitch was dead, yes, but she’d left plenty of trauma behind.

I knew the best I could do was be here, comfort her. But it still didn’t feel like quite enough.

My eyes fluttered shut as exhaustion rolled over me, and I soon joined her in sleep.

When I woke up, sunlight was shining in through the window. It had to be mid-morning at least. Cali was still sleeping against my chest. Good. She needed the rest. Fortunately, it didn’t seem like she’d been plagued with any more nightmares.

I ran a finger along her cheek, a sleepy smile tugging at my lips.

Her eyes fluttered open, and she greeted me with a sleepy smile. “G’morning.”

“How are you feeling, tiger?” I asked.

She blinked, then slowly sat up and stretched. “I feel great. I really needed a good night’s sleep.”

I rolled my eyes. “You don’t have to pretend with me. I know you slept terribly until I showed up, and that was after three a.m.”

“Well, yeah, but I really do feel better.” She leaned down to kiss my cheek. “Thank you for being my protector.”

She climbed out of bed, and I caught her arm, reeling her back in so I could place a kiss against her stomach, where her shirt had ridden up. “I’ll always protect you. I promise.”

Her smile brightened, and then her eyes went wide. “Do you smell that? Someone’s making breakfast!”

“Lucky us. Breakfast sounds good.”

We quickly got ready and headed downstairs, following the scent of bacon. My stomach growled when we reached the landing, and I suddenly realized just how hungry I was. How hungry Cali had to be. None of us had had any food at the ceremony last night, and after that, everything had been such a shitshow that we hadn’t even thought to eat.

“Come on, let’s get you some food.” I ushered her into the kitchen, and we were immediately met by the sight of a banner that read “Happy ~~Birth~~day!”

“‘Happy day’?” I asked.

Torin beamed at me from his place in front of the stove, where several pans were sizzling with a variety of breakfast food. “Isn’t it a happy day? Aren’t we all glad to be alive? Shouldn’t we celebrate your victory over the demon, Seluna?”

Well, when he put it that way, I couldn’t really argue with him. “Sure,” I grumbled. “But can you at least let a guy enjoy a cup of coffee before the celebrations start?”

“Of course!” Torin gestured to the coffeemaker. “It will be a little while longer before breakfast is ready. I’m preparing a Hero’s Breakfast to celebrate the Redwood heroes, and it’s important that it’s done right.”

Cali took a seat at the kitchen island while I sought out some lifegiving coffee. “What’s a Hero’s Breakfast?” she asked.

“It’s a Fae thing,” Artemis said, sipping from her own mug of coffee. “Nobody really does it anymore.”

Torin scoffed. “Of course we do! In the Fae world, when somebody performs a heroic feat, we celebrate them with a special breakfast: magic toast with marmalade, pheasant eggs with a Fae herb sauce, Gremlin cheese, and elixir of honey and flower essence.”

Yeah, plain coffee was sounding better and better.

“Of course,” Torin continued, “since we’re not in the Fae world, I had to make some substitutions.”

He started dishing up food onto serving platters, revealing a tray of eggs, pancakes, bacon, toast and potatoes.

Call me a cynic, but it looked like an ordinary breakfast you could’ve found at literally any diner. But I kept that thought to myself. Cali was smiling at Torin, clearly excited to have something to celebrate, and I wasn’t about to spoil the moment for her. Plus, why rain on Torin’s parade? If the dude wanted to make everyone breakfast, then who was I to stop him?

Orla walked into the kitchen and wrapped an arm around Cali. “I’m glad you’re okay,” she said. “I’m glad we’re all okay.”

A small smile tugged at my lips as I sipped my coffee. Maybe if Cali could connect with her family, remember all the people who loved her, she’d be better equipped to deal with the repercussions of killing Seluna.

Cali gestured around the room. “I can’t eat all of this myself. I hope you’re all hungry.”

I came over to her and rubbed her back. “Do you want some coffee?”

“Only if Lola didn’t make it.”

“Hey!” Lola scoffed. “It’s not that bad.”

Suddenly, Rishika strode in, looking agitated. “Has anyone seen Greyson?”

# Episode 2781

**Greyson**

Fuck, I loved the sensation of cold winter air scraping in and out of my lungs. It was harsh and biting at times, but it made me feel alive. Made me feel strong.

And after everything that had happened with Seluna and the Vanguard pack and my close call with that demon knife sinking into my chest, this was exactly what I needed. The time and space to run, to feel nothing but the elements and the forest floor beneath my running shoes.

This felt especially cathartic after seeing Xavier sleeping in Cali’s bed this morning when I went to check on her for the second time. I had no idea when my brother had snuck in, because he definitely hadn’t been there the first time I’d checked on her. But it hadn’t been a welcome sight, even though I knew he’d probably been in there for the same reason as me. He’d wanted to make sure Cali was okay after the terrible ordeal she’d been through.

A low hanging branch hung in my path, and I ducked beneath it as I continued my long lap through the woods. Normally, I would shift and run in my wolf form, but after last night, I wanted a break from my wolf. My human form was strong and fast in its own right, and in some ways, it was even more satisfying to push this side of myself. The side that didn’t have quite so many natural advantages. Plus, there was still the problem of Rhonda and LIPS. For all we knew, they could still be staking out these woods, and shifting could be just as dangerous now as it had ever been.

Now that we’d dealt with Seluna and the Vanguards, it was probably time to sort things out with LIPS, once and for all. *Is it possible to scare them off?* I couldn’t imagine Cali would be thrilled about that approach, but it was a step up from killing all of them. She couldn’t argue with that. And short of eliminating them permanently, I really didn’t see another way. At least if we scared them all off, we wouldn’t have any blood on our hands, and we could avoid the complications that came with a bunch of people going missing.

Because I sure as shit wasn’t going to sell the lake house to Dick Wigbert III and relocate. And Xavier definitely would never sell this place either. This land belonged to the Redwood pack. It was our home—we’d more than earned the right to be here.

I pivoted at near the end of my loop and changed my trajectory, heading back toward the pack house. Cali should be awake by now, and I wanted to see her. To make sure she was all right, and to prove to her that I was well and truly healed. If anything, I felt revived, in a way. Maybe it was just the relief of defeating Seluna and finally getting the Vanguards off our backs, but I finally felt like an Alpha again. Like I could make decisions for my pack without being under threat.

And since Xavier had snuck into Cali’s room some time during the night, I was looking forward to have some one-on-one time with her. After everything we’d been through, I needed to know she was okay. I needed to feel her close.

I slowed as I reached the lawn just outside the pack house and braced my hands behind my head, breathing slowly as I headed for the door.

Suddenly, the door burst open and Rishika, Xavier, and Cali rushed out of the house.

Dread weighed down my stomach, and my runner’s high disappeared. *Good god. What the hell is happening now? Is a break really too much to ask for?*

I raced forward and met them at the foot of the porch steps.

“Where the hell have you been?” Xavier demanded.

“Are you okay?” Cali was wide-eyed, looking me over like she was searching for injury. When she found none, her eyes snapped back to mine. “Why did you leave?”

“I’m fine.” I frowned. “What’s going on? Is everything okay?”

Xavier scoffed. “We were looking for you. We had no idea where you went.”

My brows rose. “Worrying about me, little brother?”

He scowled. “Cali and Rishika have been.”

That sobered me up quickly. I glanced at Rishika, who was watching our interaction with a stone face, and then back at Cali. “I’m sorry I made you worry. I just went for a run. Like I often do.”

I got that the last day or so had been a nightmarish hellscape, but I really hoped this level of concern wasn’t going to be a regular thing. The pack didn’t need to get worried every time I stepped out of the house.

“Given everything that’s happened—you know, like you collapsing and nearly bleeding out last night—you might have given us a heads-up,” Xavier grumbled, his arms crossed over his chest.

I smirked. “You sure you weren’t worrying about me?”

Xavier snorted. “Right. I’m gonna go finish my coffee.” He turned on his heel and headed back inside.

“I’m sorry to cause alarm,” Rishika said. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

I nodded. “I appreciate it, but I promise you have nothing to worry about. We’ve gotten through the worst of everything, and now things will be better. Calmer.”

Rishika gave me a tight smile. “I’m glad you’re all right.” She followed after Xavier, heading back into the pack house.

As I watched her go, I realized suddenly that I was going to have to do a little repair work on the pack. Clearly, they weren’t feeling quite as free as I was. They were probably still waiting for something new to go wrong. I understood that sentiment, but I couldn’t have them freaking out over nothing. That wouldn’t help anyone.

“So you’re really okay?” Cali asked.

I pulled her into a hug. “I’m really okay. I’m so sorry I made you worry, love. Next time, I’ll leave you a note.”

She smiled. “You don’t have to, though it would be nice to get a note from you from time to time.”

“If you want, I’ll write you a love note every morning.” I smiled. There weren’t many things in this world I wasn’t willing to do to make her happy. “How are you feeling today? I know yesterday was… a lot.”

“That’s an understatement.” She sighed. “But I’m good now. The sleep helped. And Torin’s making everyone a Hero’s Breakfast if you want some.”

“That sounds good to me.”

We headed back into the house, and I caught the savory notes of bacon and fried potatoes from the moment we walked inside. A low rumble of conversation echoed from the kitchen—the entire pack had to be enjoying their breakfast. It was a nice change of pace, after everything.

Cali and I passed by the living room on our way to the kitchen, and I caught Xavier’s gaze. He was standing just inside the room, clearly waiting for me.

I turned to Cali. “Why don’t you go dish up some breakfast? I’ll be there in a minute. I want to clean up after my run.”

“Sure.”

I waited until Cali had disappeared into the kitchen before I backtracked to the living room.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“How do you think Cali’s doing?” Xavier asked me.

I frowned and shrugged. “She seems okay. Definitely better than last night, but that’s not the best gauge for things. Why?”

“She might seem okay, but she’s having big problems. When I went to check on her last night, she was caught in a nightmare about Seluna. I’ve never seen her like that before.”

I sighed. Unfortunately, it made a lot of sense that yesterday’s events weren’t sitting well with our mate. “Cali’s not the killing type. I can see how it would weigh on her.”

He nodded. “I just wanted you to be aware. I comforted her as best as I could, but I have a feeling the nightmares aren’t going to go away so easily.”

“Thanks. I’ll keep an eye on things. Hopefully, with time, she’ll be able to move past what happened yesterday.”

“Glad we’re on the same page,” Xavier said. “Now go take a shower. You reek.”

He stalked out of the room, heading toward the kitchen, and I chuckled for a moment before heading upstairs. But as I washed up, my amusement faded into worry about what Xavier had told me. I wished I could make Cali’s nightmares go away forever, but I knew it wouldn’t be so easy. She’d been through a very traumatic experience. It would just take time.

If I could go back and change things, if I could somehow keep her away from Seluna and Lucian and undo what had happened yesterday, I would. Unfortunately, that didn’t change a damn thing about what she was going through now.

*Maybe we can go for a walk later and I can get a better feel for how she’s doing.*

I finished my shower and headed to my bedroom to dress. As I pulled on a shirt, I turned to head for the door.

“Holy shit!”

Vander was in my room, dressed in stylish winter clothes, sitting in a chair on the other side of my bed.

“Do you ever knock?” I asked.

They crossed their legs. “It’s not a habit. Listen, I’m not here for pleasure, though it’s always a pleasure to be at the Redwood pack house. I want to talk to you, since you’re the Alpha, and let’s face it, Cali can get a little… excited. And Xavier is a little hot-headed. Though I’m sure they mean well.”

I frowned. “Why are you here? Shouldn’t you be out protecting the forests or something?”

“The forests can wait,” Vander said. “I’m here to deliver a warning.”

# Episode 2782

**Violet**

It was finally over. *Thank god.*

I lay in bed with Charlie, our limbs tangled together. I idly traced patterns on his chest. I couldn’t believe what he and the others had gone through in that battle. Fighting demons and other werewolves, being turned to stone…

A very protective part of me wished I could have been there to help, but another part of me was glad I hadn’t been part of that fight. It sounded like it was something right out of my worst nightmares.

Charlie caught my hand with a sleepy hum. “Morning.” His eyes fluttered open, and he gave me a teasing smile. “Watching me sleep, huh? How romantic.”

I blushed. “And here I was just thinking about how grateful I am that you came back in one piece. But maybe I’m changing my mind about that.”

“We can’t have that.” He kissed the tip of my nose. “How can I make it up to you?”

I pretended to think about it. “Next time, take me with you. As scary as it must have been, I would have felt better about it if I’d been there to protect you.”

His smile faded. “It’s better that you weren’t there. I would have worried about you.”

I scoffed and smacked his chest. “I can kick ass as well as anyone. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“But you just said you wanted to protect me. Why can’t I want to do the same for you?”

Well, when he put it *that* way. I sighed. “I guess you have a good point.”

“So you understand why I’m glad you weren’t there.” He kissed my lips. “We’re mates. We’re always going to worry about each other. And while it’s totally natural to wish you were there to protect me, I think it’s also okay for me to be glad you were protected by not being there.”

“And I get that. It was just hard to be here, knowing you were out there facing the kinds of monsters I’ve only ever dreamed of.” I snuggled against his chest, and he stroked my hair.

“It was a team effort. Though, if it weren’t for Cali sticking it to Seluna, we might not have made it out alive.”

I stiffened, then forced myself to relax. The fight was over. We’d won. I didn’t need to be afraid for him anymore—at least not where Seluna was concerned.

“If that had happened,” I mused, “I would have put your statue in the yard. And then I would have planted a garden so you could at least enjoy the flowers.”

He laughed. “Thankfully, I’m not a statue anymore. I’m going to owe Cali for that for a long time.”

I made a mental note to thank Cali the next time I saw her. She’d saved the entire pack, and my mate. I guess, if I went with the big picture, Cali had saved the whole world. But Charlie was *my* world—I didn’t know what I’d do without him.

Charlie sniffed the air. “Do I smell breakfast?” He sat up, and I pulled him back down.

“I need a few more minutes,” I said, not the least bit apologetic.

“If you say so,” he teased.

My brows rose. “I need to make sure you’re not a statue.”

He blinked. “But isn’t it obvious?” He flexed his muscular arms. “Do I look like a statue?”

“Prove it.” I grinned and pulled him into a deep kiss with the promise of more. He kissed me back with a hunger that bordered on desperate. I felt the exact same way—after almost losing him in the battle against Seluna, I needed to savor him, to remind myself that he was real and well and right here in front of me. That he wasn’t dead and bloodied or part of the Vanguard garden, forever cursed to be a stone fixture.

And he did prove it. Twice.

Later, we dressed and made our way downstairs, and Charlie immediately beelined for the food spread out on the kitchen island. I smiled as I took in the pack members gathered around the space, all eating breakfast together. It was a welcome change of pace, seeing everyone together, no longer under the threat of a demon and the Vanguard pack.

I pulled Cali aside when she passed by me on her way to get more coffee, and I didn’t hesitate to throw my arms around her.

“Thank you so much,” I whispered. “You saved them.”

When she pulled back, her face was bright red. “Everyone played a part. It wasn’t just me.”

Lilac came over then, and Cali took the opportunity to get her coffee.

“We should have these Hero’s Breakfasts every day,” Lilac said, his mouth full of half-chewed food.

“Ew, Lilac!” I squealed. “Come on. I know you have better manners than that.”

Charlie came over, a plate of food in hand. “This breakfast is pretty amazing, but I think everything Torin makes just winds up that way.”

I glanced down at his plate, then over at the spread of food on the kitchen counter. “But it’s just a regular breakfast, right? Eggs, pancakes, bacon—that kind of thing?”

My mate shook his head. “Nothing regular about it. This is the best breakfast I’ve *ever* had.”

I smiled. “Whatever makes you happy.” He was probably just hungry from the battle.

Dani walked into the kitchen and joined us, and I was immediately taken aback by how different she looked. That ever-present melancholy in her eyes was gone, replaced with a sparkle that I’d never expected to see.

Charlie was still working on a mouthful of bacon when he asked, “How did you sleep?”

Dani smiled. “Last night was the best sleep I’ve had in a long time. I haven’t felt this good in ages—I’m actually looking forward to the mentoring session today.”

A familiar voice let out a groan behind her, and I turned to see Marta approaching. “Seriously? Mentoring? With that jerk? Are you sure you’re okay? Okorie’s probably going to claim the Hero’s Breakfast is just for him.”

Dani laughed. “Probably. But it was kinda cool to use our magic together. To have my magic be useful and not used as a weapon for once. I don’t know—it felt pretty heroic to me.”

Marta’s expression softened. “I can understand that.”

“Plus,” Dani added, “now that I’m no longer dealing with a demonic possession, I can start focusing on getting my magic under control and finding Tabitha.”

Suddenly, Ravi’s voice boomed through the kitchen. “Hey everyone, it’s snowing!”

In an instant, breakfast was forgotten, and everyone rushed to the window as the first snowflakes began to fall on the lawn.

Torin squealed with joy. “Does this mean we’re going to have one of those white holidays?”

And then I remembered—Charlie and I were going to visit his parents in Minnesota soon. White Christmases weren’t uncommon here in Oregon, but we’d definitely have one in Minnesota. Now that Seluna was taken care of, the holidays were looming over me. I’d put them off for a while now, unsure of how I felt about going to visit Charlie’s parents. To be honest, I still didn’t know how I felt. As far as I knew, Iris still hated me.

I pulled Charlie aside. “What should I get your mom for Christmas?”

Maybe if I got the right kind of present, I’d be able to show her that I wasn’t a threat to her or her son. But by that same token, if I wasn’t careful, a bad gift could make things so much worse.

“You don’t have to get them anything—your presence is present enough.” He waggled his brows at me. He loved puns. It wasn’t one of his better qualities.

Besides, he was wrong. I couldn’t honestly imagine a scenario in which his parents would be excited to see me, especially with Charlie.

“It’s not polite to show up at someone’s house without a gift, especially at Christmas,” I said.

“Says who?”

I shrugged. “Some movie I watched with Lilac. I know my chance at a good first impression is pretty much gone, but if we’re going to visit them, I want to start things off on the right foot.”

He nodded. “I’ll think about it. I know my dad likes ties. Or, at least, he pretends to like them whenever he gets one.

Yeah, there was no way I was going to bring his dad *a tie.* “What about your mom?”

“I know she likes candles.”

I blinked. “I’m not showing up at your parents’ house with a tie and a candle. You’d better come up with something else. Something good.”

He saluted me. “On it.”

Lilac peeled himself away from the window, a piece of bacon in his hand.

I glanced over at the window, where Marta and Dani were still watching the snow fall, then I looked back at Lilac.

“How are things with Marta?” I whispered.

He smiled. “They’re great. She was worried about the whole mate thing, but I helped her realize there’s nothing to worry about. And now that the demon problem is gone, I think things will only get better from here.”

“That’s great news.”

Suddenly, Okorie popped his head into the kitchen. “Marta, Dani, let’s go.”

Marta glared at him. “Fine.”

I watched her head down the hallway with Okorie, grabbing her coat and heading outside while Dani ran upstairs to get her gloves.

I headed upstairs to get dressed and noticed movement in the yard outside my window. It was Marta and Okorie.

Wait a second, were they *kissing*?!

# Episode 2783

I tried to be present and enjoy myself as Torin laid out his (predictably) in-depth Christmas plans. But I couldn’t stay focused on his growing list of holiday activities straight out of a Hallmark movie. Not while something else kept nagging at me.

I felt like I’d lied to Greyson earlier. He’d asked how I was doing when we’d spoken outside the pack house. I’d been so relieved to see him whole and well—my mind had gone to all kinds of worst-case scenarios when Rishika had rushed into the kitchen looking for him—that I’d just wanted to pretend everything was okay with me, too.

Because the thing was, while I definitely wasn’t sick, I wasn’t okay either. I couldn’t stop thinking about the nightmares—about how real they’d felt. Even now, my mind felt… bruised, somehow. Like killing Seluna or the nightmares or both had left a mark on my psyche that still ached.

So no, I wasn’t fine. And I definitely wasn’t “good now.”

It wasn’t fair. I’d told Xavier about what had happened—I should do the same thing with Greyson.

I set down my untouched mug of coffee and slipped out of the kitchen. Greyson had said he wanted to clean up after his run, so I headed upstairs. I paused outside his closed bedroom door when I heard voices inside.

*Who’s he talking to? Who’s in there with him?*

I knocked on the door, and Greyson opened it a few moments later. His hair was wet, the ends dripping down onto his shirt. He looked and smelled amazing.

*Keep it in your pants, Cali!*

I looked past Greyson, and my eyes widened. Behind him, Vander was sitting in a chair, dressed in the most fashionable winter getup I’d seen in a long while.

“Vander?” I asked. “What are you doing here?”

Greyson sighed before glancing at them. “You may as well let Cali hear what you have to say, since it involves her.”

Vander pursed their lips and uncrossed and recrossed their legs. “Actually, I’m not sure having Cali here is the best idea.”

My brows rose, and I pushed past Greyson and stepped inside the room. I’d been surprised to see Vander, but now I was nervous. *Why don’t they want me to be here for this conversation? Greyson said it involves me. What could they be talking about?*

“If this involves me, I have a right to know.”

Vander cocked their head. “How did you sleep last night, Caliana?”

*What the… What?*

I swallowed audibly. “Why do you ask?”

They waved me off. “Oh, I already know the answer. You were haunted by nightmares last night, weren’t you? The worst you’ve ever experienced.”

My mouth went dry. “How did you know that?”

“Because that’s what happens when you remove a demon from our world. The body might be gone, but the demon’s energy lingers. And when it does, it can cause all sorts of problems, especially for the person who removed its body from the earth.”

I was speechless. This was the *last* thing I wanted to hear. Vander was right—my being around for this conversation wasn’t working out so well.

*Seriously? As if dealing with Seluna herself wasn’t bad enough, it’s not even over now? Now I have to worry about demon energy?* Why could I never catch a break?

Greyson took my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze before turning back to Vander. “What are we supposed to do?”

“The only way to free Cali and prevent further issues is to send Seluna’s remains back to where she came from. Back to the demon world.”

I backed up until I hit the wall. “Okay, no way. I’m *not* going to the demon world. I didn’t even know that was a thing. What even is that? *Where* is that?” I shook my head. “No, you know what? I don’t care. I never want to see another demon again. One was too many.”

“You won’t have to,” Greyson said, glancing back at me before speaking to Vander. “And what happens if we don’t return Seluna’s remains?”

Vander’s expression was grave. “The demon energy will continue to haunt Cali every night, and it will only get worse.

*Worse?*

I shuddered, thinking of nightmare-Seluna’s grip on my throat, of the worms crawling out of her corpse face, and of the very realistic-feeling snake I’d pulled out of my own throat. It was, hands down, the most traumatic and terrifying thing I’d ever experienced.

Tears burned in my eyes. “How can it get any worse?”

Vander’s expression softened. “I’m so sorry, Caliana. I promise I’m not trying to ruin your day. This is why I only intended speak with Greyson.”

“Well, you’ve done a pretty damn good job of ruining my day!”

“I understand this is frightening, but it’s actually a very simple process. Just return whatever’s left of Seluna to her home world, and you’re good. It’s over.”

I had a million and a half questions, but before I could even ask one, Vander stood up.

“Sorry to cut this short, but there’s an issue in Tibet. Gotta go!” They disappeared with a poof.

I stood there, blinking and speechless, staring at the now-empty chair. “What. the. Fuck.”

Greyson snorted. “They really know how to make an exit.”

I shook my head. “How can they just drop something like this on me and vanish?”

He gently took my shoulders in his hands and turned me to face him. “Why didn’t you tell me about the nightmares, love? Were you going to?”

“That’s actually why I came up here in the first place.” I searched his face, hoping he believed me. “I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I just didn’t want to worry you. Everyone’s ready to move on and be happy, and everyone seems fine. They were turned to stone, but now all they care about is breakfast. I mean, you were stabbed in the chest with a demon blade, and just look at you now.”

“And what about you?” he asked gently.

A new wave of tears threatened, and I shook my head. “I didn’t mean to lie to you. I hope you’re not angry.”

“Of course I’m not angry, love. I love you, and all I want is for you to feel like you can tell me anything. Any time. If I’d known you weren’t doing well, I would have been there for you. I’m sorry I wasn’t.”

I shook my head again, a few tears slipping down my cheeks. “It’s my fault. How could you have known when I didn’t tell you?”

He gently wiped my tears away with his thumbs. “Okay. Let’s start over, then. How are you doing?”

I laughed, even though the tears kept slipping down my cheeks. “Oh, you know, there’s the terrifying nightmare and the fear of bringing everyone down.” My smile slipped. “I don’t want anyone to worry. This is supposed to be a time for celebrating.”

“Cali, this is a pack, and you’re a member of it. What affects one of us affects all of us. Nobody will fault you for having nightmares. Nobody would ever blame you for not being one hundred percent okay right away. *I* would never.”

He pulled me into a tight hug and kissed the top of my head.

“I’ll do everything I can to take care of this, okay?” he said. “We can talk to one of the witches, see what they know about returning demon remains. We’ll fix this. We’ll make sure you get the relief you deserve.”

“Thanks.” I sniffled as I pulled back. “Not to be a Debbie Downer, but wouldn’t the Vanguards have cleaned any ashes up already?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “But try not to worry. I’ll figure something out. The Vanguards seemed pretty happy to leave that room after everyone got turned to stone. Maybe we’ll get lucky and the ashes will still be there. Now, what did you say about breakfast?”

We headed downstairs and found Xavier standing in the kitchen doorway, a mug of coffee in hand.

“Hey, we need to talk to you,” Greyson said, putting a hand on his brother’s shoulder.

We went into the living room and told Xavier what Vander had said.

“Of course that demon bitch is still causing trouble,” Xavier growled. He looked at me. “Don’t worry. We’ll do whatever we have to. I’m not going to let Seluna haunt you. Fuck her.”

I appreciated the sentiment, but it didn’t change the monumental task ahead of us. “Why should I be responsible for Seluna’s afterlife? She was a literal demon, and she tried to ruin my life! It wasn’t fair. I never asked her to invade my body. If anything, I should be rewarded for ridding the world of such an evil entity.”

“So how is this supposed to work?” Xavier asked.

Greyson shrugged. “Vander didn’t provide much information—only that we have to return Seluna’s remains to the demon world.”

I swallowed roughly. “But who has to go?”

# Episode 2784

**Xavier**

This was just fucking great. Apparently we *weren’t* done with Seluna, and Cali’s nightmares weren’t the product of run-of-the-mill trauma. She was actually being fucking *haunted* by the remnants of Seluna’s power. And now we had to somehow collect that demon bitch’s remains—assuming the Vanguards hadn’t already vacuumed them up—and transport them to the demon realm? What, did Vander want us to drop them off at Disney World while we were at it?

“This is bullshit,” I said.

I could barely wrap my head around the whole thing. We were *so* close to having something akin to peace. Just down the hall, the entire pack was celebrating. But apparently Torin had broken out the Hero’s Breakfast too soon, because this wasn’t over yet.

“I know,” Greyson said.

“Cali’s right. It isn’t fair. She’s suffered more than enough already. We all have. Dani got possessed too, and half of us were turned to stone. Why the hell can’t killing Seluna be enough? That demon doesn’t deserve to rest in peace.” The more I thought about it, the more pissed off I got. This wasn’t Cali’s problem to solve. This wasn’t her responsibility.

“I know,” Greyson said again. “You’re preaching to the choir. But I don’t think we should do anything just yet. Not until we learn more. And I think I know exactly who can point us in the right direction.”

He led us out of the living room and into the kitchen, where Kira and Big Mac were tucking into their Hero’s Breakfasts.

“Can we speak to you both?” he asked. “Privately?”

Kira nodded and immediately stood up, but Big Mac rolled her eyes. “What have you three gotten into now? And why is it always my problem?”

Greyson sighed. “Please.”

The witch’s brows rose. “Well, since you asked so nicely.”

She stood up, and the five of us stepped outside into the hallway.

I didn’t beat around the bush. “We need to know everything you know about the demon world.”

Both witches’ eyes widened, and Big Mac scoffed. “What fresh hell…” She shook her head. “Why do you want to know?”

Greyson stepped forward. “Because we’re not done with Seluna. Not yet. According to Vander, we need to return her remains to the demon world before her remaining power poisons Cali and everyone around us.”

“Oh, is that all?” She sighed. “Can we not have one day without world-ending drama? Just one day?”

I ground my molars together. I understood where her frustration was coming from, but I didn’t have the time or patience for it. “This is about my mate. If she can’t sleep through the night because Seluna’s tormenting her, then nobody should be able to sleep.”

“I’ve done some research, and what Vander told you makes sense,” Big Mac offered. “Demon energy signatures, especially once they become corporeal in a new plane… They’re sticky. It’s not always as simple as just killing the body.”

“You might have given us a heads-up about that,” I deadpanned.

Her cheeks colored. “I’m no expert, and not every demon is the same. But going all the way to the demon world to return her remains… Is that really necessary?”

I shrugged. “Vander thinks so, and it seems like they know what they’re talking about. And unless the post office makes special deliveries, yeah, we’re supposed to go. Believe me, I have less than zero desire to go there. Just like everyone else, I’m assuming. But if it’s the only way to put an end to Seluna once and for all, then I’ll go wherever I have to. So, where the hell is it? How do we get in?”

Kira shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“The demon world has portals connecting it to ours, just like the Fae world,” Big Mac said.

“Wait, if she could walk into the human world through a portal, then why did she make Lucian perform that ceremony?” Cali asked.

“My guess is that the statue trapped Seluna in another plane of sorts, and that’s why she had Lucian do the ritual to get her out. Plus, the ritual came with a host body.” Big Mac looked at her meaningfully. “But, in theory, if we can find one of the portals, we can enter the demon world. But I don’t know where any of them are.”

“Okay.” Greyson sighed. “Let’s say we do find one. How do we get in?”

“I don’t know,” Big Mac said again. “But even if I did know the location and all the secret combinations to get in, I’m not sure I’d tell you.”

My eyes narrowed. “You’re shitting me, right? We just told you that demon bitch’s remains are wreaking havoc and this is the only way to put an end to it, and you’re not sure you’d help us?”

*Fucking witches.* Or, fucking Big Mac. At least Kira tried to be helpful. I couldn’t say the same for the other witch. It seemed like she was always pissing me off for some reason or another. Either way, this was a waste of time if she wasn’t even going to help us.

*Maybe I can catch Okorie at some point. He might be more knowledgeable. And more forthcoming.*

I was pretty sure I’d seen him pulling Marta and Dani away from their breakfast earlier to go train. Maybe they were just outside. Now seemed as good a time as any to go talk to him.

I turned on my heel, ready to head out and solve this for Cali myself if I had to, but then Kira caught my arm.

“Hold on.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“I remember back when I was with Iñigo, he had some dealings with a guy. And that guy—I’m pretty sure *he* had some dealings with demons, though I was never one hundred percent sure.” She grimaced. “I’m sorry I can’t recall more right now, but if anything comes to me, I’ll let you know.”

“Would you recognize this guy’s name or face if we came across him?” Greyson asked.

Kira shrugged apologetically. “Maybe. A big portion of my time with Iñigo was spent healing and simply doing as he asked. I was really low in the ranks. It didn’t give me much opportunity to get the inside scoop.”

I knew all about Kira’s responsibilities for Iñigo. Healing me while I was the vampires’ personal blood bag had been a big part of it.

I nodded. “Thanks.”

“If you don’t mind, I’m going to try to enjoy what’s left of my breakfast,” Big Mac grumbled.

She and Kira returned to the kitchen.

Cali turned to Greyson and me with a stricken expression. Honestly, I couldn’t blame her. The last twelve hours had turned into the worst kind of bait and switch.

“What am I supposed to do?” she asked. “I don’t want to go to the demon world.”

“One thing at a time,” Greyson said. “Even if we find out where to go and how to get through the portal, it won’t do us any good if we don’t have Seluna’s remains.”

Cali went still. “Are you saying we have to go back to the Vanguard palace?”

*Like hell.* I stepped in with a growl. “There’s no way Cali’s going back there.”

“When did I say Cali was going back to the palace?” Greyson asked evenly. “That’s not on the table. No, if anyone’s going, it’s me. I’m the Alpha.”

For once, I didn’t mind hearing my brother say it. This was the one time I was glad to not be Alpha. If I saw Lucian again, there was no telling what I’d do to the bastard.

“I don’t want anyone to go there,” Cali said. “Can’t we have the ashes delivered or something?”

“I don’t think it’ll be that big a deal,” Greyson said. “I have a feeling that once I explain to Lucian why we need the remains, there won’t be any objections.”

“I can go with you then,” I offered, despite my better judgment. “The Vanguard pack’s in pieces, but it wouldn’t hurt to have backup.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary. I’ll handle it.”

“And what are we supposed to do after that?” Cali asked. “We don’t know how to get to the demon world.”

I sighed. “Hopefully Kira will think of something. I know it’s hard, but maybe try not to worry about it right now. Go enjoy your Hero’s Breakfast. You deserve it.”

I gave her a quick hug, which she half-heartedly returned.

“Right,” she said dully. “I’m a *hero*.”

She headed into the kitchen, and Greyson and I watched her go. I hated seeing her like this. I hoped she’d be okay.

“I should probably get going soon,” Greyson said.

“I’m sure you don’t need to be told this, but be careful. Lucian’s unpredictable—he might turn against you.”

Greyson’s lips turned up into a feral smile. “I kind of hope he does.”

My brows rose. “When I threatened him, you held me back. Was that all an act?”

“I’ll let you know when I get back. In the meantime, if you think of anything, anyone who might know about the demon world, maybe somebody from your past, let me know. We can’t leave any stone unturned.”

He headed out of the pack house, leaving me alone with my thoughts. He’d been referring to the numerous characters I’d met in my time as a mercenary. Some of them were fucked up enough that they very well could have been demons, but they weren’t going to help me.

In fact, only one name came to mind. Fortunately, I had their phone number.

# Episode 2785

**Ava**

*My god, this instant coffee tastes like burnt shit.*

With the mug clenched tight in one hand and the lukewarm swill coating my tongue, I was sorely tempted to spit it back into the mug. But instead, I forced myself to swallow it down with a grimace. I couldn’t afford to miss out on the much-needed caffeine.

Besides, it wasn’t like I had any better options. The canister of instant coffee was coated in dust and well over a year past its expiration date, but it was all I’d been able to find in Knox’s kitchen. Or, whatever facsimile of a kitchen he’d managed to throw together.

My cousin lived in a vintage Airstream mobile home, which sounded cool and hipster enough on paper, like the kind of thing outdoorsy Instagram influencers did. In reality, though, it was filthy and run-down. I’d needed to wash this mug alone three times just to make sure it was clean. I perched myself on the edge of the tiny pull-out couch.

*Well, this is promising.* I rolled my eyes and forced myself to take another sip.

The creaky, rusted screen door opened, and Knox stepped into the trailer. “So? What do you think? Pretty sweet digs, right?”

I wrinkled my nose. “Have you *ever* bothered to clean this place up? And I mean, even once?” I nodded at the pile of food wrappers, plastic cups, and takeout containers that was probably hiding a garbage bin. “Seriously, how can you live like this?”

He scoffed. “I can see living with the Redwood pack has made you soft.”

I rolled my eyes again. “You sound like some mafia guy from an old movie.”

“And you sound like a princess.”

I laughed. “Living like this makes you a slob.”

I stood up, looking for a spoon to mix up the lumps of coffee powder that had collected at the bottom of my mug, and started opening drawers at random. One was empty. Another was filled with condoms and candy bars.

“Gross,” I muttered.

I finally managed to find a fork, but lying on the counter next to it?

I held up the faded pair of lacy panties with the fork I definitely *wasn’t* going to use. “Seriously?”

Knox yanked the panties out of my grip. “I don’t owe you an explanation.”

Then he started moving through the trailer, picking up dirty dishes and garbage as he went. It was satisfying to know he was taking my words to heart. But then I realized he wasn’t cleaning so much as redistributing the garbage.

“At least this is a place to live,” he muttered. “You should be grateful.”

I forced a smile. “I am.”

And, as completely disgusting as this whole situation was, Knox was family. I felt a genuine familial connection to him, one I hadn’t felt since Nolan died. I wished I’d been able to spend more time with him when we were growing up. That I’d gotten a chance to get to know him better. Maybe then he wouldn’t have ended up like a gross frat boy.

Maybe a lot of things would have been different.

But Xavier had robbed me of that future with the remnant of my family. Not that I’d ever truly blamed him for it—I’d crossed a line when I’d killed his mother. Some would call Xavier killing me “justice,” and I couldn’t say I’d disagree with them. I’d deserved to die for killing Marlene. I understood that now.

Knox suddenly stopped what he was doing to look at me. “I can’t believe I’m even talking to you. What was it like?”

I frowned. “What was what like?”

“Being dead! Were there ghosts? Or did they just seem normal, since you were a ghost too?”

I fought the urge to grimace. It wasn’t a time I liked to think about, and I definitely didn’t want to dig it all up for my cousin’s entertainment. I’d been lucky, in a way, when Silas had pulled me from the spirit world and brought me—and my body—back from the dead. Even if it had all been part of his manipulation, I’d still benefited from it in the long run.

I’d been dead, but now I was alive again. And I had no intention of looking back.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

He shrugged. “Suit yourself. Though I honestly don’t know how you can stand being around Xavier. He’s the one who put you six feet under—”

I grabbed his arm. Hard. “Stop. We are *not* talking about this.”

“I’m sorry.” He yanked his arm out of my grip. “I guess being dead really fucked you up, huh?”

He was like a broken record. I wasn’t going to talk about this with him. We were in desperate need of a subject change.

“How’s your mom?” I asked.

He shrugged again. “She’s fine. On a road trip with Dad.”

“Why didn’t you go with them?” I asked.

“I had to see for myself what happened to my mom’s former pack. See if it was true that Nolan was gone and you were back.” He sighed. “I didn’t realize how bad it was. That the pack was in pieces, and the pack house was gone too.”

“Yeah, it’s not pretty.” But then again, that was what happened when you sided with Silas and lost. Not that there’d been any way for the Samara pack to get out of that situation in one piece. The entire pack had had a target on their backs from the moment Silas had sought out help from Nolan.

“Do you enjoy living in California?” I asked.

His brow furrowed. “Why do you ask?”

“It just seems like if you’re roaming around in the Airstream, you must be looking for something.”

He waved me off. “California’s fine, and the Sycamore pack is fine, but I always kind of felt like I didn’t belong there. I came out here hoping maybe the Samara pack would be a good fit.” He let out a bitter laugh. “Guess I arrived a little late.”

*And with Nolan gone, Knox is the only Alpha male left in the Samara Alpha bloodline.*

He pulled a pile of dirty socks out from under a chair. I could smell them from here, and I watched as he added them to the pile of dirty laundry he’d tossed against the wall.

*What a waste of Alpha blood. I can’t picture Knox being the Alpha of a scout troop.*

And yet, he was here. Trying to connect with his roots. With what remained of this side of his family. He’d mentioned something about having big plans. I couldn’t help but wonder if those plans included cleaning the dirty dishes in the sink.

“I’ll make some breakfast,” he offered. He went over to the mini fridge and pulled out an off-color package of bacon. He turned it over in his hands, reading the label. “Does bacon have an expiration date?”

My phone rang, and I pulled it out, relieved at the excuse to step out of the trailer. It was Xavier. I remembered suddenly that he’d told me I should return to the Samara pack for good. He didn’t want me around, so why was he calling me now?

One thing was certain: there was no way in hell I was talking to Xavier with Knox around.

“Ava?”

I looked up and met my cousin’s expectant expression. “Sorry, what?”

“Bacon?” He hefted the bag.

“I’m a vegetarian,” I lied smoothly. “Sorry, I have to take this.”

I stepped outside and accepted the call.

“I didn’t expect to hear from you so soon,” I said, trying to sound casual. “Are you having trouble shifting again?”

“I’m not calling about that.

His voice was flat, giving absolutely nothing away. I fought the urge to groan in frustration. “Then to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I know you worked for the asshole vampire, Iñigo, at the diner.”

I swallowed. *Speaking of fucked-up relationships…* “Why are you asking me about Iñigo?”

“Do you know if he had any dealings with a demon, or if he had contacts in the demon world?”

My brows rose in sudden comprehension—and my stomach plummeted down to somewhere near my feet. He wasn’t calling to invite me back to the Redwood pack. Whatever he was calling about, it had something to do with Seluna.

“Is there a problem I should be aware of?” I asked.

“I’ll explain later. But can you think of anyone Iñigo might have dealt with?”

I wanted to help him, and not just so I could keep his trust and strengthen his faith in me. I wanted to help him just because he’d asked me. Because he was my mate. Because he *needed* help, if he was calling at all.

“I do remember a guy who came to the diner once. Mabel insisted he was a demon or something. I never put much stock in it—after all, Mabel was stoned twenty-four hours a day.”

“Did you catch his name?” Xavier asked. “If there’s any truth to it, I need to know.”

I thought back. “Umm… Rhett? I think? Or was it Reese? No, it was the first one. Rhett. I’m sure. I remember him—he had a diamond tattooed on his neck.”

“Do you know where I can find him?”

“No.” I took a deep breath. “Xavier, do you want me to help you?”

# Episode 2786

After making a half-hearted attempt to finish my breakfast—and a good portion of it still got gobbled up by Lilac—I headed out of the kitchen in time to see Greyson walking out the front door. Was he already prepped and ready to go back to the Vanguard palace?

“Greyson!” I called, rushing forward. “Wait.”

He paused just outside the front door, on the porch. As I stepped outside with him, he frowned slightly. My expression must have given away my worries, because he pulled me into a tight, warm hug and kissed my forehead. “Don’t worry, love. I won’t be there for very long.”

I hugged him back and wished I could believe him. The Vanguard pack wasn’t as strong as it had been before the fight against Seluna, and they were no doubt still picking up the pieces after the battle. Literally—the palace had been pretty much destroyed in the fight. I knew Aysel was on Greyson’s side—for now, at least—and that Lucian’s power and control had taken a hit as a result of him, you know, bringing a demon into the world and trying to make her his Luna.

I knew all of these things, all of the reasons why we had the upper hand, why Greyson didn’t have anything to worry about. But this was still the Vanguards. They were unpredictable, and I wished more than anything that Greyson didn’t have to go. That nobody else I cared about had to set foot in that godforsaken palace ever again.

“What’s the difference between going to the Vanguard palace now or later?” I asked, my face pressed against his chest.

He leaned back just far enough for him to see my face and smiled. “Well, unfortunately, the difference is how good a cleanup job the Vanguards have done so far. If they clean up whatever was left of Seluna, then we could be in a tight spot.”

I sighed. I hadn’t thought of that. It still annoyed me to the point of fury that we had to worry about Seluna’s remains at all. That, even though we weren’t the ones who’d brought her here, we had to be the ones to clean up Lucian’s mess.

I looked back down at his chest. His shirt concealed the knife wound. “And you’re sure you’re completely healed? What if going near the Vanguards—or Seluna’s ashes—does something to the wound?”

“I guess it’s possible, but I don’t think we have any reason to believe that will happen.” He gently brushed my hair away from my face. “I know you’re worried. I know this situation is… just complete shit. That you deserve better than this. But that’s why we’re trying to fix it. And I promise you, I’ll be back.”

He kissed me gently, then pulled back to look into my eyes.

I couldn’t quite put my finger on it, but something about the way he looked at me, something about his expression, perhaps, reminded me of the look in his eyes when he’d been a statue. Emotion filled my throat. I hated to remember him like that. To think of anyone I cared about being trapped in stone.

“What is it?” he asked.

He knew me too well. He could read my face better than anyone else, except maybe Xavier.

I hesitated. I didn’t want to dredge up bad memories, but with everything that had happened, I’d never had a chance to ask him.

“What was it like when you were a statue?” I asked.

His brows knit together. “Why? What are you thinking about?”

I swallowed down the emotion rising in my throat. “It was horrible for me. To see you trapped like that. I can’t even imagine what it was like to live it.”

He looked away, and my stomach tightened with guilt. If only I’d been stronger. If only I’d been able to take Seluna down sooner, then maybe nobody would have had to suffer like that.

I cupped his cheek and gently turned his face so our eyes met. “Was it awful?”

His eyes flashed with something pained. “It was like being trapped in a nightmare. I could see you and hear you, but I couldn’t talk to you. I couldn’t touch you. I couldn’t move or protect you or do a goddamn thing to help.” He let out a shuddering breath. “I’ve never felt so helpless. I hope I’m never in that position ever again.”

I put my arms around him and hugged him tightly. Hearing him talk about it just showed it was even worse than I dreaded. “I’m so sorry. I hate that she’s caused you so much pain. I’m sorry I couldn’t stop her sooner. At least then you wouldn’t have had to go through that.”

“Hey.” He pulled out of my embrace and looked down at me, his brows knitting together. “You have nothing to apologize for. Do you understand? Nothing at all. You stopped Seluna. You saved us. All of us. That’s what’s important.”

His words eased some of the guilt coiling inside me. Some. Not all. But it was still exactly what I needed to hear right now. “I still hate that you had to go through that.”

“And I hate that you had to go through being possessed, fighting her alone, and then being haunted by her now. Being a statue was awful, sure. But I’m not one now. I’m here, with the woman I love—the woman I owe my life to.” He brushed his lips over mine. “You were amazing. You *are* amazing.”

Our mate bond felt like a living, thrumming thing connecting us, practically humming with love and emotion. I still wished I could take his painful memories away. For a strong, commanding Alpha like Greyson, being rendered helpless and immobile must have been one of the worst things he could endure.

“Besides,” he said gently. “No matter how hard it was for me, it must have been just as bad for you, maybe even worse. To see both of your mates and your friends trapped in statues, and to face a demon alone? Cali, you’re the bravest person I know. I can’t even put into words how proud I am of you. In fact, maybe I have a better way…”

His fingers twined through my hair, and he kissed me, gently at first, then with more firmness, more demand and emotion. Like all the fear and love he had for me was rushing forward now that we’d found this moment of relative safety.

I kissed him back with everything I had, twining my arms around his neck and nipping at his lower lip to deepen the kiss. All of my worries, my fears, my stress—it all dissipated in Greyson’s arms. He held me tightly, and a sense of safety settled over me as I leaned into him. I never wanted to let him go. Because once I did, he was leaving for the palace.

I wanted this moment to last forever.

He broke away from my swollen lips and whispered, “I want you so badly. I wish I didn’t have to leave.”

“Then don’t. Maybe there’s another way.”

He looked tempted to bail on the whole thing, but he shook his head. “No, I can’t chance that. The sooner we get Seluna’s remains, the sooner you’ll be free of her once and for all. I can’t let anything get in the way of that.”

There was no reasoning with him. No changing his mind, or arguing with him when he was doing all of this for my benefit. So I did the only thing I felt I could do: I pulled him back in for another kiss. I wasn’t above doing anything I could to keep him with me, even just for a few more minutes. I loved him so much, and I still couldn’t believe that Seluna had tried to use that love for evil.

Our love was special, sacred—with or without the *due destini*. It was real love. And someone like Seluna didn’t deserve to be allowed near it.

Greyson kissed me back with just as much ardor, walking us backward until my back gently hit the wall. His mouth dragged down my throat, and he groaned before pulling back. “I really should get going.”

“I know,” I said breathlessly.

He straightened his clothes, then ran a hand through his mussed hair. “I really don’t think Lucian will be a problem. At this point, he owes us one. Big time. So try to stop worrying about that, okay?”

“I’ll try. Do you have your phone? If there’s any sign of trouble, call me.”

He pulled it out of his pocket and kissed the crown of my head. “I don’t think I’ll need it, but I promise I’ll call if there’s a problem.”

He turned and headed out to one of the cars, and I watched him go.

*He’s right. Lucian is on the same side as us now—at least where Seluna is concerned. He’s finally seen the light about his so-called goddess.*

I headed back inside and was returning to the kitchen when Torin suddenly grabbed my arm and pulled me into the den. He shut the door behind us and blocked it with his body.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

He swallowed audibly. “We have an emergency!”

# Episode 2787

**Xavier**

*Xavier, do you want me to help you?*

The question echoed in my head.

*Did* I want Ava’s help? I’d told her I wanted her to leave, and for once she’d actually taken the feedback and left me alone, in a way. She was off with Knox, clearly reconnecting with her Samara pack roots. She’d offered to help out with my wolf if I needed it, though. Was she hoping that was the issue, and that she’d have to come over and see me?

Against my will, my mind flashed back to last night, when we’d kissed, when our bodies had been pressed together, and we’d finally been ready to have sex for the first time since things had fallen apart. Naturally, that effect had come from the incubus. It must have. Because whether or not my wolf wanted her, *I* didn’t want her.

I shoved all of those memories into the dark corners of my mind. An incubus fed off that kind of energy because it could. And I hated to admit it, that the mate bond with Ava still existed, but if it hadn’t been there between us in the first place, the incubus wouldn’t have been able to manipulate us.

And then I wouldn’t have been tempted.

But it wasn’t as if I was going to admit that to Ava, of all people. Hell no.

That reminded me, I really needed to tell Cali about all that bullshit with the incubus. Not that I was particularly looking forward to it, but it had to be done. But with all this demon world shit continuing to upend our lives, I hadn’t had the opportunity. It wasn’t like now was a good time to do it.

I couldn’t just say, *Oh, hey, Cali. I know you’re being tormented in your sleep by Seluna, and you’re probably traumatized by everything that happened when you fought her, but by the way, Ava and I got caught up in the influence of an incubus that fed off our mate bond, and we almost hooked up. My bad.*

“Xavier?” Ava’s voice echoed through the phone. “Hello? Are you still there?”

I cleared my throat. “Yes.”

“Yes what? Yes, you want me to help, or yes, you’re still there?”

I still didn’t know the answer to that. I actually felt more than a little guilty about calling her when I didn’t actually want to see her. I knew what she was like. I knew she’d take the slightest breadcrumb of interest and turn it into a trail to come back to me. And I hated that I had that effect on her, just as much as I hated her reaction.

My wolf, of course, had a whole different set of intentions for Ava. The idiot still had it bad for her.

I cleared my throat. “No, this was plenty.”

The line went silent for a moment, and I could practically feel her disappointment through the phone. But she rallied quickly—it was one of her strengths.

“If you think of anything else you want or need, I’m more than happy to help.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled. Then before I could get control over my mouth, I blurted out, “Where did you stay last night?”

Immediately, I kicked myself. *Fuck, I’m a goddamn idiot.* Why the hell did it matter where she’d stayed? I was the one who’d told her to stay the fuck away from me when everything with the Vanguards was over. I was the one who’d put that distance between us. Me. So it was a dick move to even ask that question, much less for even one small part of me to expect an answer.

A low laugh echoed through the line, as sharp-edged as it was quiet. Like Ava knew exactly how goddamn hypocritical it was for me to dump that question on her, but didn’t want to push my buttons.

The low timbre of her voice sent a thrill through my wolf, and I fucking hated it.

“Keeping tabs on me?” she asked. “Last I checked, that’s not typically how you cut someone out of your life.

“It was… a courtesy question,” I managed. My face felt hot—too hot. Fucking hell.

“Sure it was. Just like this was a courtesy call.” Her voice lost some of its dark humor. “Let me guess, you need this intel for Cali? What’s going on with the half-Fae now? Something still up with the demons? Even after she turned Seluna into a shish kebab?”

I really hated that even after all this time, with all the distance and baggage and toxic emotions between us, Ava could still read me so well. She picked up on a lot—never let it be said that she wasn’t smart—but she could also read me like a book. Every fucking time. It was maddening.

But then again, maybe she’d just spent too much time around me. Too much time with the Redwood pack. Maybe if this much-needed physical distance between us lasted, she’d stop being able to read my mind all the time.

It was a nice thought.

“It’s none of your concern,” I said. “If I have any questions, I’ll contact you. No other reason.”

She clicked her tongue. “Right. Well, thanks for calling.”

The call ended, and I slowly pulled away from my cell phone, my brows rising in surprise. *She hung up first.*

I shoved my phone into my pocket. At least all this emotional labor was getting us somewhere. Now we had a potentially useful lead. Maybe the name would help jog Kira’s memory and we’d be able to put the pieces together ourselves. If Ava was right about Rhett, then it was possible to figure out how to rid Cali of these dreams, which was ultimately what I had to focus on here.

Any interaction with Ava was worth it if it meant Cali benefitted. I’d deal with Ava and my fucking wolf until the end of time if it meant protecting Cali.

That was a nice thought, too—and it was only mildly concerning that my wolf was in agreement for once. I didn’t know which part he was agreeing with—that I’d deal with Ava, or that I’d protect Cali—but I decided not to look into it too closely. Some stones were better left unturned.

I headed back downstairs.

*How hard could it possibly be to find a demon named Rhett?* It wasn’t a common name, and it seemed especially underwhelming for a demon. Plus, if push came to shove, I could always follow up with Mabel the pothead at the diner.

Rishika passed me on her way up the stairs. “I just saw your brother leave. Said he was heading out to the Vanguard palace.”

I nodded. “Good to know. Thanks.”

I was glad Greyson wasn’t dragging his feet. The faster we could get Seluna’s ashes, the faster we could set this disaster of a plan into motion.

*Rhett, Rhett…* I tested the name out, trying to see if it triggered any memories from my mercenary days. Nothing. Fortunately, I wasn’t the only one with a long history of sketchy contacts in the supernatural world.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket again and ducked into the living room.

To my immense relief, Gabriel answered on the first ring.

Music and city sounds blared in the background as soon as he answered the phone, and I held my phone away from my ear with a wince. “Gabe?”

“Xavier Evers! Speak of the devil!” Gabriel boomed. The ambient noise was so loud, I could barely hear him speak.

I laughed. “You were talking about me?”

“Only good things, of course. And some bad,” he laughed. “What’s up, man? To what do I owe the pleasure?”

I crossed my fingers on my free hand, hoping I’d get a hit. “Have you ever heard of some guy named Rhett? He’s got a diamond neck tattoo. Oh, and he’s probably a demon.”

“A *demon*?” Gabe’s shock carried over the phone. “Man, you guys are always neck-deep in some shit, aren’t you?”

I snorted. “You have no idea.”

“Do I need to worry about you, bro?”

“I’m fine. Really. I’m just looking for some information.”

“Well, I’m not sure about any Rhett with a tattoo, but if you need a connection, there’s someone in Bend who specializes in tatting up supernaturals. If a demon is looking for a tat, this guy’s most likely the person they’d see.”

“Great. What’s the name of the place?”

“I can’t remember the name, but it’s next to the office of a paratherapist named Carlson Greene.”

*Wait… Does that name sound familiar?*

Then it hit me. Swift. He’d mentioned someone named Carlson Greene.

“Are you sure about this tattoo shop?” I asked. “I don’t want to trek my ass all the way out to Bend for a dead end.”

“I wouldn’t tell you if I wasn’t sure.”

“Thanks, Gabe.”

“Hey, we should get together soon. Try to catch up sometime. I’ve got some stories you wouldn’t believe.”

“Sure,” I grunted, already in motion. I grabbed my keys and headed out the door. “This shop, does it take walk-ins?”

# Episode 2788

**Greyson**

Yesterday, if someone had told me I’d be heading to the Vanguard palace*,* I wouldn’t have believed them—or at least I wouldn’t have wanted to believe them. The palace was the last place in the world that I wanted to see, but I supposed it was better that I was the one going, rather than someone else from the pack. I had to be the one to see this whole thing through for Cali. It was bad enough that she’d had to deal with Seluna at all, but being forced to *keep* dealing with her, even after Seluna had been killed? That was just too much. I couldn’t help but wonder if the *due destini* had made Cali more vulnerable to curses, magic, and mayhem.

*It sure seems like it. Every few days, it seems like Cali’s under the influence of some dark power or another.*

There was no one minding the Vanguard gate today, and it was wide open, so thankfully I didn’t encounter the usual hassle around getting in. I tried to fend off a wave of dread as I pulled up in front of the palace and parked the car behind a familiar van.

*That looks like Phil’s van*, I thought, just in time to see the handyman come around to pull some tools out of the back.

“Greyson Evers, surprised to see you here,” Phil said as I climbed out of the car. He glanced over his shoulder at the looming Vanguard palace and whistled through his teeth. “Hope your house doesn’t need repairs anytime soon; I’m going to be tied up fixing this place for a while. I don’t know what happened in there, but whatever it was…” Phil arched his eyebrows. “But, the lake house is all done. I tried to call to let you all know, but I wasn’t able to reach anyone.”

*I bet. We were too busy helping to tear the Vanguard palace apart.* “Sorry about that. It’s been a bit… hectic.” It was almost amusing to consider how clueless Phil remained in the midst of all the supernatural goings-on around him—though we’d had a few close calls with him.

“No problem, I’ll send the bill along.”

“Thanks, please do.”

I wondered if it might be a good idea for Cali and me to spend a few days at the lake house. It would be nice to get away for a while. Ever since our trip to Portland, I’d been fantasizing nonstop about having Cali all to myself for a night or two.

I said goodbye to Phil and then headed into the palace, stepping over a bunch of Vanguard wolves who were hard at work cleaning up the mess the demon army had made. Phil hadn’t exaggerated. The palace looked like it was seconds from crumbling to the ground.

“May I help you, sir?” An attendant I’d seen a few times before came walking over with a push broom in hand.

“Yes, could you tell me where I can find Lucian?” *Ugh. Even saying his name annoys me. I just want to get the ashes and get the hell out of here. Fast.*

“He’s in the parlor, just down the hall,” the attendant said, pointing down one of the ruined hallways. “Please watch your step.”

I went to the parlor but hesitated outside the door. Lucian was inside, lying on a love seat and staring forlornly out the window. I was just about to knock and announce myself when Aysel stopped me.

“Hey, I’m surprised to see you here,” she said. She pulled me away from the door. “My brother is a bit… fragile right now,” Aysel said, her voice low. “I think it might be an aftereffect from Seluna.”

*I couldn’t care less how Lucian feels.* As much as I wanted to say that out loud, I kept it to myself. I needed to catch more flies with honey right now if I wanted get what I’d come for. “Thanks for the heads-up—I’m not here to disturb him… Maybe you could help me?”

Aysel’s eyes lit up. “Sure, whatever you need.” She smiled and stared deep into my eyes.

I quickly looked away, hoping she couldn’t tell how put off I was by her enthusiasm. I decided that I needed to be polite but cautious. I didn’t want to give her any false hope. I was here for Cali, and I had no intention of playing any sort of seduction game with Aysel.

“I’m here because I need to collect whatever remains of Seluna,” I said.

Aysel looked taken aback. “What? Why?”

I hesitated, trying to determine how much to reveal. “After everything we’ve been though, I think the pack just wants something tangible to confirm Seluna’s death. It’s something the witches need to do—it doesn’t concern the Vanguards.” I glanced around at all the cleaning up that was going on. “I only hope to hell I’m not too late. You all have quite the cleaning crew in here.” What if they’d already disposed of Seluna’s ashes?

My heart dropped at the thought that I wouldn’t be able to get what I needed to end Cali’s suffering.

Aysel shook her head. “Lucky for you, they haven’t gotten to the gallery yet, so the ashes should still be there.”

I sighed, relieved. “That’s great, I’ll go get them.”

Lucian looked away from the window and turned toward me with a jolt of surprise, as if he’d only just realized I was there. “What are you doing here, Greyson?”

“I’m collecting what’s left of Seluna.” I decided not to add any more. The less the Vanguards knew about what was going on under our roof, the better.

“Absolutely not.” Lucian’s eyes went wide. “I have forbidden anyone from entering the gallery. It’s off limits.”

*I should have known it wasn’t going to be easy. Nothing ever is when it comes to the Vanguard pack.* I could feel a sliver of anger sprouting inside me, but I knew I needed to be careful not to rile Lucian up—especially in his current state.

“Why do you care?” I asked.

Lucian looked away. “Despite everything, I can’t just turn off my feelings for Seluna. I need time to overcome my grief.”

I didn’t have time for this. “I’m sorry, Lucian,” I started, “that you were fooled by a demon, but it’s time to get over it. I’m not leaving here without Seluna’s remains. And whatever feelings you need to deal with? Not my problem.”

Lucian stood up, his face darkening. “Are you defying me, Greyson? In my pack house? Just because my palace in disarray, doesn’t mean my power has diminished, or that you can come in here making demands.”

I balled my hands into fists and stepped up to Lucian, trying, and failing, to keep my anger in check. “I meant what I told you last night. Do not cross me.”

I glared at Lucian, and he glared back.

“Lucian, stop!” Aysel said. “If it weren’t for Greyson and his mate, you’d be demon fodder. What the hell do you even want Seluna’s remains for? She used you, brother. Good riddance. Let the Redwoods have her.”

Lucian turned away from us, his face twisted with emotion.

I felt not even the tiniest shred of pity for the princeling. Screw him.He might have sided with the Redwoods in the end, but he’d caused so much chaos and pain that I wouldn’t shed a tear if he dropped dead that very minute.

Lucian waved his hand, not bothering to look at me. “Do as you wish.”

Without another word, he turned and left.

I exhaled, relief washing over me. I’d been worried that there would be a fight. I’d be able to take care of Lucian, easy, but the palace was crawling with Vanguard wolves, and there was no way I’d be able to take on the entire pack.

“I wonder if he’ll ever be the same,” Aysel said as she watched her brother go.

*I hope not. A new and improved Lucian would be a welcome thing, as far as I’m concerned.*

“So, shall we?” Aysel said, turning to me and pasting on a smile.

I nodded.

I followed her to the gallery, where a guard stepped aside to allow us entry. The room was dark, the ground strewn with remains of the statues. The sword that Cali had used to kill Seluna was lying in a pile of blackened ash.

“That’s it, right?” Aysel said, pointing to the pile.

“Yeah, but I don’t have anything to put it in.”

“I’ll grab something.” Aysel ducked out of the room and returned a few seconds later with a trash bag. “This seems appropriate, don’t you think?”

“Yes, maybe a bit *too* classy for the likes of her,” I said.

I started to collect the ash, using my bare hands. It didn’t take long, and once I was finished, I tied the bag shut.

“All set then?” Aysel asked, looking at the bag with an unreadable expression on her face.

“Yup, that’s all of it. Hey, thanks again—and I hope your brother recovers.” *That’s a lie, but what else is there to say?*

I started toward the door, but Aysel put a hand on my arm, stopping me. “Greyson, hang on… You can’t leave.”

# Episode 2789

I looked at Torin, unable to hide my exasperation. *I can’t imagine what his emergency is, and why now? Can’t I ever have just a moment’s peace?* I just wanted to go to my room and maybe take a nice, long bath and relax, but once again, that didn’t seem to be in the cards.

Torin was absolutely beside himself as he held up his phone in front of me. “What does this message mean?”

It was a DM from someone named Heath.

“Hey sexy,” I read, “DTF?” I looked up from the phone. “What did you do, Torin?”

“I don’t know! Is this, like, a foreign language or something? DTF… DTF… Date treat friend? Don’t touch frogs? No, none of that seems right, although I do agree that you shouldn’t touch frogs, what with the warts and everything.”

I just looked at Torin, completely dumbfounded. *Don’t touch frogs? Is he serious?* He was hilariously wrong about what DTF meant, but I was *so* not in the mood to explain what pretty much amounted to the birds and the bees.

“So…” I ventured. “Who is this Heath guy, and why are you getting messages from him, anyway? Do you know him?”

“No,” Torin said slowly. “But his picture is so cute, right?”

I leaned in to get a closer look. The message was a DM from Tinder.“Torin, first of all, how the hell did you get a phone? And second of all, what are you doing on Tinder?”

“Ravi was showing me how to text, and he gave me his old phone. He said he had to upgrade,” Torin said simply. “These things are cool. It’s like magic without having magic. I’ve been on it all day, and I haven’t even made one call yet! Calling people is the *least* of what these contraptions do. Do you know how many apps I have? Now I know why all of you are always staring at your phones.”

“Don’t tell me Ravi also helped you download a dating app?”

“What? He said it was how I could meet people,” Torin explained. “I was just looking for some more friends… And I liked Heath’s smile. He seemed nice.”

I stared at the picture of the too-handsome man and his crooked smile. *Nice? That smile is anything but nice.* “Sorry to break it to you, Torin, but Heath isn’t looking for a friend… At least not in the way you mean it.”

I almost told him that Heath probably wanted a FWB situation, but I didn’t even want to go down the “friends with benefits” road with Torin right now. I didn’t have the energy to explain one risqué acronym, let alone two.

“No? Well if he doesn’t want to be friends, then what *does* he want?”

“Tinder is a hookup app, Torin. He wants to, you know, hook up.”

Torin gave me a blank look. “I don’t know what that means.”

*Am I really going to have to spell this out for him?* “It means that a lot of the people on this app just want to meet up to have sex. DTF means ‘down to fuck’.”

Torin gasped and splayed his hand on his chest. “Really? Hmm… Interesting.” He stared even harder at Heath’s picture, his jaw set in concentration.

“Maybe you should just delete the app and forget any of this ever happened.”

Torin held up a finger. “So, wait, I just want to make sure I have this straight. If you want to have sex, you just choose someone from the app? Fascinating.” Torin stroked his chin and stared down at his screen.

“So, do you want me to delete the app?” I reached for his phone.

Torin held the phone just out of my reach. “Oh, not yet. I need to do some research. They don’t have things like this in the Fae world.”

“Okay, well, if you meet someone, you should always make sure it’s in a public place.”

Torin nodded, but he wasn’t paying attention to me anymore. He was too busy scrolling through profiles and swiping like a madman.

I left Torin then, glad that he was looking for more friends, though I wasn’t quite sure that he was going to find any on Tinder.His heart was still broken over Astrid, and I didn’t want him to get taken advantage of. On the other hand, it could be good for him… I just hoped he’d be careful.

*I’ll keep an eye on him, just to be sure.* *If anyone does anything to hurt him, they’ll have to answer to me…*

*Not that I would kill them or anything.*

And just like that, I was thinking about Seluna again. Fuck.

I wondered if Xavier was right, that the nightmares about killing Seluna would go away over time. They seemed so real, so much so that I was being forced to relive killing her over and over again, and I just wanted it to stop. I wondered if I’d ever be able to put it out of my mind.

“Hey, how’re you doing?” Artemis asked as I passed her in the hallway.

I paused, trying to figure out the best way to answer her question. “I’m still dealing with everything. I’m just wondering how you managed to deal with… killing people, as a bounty hunter.”

“Cali, you didn’t just kill *someone.* Seluna was a demon. It was either her or you. You made the right choice.”

“I know. But have you ever been haunted by your actions?”

Artemis looked off into the distance, thinking. “I only killed when it was absolutely necessary.”

“Still, how did you deal with it?”

Artemis shrugged. “I’m a fighter; it’s part of how I survived. And it’s not wrong to feel bad about it—you’d be an awful person if you didn’t.” She pulled me into a hug. “If I were you, I’d try to find something to help me get over it.”

“What do you mean?”

Artemis smiled. “For example, when I was recovering from the whole Letifer ordeal, Rishika was right there with me. Letting someone I love take care of me wasn’t something I was used to, but it helped. My advice? Let your mates help take care of you.”

Artemis made it sound so simple. “Maybe you’re right.”

“I am right,” Artemis said. “I was able to survive in the Fae world because I learned that I needed to take care of myself, whatever it took. That’s what you have to keep in mind.”

“Thanks. But I’m still not quite sure how I can apply that to my situation. But I *do* like the idea of letting Xavier and Greyson take care of me. They always seem to know just what to do to comfort me.”

“See, that’s what I mean. Rely on them—that’s what they’re there for.” Artemis gave me a hearty slap on the back. “Hang in there. You’ll be okay.”

“Thanks,” I said, my back stinging like hell. Damn, she was strong.

Artemis and I headed to the kitchen, where we found Torin pulling out baking supplies in a frenzy.

“Torin, what’s going on?” He’d already baked a zillion cookies, so I had no idea what he could possibly be trying to make now.

“Cali! Thank you so much for explaining that app to me,” Torin said, still throwing around cookie sheets and pie tins. “I can’t believe I was using it wrong.”

“What app?” Lola asked as she came walking in.

“Tinder,” I said, giving Lola a look.

Lola’s eyes lit up. “Yes! Do you have a profile? Can I see it? I’m really good at making profiles,” she said quickly, already reaching for Torin’s phone.

I groaned. This was the same girl who’d put my virginity up for sale on a website. Who knew what kind of trouble she’d get Torin into?

“Here,” Torin said, handing Lola his phone. “What do you think of it?”

Lola scrolled through Torin’s profile, shaking her head in distaste. “Oh no, this won’t do. You need to put some photos on here that show you have friends, so they don’t think you’re a serial killer.”

Lola grabbed me by the arm and maneuvered me over to stand beside Torin, all but shoving me into place.

“What gives?” I shrieked.

“Oh stop it, you’re fine. I’m just going to get a snap of you two,” Lola said, aiming Torin’s phone so that she could snap a picture.

I wanted to help Torin, but I wasn’t sure that this was the best way.

“Cali, quit frowning. Look at Torin and pretend that he said something really funny.”

I looked at Torin and laughed, hoping it looked more pleasant than it felt.

“Okay, now high five while looking at the camera. That’s it!” Lola said, snapping away. “Now just a regular ‘we’re friends hanging out’ pose.”

“I don’t know what that looks like,” I said dryly, wanting this to be over.

“Stop being difficult, Caliana! Sling your arm over Torin’s shoulder, and both of you smile at the camera.”

We did as we were told.

“Great. I think we got some good ones,” Lola said, handing the phone over to Torin.

I looked over Torin’s shoulder as he scrolled through the pictures.

“Hey, what’s that?” he said, pausing and zooming in on one of the pictures.

I leaned in to get a closer look at the photo. It showed me and Torin—but there was also something in the background, right behind me.

# Episode 2790

**Xavier**

I was parked in front of what was supposed to be the tattoo shop in Bend, but was now a vacant storefront with a “For Lease” sign hanging in the window. I slammed my hand down hard against the steering wheel.

Shit.

*I came all this way, and for what? Only to reach a fucking dead end. Why is everything so damn difficult?* I’d really thought I was going to get a lead on the demon Iñigo had worked with, but it looked like it wasn’t going to be as easy as that. *I should really be used to doing things the hard way by now.*

I pulled out my phone and snapped a picture of the storefront with my middle finger in the foreground and sent it to Gabe. *Thanks a lot, bro.*

I let out a hard sigh and got out of the car, my mind racing for solutions to this latest inconvenience. I stared at the “For Lease” sign. Maybe the realty company would have some info…I looked around to see what else was here. There was a green neon sign on the building next door that read: “Carlson Greene: Therapist”. It wouldn’t hurt to pop in for a visit. Maybe he’d have some info about the tattoo artist.

I walked into the office, a bell tinkling overhead as I opened the door. An older balding man looked up from his desk and broke into a broad smile as I entered.

“Hi there, I’m Carlson Greene.” He stood up and held out his hand. “Pleased to meet you. What can I do for you today?”

“I’m Xavier,” I said, giving him a firm handshake.

The man winced in obvious pain and shook his hand after I released it.

Whoops.

“Sorry.”

It didn’t help that I towered over the man, who looked to be in his mid-sixties. *This guy is Swift’s competition? Hard to believe.* He didn’t seem the type to give anyone a run for their money, but I knew better than to judge a book by its cover.

“Oh, it’s fine, I can take it,” he said with a nervous laugh. “I’m sure this isn’t the first time you’ve heard that you have quite the handshake. Oh, and I should mention that I usually don’t take walk-ins, but I had a cancellation, so you’re in luck. Why don’t you step into my office?”

I started to object but thought better of it. Right now, Carlson was the only lead I had, so it was probably best for me to cooperate for the time being. I’d done worse things than speak to a therapist to get information, and the guy seemed mild mannered enough, so I didn’t foresee much resistance in getting what I wanted.

I followed the man into a small office with a couch and a chair—simple and plain. It was a far cry from Swift’s New Age décor. I sat down on the couch, which was surprisingly comfortable. I wondered how many people had come before me, pouring out their darkest secrets in a storefront therapist’s office. I shuddered at the thought.

He gave me some paperwork that I barely read, signed, and then he leaned back in his chair. “So, what brings you in today, Mr. Evers? Marital problems? Career stuck in neutral?” He sat down and took out a legal pad.

“I don’t have any problems,” I grunted.

“Ah, the first line of defense. Deny, deny, deny.” He chuckled. “I haven’t met a client yet who thinks they have problems, yet why else would they come to a therapist in the first place?” He leaned in. “You know, whatever you tell me is sacred. Patient confidentiality and all that.”

I groaned. God, why did that tattoo shop have to be closed down? And since when was I this guy’s patient? Maybe I should’ve read that paperwork.

Carlson leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. “So, what’s on your mind? Are you happy?”

I snorted. “Happy?”

“Why do you find that amusing?” He scribbled something down on his notepad and then looked back up at me, waiting.

“I wouldn’t describe my current situation as happy.” In fact, I could think of countless things, right off the top of my head, that were making me quite *unhappy* at the moment. I realized then that I hadn’t stopped to ask myself the question Carlson had just posed to me in an awfully long time.

“So, no, you’re not happy?”

“No. What is there for me to be happy about? For starters, I’m sharing my mate with my brother, and it sucks big time.” I didn’t know why I’d just let all that out so quickly. *There must be something about this couch that makes you want to talk…*

“Mate?” Carlson leaned in close. “Are you a werewolf?”

I said nothing, realizing in that moment that I may have said too much.

“Ah, playing coy. No need. I understand completely. Well, Xavier, was it? You’ve come to the right place. I’m a licensed paratherapist!” He pointed proudly at the certificate hanging on the wall behind his desk. “So, tell me about this mate of yours. The one you’re sharing. Do you love her?” He had his pen poised over his pad.

“Of course I love her. What kind of stupid question is that?”

Carlson scribbled something on his legal pad. “And what about your brother?”

I sucked my teeth. “He’s an asshole.”

*Wow. Just saying that felt kind of… refreshing? Maybe there’s something to this.*

“Hmm.” Carlson made a few more notes and then threw his pen down on his desk and leaned back in his chair. “So, your brother is in love with your mate. How does that make you feel?”

“How do you think?” I growled.

*It’s torture. It fucking tears me apart every single day. I want nothing more than to just have Cali to myself, but there are so many obstacles in front of me that I don’t even know where to begin. Everything in the world seems to be coming down on us, and there always seems to be some problem or another threatening to tear us apart.*

*She’s more than just a mate, she’s my everything.*

There was so much circling around inside me that I hadn’t even realized was there, but there was no time to say it all to Carlson Greene—nor was he the right person to discuss it with.

I sighed. “But that’s not why I’m here.”

“Oh? You mean to tell me that there’s something more troubling to you than finding yourself in a love triangle with your mate and your brother? If there is, we need to talk about it!” Carlson looked excited, as if there were nothing he wanted more than to get to the bottom of all my trauma.

I stood up. “I’m not about to get into that. Besides, I didn’t come here for therapy. I want to know, what do you know about the tattoo shop that used to be next door?”

Carlson looked confused. “I don’t know. It closed about a month ago.”

“Any idea where the owner might have gone?”

Carlson shook his head. “I’m sorry, but no.” He stood up quickly. “This is most unusual,” he muttered.

“What about some of the customers? Ever hear of a demon named Rhett? He’s got a diamond tattoo on his neck. Does that ring a bell?”

Carlson’s eyes went wide, and then, almost immediately, his expression turned stony. “No. Never heard of him.”

*Bingo. You’re lying.* “Tell me what you know. It’s very important.”

Carlson pointed at his paratherapy license again. “I can’t talk about clients. It’s privileged information.”

I was stunned. “You had a demon as a client?”

*Since when did demons go to therapy? You learn something new—and troubling—every day.*

“I’m sorry, but I can neither confirm nor deny that.”

“Cut the shit,” I said, tired of playing games, and also just literally tired. I just wanted to get the information I needed so that I could get out of here and get back to Cali. “Tell me what I need to know, or I’ll tear this place apart. I always get what I want, but it’s up to you if I get it the easy way, or the hard way.”

“Why are you here?” Carlson said, shielding himself behind his desk. “Who sent you?”

I shifted just enough to make sure Carlson got my drift. “No one sent me, and it’s none of your business if they did, anyway. I’m going to ask you again—tell me what you know about Rhett. I won’t ask nicely again.”

Carlson’s skin went ten shades paler. He swallowed and nodded. “Okay.” He turned and yanked open a file cabinet. He searched through a few files before extracting one and handing it to me. “Here you go, but I must warn you to turn away right now, before it’s too late.”

# Episode 2791

**Greyson**

My hackles rose, and I rounded on Aysel, ready to finally tell her what I thought about her, her brother, and their damn palace that doubled as a prison whenever the mood called for it.

“I *can’t leave*? I’m not going to be told by anyone in the Vanguard pack where I can, or can’t, go.” *Especially not while Cali is being affected by Seluna’s residual demonic energy. Nothing matters but her and her safety, and I’ll cut down anyone who gets in my way.* “I already warned you and your brother not to fuck around with me.”

I straightened and looked down at Aysel, who looked so small right now.

Aysel winced. “Sorry. I just meant that you can’t leave *yet*.”

I sighed, my anger draining away, though my annoyance remained. “You all really need to start working on your wording.”

It seemed like every time I walked through the Vanguard doors, someone was hell-bent on trying to order me around, and I was beyond sick of it. I couldn’t wait to be rid of the Vanguards once and for all.

“I’m sorry about the confusion, but I really do need to talk.” Aysel paused and let her gaze drag around the rest of the room, as if she was checking to see if anyone was within earshot. “If you’re open to it, could we do it anywhere else? I don’t think I want to have anything to do with this room for a long, long time.”

“Well, that’s one thing we can agree on,” I said. Aysel had been turned to stone in this room just like I had, after all. I couldn’t imagine that she would ever think fondly of the place again.

Aysel wrapped her arms around herself, looking exposed and shaken. “So, you’re coming with me?”

I sighed as I weighed my options. The only thing I really wanted was to get back to Cali ASAP. I didn’t want her to have to deal with Seluna’s energy any longer than she had to, but I also wanted to get whatever Aysel wanted to talk about out of the way so I could be done with it. I didn’t need her showing up unannounced a few days down the line, requesting a chat.

“Fine, let’s talk,” I said finally. *There’s no harm in humoring her. I got what I came for, after all. The hard part is over.*

“Great.” She took another quick glance around. “Follow me.”

Aysel left the gallery, and I followed her to a small study with leather couches and, of course, more ancestral portraits—the few that Seluna must have left intact during her reign of redecoration terror. It seemed to be one of the only rooms in the entire palace that wasn’t completely trashed. Aysel closed the door behind us, shutting out the sounds of cleaning and construction.

She sat down on a love seat and motioned for me to join her, which I did, reluctantly. I set the trash bag full of Seluna carefully on the floor.

“What is this about?” I asked, resisting the urge to check the time. I couldn’t imagine what Aysel thought we had to talk about. We’d said all we needed to say back at the pack house after I’d finally admitted to her that I’d been stringing her along. She hadn’t taken it well, but when I looked back on it, she’d taken it better than I would’ve thought. *So maybe now she’s going to try to get her revenge.*

Aysel took a deep breath. “I’m sorry.”

I was surprised to hear Aysel apologize—for anything—but I was still kind of suspicious. “For?”

Aysel rolled her eyes, clearly struggling with whatever it was she was trying to say. “I’m sorry for the spell—the curse—that I put on you. It wasn’t right for me to do that. I never should have done it, and I know that now.”

She turned away from me and went to the window.

I was really surprised to hear her say that, and I had never thought in a million years that she would ever apologize for what she’d done. I didn’t think princesses did the whole apology thing—no matter how absolutely and completely wrong they were.

“Where is this coming from all of a sudden?” *I guess she doesn’t need a reason to apologize other than being sorry, but she’s still a Vanguard, and I still don’t trust them… Right?*

“I’m just finally trying to be accountable,” she said, dropping her head. “I shouldn’t have tried to claim you the way I did. I realize now that it wasn’t right, and I’m sorry about the whole taking you to my cottage thing, the curse thing—everything I did was messed up, and I’m sorry I did it. It shouldn’t have taken seeing my brother in a manipulative relationship with a demon for me to realize what I did was wrong, but here I am.” She paused as tears gathered in her eyes. She swiped them away quickly and continued. “I’m sorry if my apology isn’t the best—I’m not used to saying sorry.”

I nodded, not sure exactly how to jump in here.

She laughed a little and sniffed, still fighting back tears. “You know, being royal and all, it’s not often that I have to apologize. It’s not as bad as I thought.” She smiled slightly. “And believe me, I don’t expect you to forgive me or anything—we’re probably way past that—but I just needed for you to know that I’m sorry.”

I was taken aback and not sure where to begin. Not only was this unexpected, it seemed… *sincere*? I’d never seen her so emotional, nor had I ever heard her say anything so meaningful. It was refreshing, and definitely a bit unsettling.

“Thank you for apologizing,” I said, not sure what else there was to say. “I don’t feel like what you did warrants forgiveness, not right now, but I also don’t want to perpetuate the rift between us.” I stood up, feeling drained and ready to go. “Either way, it’s all behind us now.”

I looked down at the trash bag and suddenly just wanted to get it home before something happened to get in my way. Aysel’s apology might have been real, but I wasn’t going to be able to let my guard down until I was far away from the palace.

“I’d love to chat more, but I have to deal with this.” I picked up the bag and held it up.

Aysel stood too. “I’ll show you out.”

I followed Aysel back out into the hallway, hoping like hell that this really was the last time I’d ever have to see the inside of the Vanguard palace. It wasn’t lost on me that I’d made similar wishes nearly every time I’d left the place.

Aysel’s apology was a nice gesture and all, but as far as I was concerned, this was the last time I would ever see her—at least until a council meeting or something like that, and then hopefully it would only be from across the room. I’d had enough of Lucian and Aysel to last me three lifetimes.

As we approached the front door, Lucian came wandering down one of the massive spiral staircases. He was dressed in one of his patented robes and looking a bit more like himself.

Lucian’s gaze dropped to the bag in my hand. “Is that her?”

I nodded. *Don’t do anything that I’ll have to kick your ass over. Just be cool.* My gaze darted toward the front door. *Maybe I should make a break for it before something goes wrong…*

Lucian held his hand out. “May I?”

Warily, and with alarm bells clanging in my head, I handed it over.

Lucian raised the bag to his face and whispered, “Goodbye, my love. We could have ruled the world.” He blew a kiss at the bag.

My stomach lurched. Was this guy serious?How he could still feel anything at all for Seluna was beyond me. She’d humiliated him in front of his entire pack and a big sampling of ours, and then not only tried to kill him, but his sister, too. If that wasn’t enough to sour him on Seluna forever, then I doubted anything would.

Lucian handed me the bag, and I slung it over my shoulder and gave him a tight nod before I left.

*Goodbye for good, Vanguards. Good fucking riddance.*

As I walked toward my car, I heard a car door slam. I turned to see Dick Wigbert III heading right for me.

*How is it that all I ever see are people and places that I don’t* want *to see? Is it bad luck?*

I stared at the man, trying to decide whether I should engage or just hop in the car and get the hell away from this madhouse.

If Dick noticed my cold reception, he didn’t show it. “Greyson Evers! What a pleasant surprise. What brings you here?”

# Episode 2792

My stomach twisted with fear as I took a closer look at the photo.

“There’s something behind me!” I gasped.

*Is it something related to Seluna? Is there demonic energy following me around? Is it still here right now, watching me?*

I tried to get a better look at the photo, but Lola snatched it away before I could.

“It’s a smudge!” Lola said. “My bad. I didn’t realize the lens was so dirty.

“Sorry, I must have put it in some butter by accident,” Torin said.

Lola waved him off and wiped it off on her shirt. “Shoot, we’re going to have to retake all these pictures. Torin, maybe this time we could get a few with the cookies? Just take your shirt off and put an apron on. It’ll be dating profile gold!”

Torin nodded. “And I’ll have to take one with a fish, too. I always see those kinds of photos on profiles.”

Lola gasped. “*No!* Never swipe right on one of those!” She looked absolutely horrified. “I’m so glad you brought me in on this dating app stuff. Who knows what kind of creep you’d end up with without my help?”

I was only half listening as Lola started giving Torin all of her tips and tricks for the online dating game.

“First things first, don’t ever swipe right on someone who says they’re ‘looking for a good time, not a long time.’ That might sound fun, but you’d be surprised. What else? Don’t swipe right on *anyone* who didn’t take the time to fill out their profile, or anyone who mentions a bunch of free activities in their profile as their ‘ideal first date’—it means they’re cheap. What else, what else… Am I missing anything?”

*How does Lola know all this? She’s been dating Jay forever.*

I tuned Lola out, trying to focus on getting a handle on my anxiety. I’d really thought there was some sort of entity lurking behind me in the picture. Was it really a smudge? Or was that just a convenient excuse? I didn’t know.

I kind of wanted to ask Lola to take another photo right then so I could see for sure that nothing was amiss, but I didn’t trust my ability to keep my voice steady and didn’t want Lola or Torin to think anything was wrong. I wasn’t interested in making my problem everyone else’s, and I felt exhausted even thinking about it, really. We’d all been through enough with the whole Seluna possessing me thing without me having to rope everyone into yet another crisis.

I thought of Dani and wondered if she was dealing with the same Seluna issues as me. *She has to be—she was possessed, too!* Except she didn’t kill a demon like I did. It might be like comparing apples to oranges. *Maybe I’ll find her and see how she’s doing.*

I remembered that Okorie had arrived not too long ago for Dani and Marta’s mentoring session. I bounded downstairs and went straight for the back door, but I stopped short when I saw Violet crouched down by the window.

*What the hell is she doing?*

I stood behind her and followed her gaze to the clear view of Dani, Marta, and Okorie in the yard. They were deep into training, if the look of pure concentration on Marta’s face was any indication. Okorie looked every bit the stern teacher, and Dani was standing to the side, watching Marta practice.

They’d picked a good day for a mentoring session. It was cold, but the evening was beautiful. The snow had stopped a few hours ago, but the yard still looked so pretty with the slight dusting on the grass. It was a nice, calming sight that made me stop and smell the roses, so to speak. I didn’t get many moments to contemplate things like the way the sun shone down on the snow, making it sparkle, so it was a nice moment of reverie if nothing else—except for Violet popping up to look out of the window every so often.

“Hey, Violet,” I said.

Violet jumped, then she grabbed me by the arm and pulled me down beside her. “Don’t let them see you!”

I was confused. “What? Why? It’s not like it’s a secret that they’re being mentored.”

Violet was silent for a while, but she didn’t stop darting up to peer out the window, her nose all but pressed against the glass. “Do you think there’s anything… weird going on between Okorie and Marta?”

She turned away from the window to look me in the eye.

“What?” I asked, puzzled. “What do you mean, ‘going on’? They’re training.”

Before I’d met Xavier and Greyson and learned about all the different supernaturals the world had to offer, I might have found it strange that there were three witches throwing magic around in the back yard, but that ship had sailed long ago—now it was as normal as watching a television show.

“That’s not what I mean,” Violet said.

“What, you mean, like, are they involved?” I whipped my attention back to Okorie and Marta, who were standing close while Okorie used his hands to explain something. They didn’t look particularly cozy…

“Yes, that’s exactly what I mean! Otherwise, why would they have been kissing?”

“What? You saw them kissing? Are you sure?”

Violet faltered a bit. “No, I’m not sure, but that’s what it looked like.”

She turned back to the window and sighed.

“Violet, if you’re not exactly sure, you definitely shouldn’t jump to conclusions,” I said quickly. I knew better than anyone else how quickly that kind of stuff could spread around the pack house. “Besides, Marta adores Lilac. I think. Right?” I didn’t really know that much about their relationship.

“Yeah…” Violet said.

“Yeah! So she would never do that to him. And I’ve seen Okorie and Marta interact—they get along okay, I guess, but I get the feeling that they’re just tolerating each other until this whole mentoring thing is over with. I highly doubt that they have some love affair going on.”

“How would you know?” Violet said. “We don’t even know Marta all that well. Plus, she and Lilac have been having some problems.” Violet got up suddenly, a determined look on her face. “That’s it, I can’t take this. I have to go confront her.”

I grabbed Violet’s arm, stopping her. “No, you can’t do that! You don’t even know if she and Okorie really kissed. Maybe you should stop torturing yourself.”

I liked Lilac and Marta together; they made each other happy, and I definitely didn’t want Violet to go muck things up over something she wasn’t even sure that she’d seen. Once an accusation like that was out there, it was really hard to take it back—even if all parties involved were innocent.

“But I can’t just sit here doing nothing. What if it’s true, and Lilac finds out? Then he’ll think that I knew and didn’t tell him!” Violet argued.

“But what if you could be stirring up something that isn’t true, and that could cause a lot of problems?” I asked. “You know, different ones than you said they already sort of have?”

Violet calmed a bit and seemed to really be considering what I’d said. Her expression softened. “Okay. But I’m going to be keeping an eye on Marta. I love Lilac, and I’m not going to stand by and watch my brother get his heart broken. So if you see anything, Cali, you’d better tell me.”

Violet took one last look out the window, and then she was gone.

I looked out at Marta, Okorie, and Dani. From my perspective, everything looked fine. But if there really was something going on… I honestly didn’t even want to think about it. I’d had more than my fair share of drama with my mates, and I didn’t want to get involved. I decided that I would talk to Dani later. I was feeling a bit overwhelmed by everything now.

I turned and headed back to the kitchen. Torin was shirtless now, and holding a rolling pin while Lola directed him.

“Higher! Higher! No, lower, lower, that’s too low, come on Torin!”

“This is confusing!” Torin complained. “You’re being confusing, Lola!”

“No I’m not. That’s perfect, the rolling pin’s in the right spot, now puff out your chest, but do it so you don’t look like you’re puffing it out.”

Torin adjusted his pose, clearly confused. “How do I do that?” He threw his shoulders and head back. “Like this?”

Lola groaned. “No, not like that!” She grabbed his shoulders and tried to adjust him, then threw a couple of pinches of flour on his cheeks. “Now, hold your stomach in, puff your chest out, flex your left bicep, hold the rolling pin just above your belly button, and, if you can, point one toe.”

This gave me a much-needed laugh. Torin had no idea what was in store for him when Lola hopped on board. She did take a good photo, though.

“Okay, that’s good, Torin. Perfect, now hold it!” Lola held up both Torin’s phone and hers, probably to get multiple angles—and then her phone dinged. She glanced at the screen, and her mouth opened into a big O before she shrieked and threw her phone down.

Uh, what the hell was that?

“Lola, are you okay? What just happened?”

Lola looked up at me in shock. “My dads are coming!”

# Episode 2793

**Xavier**

I was trying to take the folder from Carlson, but he was holding it so tightly that I literally couldn’t pull it away from him.

*Wow, who knew he had it in him? He’s making me break a sweat—well, not really, but I’m still impressed.*

“Did you hear what I said? Rhett’s not just a demon—he’s the scariest client I’ve ever had.” Carlson was slowly but surely tugging the folder back toward him. I could tell he was using every ounce of strength that he had to keep me from taking it, but it wasn’t enough.

I finally managed to yank the folder free, and I wasted no time flipping it open. I wasn’t about to be scared off by someone who called themselves a *paratherapist*, that was for sure. I didn’t have a reason to be afraid of the things that he was afraid of—especially since now I knew for sure that demons could be killed, just like everything else.

“There’s barely anything in here.” I looked up at Carlson. “What is this?”

I’d expected to find a bunch of useful information inside—especially after our little game of tug of war.

“I met with Rhett one time only—and that was enough.” Carlson shuddered, a faraway look in his eyes. “Unfortunately, that was enough time for him to tell me things—things he did, things I wish I’d never heard about. I told him that I couldn’t help him, and he left. I didn’t sleep for a week after.”

“What kind of help would a demon like Rhett want?” If he was really so big and bad, it was strange that he’d come to a therapist. It just didn’t track. “What, did he have demon parent issues or something?”

“No, he was having nightmares, but that was as far as I got. He came in that one time, and I haven’t seen him since—thank god.”

I took note of the address in his file. “Does Rhett still live at this address?” I flipped the file around to show it to Carlson.

The man shrugged. “Does a demon ever truly live anywhere?”

*This guy isn’t cut out for this business, I don’t think.* “Cut the crap, Carlson—is this a current address or not?”

“I told you I only saw him once, so how would I know that? Believe me, once he was gone, I wanted to forget I’d ever met him. I certainly didn’t call him back to verify his address. I didn’t even end up billing him. Why do you want to find him, anyway?”

“Because he’s the only link I have to getting to the demon world. Unless you happen to know where the nearest demon portal is?”

I knew it was a long shot, but I’d been surprised before. Carlson was a paratherapist after all; maybe he’d spoken to a demon or two in his career who’d let the locations slip. I didn’t care where the information came from, I just needed to get it.

Carlson laughed nervously. “No, I’m afraid I don’t. As for Rhett, he did mention that he used to hang out in Los Angeles a lot. But please, take my advice—drop this. Go back to wherever you came from and forget you ever heard of Rhett.”

I could see the pleading look in Carlson’s eyes, and I kind of felt bad for the guy. It was clear that Rhett had done a number on his psyche.

“Thanks for your help, but I’m not dropping anything until my mate is safe.”

I left the office and got back into my car. *Fuck. I do not want to go on a wild goose chase all the way down to LA.* I couldn’t stomach the idea of getting even further away from Cali. The chances of me finding Rhett there were about one in a million—and probably even worse if the demon had no intention of being found.

I sat back in my seat, feeling a little overwhelmed as I weighed my options.

*I could go back to the pack house… But then I wouldn’t be much better off than when I left. Maybe I should track down the realtor for the old tattoo parlor and find out about the artist who used to work there.* But even if I did that, would the artist have the slightest clue about where to find a demon portal? I didn’t think so. *Maybe I can drop by the address I found in Rhett’s folder.* There was a chance that I could get lucky—if finding a demon could ever be considered lucky—and find Rhett sitting at home binging *Breaking Bad* or something.

I sighed as I started the car, not feeling up to any of it—but there was no way I was going to give up now. Cali’s safety and mental state were on the line, and I wouldn’t stop until I had what I needed. I hoped that Greyson was having better luck than I was, doing his part.

*I might as well drop by the demon’s house. Maybe he’ll invite me in for lunch. What do I have to lose but another couple of hours?*

I punched the address into my GPS and followed the directions to a seedy, run-down house on a block filled with other homes that looked just like it. It seemed like the perfect place for a demon to dwell in anonymity. There wasn’t a blade of grass in any of the yards, and a couple of the houses would’ve looked condemned if they hadn’t had lights on inside.

*I guess being a demon doesn’t pay very well.*

I parked a few houses down and sat for a moment, trying to decide what to do.

*Should I surprise a demon? That doesn’t seem like the best idea.* I doubted knocking politely and asking nicely would be received well, either. *Fucking demons.*

I’d driven all this way—if there was even a chance that Rhett was here, I had to try.

I finally got out of the car and strolled cautiously to the house, taking the porch steps two at a time and trying to be as quiet as possible to keep a bit of the element of surprise on my side. It was never good for your target to see you coming—and that was doubly true when your target was a demon.

I could hear the faint sound of music coming from inside. Good. Someone was home.The doorbell was missing, which wasn’t a surprise considering the overall state of the house. I knocked on the door, running through what I planned to say in my head. A few seconds passed and I knocked again, and seconds later I could smell someone nearby, and I heard them lean on the door as they looked through the peephole.

I smiled. *That’s right. It’s just your friendly neighborhood werewolf, here to find a demon portal…*

The door opened to reveal a tall, scarred, muscular man. He had one green eye and one blue, and both of them were trained right on me—and his stare wasn’t what I would’ve called friendly.

“What do you want?” He snorted and hocked a loogie that landed about an inch away from my left foot.

*Gross. Is every demon an asshole?* I took a moment to size him up. If we got into a fight, I might have my hands full. “I’m looking for Rhett.”

The man’s strange eyes narrowed. “Who sent you? How’d you get this address?”

I already knew the answer, but I asked anyway. “Are you Rhett?”

The man crossed his arms over his wide chest. “That depends on who wants to know.”

I snorted. *This demon’s seen one too many Westerns.*

“I understand that you might know where a portal is.” I was hoping it wasn’t inside his house. I could tell by the garbage littering the front porch that the inside wasn’t going to be pleasant.

He laughed. “Fuck off.”

He moved to slam the door shut, but I slammed my hand against it and pushed it back open.

“Not a smart move, Rhett.” I gestured at the run-down neighborhood around us. “I’m guessing you live here because you can come and go as you please, with no one paying you a lick of attention. It would be a shame, wouldn’t it, if the neighbors found out that they had a demon living right next door?”

“What are you?” Rhett asked, both eyes narrowed to slits. “You must be something pretty fucking special if you’re threatening me.”

“You don’t want to find out what I am, Rhett. But what I can tell you is that I’m not in the mood to play games, and honestly, I’m not here to threaten you. I just need to know where to find a portal to the demon world. Tell me that, and I’ll go—then you can forget that we ever crossed paths.”

Rhett laughed, but it wasn’t a happy sound. “I could give you a location, but it wouldn’t do you any good.”

I let out a loud sigh, not bothering to hide my annoyance. “Why not?”

“Simple. Unless you’re a demon, like me, you ain’t getting in.”

# Episode 2794

**Lola**

My life flashed before my eyes as I stood there staring at my phone, unable to stop reading my dads’ text over and over again.

*Maybe I’m misinterpreting it, or reading it wrong—or maybe they sent this text to me by mistake!*

It was all wishful, desperate thinking. There was absolutely no way to misinterpret: *Hi, sweetie, Pops and I wanted to surprise you for the holidays… We’re going to be in Oregon in two days!*

“TWO DAYS!” I wailed.

“That’s so soon,” Cali said, then she winced as if she knew that wasn’t helpful.

“You think I don’t know that?! They might as well be walking up the front steps right now! I can’t believe they didn’t give me more notice!” I was freaking out. Every single lie I’d told my dads was coming back to bite me in the ass. “What am I going to do?”

*Maybe I can catch a flight somewhere. I hear Paris is nice this time of year…*

“Um… Do I still need to hold this pose? I think my knee’s about to give out,” Torin said.

“No, Torin, take a break,” Cali said. “This might take a while.”

Cali grabbed my hand and led me out of the kitchen and into the living room.

“Maybe it won’t be that bad,” she said.

“Cali, are you kidding? It’s bad.” I was pacing back and forth and trying to stop breathing like I’d just run a marathon. “Seriously, I’m fucked. They’re going to find out that I lied about… pretty much everything!”

Lying was the one thing that almost no one could explain away. It was never good to lie, and I’d been doing a lot of it lately.

“Lola, you’re not giving your dads enough credit. They love you! That’s why they’re coming in the first place. I’m sure that if you just tell them the truth, they’ll understand. They might be a little upset, sure, but they’ll forgive you.”

“Cali, I love you, so don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re nuts. Tell my dads the truth? Are you even hearing yourself?” If I wanted to tell them the truth, I would’ve done that from the beginning! I sighed and dug my fingers into my temples. “I mean, that *is* exactly what Jay said to do—and I thought about doing it, I really did. I was going to call them… Or maybe text.”

“You can’t text them something like that,” Cali said. “That would be the wrong move for sure.”

“That’s not the point! Do you really think I can tell them to their faces? In *person*? I really think you’re underestimating how serious this is. At least with a phone call, I could hang up or pretend the connection is bad if things go south!”

Then I could avoid their phone calls for a few weeks until things calmed down. It sounded like the perfect plan—but now it was too late for that.

“I really think you’re overreacting, Lola.”

“I don’t think so. Don’t you remember why I lied in the first place?”

Cali gave me a blank look. “No…”

“Because my dads hate Jay! What would you do if your mom and dad came out and said that they hate Greyson and/or Xavier and they don’t even want you around them? You’d lose your shit!”

Cali frowned. “I mean, that’s kind of what happened at first,” she said. “But we talked things out, and they’ve gotten to know both of them. Your dads just need to get to know Jay more.”

“I don’t think it’s going to go that way in my situation. My dads blamed Jay for my dropping out of school, and the only reason I was allowed to come back with him is because I promised I’d go to school. Which I’m not. So who do you think they’re going to blame? Like, just try to put yourself in my shoes for a second and imagine what they’re going to do when they find out that I’m not even enrolled!”

I’d told Jay that I was going to be honest about everything, but now that the prospect was staring me in the face, I wasn’t sure that I could go through with it.

*Why did I tell Jay that I was going to tell them? There’s absolutely no way in hell I’m capable of that.*

I stared down at the text again, knowing that I needed to respond. I sighed as I typed a message with every bit of excitement that I didn’t feel.

*OMG!!! REALLY?!?! I can’t wait!!!*

I felt sick to my stomach as I sent the message. *But really, what’s another lie to add to the pile at this point?* I thought.

“So, where are they going to stay?” Cali asked.

“OMG. I hadn’t even thought about that! I told them that I was in a share house off campus… Way off campus. I also maybe made the mistake of saying that most people had gone home already.”

There were so many lies that I was starting to wonder how I was going to keep them straight. What if I accidentally told a lie about something I’d already told the truth about? Or vice versa? I groaned and dropped my face into my hands.

“What, so they’re supposed to stay *here*?”

My eyes went wide. “Oh my god, wait, they can’t stay here!”

“Can they stay at a motel or something?”

“A motel? Really? How can I ask them to stay at a motel when this house has more rooms than Buckingham Palace?” They’d probably be disappointed and think that I didn’t *want* them to stay with me—so then I’d be hurting their feelings as well as lying to them about almost everything.

“Calm down, Lola, you’re starting to hyperventilate. They probably already have a place to stay,” she said. “Listen, I promise we’ll figure something out. Everything’s going to be fine.” Cali gave me a pat on the shoulder.

“I love your positivity, but I don’t really see how everything’s going to be fine. How am I possibly going to explain to my dads that, oh, yeah, I’m a werewolf, only I’m not just a werewolf, I’m also a vampire. And I live in a pack house with werewolves, vampires, Fae, and witches! And I’m also shacking up with my boyfriend—who you hate—in said pack house.”

I really was hyperventilating now, and it was about to get worse.

“Oh my god, Cali.” I felt like my knees were about to give way, and I leaned against the wall to support myself. “What if… What if I try to drink their blood? What if Jacs catches their scent and goes on a hunger rampage? What if we both team up and dig our fangs into my dads’ necks? What then?”

Cali grabbed me by the shoulders. “Get a hold of yourself!”

I slumped against the wall. “What am I going to do? I hate that I lied, and I hate that I’m going to disappoint my dads. They’ve done so much for me, Cali, and what do I do? I lie to them and let them down. I’m the worst daughter ever!”

Cali pulled me into a hug. “It’s okay, Lola. Jay!” she called out over her shoulder.

Jay came in, looking concerned. “Hey you two, what’s wrong?”

I ran into Jay’s arms and buried my face in his chest. “EVERYTHING! Every single thing!”

“Aw, it can’t be that bad,” Jay said, stroking my hair. “Whatever it is, I’m sure it’s not as bad as you think.”

I closed my eyes and released all of my weight onto him. “Maybe not.”

I was starting to feel better… And then my dads’ text popped back into my head.

“Tell me, Lola, what’s wrong?” Jay asked, pulling away so that he could look me in the eye.

“Lola’s dads are coming,” Cali said before I could.

“Oh yeah? Is it because you finally told them everything?”

“No! That’s the problem! They don’t know anything at all! But in two days, they’ll know all they need to know: that their daughter’s a big fat liar!”

“I got this,” Jay said to Cali. He put an arm around my shoulders and led me upstairs.

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do!” Cali yelled after us.

“We will!” Jay said as he led me into our bedroom.

He guided me to the bed, and I plopped down, unable to shake the dread and anxiety circling in my stomach.

*How could I have been so stupid? What, did I think that I could let my lies carry on forever and they’d never find out? This is exactly what I get for not being truthful. Now my dads are gonna disown me!*

Jay leaned down and kissed me. “I know the last thing you want to do is tell your dads everything because you’re afraid of disappointing them, but Lola, maybe this is a sign? Maybe it’s time to come clean?”

“Sure, but I can’t just flood my dads with my millions of lies all at once. They’re going to think I’m the worst—and so they should!”

“Well, maybe you just tell them a little bit at a time. Let it trickle out over time.”

“I don’t see how that’s possible. I’m living with a pack of werewolves—and vampires and witches and everything in between. How the hell can I hide the fact that I’m living in a house that’s basically the epicenter of supernatural beings?”

Jay looked off into the distance and then said, “What if you’re not?”

# Episode 2795

**Greyson**

I held up the trash bag inches from Dick’s face.

“I’m just bringing out the trash!” I said to him. *Though it’s none of your business, jackass.* There was a hell of a lot more I wanted to say to him, but I was in no mood for any sort of confrontation, so I kept it to myself.

I started to walk past, but Dick wasn’t taking the hint.

“I’d still love to discuss your land. There are a lot of wolves lurking around out there. Are you sure you don’t have some pretty young thing on your arm who you don’t want getting hurt?” Dick smiled, but I didn’t trust it. He looked every bit the slimy car salesman, and my dislike for him grew.

*Cali is pretty, and young, but certainly not a thing… And she can definitely hold her own. She proved that when she killed Seluna. But wait—is Dick making some sort of threat?*

I stepped closer to the man. “I haven’t changed my mind about anything. I’m not selling my property to you, or anyone else, no matter how much money you throw at me. I’m not selling. Period.”

“I think you’re being a little rash, Greyson. Everything has a price. Maybe you just aren’t thinking big enough.”

I shook my head. *This guy just doesn’t take no for an answer, does he?*

“Are you looking into buying this place, too?” I asked. Maybe changing the subject would work better.

Dick looked around. “Maybe. Looks like it’s under some construction. Perhaps the owners would be more amenable to selling to get it off their hands. You’d be surprised how many people would rather abandon massive construction work in favor of something new and improved.”

I glanced back at the palace. “I wouldn’t get my hopes up if I were you.”

I brushed past Dick and headed to my car. I couldn’t imagine Lucian ever selling. The palace almost seemed to be part of Lucian’s being—it helped him feel like a prince. I didn’t think Lucian would care too much about the money, either.

*I wonder what will happen to Dick if he gets too aggressive, especially with the Vanguards. He’s already playing a dangerous game just by sniffing around out here.*

I was a rational guy—I knew that we couldn’t simply kill everyone who worked for LIPS to get rid of them, and while I’d warned Lucian about LIPS, I had no clue what he’d do to them if they overstepped. Lucian wasn’t as rational as I was—the entire Seluna ordeal had made that more than clear. If Dick pressed the wrong buttons with Lucian, he might just get more than he’d bargained for.

I popped the trunk and threw the bag inside. *Well, if Lucian does kill Dick, it would be one less thing for me to worry about.*

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I looked at the screen. *Xavier.* I answered on the second ring.

“Were you able to get Seluna’s ashes?”

“Hello to you, too, little brother. And yes, I was.” I slammed the trunk closed. “No problem, almost too easy. I’m heading back to the pack house now. How’s Cali?”

“I assume she’s fine,” Xavier said with a sigh.

I paused. “You assume? Let me talk to her.”

“I’m not with her. I’m in Bend.”

I was surprised to hear that. “In Bend? Why?”

I didn’t like that he’d left Cali. She was in no state to be left alone and vulnerable. At least one of us needed to be around to keep an eye on her, just in case. What if she had another one of her nightmares and neither of us was there to comfort her? These weren’t normal nightmares, and we needed to make sure that we were there to support her until we could get the whole Seluna thing taken care of.

“Because I’m chasing demons. I got a tip from Ava.”

“You talked to Ava?” *What the hell is he up to? Ava’s in the wind, so why is he still in contact with her?*

“I can feel you judging me from over the phone, brother. It’s a long story,” Xavier said in a way that suggested that he never planned to tell that particular tale. “And anyway, it doesn’t matter. Point is, I went to Bend to track down a demon, and that’s that.”

“That’s that? Come on, Xavier. I don’t understand why you’d want to find a demon on purpose. Were you not there for all that shit we went through with Seluna? Because I thought you were, but maybe I was mistaken…”

“Save it, Greyson. It’s all well and good that you have Seluna’s ashes, but unless we can deliver them to the demon world, they’re nothing but a pile of ash. So, I went looking for a portal. You should be thanking me, not being an asshat about it.”

My patience was wearing thin. “Fine. So you went looking for a portal. And?”

“*And*, I know where one is.”

There was a pause, and I sighed into the phone. “Am I supposed to guess? Where the hell is it? Don’t leave me in suspense.”

“It’s… complicated. I’ll explain when I see you.” With that, Xavier ended the call.

I stood there looking at the blank screen for a few moments, completely exasperated. *Why couldn’t he just tell me now? How complicated can an address be?*

I hopped into the car, gunned the engine, and pulled off. I could see Dick standing in the doorway talking to Lucian as I pulled away.

*What I would pay to be a fly on the wall for that conversation… But no, I don’t actually care. The Vanguards’ business is just that—their business—and I’m so happy to be free of them and their drama.*

The drive back was quick and uneventful. I pulled into the pack house driveway, glad to be home. I was looking forward to letting Cali know that we had Seluna’s remains. If Xavier was right and he knew the location of a portal, then it wouldn’t be too long before Seluna could be returned to the demon world and Cali would be saved from her nightmares.

I pulled Seluna’s ashes out of the trunk and walked up to the pack house door, but then I hesitated. I was hardly superstitious, but I couldn’t help but wonder if it was a good idea for me to bring Seluna inside. If nothing else, Cali would probably feel safer if she stayed out.I left the bag on the porch and went inside.

Cali was coming down the stairs just as I came in, and I hurried over to her and pulled her into a hug. I lifted her up off the floor and spun her around a few times while she giggled. I was just so happy to see her. “How are you?”

“I’m fine. Did you do it?”

I sighed and put her down. “I did.”

Cali took a nervous look around. “Where is she? It?”

I gestured behind me. “Out on the porch.” I took Cali’s hand. “Have you had any more nightmares?”

“No, I haven’t, though Lola is dealing with a nightmare of her own right now. Her dads are coming to visit in like, two days, and she’s freaking out.”

*Great. More drama, just what we need.* “Well, I’m just glad that you’re okay.”

“Did you run into any problems picking her… it… up?”

“It went as well as could be expected. Lucian tried to throw a tantrum, but Aysel calmed him down. And speaking of Aysel, for what it’s worth, she apologized for putting the curse on me.”

Cali rolled her eyes. “She should have apologized a long time ago—or better yet, not done it in the first place.”

“True. But on the plus side, we don’t have to worry about Aysel—or Lucian—anymore. We are officially Vanguard free.”

“Best. News. Ever!” Cali said, throwing her hands in the air.

I kissed her, feeling overwhelmed with relief and grateful to have her in my arms again. *It’s actually nice that Xavier isn’t here. Now I get to have her all to myself.* Now that we had the means to put all of the Seluna stuff to rest once and for all, it was time for Cali and me to get back to basics, to spend time together and, dare I say it, try to experience life as a normal couple for a bit. *Well, a normal-ish couple.*

“Everything’s going to be okay, isn’t it?” Cali asked, between kisses.

“Yes, I’m going to make sure of it.”

Cali’s lips felt soft and warm against mine, and I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her close. I could feel the heat rising inside me, and I released her just before I lost control.

We both smiled at each other as a moment of comfortable silence passed between us.

“I’m hungry,” I said. “Are you hungry?” I started toward the kitchen but then stopped short. “You know what?”

“What?” Cali said, stopping short right on my heels.

“Maybe I shouldn’t leave those ashes out on the porch. I’ll lock them in the shed.” I went back outside and froze. “What the *fuck*?”

The bag was gone.

# Episode 2796

I was glad that Greyson was going to go lock up the ashes in the shed. I didn’t want them in the house. I had a feeling that if we kept them inside overnight, I’d have even worse nightmares, and I had already had my fill of those. I was craving a good night’s sleep, and there was no way that was going to happen with a pile of demon ashes sitting on the coffee table.

I started as the front door slammed open and Greyson came storming in, his eyes wild and his chest heaving. It was clear that he was panicked about something.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, my heart racing. *Is Seluna back? Is it LIPS? Oh no, did he just get another invitation to a Vanguard party?*

“The bag, it’s gone!”

“Bag? What bag?”

“Seluna’s ashes—I put them in a trash bag. I went out to move them, and they’re not on the porch where I left them.”

I was immediately seized by fear. “Does this mean that Seluna’s still alive? Were my nightmares some sort of premonition or something?” I couldn’t stop my mind from going to the darkest places possible.

Greyson shook his head, getting more agitated by the second. “I left the bag there for one damn minute, and now it’s gone!”

“Do you think…” I couldn’t even bring myself to say what I was thinking.

Greyson rushed past me to the kitchen, where Torin and Ravi and a few others were hanging out making one of Torin’s concoctions. “Hey, have any of you seen a trash bag?”

“A trash bag? What color?” Torin asked.

“What do you mean what color? It’s a trash bag—you know—plain, black. Plastic,” Greyson snapped. “It was on the porch.”

“Well, I haven’t gone anywhere near the porch,” Ravi said.

“Neither have I,” Torin said, giving Greyson a look. “We’re too busy making Rice Krispies Treats to go hunting for treasure, but make sure to come back and grab one after you find your trash bag thingy—they should be ready soon.”

I heard the front door open and close and turned to see my dad coming in.

“What’s wrong?” he asked after taking one quick look at me.

Greyson stomped past, officially on the war path. “Someone took a trash bag from the porch.”

My dad stopped Greyson. “I did, it was me.”

“What? Why?” I asked.

My dad shot us both a puzzled look. “Um… Because it’s trash day and it looked like a bag of trash. It wasn’t labeled or anything, so I took it out with the rest of the garbage.”

“What?” Greyson wailed. He raced for the front door, and I followed close behind.

We stepped out onto the porch just as a garbage collection truck stopped way up at the head of the driveway.

“Stop!” Greyson yelled, waving his hands over his head and running up the driveway.

I was trying to keep up with him, but he was moving really fast and I was nowhere near fast enough to keep up with a werewolf.

*I can’t believe this is happening. I can’t blame my dad for thinking that it was garbage, but stuff like this really makes me feel like I’m cursed.*

Vander had told us that we needed to return Seluna to the demon world, and so we’d started taking the necessary steps to do just that—we’d gotten Seluna, only to have her picked up by a garbage truck moments later. *What the hell?* A garbage truck was more than fitting for Seluna, but not at my expense.

The garbage truck slowed to a stop, and the garbage man hopped out of the truck. He went straight for the mound of trash at the curb and started throwing it into the compactor with speed and agility that I’d never seen used by a garbage man before, or maybe I’d just never paid any attention until now.

*If Greyson shifted, he could get to the guy quicker—but then how would we explain that? And with our luck LIPS would come driving up at the same time to warn us that they’d just seen a wolf running up our driveway. We’re so damn cursed!*

“Hey! Wait! Don’t touch that stuff!” Greyson shouted. “Wait!”

After a few painstaking seconds of Greyson yelling at the top of his lungs, we finally got the man’s attention. He motioned to his ears as if to say that he couldn’t hear Greyson, just as he threw in another bag of trash and then turned on the compactor.

“Don’t put any more trash in there,” Greyson said just as we caught up to the man.

“I’m sorry, what? I’m kind of in a hurry,” he said, barely giving us a second glance.

Greyson ran over to examine two bags still sitting on the curb. He grabbed them one by one, then tossed them aside.

“Where is it?” Greyson shouted over the loud roar of the truck.

“Where’s what?” The garbage man looked a little concerned, and I realized that Greyson could look really intimidating, even when he wasn’t trying to.

Greyson gestured to the truck. “How many other bags of ours did you put in there?”

The man shrugged. “I’m sorry, I don’t keep count of that sort of thing.” He pressed a button on the side of the truck, stopping the compactor.

“Open it up,” Greyson commanded.

The man’s eyes went wide. “What?”

“I said open it!” Greyson snarled.

“It’s your funeral,” the man said. He cranked open the compacter, and the smell hit us all like a ton of bricks.

“Oh my god!” I shrieked, stepping back as the steel plates opened to reveal a mass of smashed garbage—and what looked like millions of black plastic garbage bags.

*Shit. Literally.*

Greyson leapt onto the lip of the truck and started pulling bags out and flinging them to the ground before jumping down off the truck to rifle through them.

“Greyson, this is going to be like finding a needle in a haystack,” I said. I had my sleeve pressed to my nose in an attempt to block out the smell, but it was no use. The smell was everywhere, including in my mouth.

“I know, but what other choice do we have?” Greyson said.

Holding my breath, I joined Greyson. I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to tell which bag it was, since they all pretty much looked alike. How much did a dead demon weigh, anyway?

I couldn’t stop gagging as we dug through the trash. Pile after pile after pile, we kept searching, but all we found was rotting food, discarded clothing, old electronics, and piles of what could only be described as slime. It was like Seluna was getting some kind of sick revenge on us, even in death.

Greyson suddenly grabbed me. He had a bag in his hand and a triumphant look on his face. “Here, I’ve got it!”

I looked at the bag he was holding. I’d thought it would be a little heavier, or fuller. *I guess there’s not much to a burned-up demon.*

Greyson hopped down out of the truck and patted the garbage guy on the back. “Thanks a lot, man.”

The guy shrugged. “Hop in any time.”

He started throwing the other bags back in as Greyson and I turned and walked back up to the house.

I scrunched up my nose. “Do we really smell like this?”

Greyson laughed. “We really do. Be glad you’re not a werewolf. It’s much worse.”

Greyson threw open the shed door, tossed the bag inside, and locked the door. He looked down at his garbage-streaked clothes and winced.

“Ugh, you smell like trash juice,” I said.

“Some nerve—you don’t exactly smell like roses right now either, love. Maybe we should go get cleaned up.”

He took my hand, and we went back inside.

“I’m sorry about that, I didn’t know,” my dad said as we came into the living room.

“It’s fine, Tom, it’s my fault. I shouldn’t have left something so important in a trash bag on the porch. Lesson learned. But it’s all good,” Greyson said. “Crisis averted.”

I couldn’t help but notice that my father’s face was scrunched up, though he was trying not to be obvious about it.

I laughed. “We know, Dad. We smell great, right?”

He laughed. “Yes, you smell perfectly fine. So fine, in fact, that I’m going to have to ask that you leave the living room—immediately.”

Greyson and I couldn’t stop laughing as we went upstairs. We stopped at my bedroom door.

“I’m sorry to have put you through that,” Greyson said. “Today was trash in every sense of the word.”

I looked up at him and wiped a glob of something from his cheek. I couldn’t stop thinking about what Artemis had told me about letting my mates take care of me during my time of need. It felt like right now was the perfect time to put her theory to the test.

“Okay, well, I’m going to go get cleaned up. I’ll stop by after?” Greyson said, starting to walk away.

I grabbed his hand and pulled him back to me. “No need to rush off.” I tilted my head toward my room, and more importantly, my shower. “Why don’t we conserve water?”

# Episode 2797

Greyson’s eyes lit up, and he smiled down at me. “You’re right, Cali. It would be such a shame to waste all that water, wouldn’t it?”

“Such a shame,” I said, smiling slyly as I pulled him into my room and shut the door. I led him into the bathroom.

*Artemis said to find something to help me get over my Seluna trauma, and Greyson can help with that. He always does.* Whenever I was stressed out, Greyson was always right by my side, comforting me. *Maybe I can do the same for him.* He’d been through something horrible, too, during our tangle with Seluna. Though he was an Alpha and would never admit it, I had no doubt that he could use a little break from it all, as well.

Without saying a word, I started unbuttoning his shirt, taking care to avoid the clumps of rotten food clinging to the fabric.

“Just toss that right in the trash,” Greyson said as I slid the shirt off his shoulders.

“Way ahead of you,” I said, already throwing it into the garbage bin as we both laughed. I slid his pants down his hips and threw those in the trash, too. Even his socks were covered in rancid muck. We’d searched through the trash for all of fifteen, twenty minutes, tops, and somehow every stitch of clothing we had was covered in grossness.

Once we were both naked and our dirty clothes were disposed of, I started the shower. I checked to make sure the water was the perfect temperature, and then we both stepped inside. We embraced under the warm shower jets, our bodies sliding together as the dirt was rinsed from our skin.

“Soap, quick, I can still smell it,” Greyson said. “Though honestly, it’s probably stuck in my nose.”

“Me too,” I said. “It’s like I can smell it everywhere.”

I grabbed one of my loofahs and squirted a stream of fragrant soap on it, then I rubbed it up and down Greyson’s chest, making sure to scrub his skin.

“I’m going to smell like a girl,” Greyson complained.

“Better than smelling like rotten eggs, don’t you think?”

“Good point.”

I smoothed the loofah down over his chest and around to his back, using my other hand to spread the fragrant suds all over his body.

“Now rinse,” I said, gently pushing him under the water. While he was rinsing off, I squirted a dollop of shampoo into my hands and worked it through his hair, massaging his scalp as he moaned in pleasure.

“Have I ever told you that just your touch is almost enough to send me over the edge?”

“Maybe once or twice,” I said.

While he rinsed his hair, I scrubbed myself down with the loofah, then nudged him aside to rinse off and shampoo my own hair. When I turned around, Greyson was on his knees.

“What are you doing?”

“Put your foot up on the side of the tub,” Greyson said, his voice husky and his eyelids low.

“Okay…” I said, doing as I was told.

I closed my eyes and held my breath, waiting. Even though I knew what was coming, I jumped in surprise when I felt Greyson’s mouth sliding over my clit before his tongue snaked its way inside me. I braced myself on the wall as currents of pleasure whipped through my entire body. When his lips left the pulsing warmth between my legs, I opened my eyes to see him standing up and holding his rigid shaft in his hand. He turned me around and I placed both of my hands on the slick tiles, and I held my breath.

“Cali,” Greyson breathed as he slid inside me, slowly. He pressed his body against mine, pinning me to the shower wall, and sped up his thrusts.

I closed my eyes and tried to put everything but the electricity of his closeness out of my head, but I couldn’t shut my mind off.

“You feel so good, Cali,” Greyson grunted as his thrusts deepened.

I splayed my hands on the wall, trying to lose myself in the sensation of his hardness sliding in and out of me, but I couldn’t lose myself like I usually did. I spread my legs and squeezed my eyes shut, willing myself to concentrate, and for a while, I was able to quiet my thoughts enough to enjoy him. Before too long, I could feel my climax waiting just beyond my reach, but I could already tell that I wasn’t quite in the headspace to achieve it.

Greyson picked me up and his arms, held me against the wall, and entered me again.

“I think I’m close,” he said.

“I am, too.”

It was true, I was close, but it just seemed like I wasn’t going to tip over into a full-blown orgasm—I just couldn’t get out of my head. I wrapped my arms around Greyson’s neck and moved my hips against him, wanting to make sure that despite the difficulties I was having, it still felt good for him.

“Cali, I don’t think I can hold on any longer,” he grunted.

“Then don’t,” I whispered in his ear. Seconds later, his body jerked against mine as he came.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You just felt so good, I couldn’t hold it back any longer, but I tried… I really wanted you to finish… Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” I said quickly, trying not to make a big deal out of it.

“Are you sure? Do you want me to do something else? I’m more than happy to oblige.”

“No, I don’t know. I’m not sure. I just got way too into my head. It felt good and everything, but it was like I couldn’t focus, if that makes sense?”

“Sure, yeah, I get it. I just—I thought you were into it.”

“I was, believe me. It felt amazing, as always,” I kissed him. “It felt good and all, and I was totally into it, but when it came to it… I don’t know. Now I feel bad and awkward. Kind of worse than before. This is so embarrassing.I lured you into shower sex hoping that it would help take my mind off things, only for it to turn into a cringe fest.”

*Maybe I* can’t *deal with my emotions the way Artemis suggested.*

Greyson pulled me close. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of. Let’s get out of here. I think I’m getting pruny.”

We stepped out of the shower, and Greyson handed me a towel before tying his own at his waist. We went out into my bedroom and sat together at the foot of my bed.

“You know,” Greyson said, drying his hair with his towel, “if you thought that sex would be a good way to help you forget about everything, I don’t think there was anything wrong with trying.”

I looked at him, my heart swelling. “Thanks for understanding. I don’t want you to think I was using you or anything.”

Greyson laughed. “I don’t know many guys who’d object to being used like that every once in a while, but I know that wasn’t your intention. I just wish I could take away your problems. You know I’m a good listener, right? You don’t have to carry all of this on your own.”

I was grateful to Greyson for being so understanding, but I still felt embarrassed. “You’re probably right, but I can’t help the way I feel.”

Greyson kissed me and pulled me close. “I promise that once we take care of the ashes, everything will get better.”

I squirmed in his arms, uncomfortable. I didn’t want to talk about it anymore. Our shower moment was supposed to make me feel better, but instead, I felt worse. I’d probably made Greyson feel bad, too—he probably thought that he couldn’t satisfy me, even though that couldn’t be further from the truth. It wasn’t his fault—it was mine. My mind just kept going to all the wrong places.

*I can’t stay in here. It just reminds me of how I let him down.* I kissed him. “I’m going to get some tea.”

I turned to go, but Greyson gently grabbed my arm. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“No, but I will be.”

I threw on some clothes, wishing that I could just blip away somewhere. I’d never felt like this with either of my mates before, and it was kind of freaking me out.

I went downstairs to make myself some tea and to think without Greyson’s worries affecting my thoughts. As always, Torin was in the kitchen. He was putting the finishing touches on his Rice Krispies Treats.

“You look a little stressed. Might I suggest a little meditation?” Torin said. “Kevin says it’s really helping him.”

“Kevin? Who’s Kevin?”

“Oh, this new guy I’m talking to. He loved my baking photos.”

I was impressed. It certainly hadn’t taken Torin long to find someone. At least one of us might get some…

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts.

“You okay, Cali? You look worried about something. What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing!” I said quickly, and almost certainly unconvincingly. “All good.”

“I haven’t been studying meditation for very long, but I bet it would help you out, if you’re feeling up to it. Do you want to try it now?”

# Episode 2798

**Xavier**

Rhett’s information about the demon world hadn’t exactly surprised me. I should’ve known it wouldn’t be easy to get in. It was just like the Fae world in that not just anybody could walk in, and Rhett had been absolutely tickled that I’d thought that I could. I’d wanted to punch the smug look right off that demon’s face, but then I’d remembered the warning that Carlson Greene had given me about how Rhett was not to be messed with. Time would tell. But if I came at him, I would have to be prepared, and showing up alone at his run-down trap of a house in his shabby, sinister neighborhood probably wasn’t someone’s idea of being prepared.

*If he wants to start a fight, I’ll finish it.* But the last thing I wanted was to bring any demon wrath back to Cali and the rest of the pack. We’d all been through enough.

Maybe sometime in the future I would pay old Rhett another visit and show him what I was capable of, but I had more pressing matters to contend with right now—like making sure my mate wasn’t haunted by a demon for the rest of her life.

I sighed, trying to clear my head as I pressed down on the gas pedal. I couldn’t wait to get back to the pack house, especially now that Greyson and I had at least one part of our dead demon Seluna problem solved. Greyson had picked up Seluna’s ashes, and now we just needed to figure out how to get them through the portal.

I pulled up in the pack house driveway and let out a breath. I was so eager to see Cali. It felt like I’d been gone forever.

Greyson intercepted me as I walked up to the porch. “What the hell was that about on the phone earlier? You hanging up on me like that?”

“You’re not wasting any time getting on my ass, huh?” I asked.

“Seriously, Xavier? You didn’t even take the time to explain what happened,” Greyson said. “You were being mysterious for no real reason, and we don’t have time for that bullshit.”

I shrugged. “There wasn’t much more to say—I found the demon I was looking for. He knows where to find a demon world portal, but he took a lot of pleasure in telling me that I wouldn’t be able to get in since I’m not a demon. That’s it, that’s the story.”

“Well, you should have just said that,” Greyson said. He glanced back toward the house, and I could see the wheels turning in his head. “Maybe we can talk to Big Mac again about the whole demon portal thing, see if she’s thought of anything.”

“And what about Seluna’s ashes?” I asked.

“What about them? I put them in the shed.”

I arched my eyebrows. *They’re in the shed?* I supposed that wasn’t exactly a place anyone really went. “Cool. Well, I’ll see you later.”

I pushed past him and went into the house to go find Cali.

“Ooh! Xavier, welcome to our meditation zone,” Torin said as I came into the kitchen. He was sitting next to Cali. “Want to join us for some group meditation?”

“Uh… No, I’ll pass,” I said.

Cali stood up and hugged me. “Hey, where’ve you been?”

“I went to try to track down a demon portal.”

A relieved look passed across Cali’s face. “Did you find something? Will we be able to get rid of Seluna for good?”

“I really wish it were that easy. I tracked down where to find it, but we have to find a way to get in. Non-demons aren’t allowed, apparently. Greyson and I are working on it, though.”

“Oh.” Her face fell.

“Sorry I don’t have much more, baby. But don’t worry. We’ll figure it out.” I hugged her tightly, wishing that I could do more to ease her mind. I knew she was having trouble dealing with killing Seluna. It was clear she was pretending everything was fine.

*The sooner we can get Seluna’s remains far away from her and the pack house, the better it will be for her.*

Greyson came in and grabbed me. “Let’s go talk to Big Mac.”

“I’ll come with you,” Cali said quickly. “I’m involved in this whole thing whether you like it or not, and I want to help, if I can.”

I wasn’t going to argue with her this time. She was right. She’d taken out Seluna, just like she’d thought she would, and now she was dealing with the consequences. It made sense that she would want to have a hand in fixing things.

The three of us went up to Big Mac’s room. As expected, Big Mac was in her usual grumpy mood.

“Great, the Three Musketeers standing at my door once again. How did I get so lucky?” She let the fake smile drop from her face. “What is it now?”

“How do we pass through a demon portal?” I asked, cutting to the chase for both her benefit and mine.

Big Mac laughed. “You’re still going on about that? I told you I don’t know.”

“But do you *really* not know?” Cali pressed.

Big Mac rolled her eyes hard and pressed a finger to her temple. “Look, I only know the vaguest details, like that it’s a one-way ticket. There’s no going in and out like it’s a damn mini mart. Once you go in, you’re probably not getting out.”

“Well this just gets better and better,” I huffed, feeling extremely tired all of a sudden.

“You asked,” Big Mac said.

I bit back on what I really wanted to say. “If we can’t get into the damn place without getting trapped inside, then how the hell are we going to get rid of the fucking demon ashes?”

“Big Mac, could you create some sort of ward or protection or something?” Greyson asked.

Big Mac laughed and looked at us like we were the dumbest people on the planet. “You’re not just dealing with a couple of stray demons here. You’re walking right into *their* world. You don’t even want to go there, ward or not. My magic is powerful and all, but once you crossed that threshold, it’s not certain that it would be able to protect you.”

I grabbed Greyson by the arm and pulled him away. “We’re wasting our time.”

“Finally, you get it,” Big Mac said before slamming her door shut.

We went back downstairs to the kitchen, Cali right on our heels.

“So what now?” she asked.

“I don’t know, I’m thinking,” Greyson said.

“Well think harder,” I said.

“Maybe Okorie might know something?” Cali gestured toward the window. Outside, Okorie stood talking with Marta and Dani.

“I was going to try to talk to him earlier, too. I’m not crazy about being trapped in the demon world and burning for eternity—which is all the plan we have right now—so we have to find another way.” I led the way outside and called Okorie’s name.

He turned and rolled his eyes when he saw it was us. “Can’t you see we’re busy?”

“Mentoring can wait,” I said. “What do you know about the demon world?”

“Never been there. Try a travel agent,” Okorie said before turning back to Marta and Dani.

“I’m so tired of this bullshit,” I said. “I just want to know if there’s a way to get in and out safely. That’s it. Two seconds of your *precious* time.”

Okorie flashed us a bored look. “If you’re so tired of witches and warlocks, then maybe you should go ask a werewolf how to get in and out of the demon world safely and see how that works out for you.”

He made to turn back to mentoring, but I moved in front of him, blocking him from Marta and Dani, who exchanged a scandalized look.

“I’m going to ask you one more time,” I said, my voice low.

Okorie returned my stare without flinching. “Are you a demon? No? Well then, there *is* no getting in or out safely. Only demons can safely cross.”

“I know that already!” I said.

Okorie shrugged. “How would I know what you know? I’m only a warlock, I don’t read minds.”

*This guy is really getting on my nerves…*

Sensing my frustration, Greyson jumped in. “But how can we bring the ashes back if we can’t pass through?”

“Is it absolutely necessary for one of you to pass through, or do you just want the ashes to pass through? You could toss them through there like day-old laundry down the chute. Boom bam, you’re done.”

“It can’t be that easy,” Greyson said, though he looked like he was hoping with every fiber of his being that it was.

“I’m not so sure,” I said. “It’s not like we were told that we have to deliver them in person like breakfast in bed. Otherwise it would mean that Cali has to return them herself or risk being plagued by Seluna forever—and hell if *that’s* happening.”

Cali blanched and ducked her head.

“Look, I just want a solution for my mate. Is that too much to ask? Can you just try to help, Okorie?” I was at the end of my rope, and I hoped that Okorie could see that. A desperate man was a dangerous man, after all.

Okorie sighed and finally turned to face us head-on. “Have you considered using the Courier?”

# Episode 2799

“Uh, who, or what, is the Courier?” I asked.

Was I supposed to know who it was? It sounded mysterious, and not in a good way. I pictured a guy with a trench coat and a fedora pulled low over his eyes, riding a motorbike through traffic. *Okay, well when I picture him like that, I guess he doesn’t seem as scary.*

“The Courier is a mysterious entity who can deliver packages and messages between different realms,” Okorie explained. “Sort of like UPS, but the price is always high as hell, and you never know how much he’s going to charge. He’s a risky bedfellow, to say the least, but if you’re looking for a way around having to go into the demon realm yourself, then he might be your best bet.”

“And you know about this Courier… how?” Greyson asked.

Okorie smirked. “You tend learn a thing or two when you’re among the best of the best in the witch and warlock world. Tell me, have you rubbed elbows with anyone in your werewolf circle who can get you out of a predicament like the one you’re in now?” Okorie’s smile widened as Xavier and Greyson stared at him, unblinking. “I rest my case.”

Xavier and Greyson rolled their eyes, but I was fixated on what Okorie had said about the Courier’s price.

“Do you have any idea what kind of price this Courier guy might charge?”I couldn’t help but think about how Jay had given up his eye to Big Mac to help save Lola. I didn’t want my mates to have to go through anything like that for me.

“I don’t set the rates,” Okorie said.

“Then how do we contact him?” Greyson asked.

“I can send a request,” Okorie said simply. “Should I go ahead and do that?”

“Are we sure there isn’t some other way?” I asked. The idea of getting involved with some shadowy entity wasn’t on my top ten list right now. We’d been in contact with enough strange people in the last few weeks alone—the last thing we needed was some new person with dubious motives.

Greyson sighed. “I’m not sure what other choice we have, unfortunately. At the very least, we can talk to the Courier and find out if he really can deliver. We won’t do anything if there’s any question about how it works, how safe it is, et cetera.”

“I can try to have him come by this afternoon,” Okorie said.

“Cali!” I turned to see Lola coming toward us. I was only partly relieved to see Lola come running—she was a great distraction and all, but with her dads on their way, she was probably bringing more drama. “Cali, you’ll never believe it! Jay just came up with a genius solution for when my dads come. Oh sorry, am I interrupting something?”

“Yes,” Xavier said.

Okorie looked between Lola and me, then at Xavier and Greyson with his patented jaded expression. “Okay, you all just come get me when you’ve made a decision.” He flashed a not quite genuine smile. “Distractions abound around here,” he said to Marta and Dani as he ushered them to the other side of the yard, where they wasted no time getting back into it.

“Let’s talk,” Greyson said, looking at Xavier.

“I’ll be there in a sec,” I said.

They both nodded and moved back toward the house. I gulped, hoping they wouldn’t decide to go with the Courier before we’d actually spoken to him. I turned my attention back to Lola.

“Sorry,” Lola said.

I shook my head. “It’s okay, we were basically done anyway. What’s going on?”

“*So*,” she began, “you know how the lake house is all fixed up now?”

I nodded, half paying attention and half trying to read Greyson’s lips from afar. “Uh-huh, yeah, Greyson told me something about that.”

“*Well*, that means that I can move there and set it up like an off-campus share house! Isn’t that great?”

“Um… Yeah?” I blinked, giving my friend my full attention. “Wait, what do you mean? How can you make it seem like a share house? You’d be the only one there.”

“Except I won’t be the only one living in it,” Lola said. “Not if a few people come with! You’ll need to move in with me, and maybe Violet, Ravi—whoever—just enough people to make it seem real.”

“Um… But didn’t you just freak out because of all the lies you’ve been telling your dads?” I scratched my head. “This sounds like yet another one.”

I didn’t know when Lola was going to stop digging herself into a deeper hole, but it didn’t look like that was going to happen anytime soon. It made no sense to me why she thought piling more lies on top of the already pretty impressive pile she had going was a good idea, but I was in no mood to talk sense to someone who clearly wasn’t interested in hearing it.

“I have no choice.” Lola pouted. “The truth will kill them… And it’s not that crazy a plan. How hard could it be? Think about where we lived in Minnesota in that off-campus apartment. Is living at the lake house really so different?”

“Yes,” I said. *We weren’t lying about living in our apartment, for one.* “It’s not only a house, it’s a pack house.”

Lola waved her hand. “Tomato, *to-mah-toe*.”

I was highly skeptical of this whole thing, despite how excited Lola was. There were so many things that could go wrong—or probably *would* go wrong. I wanted to support Lola, and I didn’t want her to feel like I wasn’t on her side—even if being on her side meant helping her perpetuate yet another big lie.

*Of all the times for her dads to decide to come visit… But then again, is there ever really a good time when it comes to werewolves?* There was always something going on, after all. If they’d tried to visit even a few days ago, for example, they would have come right in the middle of Seluna-gate, which would have been way worse.

*Though Seluna-gate is still kind of going on…*

“So how long are your dads planning to stay, anyway? The longer we have to pretend, the more likely we are to get caught—and that would be so much worse.”

“They didn’t say, actually, but I can’t imagine that it would be for more than a few days. They’ll probably only stay long enough to be sure I’m okay, take me out shopping and to dinner a few times, that kind of stuff.”

“Okay. I’m willing to try this plan of yours,” I said, “but you have to ask Greyson about the house.”

Lola shifted uncomfortably. “I was hoping that you might talk to him about it.”

I glanced over at Greyson, where he stood talking with Xavier. “Why can’t you ask him?”

“Because we only have two days! My dads will be here in TWO DAYS!” she said. “I need to pull out the big guns to make this happen!”

I sighed. “Okay, fine. I’ll see what I can do, but I don’t want you to get your hopes up.”

“Thank you thank you thank you!” Lola wrangled me into a hug. “I’m going to go tell Jay!”

“Don’t thank me yet,” I said as I extracted myself from her hold.

I glanced back at Greyson. I still felt bad about our awkward shower moment earlier. *Do I really want to throw something else at him right now?*

I all but dragged my feet as I made my way back over to Greyson and Xavier.

“Well?” I asked, looking between them. “What are we doing? Are we contacting the Courier or not?”

“I think we should—besides, it’s just to have a conversation,” Greyson said. “Nothing’s been decided yet.”

Xavier grimly nodded. “I promise we won’t make any decisions about it without bringing you into it to get your take first.” He pulled me into a tight hug. “I know this is stressful, Cali, and when it’s over, I say we go on a damn vacation.”

“Okay,” I said, gulping.

“Okay?” Greyson asked. I nodded again. “Then I’ll go talk to Okorie.”

Greyson headed off toward where Marta and Dani were training. Xavier kept his arm around me and started us back toward the house, just as Torin came bounding out with a reluctant Artemis in tow. “I’m glad you’re here,” he began. “You can’t have a group meditation session without a group.”

“Uh… I have a headache?” Xavier said quickly. I tried to conceal my laugh. “I’ve been driving all day, and I really just want to relax—but not the mediation type of relaxation.”

This didn’t deter Torin, who grabbed me by the arm away from Xavier. He marched us toward Okorie, Greyson, Marta, and Dani, waving his free hand around. “Hey!” he called. “We’re going to meditate!”

“We’re busy,” Okorie told Torin, glancing at Greyson.

“Okay, so that leaves Marta, Dani, and Cali,” Torin said, turning his laser beam gaze right on us.

The three of us all muttered some version of, “Sure, sounds like fun,” but I could tell that none of us were too thrilled.

“Great! Get ready to have a clear, unencumbered mind,” Torin said.

“Sure… So what do we do?” I asked. I’d read about meditation and knew that it was supposed to be really beneficial, but I’d never actually done it before.

“We form a circle and meditate. Easy as that!” Torin said excitedly.

*That sounds easy enough, though that wasn’t terribly specific…*

“Greyson,” Torin said. “I have a quick question.”

Greyson nodded. “What’s up?”

“We’re going to need Seluna’s ashes for this to work. Can I have them?”

# Episode 2800

**Greyson**

“Come again?” I wasn’t sure I’d heard Torin correctly.

“I need Seluna’s ashes! You’ve got them around here somewhere, right? Since Seluna is causing Cali so much stress, having her ashes will help center Cali’s focus and, ultimately, help relieve all her anxiety.” Torin was being all matter-of-fact about it, as if he were talking about something a lot more mundane than the ashes of the demon who’d tried to kill us all.

*Is he serious right now? That sounds like a bunch of nonsense.*

If anything, having the ashes around Cali would only remind her of what she’d been through—and most of all, that she’d killed Seluna. She was already having a difficult enough time pretending she was fine. I didn’t think that staring at a bag full of the remains of someone she’d murderedwas going to aid her meditation. No, I knew her. All it *would* do was make her even more stressed than she already was. Besides, after what had happened earlier with Tom taking Seluna’s ashes down to the curb like they were trash, I wasn’t letting those ashes go anywhere. That was the whole reason I’d put them in the shed.

Out of sight, (sort of) out of mind.

“Sorry, but I don’t think that’s a good idea, Torin,” I said as sternly as possible, while also trying not to sound like an ass.

Torin faltered, then recovered. “Okay! I’m sure we can do it without them!”

A look of relief flashed across Cali’s face.

*Just as I thought. She didn’t want those ashes anywhere near her. Hell, who would?*

“Okay everyone, get in a circle!” He clapped his hands together, and everyone jumped to get into place.

“I’m not sticking around for this,” Okorie muttered. Then to me he said, “I’ll contact the Courier like you asked.”

“Thanks,” I said. This was good. It was a step toward things getting back to normal for Cali.

“Greyson, are you joining us?” Torin asked, eyes wide.

I shook my head. “Sorry, got some stuff to take care of.” I turned to Cali. “I’ll come check on you later, love.”

“Okay.” She smiled at me, but there was a sadness there that tugged at my heart.

I started walking back to the house, but I lingered for a bit. I watched her sit down on the grass in a circle with the others. She was laughing and talking with them as she got situated, but I could see that her heart wasn’t quite in it. She glanced back at me and gave me a thumbs up.

*Doesn’t she know it’s okay to say she’s not okay?*

I went to rejoin Xavier on the porch, my gaze still on Cali. On top of everything with Seluna, I knew that she was still upset about what had happened in the shower earlier. I was still kicking myself for letting that whole situation go down the way it had. I wished I’d picked up on it sooner, but I’d been so caught up in just being with her that I’d missed all the signs.

*I should have been more focused on her. I should have known that she wasn’t really up for that sort of thing even if she’d initially said otherwise. Had I let my own desires get in the way?*

I felt like I’d failed her.

“So, what do you think?” Xavier asked.

“About what?” I asked. “Were you talking?”

Xavier groaned. “Did you hear a single word I just said? If you don’t want to deal with Seluna’s ashes without the Courier, then fine, I’ll handle it.”

I crossed my arms. “What do you have in mind?”

Xavier pointed to the shed. “We need to get that pile of demon crap out of there and just finish this. It’s not hard to see how much Cali’s being affected by this, and the longer we let it drag on without resolving things, the worse it’s going to be for all of us.”

“And after we do that, then what’s your grand plan?” I asked.

Xavier glared at me. “Well then, smartass, do you have a better idea? Maybe you’d like to personally deliver the ashes to the demon world? That wouldn’t be any skin off my back, trust me. Oh, and don’t worry, I’ll take care of Cali while you’re trapped there burning for eternity—or whatever happens in that fucking place.”

I cut my eyes at Xavier, not in the mood to bicker with him. “I’m not allowing anyone from the pack to make that trip, including me.”

“Okay, so how the hell are the ashes going to get there, then? They can’t just walk into a demon portal on their own, can they?” Xavier paused. “Wait, can they? They’re probably, like, magical or something, right?”

I shook my head. “If they could get their own their own, they probably would’ve by now,” I said, thinking about the stint that the ashes had spent in the garbage truck. “Listen, I’m not ruling this Courier dude out. I asked Okorie to contact him already. As of now, he’s the only lead we have. It’s a plan, and regardless, I’m trying to be cautious.”

Just then, Okorie came over.

“All right, I contacted the Courier for you,” he said.

“That fast?” Xavier asked.

“Magic, truly an innovation,” he said blandly. “But I should warn you both—if I do this, you have to take it so seriously. And be ready, because he usually shows up pretty quick, so if you have any questions, you should have them ready.”

“Got it,” Xavier and I said in unison.

“Okay, well, since this is sorted out, I have some actual business to take care of,” Okorie said before disappearing into the house.

“It’s settled then,” I said. “We’ll talk to this guy, see what’s possible. And if it’s not safe or won’t help Cali—”

“—then we aren’t fucking doing it,” Xavier finished.

We didn’t say anything else. We knew we agreed with each other. We both looked over at Torin, who was busy organizing the meditation. Artemis, Marta, Dani and Cali were splayed out on their backs in the grass. Cali looked so serene, and I suddenly felt bad for not being there with her.

*Maybe I should participate after all—if only to show my support. I could just pretend. It isn’t like Torin would be able to tell the difference.*

There was nothing else I could do until the Courier came, anyway—might as well spend as much time with Cali as I could, even if it was under Torin’s wacky supervision.

I started toward the group, but then I noticed that Xavier was moving toward them, too. “What are you doing?”

Xavier shrugged, looking a little sheepish. “I don’t know, I thought I’d join in.”

“I thought you weren’t into group things.”

“And I thought you said you had stuff to do.”

We both just looked at each other. I knew that he knew that I knew that we were both willing to meditate—or pretend meditate—because of Cali. I kind of wished that Xavier would go do something else, but maybe it would be good for Cali to have both of her mates united right now.

We both came over to the circle, each of us jockeying for a position next to Cali. We sat down on either side of her.

“Wait, what are you two doing?” Torin asked. He was seated at the center of the circle with his legs crossed and his posture erect, the very picture of calm. “Can’t you see that you’re disrupting the mantra? We’ve already started! You both need to go. You can join next time!”

“Okay, okay,” I said, hopping up to my feet and backing away. “It’s probably better to let Torin do his thing,” I said to Xavier as we scuttled away back toward the house.

*Hopefully this helps her a bit*, I thought.

As we came back on the porch, Xavier’s phone rang. He took it out of his pocket, and I caught a glimpse of the screen. Interesting.

“Ava again?” I asked him. They were certainly turning into best buds.

“Shut up,” Xavier said, declining the call and shoving the phone back into his pocket. “It’s none of your business.”

Then his phone started to ring again. He didn’t even take it out of his pocket this time. He just stood, arms crossed, watching the meditation group.

*And now he won’t answer it in front of me. Very suspicious, brother.* “Seems like the two of you have been spending a lot of time together, lately.”

I’d been generous. It was a massive understatement. I didn’t know what was going on between Xavier and Ava other than that their former mate bond was wreaking havoc. Xavier was partially right: it was my business if it interfered with my pack.

Xavier shrugged and looked off into the distance.

“I know you’re going to tell me to mind my business again any second now, but you should know that ignoring that girl isn’t going to make her stay away from you. Do you want my advice?”

# Episode 2801

I was trying my best to get comfortable, but the ground was cold and hard and there was still a bit of snow on the grass and my butt was starting to get damp.

*This is the worst. Why’d we have to meditate outside? I’d far prefer a fireside meditation.*

I looked at Marta and Artemis and Dani, who looked like they were having about as much fun as I was.

I would’ve preferred to have my mates with me, but I totally understood why they couldn’t be. They’d probably distract me from meditating… Exactly like I was distracting myself right now. I just couldn’t keep my mind from racing—just like when I’d been in the shower with Greyson earlier.

*Ugh. Don’t think about that now, or you’ll never be able to concentrate.*

“Sorry for the disruption, everyone,” Torin said. “Now, don’t forget to concentrate on your breathing. I want you to close your eyes and open your minds.”

I wondered what that meant. If anything, I wanted to close my mind and shut everything down—wasn’t that the point of meditation? I had a feeling that opening my mind while in my current state would probably be a bad idea. Who knew what was floating around in there, ready to be unleashed?

I resisted the urge to just get up and leave. The only thing stopping me was the fact that I didn’t want to hurt Torin’s feelings. I just wasn’t in the mood for this at all. It was hard enough for me to keep my eyes shut, which should have been the easy part. It didn’t help that every time I opened my eyes to sneak a peek at what was going on around me, I caught sight of the shed where Seluna’s ashes were. My stress level was definitely higher now than it had been before Torin’s little meditation experiment.

“Everyone, listen please.” Torin rang a bell. “Think of the sound. Focus on it. Let it take you somewhere. Breathe in and out using deep, cleansing breaths and feel the resonation of the bell echoing within.”

I tried to do as Torin said, but the only thing I could picture was the gallery and my mates and others being turned to stone as Seluna came for me, trying to kill me. I opened my eyes once again. Torin was busy pulling out bowls and glasses from a bag.

*How the hell is glassware going to help? Are snacks a part of meditation? I would be down for a snack…*

I looked around, trying to avoid looking at the shed, only to see Xavier and Greyson glaring at each other, in the middle of arguing about something.

*Well, that’s not helping, either.*

I sighed. I should have gotten used to seeing my mates at each other’s throats by now, but with everything that was going on, I wished that they could at least attempt to present a united front—for my sake. But apparently that was too much to ask.

I tore my gaze away from them and looked back at Torin, who had set the glasses and bowls up in a semi-circle in front of him.

“Now, I’m going to give you a sound bath. It’s meant to drown out all other sounds, alleviate stress, soothe you, and surround you in comforting vibrations.” Torin started tapping the bowls and running his finger along the rims of the glasses, causing ringing and chiming sounds.

*This… is all a bit much. A good night’s sleep sounds really good right about now.*

“Close your eyes, everyone. Listen to the sounds and drown yourselves in them!” Torin’s voice was gentle, but I could still hear the commanding note. He was definitely in his element.

I sighed and squeezed my eyes shut. Maybe it would work if I really put some effort into it. I wanted to feel better, and maybe I would once it was all over. I just needed to calm my brain down, first. Easy.I closed my eyes and tried to slow my breathing.

After a few moments, the ringing sound faded away, but it was soon replaced by a vibrating hum that intensified quickly and got so loud that I had to cover my ears. I opened my eyes to tell Torin to stop, but I wasn’t on the lawn anymore. I was back in the gallery at the Vanguard palace.

Seluna was heading right for me, but she stopped at Greyson’s statue and kissed him before plunging a knife into his chest. I screamed, but instead of my voice, a ringing sound escaped my lips. Greyson’s statue crumbled to the ground in a heap of rubble.

Then, Seluna moved on to Xavier’s statue and did the same thing; she kissed him deeply before knifing him in the chest. I strained forward, trying to stop her, but my feet wouldn’t move. The sword appeared in my hand, and I tried to lift it, but nothing happened. Xavier’s statue fell to the ground and shattered. I tried to scream again, but it was the same as before—my voice was nothing more than a crescendo of tingling bells.

Seluna turned to face me. “I’ve saved the best for you, little half-Fae.”

She opened her mouth wide, then shoved her hand down her throat and pulled out a snake. She dropped the snake to the floor, and it slithered toward me, hissing and ready to attack.

I cried out as the sword began to burn my hands. It shot out of my hand, whizzed through the air, and pierced Seluna in the chest, releasing dozens of snakes. They landed on the floor and slithered in every direction.

“What have you done?” Seluna shrieked. “What have you *done*? Murderer!” Her voice had turned into a phlegmy rattle. “Murderer!”

Seluna lunged for me, and just like that, I wasn’t in the gallery anymore, but sprinting down one of the long palace corridors.

I burst through the courtyard door, but instead of the fountain, a set of gallows loomed in front of me. Lucian was standing there, beckoning to me.

“We’ve been waiting for you, Caliana.” He unfurled a scroll and started reading from it. “Caliana Hart has been charged with and found guilty of murder. She is sentenced to death!”

Lucian threw his head back and bellowed a sorrowful laugh, then he gestured and someone grabbed me from behind, wrenching my hands behind my back so hard that it hurt. I struggled to free myself, but my hands were bound so tightly that my wrists burned.

As I was forced up the stairs to the gallows, a man with no eyes approached me. His face was skeleton-like, but there was something familiar about it. *Andrei?* Andrei grinned as if he could hear my thoughts, globs of blood dripping from his rotten mouth.

“You reap what you sow, Caliana,” Andrei rasped. “You reap what you sow!”

I was forced up onto the platform, and then Aysel appeared.

“This is the end of the line, Caliana,” she said as she slipped a thick hood over my head.

The hood smelled of death and decay, and I gagged, my stomach twisting with nausea. Now I couldn’t see anything, and I was panicking.

“This is only the beginning for you, Caliana,” Lucian whispered in my ear. “You will die a thousand deaths before you can atone for your sins.”

I tried to scream, but two hands closed around my throat and choked me so hard that my voice died in my throat. Even though I couldn’t see her, I knew that it was Seluna. I tried to take a breath, but Seluna’s hands were closing tighter around my neck, crushing my windpipe.

“Make her suffer!” Seluna hissed. “Make her pay! She must pay for what she’s done! Murderer!”

Suddenly, the hood was pulled off and Greyson and Xavier were standing beside me, nooses looped around their necks. I tried to call out to them, but my throat felt scraped and raw, and no sound came out. I struggled as a noose was put around my neck, too. I looked up just in time to see Lucian give a stiff nod, and then the floor gave way. I screamed.

My eyes shot open. I was back in the pack house yard. I blinked a few times, trying to clear the horrific images out of my head, to no avail. I’d never thought I’d be thankful to feel the cold, damp ground beneath me, but it was the only thing grounding me in reality.

Torin rushed to my side. “Cali? Are you all right?”

I sat up, completely terrified and shaking like a leaf as I tried to remove the noose that was no longer there.

*That felt so real! Was that real?* I looked around frantically. *Xavier and Greyson, are they okay?*

“Cali, what happened? What’s wrong? You’re white as a sheet!” Marta said.

“Yeah, you don’t look too good. Can we help?” Dani added, her face creased with concern.

Torin looped an arm around my shoulders, trying to comfort me. “Did you have a bad dream?”

I was just about to reply when the shed burst into flames.

# Episode 2802

**Xavier**

The last thing I wanted was Greyson’s advice—and it surprised me that he thought I might. To be honest, it was crazy for him to even suggest it—especially with our track record.

I looked my brother in the eye. “No. Thanks for the offer.”

Greyson sighed. “You need to cut Ava out, Xavier. You know she’s only staying close for one reason, ultimately. You know it, I know it, and I’m sure that Cali knows it, too.”

“I thought I told you I didn’t want your advice?” I said. “I don’t need my older brother who was barely around for years breathing down my neck. I can take care of myself.”

“Fine, I’ll stay out of your business. I was just trying to help.”

What I really wanted was to smack him in the face. Greyson should know better than anyone what I was going through with Ava. Even if I wanted to just sever ties with Ava right now, I couldn’t—not with how volatile my wolf was. I didn’t know why Greyson was acting like Ava and I had something going on—that couldn’t have been further from the truth. Besides, Ava knew where we stood, so she could call all she liked, she could hope all she liked, it wouldn’t change anything between us.

Cali was the only woman I wanted. The only woman I loved.

Greyson and I both turned at the sound of commotion coming from the meditation circle. Torin shot up from the ground and ran over to Cali. I immediately started toward them, worry already circling in my gut.

*What the fuck did Torin do, now?*

“Shit! The shed,” Greyson said, pointing. The entire front of the shed was engulfed in flames that were spreading fast. If we didn’t do something soon, the entire thing was going to burn to the ground in no time.

“What the… Fuck, Seluna’s ashes are in there!”

*I knew it! I fucking knew just throwing them in the shed like a pile of raked leaves was a bad idea. But no, I’m not the Alpha, so it wasn’t my place to tell Greyson that he was making a big mistake. And now he’s going to find out for himself, which is even better.*

“We need to put that fire out, now!” Greyson yelled, already scrambling into action. His gaze darted around as if trying to locate a bucket, a hose, anything.

I scowled, still in shock. “No shit, but how? We can’t just blow it out.”

The back door burst open, and Rishika came running out with a fire extinguisher in hand. Ever the overachiever, Rishika looked like she knew what she was doing with the thing, so I felt confident that I could safely redirect my attention to Cali.

“Cali? Are you okay? What the hell happened?” I asked as I stooped down beside her. I shot a quick glance at the raging fire just in time to see Rishika discharge the extinguisher at the base of the flames, snuffing them out quickly. *Rishika is truly badass.* Greyson whipped the shed door open and pulled out a plastic garbage bag—which I assumed held Seluna’s ashes.

“They seem to be okay,” Greyson said, doubling over in relief.

“What’s going on?” Cali muttered, breathing hard. It was almost like she was having a panic attack.

“Cali, can you hear me? Tell me what happened.” I gathered her into my arms. She mumbled something, and I hugged her tighter to me. “It’s okay, it’s okay. I’m here now.” I looked up at Torin. “I’m going to ask this once: What happened?”

“We were just meditating and having a sound bath.” Torin’s eyes were wide as he surveyed the damage to the shed. “It’s not supposed to cause things to burn.”

Greyson came over and knelt down beside Cali. “Are you okay?”

Cali was still breathing hard and working to get herself under control. “I—I think so. I had another nightmare.”

I winced. Shit. I’d been hoping that Cali’s nightmare was a one-time thing. Looked like that theory had just gone out the window.I looked around, wishing the Courier would hurry up and get his ass here.

*Didn’t Okorie say that he’d arrive quicker than we expected? He sure is taking his sweet time.*

Cali glanced at the charred shed. “Did you get the ashes out in time?”

Greyson held up the bag.

“Do you think Seluna caused that fire?” Cali asked, her voice small.

“I don’t know. But how could she have?” I said. “Seluna’s dead, but the sooner the ashes are gone, the better.”

“I’m sorry, I really am,” Torin said. “Something must have gone wrong.”

I stared blankly at him. “You think?”

Torin sniffled. “I’m so sorry, Cali. I had no idea it could go that way. I’ve been studying how to do sound baths, and I never saw anything that suggested anything like this might happen.”

Kira came outside, her eyes glued to the ruined shed. “Everything okay here?”

Greyson nodded. “It’s under control. Now.”

Kira nodded, observing the carnage. “There’s a lot of negative energy out here.” She shuddered. “I’m going to put it out.” She lifted her hands and chanted a creepy-sounding spell, and we watched as the snow melted around the shed and the smoke stopped. “Good, that’s better,” Kira said, hugging herself against the chill in the air.

“Kira, do you know why that happened?” Cali said. “One second we were meditating, and the next… I was thrown into this dream, and then I’m waking up and there’s a fire…”

Kira glanced around at the group. “It’s possible that Dani amplified whatever was happening in your meditative state. Or she might have picked up residual energy from the ashes.”

Cali shivered. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“I wonder if we should try again?” Torin said.

I helped Cali up off the ground. “No. We’re meditated out for the day. No more meditation, sound baths, whatever. We know you meant well, man, but let’s leave Cali out of it for now.” I embraced Cali and pressed my lips close to her ear. “Let’s get you out of here.”

Greyson fell into step beside us as we made our way to the house.

I looked at him. “I’ve got it from here. Why don’t you find another place for the ashes? Preferably somewhere that isn’t, I don’t know, flammable as hell?”

Cali stopped. “Please don’t fight,” she said. “I saw you two earlier. Were you arguing?”

I hesitated. “It was nothing.”

*Or at least it would have been nothing if Greyson hadn’t been sticking his nose where it doesn’t belong.* I was still so pissed at him. Still, there was no way I was going to tell Cali that a call from Ava had started it all.

“Yeah, it’s all good, love. Don’t worry about us right now, worry about feeling better,” Greyson said. “Anyway, I’m off to find somewhere to store these ashes.” He put a hand on Cali’s shoulder. “If you need me, holler.”

I took Cali’s hand and tried to lead her inside. “Can I get you anything?”

Cali shook her head and stopped again. She started to say something, but then she just dissolved into body-wracking tears. My heart ached to see her in so much pain.

“You’re scaring me, baby,” I said, caressing her cheek. “What happened? How can I help you through this?”

“It was horrible,” she sobbed. “I had to watch you *die*! How much longer am I going to have to go through this? I can’t take any more. If I can’t even meditate, how the hell am I ever supposed to sleep well again?”

I pulled her close and pressed her head against my chest as she sobbed. “We’re going to get rid of those ashes. Don’t you worry.”

I knew that was of little comfort to her right now, but I didn’t know what else to say—and honestly, that was the only thing that would solve the problem.

“I wish I hadn’t killed her. It’s all my fault.”

“None of this is your fault, Cali, don’t even say that. I’m just sorry that I wasn’t the one to kill Seluna for you. But either way, that demon had to die. You did what you had to do, and now Greyson and I are going to do whatever it takes to protect you. We’re going to take care of everything. We’re going to talk to the Courier and figure out our next steps, and before you know it, all this will be behind us.”

Cali caught her breath and looked up at me. “Just promise that you won’t make a deal that’ll harm anyone. We have no idea what the Courier’s price will be, and if someone has to suffer in order to pay him… I wouldn’t be able to live with myself.”

I wrapped my arms around her tighter, trying to calm her down. “Nobody’s going to suffer, Cali. We’ll do what it takes to negotiate a fair deal.” I was holding her as tightly as I could, trying to somehow shield her from the harshness of the unpredictable world around us.

*My mate shouldn’t have to suffer like this. I should be able to shield her from all of this, but I can’t.*

Fuck. I felt hopeless and useless, since it was clear that there was nothing I could do in this moment to protect her.

I started to lead her inside. “Want some tea? I’ll make you some.”

My words were nearly drowned out by the low rumble of an engine getting closer and closer. We turned toward the front driveway as a large motorcycle made its way toward the house.

Cali gasped and clung to me tighter. “Who’s that?”

# Episode 2803

We all stood watching as the motorcycle came to a stop on the gravel driveway. The engine was loud, and when it finally died, the silence that followed was practically deafening. A helmeted driver swung his leg over the seat and stood for a moment, looking at us. There was something ominous about the way he looked at us from the blank mask of his helmet.

“Cali, go up to the porch,” Xavier said, not taking his eyes off the rider.

My stomach twisted painfully. Could this be another Vanguard? What the hell had shown up at our doorstep this time?

The rider pulled off his helmet, revealing a hard, grizzled face with a thick beard and long hair knotted by the wind. He looked like a member of a motorcycle gang, not like a Vanguard.

Xavier started toward the man, and I followed behind him. I knew he wanted me to get to a safe distance, but we didn’t know who this guy was. If there was trouble, I could use my magic. There was no way I’d be able to stand around and do nothing.

Greyson joined us as we walked, the trash bag slung over his shoulder, and the three of us approached the rider.

He stared at us, a flat look in his eyes. “Someone here got a package for me to deliver?”

I nearly gasped. This was the *Courier*? He wasn’t what I’d expected. Not that I’d known what to expect, but I’d figured he’d look more like a mailman than the leader of a biker gang.

But then again, we were dealing with demons here, and demons always changed the rules.

Greyson looked him over. “We hear you can bring objects from our world into different realms.”

The guy nodded. “You heard right. That’s my job. And I don’t got all day.” Then his gaze slid over to mine, and a smile twisted his face. “And who’s she?”

A shiver shuddered up my spine as he looked me over. There was something creepy about this guy, and even his gaze felt invasive. If I hadn’t known he was the Courier, I might have guessed that he was a demon. He was giving off this demonic kind of vibe, but according to Okorie, the Courier was a different kind of entity. I couldn’t get a read on him.

As one, Greyson and Xavier stepped in front me, shielding me from the guy’s gaze.

“She’s none of your damn business,” Xavier said, his voice a warning.

“Hey, just being friendly. I wanted to know her name,” the rider said.

“Also none of your business,” Greyson added.

I peeked out from behind Xavier’s shoulders and caught the rider’s eye. He winked at me, but I frowned. Hang on, I could have sworn he’d had brown eyes when he’d looked me up and down, but now they were bright blue. And he’d had a scraggly beard when he pulled up, but now it was gone.

What the hell? Was this guy’s face *changing*?

“*You* got a name?” Greyson asked coldly.

The guy shrugged. “Most folks just call me the Courier. Makes things easy.” He gestured toward his bike. “You fellas got any gas? I’m on empty.”

Xavier scoffed. “Do we look like a fucking gas station to you?”

The Courier narrowed his eyes, and I started to get worried. The last thing we needed was for a fight to break out. If this guy could actually do what Okorie said he could do, then we needed him. I couldn’t keep having these damn Seluna dreams. I was already starting to feel crazy from lack of sleep.

*Be nicer*, I said, trying to mind link with Xavier. But there was still something wrong with our connection, and the link wasn’t working right now.

Another reason to want Seluna good and gone—forever. The mind link with my mates was still spotty, like bad cell reception, and I hoped that once we’d taken care of the demon’s remains, our connection would be fully fixed.

“We need something delivered to the demon world,” Greyson said. “Is that something you can do?”

The Courier looked back at his bike, then at Greyson. “Not if don’t get some gas in my girl.”

His voice was cold and hard, and the whole setup wasn’t filling me with a ton of confidence. What kind of two-bit courier showed up needing gas to make a delivery?

I glanced over my shoulder. Maybe I should go get Okorie, just to have him verify that this guy was for real.

Greyson gestured toward his car. “There’s gas in there. If you have a siphon, you can help yourself.”

The Courier nodded and, as he wheeled his bike closer to the car, I gasped. Had his hair just changed from black to blond?

I was still staring at it when Xavier turned to face me and Greyson.

“Are we really going to trust this jackass?” he demanded.

“What do you mean?” Greyson asked.

“What do you mean what do I mean? I wouldn’t trust this guy to deliver a fucking postcard,” Xavier snarled.

Greyson looked at the rider thoughtfully. “I agree he seems a little shady—”

“A *little* shady?”

“—but I don’t see that we have a lot of other options,” Greyson pointed out.

Greyson was right about that. I didn’t like the look of the guy, but anything was better than seeing my mates attempt the journey and having them burn to death while trying to cross into the demon world.

But this was such an important mission—I wished I could trust the Courier.

We watched as the guy pulled a thin hose from his saddle bag, then threaded it into Greyson’s gas tank. He leaned down and sucked to start the flow of gas. Then he stood and spat a mouthful of gasoline onto the ground.

I flinched at the sight of it, then again as I watched his blond hair turn red and a matching red beard sprout from his smooth face.

I looked up at my mates in surprise. Neither of them had said anything. Hadn’t they noticed there was something weird about this guy? His appearance kept shifting!

The door of the house banged open, and Okorie came striding out. He looked at the Courier for a moment, then stepped over to where I was standing with Greyson and Xavier.

“Did you make a deal?” he asked.

“We haven’t gotten that far yet,” Greyson said shortly. “Is this your guy?”  
 Okorie nodded.

“You sure?” Xavier asked.

“I’m sure. That’s him. Kinda hard to forget once you’ve met him,” Okorie said with certainty.

“What’s the deal with him?” I asked quietly.

“What do you mean?”

I tipped my chin toward the guy. I didn’t want to point and attract any attention. “The shifting features. Blond one minute, black hair the next.”

“Oh, that. Call if a form of defense,” Okorie said.

“*Defense?*” I asked. “How does that help him?”

The warlock shrugged. “No defined features. Makes it hard for witnesses to accurately identify him. Not to mention if you make it your business to travel all over the realms it’s important to blend in, yeah?”

I squinted over the Courier. “So how do you know that’s actually him?”

Okorie followed my gaze. “I know,” was all he said. Then he stepped toward the guy.

The Courier turned as Okorie approached him. “I heard you recommended me, man. Thanks for the referral.” His face twisted into a smile. “I’ll take that into consideration the next time we do business, little man.”

I couldn’t hear what Okorie said to that, but he stood with the Courier as he finished filling his tank. Then they walked back toward us. The rider smiled at me as he drew near, and I grimaced, smelling the gasoline on his breath.

*Ugh*.

“So what is it you folks want delivered?” he asked, looking between Greyson and Xavier. “Cause if it’s too big for me to carry, I’m going to have to get my truck. And that costs extra.”

Greyson gestured to the bag on his shoulder. “It’s just this.”

“How much is this going to cost?” Xavier asked.

The Courier was now sporting a high, acid green mohawk, and he ran his hand thoughtfully over the spikes. “Well, let me see. Delivery into the demon realm doesn’t come cheap. Especially on such short notice. This is a rush job.”

I bit my lip. The way he was talking was making it sound like it was going to cost a fortune to get rid of the ashes.

“And there’s a rush fee, so that’ll be extra,” the Courier went on.

“Just tell us how much,” Xavier snapped, looking annoyed.

I got where he was coming from—I was feeling tense, too—but I reached out and squeezed his hand. I didn’t want Xavier to antagonize this guy any more than he had already.

The Courier didn’t look offended, though. He paused like he was doing some quick math in his head. Then he shrugged. “I’ll do it for three.”

Xavier stared at him. “Three what? Three thousand? Fuck man, stop being cryptic and tell us how much you want!”

The Courier shook his head. “Nah, man—three years off your life.”

# Episode 2804

**Xavier**

I stepped up at the Courier, clenching my fists as rage pulsed through me. “Are you fucking joking, man?”

The Courier gave me an icy look. “No. I never joke when it comes to my fee. Three years ain’t bad. I’m giving you a deal, pal. Look at you—you’re young, healthy. You’ve probably got lots of years ahead of you. You’ll probably live to a nice old age. What’s three years, give or take? Hell, at that point, you’ll probably be glad.”

I whipped around to glare at Okorie. “What the fuck is this? What’s he talking about?”

Okorie shrugged, looking unsurprised. “It’s really not that uncommon within the supernatural world—”

“It’s not uncommon to take away three years of someone’s life just to *deliver something*?” Cali asked, her voice shrill. “Are you kidding me?”

“Three years.” The Courier shrugged his massive shoulders. “That’s my fee. Take it or leave it.”

Cali turned to look at Greyson and me. “Leave it. You have to. You can’t do this. There has to be some other way.”

“But what way?” I asked. I turned to Greyson. “What do you think about this?”

Greyson looked like he was thinking hard. “Just sit tight for a minute,” he said to the Courier, then grabbed my arm and pulled me aside, away from Cali, who was watching us closely. “What do you think? I mean, I don’t know of another way, but if you do, I’m open to options.”

I ran a frustrated hand through my hair. “I fucking hate this. I can’t think of another way either, and I feel like we’re getting screwed here. But unless you know of another courier service, I guess this is our only option.”

“I’m on the clock here, guys,” the Courier called over to us.

Greyson gritted his teeth. “We have to do this.”

I looked at him, and I could tell he was thinking what I was thinking. “We can’t let Cali suffer anymore.”

“Exactly.” Greyson nodded. “We have to get rid of Seluna’s ashes.”

Agreed, we both turned to the Courier. Greyson took a step toward him, but I stopped him.

“Hang on,” I said, with a flicker of anxiety. “Which one of us?”

Greyson frowned. “Which one of us what?”

“Which one of us does it? Who loses the three years?” I asked.

Greyson’s jaw flexed. “I’m the Alpha, and this is pack business, so I’ll do it. I’ll hand over the bag to him,”

“Greyson—” I started, wanting to argue this with him, but he didn’t let me finish. He pushed past me and stepped toward the Courier.

I did not like Greyson taking the deal. It didn’t feel right. I knew I should have no problem letting Greyson cut his life shorter by three years. But the fact was, I *did* have a problem with it. Something was bothering me about all of this. Greyson was the Alpha, but Cali was mated to both of us. It wasn’t that I wanted to be the hero—it was something else. Could it be that I was worried? That I actually wanted to protect my brother?

Inwardly, I scoffed at the idea. No fucking way. But then again, *could* it be that?

Greyson stopped in front of the Courier. “Three years. We have a deal.” He moved to hand the rider the bag, but Cali’s scream stopped him.

“Greyson! *Stop!*” She pushed forward and grabbed his arm, her face pale and her eyes wide with fright. “Greyson, don’t do this, please!”

“Cali, we have to get rid of the ashes,” Greyson said.

And it was true. Cali looked tired and wan, and like she’d lost weight. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen her eat anything. We had to help her.

But she was shaking her head. “No, Greyson, I won’t let you do this. Seluna’s death was my responsibility. I should be the one who hands over the bag. *I* should lose the three years.”

As she reached for the bag, I hurried toward her. I was worried she was going to do something rash—she had a history of rashness, after all.

“Cali, stop,” I said, pulling her close. “You’re not handing him anything. Don’t get involved with this.”

But Cali struggled to free herself from my grasp. “No, I’m not going to let either of you sacrifice any more for me. It’s not right. I should be the one—”

“I really don’t give a shit who hands me the bag,” the Courier said, sounding vaguely bored, “but someone had better do it quick. I’m losing patience, and you never know, my offer just might go up to four years if I have to keep waiting.”

I glared at the guy as I tried to keep Cali from rushing forward.

“Just hold Cali while I do this,” Greyson told me, and he held out the bag to the Courier.

“STOP! Greyson, I don’t want you to do this!” Cali screamed, furious and terrified.

I hated hearing so much fear in her voice. I knew we had to get this over with, so, letting go of Cali, I moved quickly. I grabbed the bag from Greyson’s grasp before anyone could stop me and shoved it into the Courier’s hand. As soon as the bag made contact, I felt a cold rush move through my body like spreading ice. It started at my hand and moved quickly, making me shiver.

The Courier didn’t seem to have felt anything, and he dropped the trash bag into one of his saddle bags. “Nice doing business with you, fellas.”

Cali gave a choked sob, and Greyson glowered at me.

“Goddammit, Xavier,” he muttered.

But I didn’t care. I couldn’t care. I’d done what I needed to do.

The Courier nodded at Okorie and flung one leg back over his bike. He was about to start it when Greyson grabbed his jacket.

“Hang on,” he growled. “Where’s my guarantee?”

“What?” the Courier asked, looking down at Greyson’s hand on his jacket.

“How do I know the package will be delivered?”

The Courier looked past Greyson and directly at Cali. He looked her up and down, undressing her with his eyes. “She’ll know,” he said when his gaze reached her face again.

And without another word, he started the engine, revved, and peeled out, spraying gravel behind him.

Cali rounded on me, her eyes flashing. “Why did you do that?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer her. To be honest, I was a little stunned myself. “What’s the big deal? The Courier’s probably right. I’m young, and I still have years and years ahead of me.” I shrugged, trying to sound casual. “By the time we’re old and wrinkled, three years won’t seem like anything.”

I smiled at her, but Cali didn’t return my grin. She glared and turned on her heel, stomping into the house.

Greyson was giving me a steady look. “Grabbing that bag was a really stupid thing to do.”

And then, before I could respond, he clapped me on the shoulder and headed into the house.

I stared after him. I felt a little strange—I had just saved three years of my brother’s life, and I had no idea how to feel about it.

What the fuck had I just done? Had I been… *looking out* for Greyson?

That had better not become a regular habit. I didn’t think I’d be able to live with myself.

I looked over at Okorie, who was gazing down the driveway, watching the bike as it shrank into the distance, then disappeared.

He turned to me. “I tried to warn you,” he said. “I told you the price was really steep.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, I know, but years of my life wasn’t what I thought you were talking about. Thanks for the heads-up on that.”

Okorie looked unbothered. “Well, in any case, the package will be delivered. The Courier doesn’t fail.”

He turned and headed up the porch steps and into the house, leaving me alone outside. I looked up at the sky, which was a pale, wintery grey. I wondered when we were going to have a clear day. I felt like it had been a while since I’d seen the sky unobscured by clouds.

I supposed three years weren’t so bad. I mean, three years off the end of my life was still better than burning up trying to cross the demon world, right? And I didn’t care what Cali had said—there was no way I was going to let her go anywhere near that bag.

I looked over at the door. I needed to talk to Cali. I always hated it when she was upset with me, and she seemed really pissed.

I sighed. I knew that I’d just done the right thing, but what if—in doing so—I hadn’t just lost three years off my life, but also lost my mate’s trust?

# Episode 2805

I pounded up the stairs and ran straight to my room, slamming the door behind me. I couldn’t *believe* what Xavier had just done. He’d agreed to give away three years of his life. *Three years!* Years that he could have spent with me. The idea of losing either Xavier or Greyson always stung, but to hear the Courier put it all so bluntly had felt like being pierced with a blade.

As much as we were faced with it at the pack house, I hated thinking about mortality, about the fact that I could lose someone I loved. I knew it was possible—in battle, or a freak accident—but I kept it in the abstract as much as I could.

But—*ugh!* I was just… angry. And sad. And deeply frustrated. If Xavier hadn’t handed the bag to the Courier, Greyson would have. *I’d* wanted to do it—it was my responsibility—but both of my mates had refused to listen to me. They were willing to sacrifice three years of their lives so I didn’t have to. Was that supposed to make me feel *better*? I knew they wanted to protect me—they always did—but this felt like too much.

Like the guilt I felt for killing Seluna wasn’t already consuming enough. Now I was going to spend the rest of my life worried about Xavier. How did it work, anyway? Would the Courier just show up one day and kill him? Drag him off somewhere? Did the Courier somehow know when Xavier was going to die?

I jumped when there was a knock at my door.

“Who is it?” I asked, dashing the tears from my eyes with the back of my hand.

“It’s me,” Lola said, poking her head into the room.

“What’s up?” I asked, trying to pull myself together.

“I wondered if you’d asked Greyson about the lake house. What did he say?”

I sighed and shook my head. “I haven’t asked him. I didn’t have a chance. Something… bad happened during Torin’s meditation session.”

“Oh.” Lola stepped into the room, looking worried. “What happened?”

I shook my head. I didn’t want to get into it. “Nothing, it’s fine. I know you’re stressed enough dealing with your dads coming in. I’ll ask Greyson about the house soon, don’t worry.”

She looked relived. “Thank you. I really hope he says yes. Because if he doesn’t, we’re going to need to go to Plan B.”

“What is Plan B?” I asked.

“I don’t have a Plan B,” Lola replied wryly. She tipped her head and looked at me closely. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

I nodded quickly. “Yeah, I’m fine. I’m just feeling stressed. And the meditation thing didn’t help, what with it being a total disaster.”

“Maybe you should try something else. Something more uplifting. I heard that Torin wanted to do a holiday photoshoot. Maybe that would cheer you up,” Lola suggested.

“I’m not really in the mood—”

“Come on,” she wheedled. “You just said you’re stressed, and you look like hell. You could use something to help push some of the crap in your life way.” She smiled. “The holidays are supposed to be fun, remember? You shouldn’t be up here in your room, alone. And brooding.”

“I don’t know,” I said slowly.

“Besides, I think Torin’s a little down too. Probably because of the meditation thing. It would really cheer him up if you made an appearance.”

I thought about it for a moment.

“Fine,” I sighed, getting to my feet.

I stepped to the mirror and smoothed down my hair and wiped the last of the tears from my eyes, then followed Lola downstairs. It was probably a mistake to do this—I didn’t know how much joy I was going to be bringing with me.

When we got to the living room, we found Torin trying to arrange everyone in front of the Christmas tree—with little success. Watching him trying to organize the pack was like watching someone trying to herd cats. Every time he moved someone into place, someone else moved out of place, and he had to start all over.

Lola and I had stepped into the room, and as I looked around, I saw Greyson standing in the doorway, watching me. He’d just started toward me when Torin called out to him.

“Greyson! Thank goodness. Can you help here? I can’t get anyone to pose,” he said.

Greyson gave me a long-suffering look.

“Go help,” I said gesturing to Torin. I might have been upset with Greyson, but Torin shouldn’t have to suffer for it.

Greyson gave me a nod and turned to the pack. “Everyone needs to pay attention. I want everyone listening to Torin for a minute. This is a pack picture, so act like a pack.”

There was some general grumbling, but everyone started to move toward the Christmas tree. Torin looked relieved and started moving people around, putting the tallest pack members in the back row.

Xavier came into the room and strode toward me.

I looked around quickly, trying to find an escape route, but we were packed in too tightly. I was crowded into a doorway and trapped.

“Cali,” Xavier said, taking my hand.

I pulled it away and looked steadily at Torin, who was trying to convince Sage and Zainab they couldn’t stand next to each other because Zainab would block all the people behind her.

Xavier sighed. “I’m sorry, Cali. I didn’t intend to cause you any pain.”

I glared at him. “You and Greyson both told me you’d check with me before you agreed to make any deals with the Courier. Three years, Xavier!”

He looked away from me, but I could see in his eyes that he was upset, too. As he should be.

“What can I do to make this right?” he asked, his voice strained.

“MISTLETOE!”

I jumped and looked over at Torin, the one who’d yelled. Then I saw everyone’s eyes on me and looked up.

Hung just above Xavier and me was a small cluster of green stems, tied with a jaunty red bow.

Xavier looked down at me, and I could see something blazing in his eyes. “We’re supposed to kiss.”

There was part of me that didn’t want to kiss Xavier, but there was another part—the part that was looking at the desire burning in his eyes—that did. And I knew he was sorry about what had happened. I knew he wouldn’t ever do anything to intentionally hurt me. He loved me, and I loved him. I was his mate.

“Mistletoe! Mistletoe! Mistletoe!”

Xavier leaned closer to me. “You can just pretend if you want.”

I could never pretend—not with Xavier. My feelings for him were too intense. And the instant his lips touched mine, all the anger, the worry, and the frustration dissolved. At least for the moment.

This was Xavier. My mate. He had willingly given up years of his life for me. How could I punish him for that?

The kiss started soft—just something to satisfy our audience—but it deepened as I leaned into him. Xavier slid one arm around my waist and threaded his other hand into my hair, pulling a little as he bent me back over his arm.

The cheers from the rest of the pack turned to catcalls, and I was blushing when I pulled away from the kiss. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Greyson turning away, and my stomach dropped. I was sorry he’d been forced to see that.

“Are we okay?” Xavier murmured into my ear.

I nodded. “For now. But don’t ever do that again—”

“Okay, can we take the picture now?” Torin interrupted. “Lola, you’re over there. Jay, go right there, by the tree. Charlie, over near Zainab.”

I could see that Marta, Dani, Okorie, and Kira were standing a little off to the side, looking on as the pack gathered for the photo.

“Why aren’t they in the picture?” I asked Xavier. “I mean, they might not be official pack members, but they still belong here with everyone else.”

Xaiver glanced over at the group of witches and nodded. “Yeah they do. Hey! Witches! Get on in here!”

The small group looked surprised, but pleased, and they moved over toward the Christmas tree.

“Okay, Dani, I’m going to put you right here in front so we can see you,” Torin said, shepherding her into place. “Everyone! Think of something sweet!”

He had a camera set up on a tripod, and after he pressed the shutter button, he sprinted back toward the tree and got into position for the photo.

“It’s going to take a few seconds, so hold your position!” he shouted, like a general directing an army.

There was a blinding series of flashes, and when they finished, everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Then they moved toward the camera.

“I want to see how my hair looked,” Ravi said.

Lola stepped beside me and gave me a nudge in the ribs. “He’s right there,” she said, tipping her chin toward Greyson. “Go ask him about the house.”

“Right,” I said, my heart pounding. But, because Lola was waiting, I worked my way over to Greyson. “Hey. I’m sorry about that with the mistletoe—”

“It’s okay,” he said quickly. “I get it.”

Standing on tiptoe, I reached up to kiss him on the cheek. “Well, now that that’s out of the way, I have another question for you. Would you let Lola and me use the lake house?”

# Episode 2806

Greyson furrowed his brow. “Why would you and Lola want to use the lake house?” he asked, clearly confused.

I gestured vaguely to where Lola stood watching us. “She’s got a dads issue.”

“Um, care to elaborate on that?”

I heaved a gusty sigh. I wished Lola had just taken on telling Greyson herself instead of making me do it. “Lola *might* have given her dads the impression that she’s been going to school this whole time. And she might have given her dads the impression that she lives in a share house off campus.”

“The lake house,” he said.

“Yup.”

Greyson ran a hand through his hair. “So, in other words, she lied to them.”  
 He’d hit the issue right on the head, and I couldn’t deny it. “Well, yeah. It’s all kind of a mess,” I said. “She wants to stay there while her dads are in town, to sort of pretend like she’s going to school and just living in off-campus housing. She didn’t want to drag the whole pack into it, plus Jay’s living here and they aren’t his biggest fan. And you know… it’s a pack. Of werewolves.”

“Are you kidding? Why don’t they like Jay?” he asked. “Who doesn’t like Jay?”

“I know,” I admitted. “It’s bizarre. Jay’s, like, the nicest guy in the world, and puts up with all of Lola’s crap.” I glanced over my shoulder at Lola, who was still eyeing us. “Anyway, what do you say?”  
 Greyson shrugged. “I mean, I’ll give her the keys, but honestly, this doesn’t sound like the best idea in the long run.”

“I do not disagree,” I said flatly, thinking back to the version of this exact conversation I’d already had with Lola. “But it’s just for a short time, and I don’t think it’ll be too hard.”

“It’s her problem ultimately, not mine,” he added. He looked over at Lola, aware she was watching. “Good luck.”

He gave me a quick kiss on the cheek, and I turned and gave Lola a thumbs up. Grinning, Lola jumped with happiness. “Thank you, Greyson!” she squealed, then rushed over to Jay.

“Cali!” Torin’s voice came. “Help me pick out a photo!”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “Photo? What’s he talking about?”

“He got a dating profile,” I said. “I’d better go look. I think I was closing my eyes in one of them. I want to tell Torin not to use that one—”

“Hang on,” Greyson said, touching my arm. “Can we talk for a sec?”

I nodded, feeling warm with his hand on me.

“I wanted to tell you that I’m really sorry about the way things went down with the Courier. We were in a tough spot,” he said. “It seemed like we had a short window to decide, but that’s not how I wanted it to happen. I never would have wanted either you or Xavier to make that deal. I should have been the one to do it.”

I tipped my head. “I know, Greyson, but remember that I worry about you just as much as you worry about me. I know you did what you thought was best, what was right, but next time we should try to discuss it more, right?”

Greyson looked thoughtful, then nodded. “I agree. I’m sorry, love.”

I smiled, then reached out to squeeze his hand. “It’s okay,” I said. “Now, how about we look at the pictures?”  
 “Sounds good.”

As we stepped across the room, I wondered if I should have given both my mates a harder time about the thing with the Courier. But how could I? They were my mates. Forgiveness was part of love, and what they’d done had been born from love.

“What are we working with here?” I asked when we reached Torin.

I didn’t know what I was expecting, but the photos weren’t that bad, considering how many people were involved. There were a few where Ravi’s hair looked electrified by the Christmas lights behind it, and one where Sage was making a face like she was about to sneeze, but the general atmosphere of happiness and home had been captured perfectly. I was pretty impressed that we had so many with people not blinking.

Torin was smiling. “We should print up cards. Your dad was telling me people do that in the winter and then send them out to their friends. I was even looking into having a life-sized poster made, but the shipping costs made him look like he was going to faint—”

“Hey, sorry to interrupt.”

I looked over at Kira, who had appeared at my shoulder. “Hey,” I said, turning toward her. Greyson was in the middle of arguing with Torin about which photo his hair looked better in anyway. “What’s up?”

“I just wanted to check in and see how you were feeling.”

“I’m feeling a bit better now, thanks. But I was pretty freaked out before,” I admitted. I lowered my voice. “Between you and me, that meditation session was kind of a disaster. It really only made me feel worse. I’m actually kind of dreading tonight, when I have to sleep.”

“Why?” she asked.

“I’m sure I’m going to have more nightmares,” I said, shivering at the thought. “I feel like I’m being haunted by them.”

Kira looked thoughtful. “I think Torin had the right idea, he just executed it wrong.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“When I was grieving over Geoff’s death, I used meditation, and it really helped me,” she said. “But a bit of a different method. Maybe I can show you what I did. Do you want to try?”

“I don’t know,” I said slowly. “I guess I’m a little gun shy after what happened with Torin. I had a nightmare during it, and it was terrifying.”

Kira nodded sympathetically. “I get that, but my technique is different. It involves some magic, and I’ve done it before. I know what I’m doing. It’s not going to be the same as that sound bath thing Torin was trying.” She shook her head. “He’s discovered YouTube and thinks it’s the answer to everything. My process is a bit more well-seasoned.”

I thought this over. I really couldn’t face another night like last night. I took a deep breath. “If you really think it would help, I’m willing to give it a try.”

Kira glanced around the crowded room. “Let’s meet in the study near the front door. I think it’ll be quieter there. And maybe we should bring in the other girls who were possessed—Dani and Artemis.”

“I’m not sure they’ll want to,” I said, “but I’ll ask them.”

Unsurprisingly, Artemis was skeptical when I asked her, but she finally nodded. “I’ll do it if you think it’ll help.”

“Great, let’s ask Dani,” I said, spying her in the crowd.

Dani looked frightened as I explained the idea to her.

“You don’t have to,” I said quickly. “But Kira thinks it will help.”

Dani bit her lip, but she agreed.

The three of us walked into the hallway and found Kira waiting for us in the doorway of the small study.

My stomach was tied into nervous knots, and Greyson—who had followed us over—must have guessed as much, because he leaned down to give me a quick kiss.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Kira thinks she might be able to help us with a different meditation method,” I said. “I’m a bit nervous though.”

“It’ll be okay, love,” he said. “You can do it. If you want to, that is.”

I nodded.

“Come in,” Kira said, gesturing us inside. “Sit in a circle.”

I gave Greyson’s hand a squeeze before following in behind the other girls. We sat on the floor, holding hands as Kira lit a knot of sage and wafted the smoke through the small room.

“I want you to close your eyes,” she said, her voice low, “and think of someone you love.”

Obediently, I closed my eyes and let my thoughts drift to the people I loved—my mom, my dad, Greyson, Xavier, Artemis. I didn’t dare choose just one of them; that would feel too much like choosing a mate, and I couldn’t risk that. But just thinking about all the love in my life made me feel warm and full of hope.

Kira began to chant, the sound almost a song. The tension in my shoulders released, giving way to a curious sense of calm.

*Caliana*

*Caliana*

*Caliana*

I opened my eyes at the sound of my name and found myself back in the gallery at the Vanguard palace. Immediately, my heart began to pound. This wasn’t supposed to be happening.

Seluna was there, and seeing me, she walked toward the statue of Greyson. But before she could reach it, she stopped, and her eyes went wide. She gasped, then screamed, “NO!”

She rounded on me and tried to reach me, but something was dragging her back. And the farther she moved from me, the better I felt. I felt like I had control of my power, and of the room. It was like a weight was being lifted from me, the one that had been holding my feet to the ground.

I rushed to the statue of Greyson as he broke free of the stone. Xavier did the same, and came to stand next to me.

The three of us watched Seluna being pulled through a door. On the other side of the door was pure darkness, and she didn’t want to go.

“No! Stop! STOP!” she screamed, clawing at the door and whatever was pulling her, but it was too strong, and she was pulled through the doorway, disappearing instantly into the blackness beyond. The door slammed shut, and I opened my eyes with a gasp.

I was back in the study, and Artemis was looking at me curiously.

“Did it work?”

# Episode 2807

**Xavier**

Walking through the living room, I was feeling a hell of a lot better about life after kissing Cali underneath the mistletoe. I knew she was angry with me—and I got why—but kissing her made it clear that she still loved me, and what had happened was just a temporary setback. If anything, kissing her had made me want to scoop her up in my arms and carry her upstairs. I could feel my body warm just thinking about it, but that would probably be rushing things a little.

Stepping outside into the cold winter air, I took a deep breath, filling my lungs. The house was hot as hell, and having the whole pack all together in one space was always fun for a minute, but could start to feel overwhelming pretty quickly. I needed some fresh air—and some space.

As I stared out at the wintery lawn, it occurred to me that I still hadn’t called Ava back. I hadn’t answered at the time because Greyson had been with me, and he’d given me so much shit about her calling in the first place. I was sick of him sticking his nose into my business, so I’d sent it to voicemail. I knew I could just ignore her call completely, but lately Ava wasn’t calling to say, “Hey, what’s up?” There was usually a reason. Had something happened with the shrimp?

I pulled out my phone and dialed her number.

“Hey,” she said, picking up after the first ring.

“What do you want?” I asked shortly.

There was a pause. “*You* called *me*, X.”

“No, I’m returning your call,” I said irritably. “That’s completely different.”

She laughed. “I know. I’m just messing with you.”

“Either you tell me what you want or I’m hanging up,” I said, not in the mood for more bullshit.

“I was just calling to check in. I was thinking about you all and wondering how the demon thing was going. Were you able to do anything with the information I gave you? Did you find Rhett?”

I paused for a moment. Was she asking because she was really concerned, or was there some other agenda? On some level, it bothered me that I was even asking that question. We’d been through a lot recently. Hadn’t Ava done enough to earn some trust?  
 I cleared my throat. “It went well,” I said, trying to keep my tone civil. “I think we have it under control.”

I didn’t mention the deal I’d just made with the Courier. She wouldn’t be pleased to hear about it, and I had no interest in having that conversation with her. Besides, she didn’t need to know everything.  
 Ava cleared her throat. “I’m glad it went well, X, but there’s another reason I called.”

I knew it. My instinct had been right. With Ava there was always a catch. Something waiting in the background.

“What is it?” I asked, not sure what to expect.

“Knox is talking about bringing the Samara pack back together,” she said.

“Yeah, I know that,” I said wryly. “Good luck to the shrimp on that.”

She made a dismissive noise. “Get real, X. We both know Knox doesn’t have what it takes to be an Alpha. He’s too young, for one. He may have it in his blood, but blood’s all he’s got.” She paused. “He’s not like you.”

I didn’t know what to say in response to that. Ava had told me to be an Alpha, multiple times at this point. She’d certainly made it clear what she thought of me, but a lot of that had been trying to sweettalk me and our mate bond to her liking. Right now though, I wasn’t sure what she meant by this comment.

I laughed it off. “Don’t tell Knox that. That dude thinks a lot of himself. But why call me about that to begin with? What do his pathetic aspirations have to do with me?”

“I was hoping you could talk to him,” she said. “Explain to him that he’s not ready yet.”

She had to be joking. “What?”  
 “I’m just worried that if he tries to reunite the pack and fails—which I’m sure he will—the pack will never get another chance to come back together.”

I passed a hand over my eyes. “I’m still not sure why this is my problem.”

“Because I belong to the Samara pack,” Ava said, an edge to her voice. “And I don’t want to see its last chance ruined by my impulsive, inexperienced cousin.”

I thought about this for a moment. If the Samara pack *did* somehow manage to get its act together, it would give Ava a place to go—away from me and Cali. It was hard not to see how advantageous this could be for me.

“Do you really think the shrimp will listen to me?” I asked. “I mean, it’s not like I’m at the top of his list of favorite people.”

“Well, it might help a bit if you stopped referring to him as a crustacean every time his name comes up,” Ava pointed out.

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. I guess I can do that.”

“Great,” Ava said, sounding pleased. “I’ll try to set something up with him.”

“Okay.”

“Thank you, Xavier,” she said quietly. “I know you don’t have to agree to help. You’re right—it’s not your problem, and I appreciate it.”

“Sure,” I said, and ended the call.

Ava was right about Knox’s inexperience and how it might doom the Samara pack, but I wondered how the shrimp—*Knox*—would react when I brought that up. The guy already wanted to kill me. I didn’t imagine it would go well.

Which… Could that be Ava’s plan?

No, that was crazy, even for Ava. I tried to shake the thought off.

I turned to go back inside, but I stopped when I realized something interesting. I’d just spoken to Ava, but my wolf wasn’t going crazy. Which was weird. Every time I’d spoken to her recently, it had felt like my wolf had something *very* emphatic to say about it. But it was gone now. Where was the struggle?

I thought back to the moment between Ava and me at the Vanguard mansion, when we’d been influenced by the incubus. My wolf had gone *insane* for her, giving the incubus the chaotic energy it wanted. But ever since then, things had calmed down.

I mean, not completely. My wolf still stirred for Ava, but not like before. Something had changed, that was obvious. But why? What was it? Had the incubus had some kind of effect on our mate bond?

There was probably a lot to know about incubi, but I only knew the basics. Beyond that—their motivations, their long-term effects—I didn’t have a clue.

But it was a good feeling. Freeing. I felt like I’d been unchained from Ava. The only reason I was keeping her around was because of my shifting problem—

Then another thought occurred to me that nearly stopped me in my tracks. What if I didn’t need her anymore? What if whatever had affected our mate bond had also fixed my shifting problem? Maybe that was the reason why my wolf had calmed down. Maybe it had come back into alignment with my human half.

One way or another, I had to find out.

I turned away from the house and had just started toward the trees when I remembered: LIPS. Those nosy bastards were still out there. It was risky to shift at all, but what if I was wrong about the change and got stuck? No, that was too dangerous to just try out. I was going to have to test it first.

I headed back inside. The pack was still in the living room. Someone had brought in drinks and snacks, and it had an informal party atmosphere.

“Jay!” I called, waving him over.

He threaded his way through the room. “Hey man, what’s up?”  
 “I want to test my shifting to see if it’s back under control, but I want to do it in more of a controlled environment. Can you help me out?’

“You know it, man,” Jay said, and put his drink down on a side table. “Lead the way.”

I led him down to the basement. “I’m just going to shift like usual, and then shift back. If something goes wrong, I need you to get Ava.” I handed him my phone. “Just call her. But only if something goes wrong.”

Jay rolled his eyes. “It’s not like I’m going to call her just to chat, man.”

I walked into a large basement room and stood in the center. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I could feel my wolf stirring, excitement building for the shift. Then, with a cracking sound, I shifted into my wolf form.

Looking up, I could see Jay smiling down at me. “Looks great, man. But can you shift back?” He faked pressing numbers on my phone and held it to his ear, the screen dark. “Ava? Come quick, Xavier’s stuck,” he sang the last few words.

I growled at him, then, with another deep breath, tried to shift back.

# Episode 2808

“Cali, hello?” Artemis said. “Did it work?”

“I dunno.” I blinked a few times and tried to figure out if the meditation had worked—if anything had changed. Was I feeling more relaxed, or did I just *think* I was feeling more relaxed? Was this a placebo effect, or had Kira’s witchy meditation really helped?

Was I rid of Seluna?

“Was that it?” I asked Kira, looking up.

She nodded in that serious way of hers that left no room for argument. I slowly stood up, feeling a little wobbly. I probably looked like a duckling learning to walk, but Kira mercifully didn’t comment.

“How do you feel?” Artemis sauntered over and grabbed my hand, looking at me with all the hope in the world. “Does your head hurt?”

I paused for a moment, processing.

“I think… I think it worked?” It sounded like a question, because I was shocked it had been so easy. I smiled a little and added, “I mean, there’s no headache, and the vision went away, so…”

Artemis exhaled in relief, just as Greyson entered the room from the doorway and scooped me into a hug. He was warm and strong and felt as good as ever. His voice was low in my ear. “I’m so relieved, love, you have no idea.”

I grinned as he squished me. “I gathered that from the death grip.”

He made a move to ease his hold, but it was my turn to grab him.

“I didn’t say you could let go!”

He laughed, his chest vibrating with the sound. My god, everything already felt so much better.

But then Kira had to remind us of the obvious.

“This is just a just stopgap,” she said. “It will muffle the dreams just long enough for the Courier to deliver the ashes to the demon world.”

Despite the reality check, I felt hopeful. Everything was going to be okay. It had to be.

“Thank you so much for helping me,” I told the witch.

“Glad it worked,” Kira said. Then she raised her hand to awkwardly pat my shoulder. At least she was trying to be friendly, unlike the way Big Mac was sometimes—I appreciated that.

“Wait, Dani!” I let go of Greyson and turned to the girl, who was looking down at herself. “How are you feeling?”

She pressed a hand to her chest, then her forehead before looking up at me. There was a shy smile on her face. “I feel better too. It’s like all the noise in my head has quieted down.”

“Oh, thank god!” I dashed over and pulled her into an embrace. She squeaked in surprise before hugging me back. Pretty tightly, actually.

*When was the last time someone hugged Dani?*

I kept hugging her as Kira said, “Since the two of you seem to be connected because of Seluna, the spell will help to mute both your dreams and visions as well.”

“We’re free!” I told Dani enthusiastically.

“This is a temporary fix. So, semi-free,” Kira said wryly.

“Semi-free!” I corrected, feigning the same enthusiasm.

Dani snorted. “I’ll take it.”

I turned to a smiling Greyson. “Maybe life can now finally go back to norm—”

“NO!” A scream came from the kitchen, and everybody jumped.

Greyson growled. “Now what?”

With Greyson leading, we all rushed to the kitchen to find a pot of melted caramel on the ground. Torin and my father were standing over it. Torin’s hands were over his eyes in despair. He was giving me some strong Greek tragedy vibes.

“It’s okay, Torin,” Dad said. “We’ll clean it up and try again.”

Torin grabbed my dad by the lapels of his shirt and shook him. “So much delicious caramel wasted! Why is life so *unfair*?”

Torin was being extra, as ever, but I welcomed it. After everything that had been happening lately, I actually appreciated a little bit of holiday chaos. It was a good distraction from wondering when the Courier would finally deliver the ashes, and how long Kira’s meditation spell would last.

“—we’re a mess! Both of us!” Torin was saying, gesturing between him and my dad. They were, indeed, semi-covered in caramel. “How can we keep on cooking like this? We’ll waste so much time with clean-up! Who could possibly help me out in such a crisis?”

“Greyson will help,” I blurted out.

Greyson blinked. “What.”

“I was actually showing Torin how to make caramel apples,” Dad explained.

I clapped my hands excitedly. “Great! You two go clean up, and Greyson and I will make them.”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “We will?”

“Come on, it’ll be fun,” I said, pulling out another giant pot to start a double boiler for the rest of the caramel. Greyson said nothing—just stared at me while Torin started rambling his thank yous. He and my dad cleared the spill from the floor, then went upstairs to shower.

The moment everyone was gone, Greyson said, “You just had someone perform a mind-altering spell on you, Cali. Perhaps you should relax—no cooking involved.”

I chuckled. Awkwardly. Then I waved him off. “It’s fine.”

“Do you even know how to make caramel apples?” he asked.

I pointed at him. “That’s why I got *you* to help.”

“Why do you think *I* know how to make caramel?” he asked.

“You know everything!”

“Right,” he deadpanned. “I know everything, and you think I’ll do whatever you want all the time, just because you’re so cute it’s turned my brain into goddamn mush.”

I blushed a little at his comment, but that didn’t stop me from scoffing. “You’re actually not doing anything right now, though.” I gestured at him—he’d been leaning against the counter, watching me with his arms crossed over his chest, looking like a bored supermodel. “Cooking is part of the holiday celebrations, Greyson—you have to participate!”

He just kept on staring at me disarmingly.

Fidgeting, I asked, “What?”

“You sure you’re okay?”

Looking away, I instantly started busying myself with the bags of sugar on the counter. “Of course. What are you talking about?”

I heard his steps before I felt his hands on my shoulders. Slowly, he spun me around to face him, lifting my chin with his index finger. His voice had dropped, his eyes intense on mine. “Cali, I’m your mate. I can tell when something is worrying you. Are you sure you’re feeling better after what Kira did? Or are you putting on a brave face?”

I pressed my lips together. “I mean, I’m hopeful, but…”

“But?”

“I’m not sure how long this will last, and we don’t know when the Courier will deliver the ashes to the demon world,” I muttered. “There are so many variables, but I can’t control any of them. So I don’t want to think about it. Is that okay?”

“Of course,” he said softly. “But I want you to know that if you do need to talk about it, I’m always here.”

I was so lucky to have him. “If I need to talk or vent, I’ll come to you.”

“That’s all I wanted to hear, love,” he said, planting a soft kiss on my forehead.

“For now, though,” I added, “I want to try to feel normal for once. I love the holidays—this time of year was always my favorite as a kid.”

He offered me a small, fond smile. “I guess I can try to get into the holiday spirit. For you.”

I felt my cheeks heat up. “Just because I’m so cute you can never say no to me?”

He smirked, tracing a finger across my collarbone. “Now you get it.”

His voice was lower, his gaze piercing, his touch simple but so effective, it sent my heart pounding. And the way he talked to me? All that care, the honesty, the acceptance and desire made everything click inside my brain, setting off the urge to kiss him like a cannon.

*Boom!*

I lifted onto my toes, grabbed his face, and pressed my mouth to his. Hard. He made a sound of surprise before scooping me into his arms, planting me on the kitchen counter. I gasped, clutching onto his shirt. “Greyson! Oh my god—the stove is on!”

He flicked it off with a deft turn of his hand.

“That’s solved, then, I guess,” I conceded as he pulled me back into it.

The sound he made reminded me of a laugh before he moaned into my mouth, his grip at the back of my neck tightening as we kissed. I wrapped my legs around his waist, feeling a little bit unhinged. Anyone could walk in at any moment, and knowing this house…

“Let me take you upstairs,” he whispered, peppering kisses up my neck. I shivered.

“But the apples…”

“I literally have no idea how to make caramel, Cali,” he said. “I think Torin will forgive us.”

I grinned, placing my hands on either side of his face. My voice cracked when I whispered, “Take me upstairs.”

Greyson didn’t wait to be told twice. He picked me up bridal style, and I wrapped my arms around his neck, nuzzling his chest as he climbed the stairs. When we got to his room, he laid me gently on the bed, leaning over me. He cupped my cheek, his thumb tracing across my cheekbone as he mumbled, “I love you so much.”

And when he kissed me, I felt it through and through.

# Episode 2809

**Xavier**

I looked down at myself. I was surprised. And relieved.

I was really fucking relieved.

I’d shifted back. Seamlessly. Without issue.

“You…” Jay swallowed audibly. “You did it. You’re, like, *you*.”

I couldn’t help but grin. “Yup. That’s a damn good sign.”

I felt like shifting back into my wolf again, just to celebrate, but I decided against it. Better not to push it. Knowing I could do it at least once was enough for now. This meant that I didn’t need Ava to control my wolf anymore —at least not at the moment. I wasn’t sure how this had happened, and how much of it had to do with that incubus, but it was working.

I wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“What does this mean, though?” Jay asked as I pulled on the sweatpants I’d brought down here with me.

“It means I can start pushing to be the Redwood Alpha again,” I said.

Jay frowned. “Is this really the right time for that?”

I stared at him. “What better time is there? There’s no Orb, no Silas, Letifer, revenant army, or moon demon-goddess. Now is the perfect time. Before another big threat falls down on our heads.”

“I get that part,” Jay said. “Catastrophe is always just around the corner here.”

“Exactly,” I said. “I need to make sure the pack becomes strong again, and I can only do that if I’m the Alpha.”

Jay’s frown got deeper, somehow. Or did I imagine that? The only thing he said was, “Right.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, irritated. “Right, *what*?”

“Are you going to go up and challenge Greyson now?” Jay asked cautiously.

I paused, processing. I’d like nothing more than to go find my brother and tell him that I had my shifting back under control. But I knew now that becoming Alpha was more of a diplomatic prospect, unfortunately. And everyone and their mother too knew how I felt about diplomacy.

It seemed like I was backed into a corner right now, though. After the last Alpha vote, I’d realized that I needed more of the pack on my side if I wanted to challenge Greyson. I needed to play the game, play it well, and gain the Redwoods’ trust by proving that I could protect the pack.

Always.

“I’m going to go on an errand,” I said. “Do you wanna come along?”

“Of course,” Jay said.

At least I knew he’d always have my back.

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I noticed the scent of caramel as we passed by the kitchen. When I glanced over, though, the room was empty.

“Do you smell burned sugar?” I asked Jay.

“Torin must’ve done one of his cooking experiments,” he replied.

I snorted, opening the front door. “Sounds about right.”

“Are we shifting?” Jay asked.

“Now that I can, definitely. Besides, we need to save time.”

“What about LIPS?” he asked. “What if one of their drones catches us?”

He had a point. He opened the door for us, and then we shifted, heading out. At least with this method that everyone else was doing too, the massive wolf factor remained, but LIPS wouldn’t think there was anything supernatural going on.

We got to the yard, me in the front, Jay following, and my wolf enjoyed the camaraderie. The feeling of controlling my instincts had power coursing through me with every inhale.

The moment we started running through the woods, Jay mind linked, *So where are we going?*

*We’re gonna pay Knox a little visit*, I replied.

*Wait, you were serious before?* Jay asked. *That guy is really back?*

*I wish I was kidding*, I said. Then I quickly gave him a rundown of the situation—how Knox wanted to get the Samara pack back together, and all that. Jay and I had been interrupted earlier, and this was a conversation we definitely needed to have before arriving at Knox’s.

*Do you remember anything about this guy?* I asked Jay.

Jay scoffed in my head. It was a rare thing for him, so I knew this would be bad.

*Knox shouldn’t be the Alpha of any pack*, Jay said*. He’s immature, pretty much still a child. He throws tantrums left and right, which is a normal thing for most Alphas, but he takes the cake—*

*Hey!* I barked.

Jay ignored me. *The point is, he’s worse—he’s like an angry toddler. He doesn’t need any more power.*

*That’s exactly my worry*, I said. *Not even Ava thinks he’s good enough to take that kind of position.*

*Whoa there*. Jay sounded surprised. *Did Ava ask you to talk to him?*

*Yeah*, I replied.

Jay sounded suspicious*. Do you really think she doesn’t think he’s Alpha material?*

*The fuck’s that supposed to mean?* I asked, annoyed.

*Knox is like Nolan 2.0, and we both know Ava loved her brother*, Jay pointed out.

I didn’t think Ava was lying about the Knox situation, but I also wasn’t going to angst over it right now. I shook my head. *Doesn’t matter how Ava feels*. *Either way, I just need to nip this in the bud before it gets out of hand and really becomes a threat to the pack.*

*He’s still against us, huh?* Jay asked.

*He’s against me, for sure*, I replied. *But his hatred for me could easily spread to the entire Redwood pack and start another pack war.*

*That’s the last thing we need right now*, Jay agreed. *Especially after Seluna.*

I suppressed a shiver at the thought of the demon. I couldn’t wait for her fucking ashes to be delivered—I needed that whole thing over with. Just to make sure that Cali was safe. I’d shaved off three years of my life to make sure she’d be okay, but that was the least I could do.

Jay and I raced through the forest, and I led the way, searching for Knox’s scent. I’d filed it away after our confrontation at the Samara pack house. It took a few tries, but I finally picked it up and spotted a trail. I followed it, Jay in tow, neither of us talking.

Jay broke the silence first. *Well. Look at that little house on the prairie.*

We’d finally arrived at a clearing, and the sight before us sure had a story to tell. A sleek silver Airstream trailer took up most of the space. There were a couple of folding chairs outside, and a little fire pit.

*Seems cozy*, Jay commented. *Like the owner has really settled in here and has no plans to leave.*

I growled at Jay’s words. He was right. I prowled closer, sending out a mind link, just in case Knox was in wolf form.

*Knox*, I said. *I’m here to talk.*

Instead of Knox, though, Ava came out of the forest. Her wolf trotted over, all elegant and shit. I ignored the way my gut twisted at the sight. Of course she was here—why was I surprised? She’d told me she intended to come over to discuss things with Knox.

*What’s going on?* she asked. *Do you need my help? Are you stuck as a wolf again?*

I chose not to linger on the worry in her tone and just shifted back to human. She didn’t comment on it, and I wasn’t about to start a conversation about that right now either. Not with Knox in the vicinity.

“I’m here to talk to your cousin. Per your request.”

Ava shifted back to human as well. I didn’t look down at her naked body. Flipping her hair over her shoulder, she walked over to the door of the Airstream. “Knox!” she called. “Come out here.”

A beat of silence passed. Then the entrance opened, and Knox walked out. He held out a robe to Ava.

Jay and I exchanged a look. Seemed like Knox had been watching us the whole time. Knox looked between Jay, Ava, and me. He glared at me, a low growl coming from his chest.

“What the fuck is he doing here?” he asked, eyes glued to me.

“Knox,” Ava said, sighing in exasperation as she wrapped herself in the robe. “We should all just talk.”

She meant me, Knox, and herself, I gathered. Jay had remained a wolf. He lurked at my back, ready to attack at a moment’s notice.

“I don’t need to talk to an enemy of the Samara pack,” Knox declared.

And here I thought fucking Lucian was dramatic.

“Knox,” Ava said impatiently, “we’ve talked about this again and again. If there’s any chance for the Samaras to come back, the Redwood pack’s support would be a great help.”

Knox sneered, glaring at me. “I don’t need any help from assholes and murderers like *him*.”

The dude was fucking insufferable. Ava had obviously been trying to convince him to get his shit together, but clearly she hadn’t had any success. And if Ava—who was admittedly pretty good with words—couldn’t reason with him, I had no idea what would get through.

“Look,” I said sharply, “I’ve come here to broker a peace and to offer the help of the Redwood pack.”

Knox seethed, stepping forward. Jay growled in warning at the disrespect as Knox said, “You can take your peace and shove it up your ass, Evers. I said I don’t want your help, so get the fuck off my land.”

Before I could respond to his utter bullshit, Knox shifted and lunged at me.

# Episode 2810

**Greyson**

Cali trembled under me, kissing me hard. She wanted this, wanted me, and I felt light-headed. With a little whine, she arched her hips upward and brushed against me.

I groaned at the friction, my whole body jolting with how good it felt.

She froze, though.

I broke the kiss instantly, facing her. We were both panting, and the worry in her gaze pulled me straight out of my lusty haze. “What’s wrong? Did I hurt you?”

“N-No!” she spluttered. “I mean, I was into it, obviously, but then…”

“Did you have a vision or something?”

“No, nothing like that.” She took a deep breath before blurting, “I remembered last time. That whole, uh, shower situation.”

Right. When I hadn’t been able to make her come. I made sure to remain cool. Cali didn’t need any more stress. “What about it?”

“What if it happens again?” she asked. “I don’t want to make you feel bad about this. I don’t want you to feel like…” She swallowed roughly. “Like being with me is disappointing because I can’t—*you know*.”

My mind sputtered. Trying to comprehend what she was saying took me a moment. It was absurd.

“What are you talking about, love?” I asked. “Let’s get one thing out of the way: You have never disappointed me.”

She pursed her lips.

“Cali. Love. You went through a lot, and I’m not gonna sit here and expect everything to go back to normal just like that.”

“But—”

I gently cut her off. “If anything, it takes two to tango. Technically, it was me who didn’t get you off.” I loved how her cheeks blossomed with red. “So one could say that *I* should be worried about disappointing *you*.”

She shook her head. “What are you saying? You could never disappoint me.”

“I mean it, Cali, you could never disappoint me either.”

“But it’s not the same. You’re *you*!” She pointed at me. “And I’m—”

“Gorgeous, brilliant, irreplaceable, an actual badass who saved my life?” I completed her sentence, raising an eyebrow.

Her mouth dropped open in shock before she narrowed her eyes at me. “How the hell did you just flip this on me?”

“It’s the truth,” I said. “And we don’t have to do this right now. Let’s just cuddle or kiss, anything—I’ll do anything you need right now. I just want to have you close to me.”

She stared at me for a beat, her dark eyes scrutinizing my face. When she spoke, her voice had dropped, a little shy note that made the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. “I want you close too.”

She wrapped her arms around me, pulled me in for another kiss. I kept it light—I didn’t know where her thoughts were going. But when she deepened the kiss, I got the idea and leaned her back against the mattress and filled the space between her thighs.

I flipped us over, got her on top. She yelped, wide-eyed and breathless, her hands grasping my shoulders.

“I think you should set the pace here.” I cupped her cheek, brushing my thumb over her lower lip. “I’ll take your lead, let you do whatever you want—have fun with it. Does that sound good?”

Her cheeks were rosy pink, and she had this dazed look on her face that made my ego soar. Her words did the same. “I don’t even know how you’re real.”

I opened my mouth to offer some sort of smartass response, which she usually appreciated, but then her mouth was on mine again. She kissed me, but this time it felt deeper, wilder, vibrating with the kind of energy that made our mate bond electrify.

With quick, methodic movements, she pulled my shirt off, then hers, then she reached for my belt. She dragged my pants off, my boxers too, before she climbed on top again, and her enthusiasm was the goddamn best thing ever. I wanted her to get her confidence back.

“You make me feel so good,” I whispered in her ear, and she whimpered. Then she started kissing me from my mouth to my neck, to my chest and abs. She looked up when she reached my hips. Pleasure rolled through me, and my eyes rolled back, closing, when she put her mouth on me.

“Look at me,” she breathed, her breath scorching against my skin. I forced my eyes to open, and I gazed down at her, at the little smile on her mouth, at her red-cheeked satisfaction. I could see how offering her this bit of control gave her the kind of confidence that minimized her worries.

“Cali.” I choked her name out when her lips parted over me again. *Jesus, fuck.*

I said that out loud, and she laughed, sitting up. She took off her pants, underwear, and climbed on top of me again. I grabbed the back of her neck and pulled her down for a kiss that felt searing, my hands roaming all over. I wanted to give her control, but I wanted her too. So fucking badly.

“There you go, love,” I whispered when she sank down onto me. She whimpered, biting her lip. “Set the pace.” One of my hands guided her swaying hips. The other slid from her neck to her chest, down her trembling stomach, and then even lower.

“You got this wet just from sucking me off?” I asked, and she whimpered her *yes*, her whole body shaking when I rubbed circles at the place where we were joined. “Do you have any idea how incredible you are? How lucky I am to have you?” She dug her nails into my skin as she moaned, her hips picking up the pace. I knew she’d found what she needed. What I knew only I could give her. “That’s it, love. That’s it. Come for me.”

She did. She came with a full body spasm, trembling and writhing. I flipped us over, then pulled out only to lower my face down, between her thighs. When I sucked and licked, her whole body arched up into the feeling, the sounds she made so loud it felt like her whole body was vibrating under my mouth. I fucking loved it.

She was so sensitive already that she came again seconds later on my tongue. When I slid back inside her and moved, she felt perfect, and I told her so over and over, whispering in her ear as she urged me on, asking for more. She clung to me, shivering, grabbing my face as she kept kissing me like she couldn’t get enough.

When we finally came up for air, I kissed her nose, the corners of her eyes. They were wet, but it didn’t look like she was crying. She was breathless as she murmured, “I love you so much, Greyson.”

Her smile was the best thing in the world.

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I held her in my arms, after. This was all I ever needed—the two of us, together and safe. Without any death curses or demons. I kissed her forehead, and she clung to me, sighing happily, so content I wanted to push her onto her back and get us going again. I gathered she’d had enough excitement for the day, though, so I said, “Why don't you sleep? It feels like you haven’t been resting lately.”

She’d been so relaxed just a second ago, but my words made her tense up instantly.

“What?” I asked.

She swallowed thickly. “What if Kira’s meditation didn’t work? What if I go to sleep and the nightmares come back?”

My heart ached for her. “I’ll be right here, watching over you. You don’t have to be afraid.”

She took a deep breath and nodded, lying her head on my shoulder. Within minutes, she was asleep, obviously exhausted. A pang of guilt shot through me when I thought of everything she’d been through. I vowed to never, fucking *ever*, let anything bad happen to her again.

She craved normalcy, a happy life. My old visions of us together, of a white picket fence, kids, and barbecues with family popped into my head. For the first time in weeks, I thought that maybe that could be possible one day.

Cali slept peacefully after that. I was stroking her hair and making a mental note to triple thank Kira for her help when there was a quiet knock on the door. Had anyone else heard that? Because I sure hadn’t. I was done for the day. There were no more fucking problems for me to deal with until—

There was that knock again.

“Fuck,” I muttered, getting up super slowly to make sure I didn’t wake Cali. I grabbed my pants from the floor, put them on, and cracked the door open.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Rishika stood there, my phone in her hand. “There’s a call for you. You left your phone downstairs at the kitchen and it rang like fifteen times.”

“I’ll call them back.” I made a move to close the door when Rishika said, “It’s *Aysel*.”

Oh, no. No no *no*—I’d rather eat a fucking cactus than deal with any more Vanguard drama. Ignoring Aysel wasn’t going to work, though, because I knew that the little princess was infuriating enough to do something extreme. Like show up here.

God-fucking-dammit.

Grumbling, I stepped out of the room and took the phone from Rishika.

“What is it, Aysel?” I asked gruffly. “I’m busy.”

“You need to come over right now!” she said in a squeaky voice.

This woman just wouldn’t quit. We’d been over this a million times!

“Listen, Aysel,” I said sharply, “I appreciate all your help with Seluna, though that was the least you could do after you and your brother brought her into existence and created this situation in the first place—”

Aysel gasped, offended. “But—”

“—but don’t mistake my gratitude for anything more,” I snapped. “Any relationship between us is purely professional, pack representative to pack representative, so why don’t you just leave me the fuck alone before I—”

“Fine, sure, whatever!” She scoffed, cutting me off. “We’re never going to be together, vague threats, yadda yadda, blah blah blah, I know the drill—but that’s not what I need to talk to you about!”

I frowned in confusion. “Then why are you calling me?”

Aysel took a deep breath. “There’s a huge problem about to go down over here, and it’s going to affect the Redwood pack. So you’ll come over, right?”

# Episode 2811

**Ava**

Before Knox could slam into my mate, I raced into his path and blocked his way.

“This stops right now!” I shouted, my eyes fixed on his.

Knox’s wolf growled but didn’t stop.

“You said you’d listen if Xavier came here to speak to you, Knox,” I said. “I need you to get a grip right now—if not for Xavier, then for my sake.”

Knox huffed before he shifted back to human. He pointed at Xavier accusingly. “Xavier came here asking for a fight! It’s written all over his face!”

I turned to look at Xavier. He was hot and scowling, which was his usual vibe. “I promise you he’s not asking for a fight,” I told Knox. “Unfortunately that’s just his face.”

Xavier scowled harder. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Look, man, you interrupted me in the middle of something super important!” Knox said. That super important thing we’d interrupted was probably a video game session. I wasn’t going to mock him publicly, however—that wouldn’t help anyone, least of all me. And if the boys weren’t going to be helpful then that meant I had to do all of this myself.

The absolute lack of self-awareness between these two testosterone-fueled males was exhausting. But unfortunately, one of them was the man I was destined—cursed—to love, so I needed to deal with them.

Taking a deep breath, I told Xavier, “I’m sorry about the fuss. I thought talking to Knox would be a good idea, but clearly not.”

“I don’t want to have to consider Knox an enemy,” Xavier said, “but I will if I have to. For the sake of my pack.”

Knox laughed mockingly, stepping forward. “You got a lot of nerve if you think—”

Ugh, what was it going to take to get these two males to back the hell off? I blocked Knox’s way again, holding up my hand. “You should’ve told me you didn’t want to speak with Xavier. I’m not going to play referee between you two.”

Knox huffed, crossing his arms over his chest.

I turned to Xavier. “Maybe you should go. There’s no point to this.”

Xavier shook his head. “Fine.” He shot one last glare at Knox. “If you want to be an Alpha, acting like a fucking brat isn’t the way to go about it.”

Knox scoffed. “That’s rich, coming from someone who failed to become Alpha of his own pack.”

Xavier stiffened. His eyes narrowed, and I thought that this was it—Xavier was about to eat Knox alive. Jay seemed to be thinking the same thing, if his wolf’s expression was any indication. Surprising everyone, though, Xavier stayed silent.

He turned on his heel and stomped into the forest, Jay following, neither of them sparing us another look.

Knox laughed. “What a loser, that’s—”

“He’s right, you know,” I snapped, cutting him off. “You should work on being a bit more diplomatic if you want to be Alpha.”

I left a pouting Knox—he really had the brain of a toddler—and rushed after Xavier and Jay.

“Xavier!” I called, but he just kept on running forward, so I quickly scanned the sky for LIPS drones and shifted into my wolf to catch up. I’d already noticed that Xavier had had no issues controlling his wolf without me earlier. How and when had that happened, though? And *why*? I was too intimidated by the answers to those questions to ask Xavier directly.

Was this it, though? Would I be forgotten all over again from now on? Was disappointment all I could ever look forward to? Xavier’s turned back sure said so, and I felt my eyes burn.

*Xavier!* I mind linked. *I need to apologize for… well... all of that.*

That finally gave him pause. His wolf and Jay’s turned to face me, but the relief of not being ignored was short-lived. Xavier stared at me and said, *I don’t need your apologies. I know you can’t control Knox.*

The insinuation that I was weak hung heavy in the air, and I hated the notion. How pathetic was it that I couldn’t control my little cousin? Though the word “little” was relative. Technically, Knox and I were the same age, since I was still the same age I’d been when I died. Everyone else had gotten older without me. I couldn’t get my head around that. It would drive me crazy the longer I thought about it.

Right now, I needed to make sure that there was still peace between the Redwoods and whatever was left of the Samaras. I didn’t want to pull my pack back together just to get into another war. I just needed a moment to feel good about life, instead of lonely and sad and scared. Was that so much to ask?

*Look, Xavier*, I said. *I’ve been working on getting Knox to understand that things have changed. That ever since Silas threatened everybody, the truce between packs is even stronger. Knox’s biggest problem is that he wasn’t here to witness that battle—that’s why he doesn’t get it. Yet.*

*I do want you to get your pack back*, Xavier said. At least he sounded honest about it. *I’m trying to be supportive here, but I also can’t let a pack rise up if they’re going to pose an immediate threat to the Redwoods. You know I’d never do anything to endanger my pack.*

I nodded in agreement while Xavier continued.

*Bottom line, if Knox is going to keep acting like this, then it can only be a problem*, he said. *I can’t keep dealing with a hotheaded asshole who won’t even speak to me. Do you understand?*

Jay’s wolf stood behind Xavier. He nodded in silent solidarity.

*I promise I’ll get this under control*, I told Xavier.

He looked around. *We have to get going—not sure how much longer we can evade the LIPS drones.* He faced me. *You and Knox should be careful, too.*

*We always are*, I said.

*I’ll be in touch*, he replied. A beat later, Xavier and Jay raced away together.

I watched for a moment, feeling uneasy at the sight of Xavier controlling his wolf so easily without me. I’d left the Redwoods to help put the Samara pack together, but that didn’t mean I no longer felt connected to Xavier. The whole thing with his wolf, though, made me uneasy. He’d solved his shifting problem without even addressing the situation with me, and that stung.

Our mate bond didn’t feel as intense right now.

But it was fine—what choice did I have to feel otherwise? I could sense the bond, always, floating between us. Could it be weakening, though? Was that why he could control his wolf without me? Had his wolf betrayed me in some way, or was this just a natural evolution of us?

There was this hollow feeling inside me, nagging, pointing out that I needed Xavier to need me, because need was all I was good for, and want was never an option. Choice was never an option, because I wasn’t Xavier’s choice. Hadn’t been in years.

I forced myself to not think about any of this—not again, not right now—when I returned to Knox’s campsite. He was sitting in one of the chairs outside his Airstream, still pouting like a little asshole. I made sure there were no signs of LIPS before shifting back to human. I grabbed the robe and put it on again. Then I faced my cousin, crossing my arms over my chest.

“You really need to get your act together if you want to be Alpha, Knox,” I said.

“I agreed to talk to Xavier, and it happened, so now you need to get off my back,” he snapped.

“Don’t you see that it’s important you put aside this vendetta you have against Xavier? It’s not—”

Knox seethed, jumping to his feet. “What the hell is wrong with you, Ava? How can you still be mated to the asshole even though he fucking killed you and your brother? How can you still love a guy like that?”

I shook my head. I refused to go into the details that would excuse Xavier—into the fact that I’d killed Xavier’s mom, and Nolan’s death was an entirely different, nuanced chapter. It felt like Knox wouldn’t get it anyway. I just said the biggest truth of all.

“The mate bond goes beyond logic sometimes, Knox,” I said. “You’ll realize that one day.”

Knox scoffed. “I’d never mate an asshole like Xavier.”

“If you become Alpha, you’ll have to make hard decisions. One of them will be who you will eventually take as your Luna, and believe me, you won’t have as much of a choice as you think.”

He glared. “We’ll see about that. During our meeting tomorrow with the remaining Samara members, I’m going to get everybody’s full support. And then you won’t be able to tell me what to do all the fucking time.”

He stomped away, climbed into the trailer, and slammed the door shut.

Like the moody teenager that he was.

I sighed, shaking my head. This was going terribly. Knox was way too immature to deal with the responsibilities of being Alpha. It felt like he’d start wars left and right for no reason. I rubbed my temples, feeling a headache coming, as I wondered the same thing yet again.

Could I find someone else to be Alpha of the Samara pack?

# Episode 2812

**Greyson**

I had to laugh. The Vanguards had had a demon problem, a clean-up problem, and now there seemed to be a brand-new issue—all in the span of a few hours.

“What kind of problem are you talking about, Aysel?” I asked. “Is it bigger than a demon marrying your brother? What’s the threshold now for what’s considered a problem?”

Aysel huffed. “Oh, that’s rich coming from the Alpha who can’t seem to stop attracting trouble.”

“Trouble that lately seems to include you, so out with it.” I wasn’t in the mood for her games. I’d had my fill of Vanguard nonsense to last a lifetime.

“It’s serious, or I wouldn’t have called, would I?” She groaned. “You have to come over and deal with this, otherwise we’re all screwed. Not just the Vanguard pack, the Redwood pack, too. Do you understand?”

“I’m not just racing over to your pack on your say so,” I declared. “Tell me what’s happening, right now, or hang up.”

“It’s a conversation we need to have in person. It’s an emergency, so I’m expecting you here at the palace,” Aysel said. “I’ll see you soon.”

She hung up before I could reply. I was left there, staring at the phone, contemplating murder. I’d never been a bloodthirsty individual, but the Vanguards had a way of pushing my buttons. I wondered if calling Aysel back would help with anything, but I quickly rejected the idea.

Aysel was stubborn—to an obsessive, pathological degree of the “let me just kidnap the man I want to fuck” variety. Trying to control her over the phone wouldn’t work. She probably wouldn’t even pick up. She expected me to go at the goddamn palace, and that was that.

I needed to set some boundaries here, that was for sure. I had to create a harsh line between what I would and wouldn’t do when it came to the Vanguard pack, and spell it out for them however I needed to, even if it meant using force. It was for their sake, really, before things got out of hand—before I decided that being civilized just wasn’t worth it anymore, and Xavier’s violent way of dealing with things was the way to go.

I was sick of playing their stupid games—I did not fucking jump when Lucian told me to, and I was not at Aysel’s beck and call. She’d said that whatever was going on would affect the Redwoods too, that it was an emergency, but she could fuck right off if she thought I’d run over to meet her at the palace instead of simply talking to her over the phone.

Besides, I had Cali to take care of right now.

Resolved in my decision, I returned to my mate and took a seat on the bed. I focused all my attention on her, on how pretty and peaceful she looked as she slept. No nightmares. A bit of my anxiety eased at the sight of her. I tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, thinking of what she’d say if she heard about Aysel’s bullshit.

“Oh no, Greyson! If this affects the pack, you have go to meet Aysel!”

There was an extremely annoying voice in my head that was saying the same thing. What kind of responsible Alpha was I if I didn’t look into a potential pack threat? Still, I’d promised Cali I’d stay to make sure she slept well. That was what I really wanted to do right now, and also fucking Aysel could just tell me what she wanted over the phone, so—

“Greyson…” Cali hummed my name, stirring a little as her eyes fluttered open. There was a soft smile on her lips.

“There’s my girl,” I murmured, caressing her warm cheek. “Feeling good?”

She nodded before she pulled me closer to her, glancing down at my mouth. “Definitely. That was…” She leaned up to kiss me, but then her eyes trailed down my body, and her smile faded. “Wait, why are you dressed? Is something wrong?”

I considered keeping Aysel’s phone call to myself, but I wasn’t about to underestimate Cali’s stress tolerance after all she’d been through. She deserved the truth from me—always.

“Just got a call from Aysel, some kind of issue that needs my attention,” I said. “I’m sure she’s just being dramatic.”

Cali’s brows furrowed. “Wait, she didn’t tell you what it was over the phone?”

I huffed. “No. She said it’s an emergency, but it’s probably one of her dumb games. You know how she can be. She was cryptic as ever.”

“What if it’s not a game?” Cali asked. “Maybe it’s really an emergency, so—”

“It can wait,” I said firmly, taking both her hands in mine. “I want to be here with you right now.” I leaned in, kissing her temple, her cheek. “I want to make sure you’re okay.”

She met my eyes, shaking her head. “I’ll be fine! Kira’s thing worked. I didn’t have any bad dreams at all. I don’t want you to slack off on your Alpha responsibilities for me.”

“But—”

“Greyson,” she said firmly. “I’d never forgive myself if something happened to the pack because you were worried about me.”

I gave her a look. “That was a low blow, and you know it.”

She stroked my cheek. “It’s the truth. You have to deal with the Vanguards, for the pack’s sake.”

I sighed. I knew it was the right thing to do in theory, but that didn’t mean I *wanted* to do it. But Cali was certain about this—she was always so selfless, always thinking of others. I’d call that quality of hers annoying and inconvenient if I didn’t love her for it.

“Fine,” I grumbled, leaning in to kiss her forehead. “I’ll be back ASAP. Try to get a little more sleep if you can, okay?”

“I’ll be waiting for you right here.” She yawned and nodded, snuggling under the covers. She was naked in my bed, soft and gorgeous.

I promised myself I’d get this Vanguard thing over with ASAP and rush back to her.

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“Make sure the pack is on full alert while I’m gone. Just in case Lucian is planning something,” I told Rishika. I’d gotten dressed and found her downstairs.

She didn’t look happy. “Are you sure you don’t want me to come as backup?”

“I don’t want them to think that the Redwoods are trying to pull anything by arriving in force,” I said. “I’ll go see what Aysel wants and be in touch. If there’s even the slightest whiff this is some kind of a trick, I’ll be out like a shot.”

Rishika frowned. “I’m gonna rip that entitled brat’s throat out one day.”

“Get in line,” I drawled, grabbing a set of car keys—one of Xavier’s—from the hallway table.

I’d decided to go to the Vanguard palace by car, just in case LIPS had sent any drones out. Also, just to seem cooperative toward the Vanguards, when in reality all I wanted to do was set fire to the entire estate.

Was it too soon for fire jokes?

Anyway, my annoyance didn’t fade during the drive. Aysel really could have just told me what the fuck she wanted over the phone. Finally, I arrived and parked Xavier’s car. I noticed there was a familiar truck in the long drive of the Vanguard house. I frowned—when had I seen this truck before? I couldn’t place it.

I went over to look through the car’s windows, and…

Sure enough, in the passenger’s seat, there was a clipboard with the LIPS logo.

Great. Just great. What fresh hell was this? Good thing I’d driven over here, if LIPS was already inside. But what the fuck were they doing at the Vanguard palace? Irritated and confused, I moved forward and walked through the guard area. Nobody was here. They had to be dealing with the mess inside.

But my gut said something was very wrong.

Shaking my head, I climbed up the stairs and rang the doorbell.

The attendant who opened it gave me a confused look. “Mr. Evers! Is someone expecting you? I wasn’t—”

“There he is!” Aysel’s shrill voice came from behind the attendant. She pushed him aside and opened the door wide. “Greyson! You did come. I knew you would.”

“You made it clear that I needed to,” I deadpanned.

She nodded in realization. “Right!” She frowned suddenly. “What took you so long?”

“I spent a while pondering how to get back at you in case this whole thing turned out to be yet another elaborate ploy to get into my pants,” I replied. “My revenge will be swift and bloody. It’s been a long time coming, actually. I am constantly semi-regretting not getting rid of you and your brother sooner, consequences be damned.”

“This isn’t a joke, Greyson.” Aysel huffed, grabbing my arm to pull me inside.

“I’m just being honest.” I shrugged.

“This is serious. We’re supposed to have a truce, and I need your help,” Aysel declared, dragging me to one of the studies. “I have to talk to you—”

“And you couldn’t explain over the phone.”

“I couldn’t, because I actually needed you to come over. Who knows who could be listening over the phone? This is a huge emergency!” she exclaimed, and shut the door behind her. Then her voice lowered to a whisper. “Those damn LIPS people are here right now, talking to Lucian about buying the palace!”

Okay. At least that explained the car outside. LIPS was really becoming a nuisance now, with that Dick guy hanging around.

“Do you want me to keep Lucian from killing them all? Is that why you said this was an emergency?” I asked.

“I wish,” Aysel said. “It’s even worse.”

I scoffed. “What could possibly be worse?”

Aysel grabbed both my hands, her eyes wide. “Lucian is about to sell them our house!”

# Episode 2813

I woke up after what felt like a while and stretched on the bed. Greyson was nowhere to be seen, probably still dealing with Aysel’s always-potentially-dangerous nonsense. I told myself that everything would be okay, though—Greyson had it under control. The sheets smelled like him, and I cuddled back into them. I smiled at the thought of us together earlier.

*So that was…* something*, all right!*

I felt relieved, and happier than I’d been in a long time. I’d taken a long nap with no bad dreams, my exhaustion had faded out, and Kira’s spell had worked. I was pretty tempted to erect a statue in her honor at this point.

*Wait, no. Absolutely* no *statues anywhere, ever*, I thought, shuddering.

I didn’t have to feel so spooked anymore, though. The nightmares were over. I contemplated lazing about some more, just waiting for Greyson in bed, but people—Xavier, especially—would be looking for me soon.

I got out of bed, took a quick shower, and then got dressed. Everything felt so normal that I got the urge to whistle, even though I was super bad at it. When I got downstairs, I heard a commotion in the living room and the kitchen. I winced when I remembered the abandoned caramel apples, and as I entered the kitchen, I braced myself for Torin’s absolute, irrevocable disappointment.

What I found instead was the picture of culinary contentment as Torin and my dad bustled about, making dinner. The caramel apples were set on the counter, looking crisp and perfectly coated.

“Cali!” Torin grinned. “You seem rested.”

Cringing, I blurted out one excuse after another. “So sorry about the apples—I tried to reheat the last of the caramel, but then I realized it wouldn’t be enough to dip all the apples, which meant we’d have to make more caramel, but Greyson didn’t know how to make it, and obviously I don’t know how to make it, and then we got a little distracted—”

Torin waved me off. “No worries at all! Your offer to help settled my wounded soul, and I’m so grateful for that.” He looked down at the currently clean floor, sighing. “May the lost caramel rest in peace.”

Before I could comment on Torin’s words, he’d already moved on, turning his attention to my dad, who asked him something that had to do with garlic. I had no idea what they were talking about. Thankfully, I didn’t have to feign interest, because then Lola burst into the kitchen and grabbed me by the arm.

“Cali, there you are!” she said. “I was looking all over for you!”

“That sounds ominous, especially since I wasn’t very hard to find,” I teased as she dragged me out of the kitchen and into the hallway.

“This isn’t a game, Cali,” she said. “We need to pack!”

And now I was confused. “What? Why?”

Lola huffed. “For the lake house, remember? We need to pack if we’re going to move there tomorrow to fool my dads.”

Oh, yikes. I’d promised Lola that I’d help her pull off yet another one of her ridiculous plans. I wondered if enabling the madness helped Lola, or if it just made her worse. I guessed we’d have to reflect on that one when we were both ninety years old and still getting into trouble.

“I didn’t realize packing was going to be a complicated process. I mean, my plans consisted of me throwing random clothes in a duffle bag,” I said cautiously.

Lola started hyperventilating. “Cali, no! It has to look like we’ve *lived* there! It has to seem like we spent all semester in the house.”

“Okay, calm down, I see your point,” I said, rubbing her shoulders soothingly. “It’s all going to be okay—why don’t you tell me exactly what you’d like me to bring, and I’ll do it.”

Lola made a wheezing noise. Honestly, where the hell was her boyfriend? Reining in the tornado that was Lola was Jay’s full-time occupation, and she repaid him with excitement, undying affection, and sexual favors. Everybody knew that, so why had Jay not reported for duty yet? Both he and Xavier had vanished, now that I thought about it.

“Lola, have you seen Xavier? I need to—”

“You need to follow the plan, Cali, no deviations,” my friend declared, cutting me off. Then she dragged me into a room with a bunch of papers strewn over the desk. “You have to focus, here!” she said, picking up a page and wildly pointing at it. “These are the cover stories for each and every one of the people staying with us at the lake house, along with their room designations and exact locations for the moment my dads arrive.”

I looked at the chaotic notes on the desk while Lola kept rambling. It was like watching a conspiracy board come to life. Perhaps my friend was taking this a smidge too far.

*She’s off the deep end, and Jay isn’t here to stop her.*

Apparently, I would have to be the one to take charge right now.

“Lola, please,” I said. “You shouldn’t worry this much. Everyone can be who they actually are; we don’t need to reconstruct their personalities. They’re our friends who go to school with us, and that’s it.”

“Ha!” Lola scoffed. “But someone might let something suspicious slip through. And then it’ll all be over! *Forever!*”

“Okay, but as a werewolf pack, I’m pretty sure everyone is pretty good at keeping secrets from the human world, right?” I said. “You need to trust the pack. They can do this for sure.”

Lola paused suddenly, pressing her lips together. “You really think so?”

“Where are you guys moving without me?” said a familiar voice.

Both Lola and I jumped around. Jacs was leaning against the doorway, looking annoyed, as always. I gazed back and forth between her and Lola, as Lola said, “Oh. Um, the lake house. It’s just temporary, you know?”

“No, I don’t,” Jacs replied, raising an eyebrow.

Lola waved a hand. “It’s nothing—we’ll be back after Christmas!”

Jacs offered Lola a sharp smile. “That’s great. When are we moving, exactly?”

Lola blinked. “Ha, no, I mean—don’t you want to stay here where you’re comfortable?”

Jacs laughed. “Yeah, *right*. Staying with a bunch of wolves without the only vampire ally I have? Pass.”

Lola looked a little pale all of a sudden. For some reason, it seemed like she didn’t want Jacs involved in her scheme. But Jacs didn’t get the hint. She stared at Lola intensely.

“Unless you two don’t want me with you,” she said. “I thought we were friends, but I guess that’s no longer true, so—”

“Oh my god, fine!” Lola huffed. “You can come with us, but you have to promise to pretend to be *human* in front of my dads. Okay?”

Jacs shrugged. “No problem.”

Lola looked like she had a huge-ass problem, though. Her pale complexion had now turned into a lovely shade of light green. I really had to speak up and try to convince Jacs not to come along. This was for Lola, dammit!

“I’m pretty sure you’re gonna hate this whole thing, though,” I told Jacs seriously. “Pretending to be human means no drinking blood in the kitchen. No hunting, no anything vampire-y.”

Jacs scowled. “I know how to pretend to be human, Cali. I’m probably better at doing it than you two.”

I scowled. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Jacs looked between Lola and me. “You’re both really freaking weird. You know that, right?”

I gasped and turned to face Lola, who looked equally stunned. In a loud whisper, I asked Lola, “Are we weird?”

Lola looked annoyed, opening her mouth to say something—probably cuss Jacs out. But then, she just shrugged. Did… Did Lola just admit defeat? Also, I was half human, and this vampire thought I didn’t act human enough? *What?*

*Honestly, now I’m offended!*

I was about to give Jacs a piece of my half-human, totally normal mind when she flipped her hair over her shoulder and said, “Anyway, I’ll go pack. Let me know when we’re leaving.”

She sauntered away while I glared at her back. Lola sighed.

“Don’t worry,” I said gravely. “I’ll make sure she stays in line.”

Lola gave me an awkward look. “Yeah… About making sure people stay in line…”

I squinted at her suspiciously. “Oh boy… Where is this heading?”

“Your parents are here…” Lola trailed off. “So, I feel like they should come with us to the lake house.”

I gaped. “Oh my god, you can’t just make my parents lie for you and take part in your insane schemes, Lola! They’re not me!”

Lola clasped her hands together, desperate and begging. “Please, it’s just for a few days! I need everything to look normal! *Please!*”

*How do I get into these kinds of messes, though? HOW?* I wondered. The answer was right before me, in Lola’s sad puppy-dog eyes. I was such a sucker.

“Fine,” I said, huffing. “I’ll tell my parents, but I don’t know how they’ll react.”

Lola took a deep breath. “I get it.”

“My dad is a werewolf now, remember?” I asked. “He’s handling it well, but he’s still so new to it. Who knows what could happen?”

Lola pressed her lips together. “Cali, please, your parents need to help me out here.”

“But why should we involve them?” I asked. “Oh no. There’s something you’re not telling me, isn’t there?”

Lola cringed. “Well…”

“What is it?” I pressed.

Lola blurted it all out in one breath. “I kind of let it slip to my dads that Tom and Orla are here, so now they want all of us to have dinner together!”

# Episode 2814

**Xavier**

The moment Jay and I were inside the house, we shifted back to our human form.

“Do we need to—” Jay started, but I raised my hand to stop him. After I made sure that nobody was listening in, I gestured for him to follow me to one of the side rooms. The moment the door closed behind me, Jay spoke up again, keeping his voice low.

“Do we need to make a plan to protect the pack against Knox if he decides to attack?” he asked.

I shook my head. “I don’t want to raise the alarm yet. There’s still a chance that this can be taken care of without any fighting.”

Jay stared at me. “You sure?”

“For fuck’s sake, the Samara pack isn’t even a pack right now, and Knox certainly isn’t a leader.”

Jay shook his head. “I don’t have your confidence in that, Xavier. Knox was a little asshole when he was a kid. He’s like a mini, extra hairy Nolan—and Nolan proved to be unreasonable until the end.”

Jay’s words gave me pause. If Knox was really like Nolan, then I might have to go to extremes. *Again*. I didn’t like the idea of having to take out another person in the Samara pack’s Alpha line, but needs must.

Perhaps Ava could hold Knox back, though. However, at this point, trusting Ava felt iffy again. Where did her loyalties lie? Technically, she’d now turned her back on me and our mate bond in favor of getting her pack back together. We’d always had our issues, and now it had all just gotten worse again. I wasn’t exactly upset about it—Cali was my choice—but it just…

It didn’t sit right with me.

Any of it.

It felt like I had to tell Greyson about this whole situation. I hated running things past him when it came to Alpha stuff, but at this point, with Knox out there acting like a dick, it felt like I had no choice. I had to prove to the rest of the pack that I could follow the rules, anyway—that I could be the right kind of person to take the lead.

“I’ll talk to Greyson about Knox,” I told Jay. “That’s step one. No need to rush into anything extreme. Agreed?”

Jay nodded. “Agreed. What are you going to do now?”

“Shower, then check on Cali,” I said as we walked out of the study.

“I have to track Lola down,” Jay said. “She’s going crazy about her dads coming.”

I snorted. “Good luck with that.”

Rolling his eyes, Jay shoved me before walking away. I went upstairs, heading to Cali’s room, thinking I could always ask her to join me in the shower. As I walked past my room, though, I heard my phone vibrate.

When I picked it up, I realized I had about a dozen messages. What the fuck? Frowning, I scrolled through the notifications—Greyson had called and texted me a bunch of times with variations of the same thing.

*Emergency, call me ASAP*

That man was so fucking dramatic. I hoped he hadn’t found out about Knox and the Samara pack before I’d had a chance to tell him.

“Why are you blowing up my phone?” I asked after he picked up.

“Where the hell have you been?” Greyson snapped. Someone was in a bad mood.

“Seriously?” I scoffed. “Where are *you* right now?”

“At the Vanguard palace.”

Now, that one I didn’t expect. “Why the hell would you ever go back there? Are you crazy?”

“We have a bit of a problem on our hands, brother,” Greyson said sharply, in a tone that made me think whatever he was about to tell me it was more than a “bit” of a problem.

I rolled my eyes. “Look, Greyson, I don’t want to deal with any more Lucian and Aysel drama. You’re the one she’s obsessed with, so—”

“It’s not about Aysel. LIPS has approached Lucian about selling his land.”

I barked out a laugh. “Wow. Hope LIPS escaped with all their limbs. Cali won’t be happy if they’re dead.”

Greyson growled loudly enough that I flinched. “You’re not listening, Xavier—Lucian is actually going to sell. He’s about to agree to sell his land to LIPS!”

I was stunned. “You’ve gotta be kidding me…”

“Exactly,” Greyson grunted.

“No, this has to be some scheme,” I said. “Lucian and Aysel are always going on about how they’re royalty and the palace is their ancestral home and shit. He’d never sell that place.”

“Well, the guy has been all fucked up since the whole Seluna situation. He’s acting really weird. Even weirder than usual,” Greyson said.

This was bad. And that was putting it mildly. “What are we going to do about this? What’s going to happen if LIPS buys the Vanguard land?”

Greyson scoffed. “I’m not letting Lucian sell. I’ll change his mind. But I need you to get the pack on alert. I don’t want LIPS stopping by unannounced.”

“Got it,” I said. “You deal with the crazy prince, and I’ll handle everything else.”

Greyson’s tone was dry. “I definitely got the short end of the stick.”

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“Keep everyone on alert,” I told Rishika and Artemis after spotting them downstairs.

“What’s going on?” Rishika asked grimly.

“LIPS is turning out to be more of a pain in the ass than we expected,” I explained. “Make sure the word gets out that for now, no shifting allowed.”

Rishika nodded. “On it.”

“And while we’re at it, don’t murder any of the LIPS humans in the meantime, Xavier,” Artemis noted. “I understand why you’d want to, but Cali wouldn’t like it.”

My left eyebrow twitched. “Who says I’m going to commit murder?”

“You got this murderously angry look about you—call me paranoid,” Artemis said bluntly. “Maybe you should calm down.”

I huffed and turned my back on her. She was right, though—I *was* angry. I’d just fixed my shifting ability, but with fucking LIPS lurking around, I had to be more careful than ever about turning into a wolf. Even though the Samara issue had to be dealt with, I now felt like it had been a huge risk to shift and go meet Ava and Knox.

Thinking of LIPS had me on edge, and yeah, Artemis was right about that second part too—I did need to calm down. The easiest way to do so would be to talk to Cali. I picked up her scent and followed it to one of the studies. When I opened the door, I found Cali sitting at a desk, her expression dazed as she watched Lola pace, rambling away.

“We have to get a roast!” Lola was saying, flailing her hands in Jay’s direction. He was watching her like a hawk. “They’ll want that for Christmas,” Lola went on. “And decorations! But Torin said he’ll take care of that. Do you think he’ll go overboard? Well, we don’t have time to rein him in, so whatever. And then with Lilac and Marta and Dani, the house should be pretty full, right?”

Cali seemed like she was a hundred miles away from the conversation.

Lola’s voice got louder. “Cali? Oh my god, are you even listening?”

Cali looked like a confused kitten. “Yes. I mean, maybe I got a little lost there—”

Lola gasped, offended.

“Okay, that’s it.” Jay spoke up before I could. Grabbing Lola by the shoulders, he said, “Babe, you need to relax right now.”

“But Jay! I can’t just—”

She started rambling all over again, and Jay could hardly get a word in.

Cali looked at the doorway, spotting me. Her confused expression broke into a smile. “Xavier, you’re back!”

She jumped up from her chair and made a beeline for me. The moment I hugged her, everything felt better. I kissed her cheek, her mouth. I nuzzled the top of her head, her scent soothing all the bad, restless feelings inside me. I really needed this.

When Cali smiled up at me again, something in my chest loosened. She seemed alert and rested, I realized.

“You look happy. How are you feeling?” I asked.

“I think the nightmares are gone. Kira helped me out with some meditation, and I think…” She looked hopeful, and it made me smile as well. “I think the whole Seluna thing is behind us now, Xavier.”

I nodded, stroking her cheek. “That’s at least one less thing to worry about.” Raising an eyebrow, I looked at a still-rambling Lola and a lost Jay. “What’s going on here?”

Cali cringed. “Lola’s kind of losing it. Her dads are coming, and she has to lie about going to college out here.”

“Right,” I said. “You said something about that. Are you sure it’s a good idea?”

“I doubt it.” Cali sighed. “But I have to figure out a way to convince my parents to go to a ‘parent dinner’ with Lola’s dads.”

That sure made my eyebrows rise. “Are you seriously going to involve Tom and Orla in one of Lola’s schemes?”

Cali groaned. “Lola let it slip that they’re here, and her parents want us to all get together. I think it’s kind of set in stone at this point.”

I snorted, shaking my head. “I guess it should be fine. It’s just one dinner, right?”

Cali pressed her lips together. “True. But I hate having to put my parents in this kind of position. At least Jay will be there too.”

I frowned. “Wait, boyfriends are going too? Do you want me to go?”

Cali paused. “Well, um. Not if you don’t want to go.”

A thought burst into my head, and I squinted at Cali. “Is Greyson going?”

# Episode 2815

**Greyson**

“Greyson, no!” Aysel hissed, blocking my way to Lucian’s office. “You can’t interrupt the meeting!”

I glared at her. “Your idiot brother might be selling his land to that Dick douchebag as we speak. Stopping him is literally the reason you called me here today, so what the hell are you talking about?”

Aysel huffed. “Lucian’s been having some major mood swings lately, and not even I can predict what he’d do if we barged in. He might just shift in fury in front of the human, and then it would all be over!”

Aysel’s words made my head throb. Yep, there it was—a literal headache to accompany the metaphorical headache that was the Vanguard pack. I just couldn’t catch a break.

“Listen, Aysel, I can’t keep fucking babysitting your brother when—”

The door opened behind me, and I didn’t finish my sentence. Aysel and I both turned to see Dick Wigbert III and his assistant come striding out of Lucian’s office. The motherfucker looked so pleased, I wanted to punch him. The moment his eyes met mine, he offered a sleazy smile.

“Ah, Mr. Greyson Evers, how nice to see you. I was actually going to come by to visit again.”

“No need,” I said coldly. “We have no business with each other.”

Dick kept smiling, because he clearly had a death wish. “We’ll see about that.”

He walked away, his snooty minion in tow, and I was left with a sinking feeling in my stomach.

Had Lucian done something that we couldn’t reverse?

“Shit,” I said under my breath when Aysel and I walked into the office.

The room was dark with the blinds closed. There were papers everywhere, and the alcohol cart had been set in the middle of the room like it was the new centerpiece. Lucian was sprawled over what could only be called a fainting couch, wearing a pale blue silk pajama set with a matching robe. And slippers, of course. He looked all puffy-eyed, like he’d been crying, so that was also super fun.

Had he seriously just taken a meeting like that, though? Where the fuck were the over-the-top suits? The coiffed hair? The general air of delusional superiority? Appearances were Lucian’s number one priority, so for him to let himself go like this…

Aysel was right.

Lucian wasn’t well. At all. Not that I felt any kind of empathy toward him—he’d lost that privilege when he’d treated Cali like shit—but I had to admit this was a mess.

“Brother, what happened?” Aysel asked him.

Lucian smiled bitterly, looking away. “Who even cares? Where’s my whiskey?”

Aysel sighed, walking over to the bar cart. She poured him a tumbler of whiskey, he held out his hand, and she placed the tumbler in it. He drank the whole thing in one gulp.

This was definitely going to be a problem.

“What did you say to those LIPS guys, Lucian?” Aysel asked her brother after shooting me a look.

Lucian shrugged. “What does it matter? We have more houses. They can have all of them, for all I care.”

My blood ran cold. “You sold them the land?”

Lucian finally looked at me. He seemed a little confused to see me before he smiled, as if we were old pals. “Ah, an Evers brother. What can I do for you? Would you like a drink?” He waved lazily at the bar cart, and I gritted my teeth together.

“This isn’t a social call,” I said. “Did you or did you not sell them this land?”

Lucian sighed. “They were offering a good price, more than I thought a few humans could scrounge together. Very industrious of them.”

I was starting to seriously worry that Lucian had done something that couldn’t be reversed. I contemplated throwing him out the window, but I refrained. I remained calm, walked up to him, and stared. He could barely keep eye contact, which was a huge red flag for an Alpha.

“You can’t sell your land, Lucian,” I said, my tone even. “That is not how things work around here.”

And just like that, Lucian growled. “I can do whatever I want with what I own. I am a prince after all.” He fell back on the couch, cackling like he’d just told a really funny joke.

Aysel gave me an anxious worried look. *See what I mean?* she mouthed.

I took a deep breath. “Just tell me you didn’t sell this land to LIPS, Lucian.”

Still snickering, Lucian wiped his eyes. Then he said, “Fine. I didn’t sell the land to LIPS.”

I exhaled in relief.

But then Lucian added, “*Yet*.”

I was done with pleasantries. With a growl, I strode forward and grabbed Lucian by the collar, forcing him to sit up, shaking him.

“You have to snap out of this,” I said. “I get it, you got your heart broken by some demon chick, but you should think of it as dodging a bullet. Your pack needs you, you’re their Alpha, so—”

Lucian huffed. “I’m not—”

“You’re not *what*?” I snapped. “Xavier and I didn’t spare your life after what you did to Cali just so you could fuck shit up for every supernatural being in the area. Don’t you have any allegiance to werewolves? If LIPS gets a hold of this land, they could expose us all.”

Lucian pressed his lips together. “I understand you’re upset—”

I grabbed his robe tighter, speaking from behind clenched teeth. “Don’t make me regret not killing you, Lucian. Because I’m already fucking struggling with it.”

Lucian glared, so I was glad to see there was at least some fire left in him. He plucked at my fingers one at a time until I let go of his collar. Without a word, he walked over to the bar cart and filled his whiskey again. “I don’t give a damn about LIPS and their requests. I just don’t want this land anymore. I’m royalty, I shouldn’t be having these kinds of problems.”

“Well the royalty part might be one of the reasons why,” I said. “Royalty is fucked up as an institution.”

Aysel elbowed me, but I ignored her as Lucian quietly went on, “Seluna convinced me so easily. I thought that she had been brought to me by divine will. I thought I was special, and I was wrong.”

“You really were wrong. But on the upside, reality checks probably help megalomaniacs grow as people,” I said.

Aysel elbowed me, again. I ignored her, again, as Lucian added, “I’ve decided that we need a clean slate, to start all over. And one way to do that is to get rid of this cursed land.”

“You can’t do that, brother,” Aysel said. “This is my birthright too!”

Lucian sneered at her. “Well, take that up with our parents, who gave the land to me. Oh wait, you can’t! Because they’re *dead*.”

Aysel jerked away like she’d just been slapped. Sad or not, Lucian remained a total asshole, so I personally wasn’t surprised.

“What you’re doing is hurtful to me, brother,” Aysel whispered. “This isn’t how an honorable Alpha behaves. Your pack needs you.” She pointed at her chest, sniffling. “*I* need you!”

Lucian shook his head bitterly. “No one should rely on me anymore. I obviously don’t make the best choices.”

I saw my opportunity and took it. “That’s true. Your decision-making skills are horrible, so what you should do is listen to us, and what we’re telling you is that you shouldn’t sell this land.”

Lucian squinted at me. “Huh. Interesting point.”

“I’m only speaking the truth,” I said. “If you sell the land to LIPS, Dick is going to make sure that no werewolf in this area will ever be able to shift safely again. We might have to go into hiding entirely. Is that what you want? To suffocate or expose our kind?”

Lucian’s squinted eyes slowly widened. A strange expression had taken over his face. “So you’re saying LIPS is our enemy?”

This was a slippery slope, but I’d finally grabbed Lucian’s attention, and I wasn’t about to let go. “Yes. LIPS is our enemy. Not entirely, but in a way, they do want to harm us,” I said. “Just make sure the enemy doesn’t get your land.”

Lucian frowned. “But then Dick would just try to get other land, right? If he’s the enemy of all wolves, he must be dealt with.”

Lucian’s train of thought was starting to get a little derailed, and I felt like he was going off on a dangerous tangent. I tried to rein him in. “Lucian, look. All you have to do is *not* sell your land, nothing else, so—”

“But the enemy must be defeated, always!” Lucian’s face lit up to an alarming degree. “This is it—my new purpose!” Lucian marched over and grabbed me by the shoulders, a huge smile on his lips. “We can do this together, Greyson!”

His fervor stunned me for a beat before I pushed Lucian away.

“What the hell are you going on about?” I asked.

Wild-eyed and grinning madly, Lucian said, “We will kill Dick! Together!”

# Episode 2816

“Is Greyson going?” Xavier asked. His expression was intense, suspicious, and upset, as if he already knew he would hate the answer to my question.

“If Greyson wants to come to dinner,” I said, picking my words carefully, “then he can. Just like you can come with us.”

Xavier crossed his arms over his chest, scowling harder. “Right,” he said sharply. “And how are you gonna explain that to Lola’s dads? Will you just say we’re in a *due destini* relationship? Why not just tell them that their daughter is a werewolf-vampire hybrid while we’re at it? Just get the whole thing over with.”

Xavier’s sudden outburst made me flinch. It was like the good old days when he hadn’t been able to control his temper, and I frowned. “I really haven’t thought of the logistics yet. I’m still trying to figure all this out—Lola just dropped this outrageous plan in my lap. I’m just scrambling to keep up.” My voice lowered. “And your tone isn’t exactly helping matters.”

Xavier’s glower softened. “Fuck, you’re right. I’m sorry, Cali, I just…” He shook his head. “I just don’t think this is a great idea.”

I scoffed, shooting a look at Lola. She was still rambling while Jay tried to settle her down as if she were a fussy puppy crapping all over the place. Good times.

“I know, I agree with you. It’s a horrible idea,” I told Xavier. “But I have to help Lola. I want to be there for her, especially considering she’s always been there for me, with everything I’ve gone through.”

He sighed, nodding. “You know what? If you want me at that dinner, I’ll be there.”

Xavier looked so sweet—not a frequent occurrence for him—that I felt a little bad for not inviting him sooner. But then, I felt uncomfortable inviting him at all without talking to Greyson as well.

*Yeah, this just screams* bad idea.

“I mean, I’ll see how it goes, and I’ll keep you posted, so…”

Xavier rested his hands on my shoulders, his touch grounding. He looked solid and serious, and there was a confidence to him that made me feel much better. “I get it, this is complicated. But if you need me, just tell me when and where and I’m there. I’ve always got your back.”

I didn’t doubt that for a second. My mate’s words actually reminded of the deal he’d made with the Courier. We hadn’t really discussed it—not enough—and the reminder made my stomach drop. This was a messy situation, but at the end of the day, Xavier’s first urge was always to help me, so I couldn’t exactly stay mad at him.

“Thank you,” I muttered, wrapping my arms around him. He kissed the top of my head before offering me smile that had my heart pounding.

“You know, maybe you can get your dad to cook his famous spaghetti,” he said. “That’ll make Lola’s dads happy, and definitely distract them from any weirdness. Don’t you think?”

I snorted, lowering my voice just so Lola wouldn’t hear. “That’s a good point. This whole plan is already a huge mistake, so making the most of it seems like the only way to go.”

Xavier chuckled, and I wished that I could do something—anything—to make sure this ridiculous scheme of Lola’s worked out. I doubted it would, though. And with Xavier at the dinner, and Greyson not knowing about the whole thing yet…

It just felt like this was a brand-new problem in the making.

“You know,” I said to Lola after Jay and Xavier had left, “maybe we should talk more about what’s actually going to happen while your dads are here.”

Lola flapped her hands around. “I have it all mapped out, full schedules.” She thrust one in my face. I caught a glimpse at the title, which was admittedly groundbreaking.

*Cali’s Daily Schedule*

There were a bunch of hearts drawn under that, so I appreciated the love at least.

“Lola.” I cleared my throat, inspecting the list. “This is…”

A lot. This was so much I had no idea what the fuck to do with it. Lola had mapped out my days by the hour.

“You even put in bathroom breaks in here,” I said awkwardly, going through the time slots.

“Of course!” Lola exclaimed. “I know you have a nervous little bladder!”

Okay, this had gone too far.

“Lola, this is extreme,” I told my friend. “We don’t need to map out every second of every day.”

Lola shook her head. “You don’t get it—what if someone ends up alone with my dads and lets something slip by accident?”

“That is literally what you’re trying to avoid with these individual daily schedules,” I told her wryly, pointing at the piece of paper. “But it’s still not necessary. People can just improvise.”

Lola looked forlorn. “You think so?”

I sighed, resting my hands on her shoulders. “Maybe you should take a break. This is all a bit much. You have to trust that we know what we’re doing and want to help you.”

Lola nodded once, then twice, then she reminded me of a bobblehead. “Yeah, okay! But maybe I’ll go talk to Jacs about pretending to be human again. Maybe she’s a better actress than I initially thought. I’ll just give her a little refresher course. What do you think?”

That was a bad idea, but at least it would give Lola something to do.

“Of course,” I said, ushering my friend along. “Have fun dealing with Jacs.”

I felt like bursting into maniacal laughter the second the words came out of my mouth, but I stopped myself just in time.

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Afterward, I went upstairs to find Xavier. Just to assure him that I’d talked Lola down, and also to bond with him after all the weirdness between us. Like, *Ha, my mate just shaved off three years of his life for me! He’d literally die for me! Fun, right?*

It sounded romantic in theory—I’d die for you and all that—but in practice, it felt… *icky*. Worrisome. Like something I never would have asked him to do.

I found Xavier in his room, getting ready for bed. The door was ajar, and I leaned against the doorway. He’d just pulled off his shirt, and the sight of him made my cheeks heat up.

He caught me staring and offered a half smirk. “Like what you see?”

That was never up for debate. Xavier’s body was a work of art, his face too, and when he looked at me… The *way* he looked at me always had an impact. From the moment I’d met him, Xavier had always had this magnetic pull that couldn’t be ignored.

Unless I was worrying about other things—like the fact that he’d lost three years of his life because of me, and also Lola’s bullshit.

“I’m just—I wanted to update you on the Lola situation,” I said, shifting a little in place.

Xavier shook his head. “I’m sure you took care of it, baby. You and Jay are like, pro Lola wranglers.”

I looked down at the ground, sighing. “It’s just weird to deal with something as random as pulling off a lie for Lola’s dads, when earlier today we were worrying about demon ashes.”

When I glanced up at him, Xavier was frowning. “I want you to be able to forget about all that, Cali. It’s over now, we took care of it.”

It was fascinating to see how my mates dealt with a crisis. I knew it was probably wrong, but I couldn’t help but compare. Greyson was all, *You can vent and talk to me about anything, I don’t expect things to go back to normal just like that.* Meanwhile, Xavier was all, *I impulsively made a deal with a random courier guy of unknown supernatural origins to fix everything and save you, so let’s just move along now and forget anything happened.*

They both meant well, but it was just…

A lot.

“*You* took care of it, Xavier,” I said quietly. “The demon mentioned the three-year price, and you just handed the ashes to him and made the deal. You didn’t even say anything to me.”

Xavier stared. “Are you still upset about that?”

*This man is unbelievable*, I thought, feeling like crying and laughing at the same time.

“You literally gave away three years from your life as if they were nothing, Xavier,” I said. “I can’t just forget about that—we didn’t even talk about what happened. Not for real.”

Xavier nodded and sat down on his bed, patting the mattress for me to take a seat next to him. When I did, he muttered, “Are you mad at me?”

“I was never mad,” I said right away. “I just wish we’d had more time to talk about it before you made that choice. I wish…” There was a lump in my throat. “I just wish I didn’t have to keep worrying about losing someone I love because of a problem I should have been able to take care of myself.”

Xavier scowled, reaching out to hold my hand. “You’re putting a lot of pressure on yourself. This is a demon we’re talking about. No one should be expected to know how to handle the fallout of being possessed.”

I shook my head, looking down at our joined hands. My voice cracked. “I’m just scared. Three years of your life is a big price to pay. I should have paid it myself, or found a different way to get rid of the ashes.”

Xavier took both my hands. “Cali, look at me.” When I did, he said, “I’d pay it again for you. I’d do anything for you. Always.”

The earnestness in Xavier’s expression, his love and bravery and strength… It was all so alluring that I felt like hugging him and never letting go. The recklessness of his actions, though, made me uneasy, and I couldn’t stop the worry from spreading.

“The Courier said he’d take three years of your life—but what does that mean, exactly?” I asked. “There’s always fine print when it comes to magical deals, Xavier. Isn’t there?”

# Episode 2817

**Greyson**

“No, we are *not* killing a human,” I said with authority. I wasn’t going to break my promise to Cali just because Lucian had decided to go on a rampage. “We will do everything we can to avoid killing, and that’s a rule. Do you understand, Lucian?”

He pouted. “Spoilsport.”

“Just dial back the bullshit and don’t sell the house,” I said firmly.

Lucian huffed and flopped back down onto his fainting couch. “Fine. Close the door on your way out.”

The last thing I needed right now was for my fight with Lucian to escalate, so I kept my tone even. Not hostile, but firm. “You need to get your shit together, Lucian. For your pack, and for your sister. Do you understand?”

Lucian looked away and took another sip of alcohol. His nod was not convincing, but it would have to do for now. Shaking my head, I walked out of the room, Aysel following.

“Do you think your brother’s going to do anything rash?” I asked once we were in the hallway and out of earshot.

“I can’t tell anymore,” Aysel said with a sigh. “I used to be able to read his moods so well. Now he’s just a wildcard.” Her eyes watered, and she wiped at the corners with her palms. Her frustration and worry seemed genuine, at least.

“We need to prioritize right now, Aysel,” I said. “You can’t let Lucian out of your sight. He can’t sell the land, and he can’t kill Dick. If he does either of those things, it will be bad for all werewolves in the area. It will be bad for *you*, Aysel.”

Aysel nodded. “I don’t want him to sell the house either.”

I stared at her, waiting for the second part of the equation. “And?”

She blinked at me. “And what?”

“And you can’t let your brother kill any humans,” I repeated. “I need to be able to trust you on this, Aysel.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine, I’ll *try* to stop him from killing a human.”

“Not good enough,” I said. “Let’s go again.”

She pouted, crossing her arms over her chest.

I took a step closer, looking down at her. In a tone that bordered authority and threat, I said, “I need you to realize your position, Aysel. I did you a favor by not starting a pack war after all the bullshit you and your brother pulled. I came over today to help you deal with Lucian. I’m the only person you can call, your only tentative ally, so at this point, I don’t just demand your loyalty. I *expect* you to follow direction. I expect you to respect me, because you don’t want to push your luck here.”

Aysel swallowed roughly, breaking eye contact. Huffing, she finally said, “Fine. I *promise* I’ll try my hardest to keep Lucian from killing a human.”

I looked at her as she stared at her feet, and the hint of her submission made me feel less aggravated. I’d have to resign myself to the fact that handling the Vanguards was going to remain in my job description for the foreseeable future. I’d thought I would be free from them now on, but no. Of fucking course not.

“Keep me updated on Lucian,” I told Aysel.

“I will,” she mumbled. I turned my back on her, walking away.

When she said good night, I didn’t respond.

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Dealing with the Vanguards had taken three million years. By the time I got back to the pack house, the sun was setting. Cali had to be out of bed by now, and I hated missing out on snuggling with her.

She was the only thing on my mind when I walked into the house, but Rishika had other ideas. “You were gone for a while, Greyson.” She stared at me intensely. “What happened with the Vanguards?”

“I took care of it,” I said. “For now.”

Rishika frowned. “Should I be worried?”

“I’ll keep you posted. Sound good?”

She nodded seriously.

“Have you seen Cali?” I asked.

“I think she’s in the kitchen,” Rishika replied.

The only person in the kitchen was Torin, actually. His whole face lit up when he saw me. “Greyson, there you are! Would you like some dinner?”

I was about to refuse and keep looking for Cali, but my stomach growled.

“I’ll have a quick bite, sure,” I said. “Did you see Cali earlier?”

“Yeah, she looked much better,” Torin said. His words were definitely a relief—Kira’s spell still had to be going strong. “Take a seat, I’ll set you up in a jiffy,” Torin added, and went straight to the stove. Whistling, he pulled the leftovers from the oven and started heaping things on my plate.

“Torin, that’s too much—”

“You have to eat, you’re the *Alpha*.” He gestured vaguely in the direction of my arms. “Muscles need calories!”

A moment later, I was sitting at the counter with a heaping plate of food in front of me. I wouldn’t be able to eat all this, but Torin looked so content that I couldn’t bring myself to deny him.

“This looks delicious. Thanks, man,” I said.

“You’re welcome,” he replied, sitting cross from me at the island. He leaned forward, staring at me, his eyes wide and full of intent.

I paused, my fork halfway to my mouth. “Did you need something?”

“Well,” Torin said, waving a hand, “now that you mention it, maybe you can give me some advice?”

I really wasn’t in the mood to talk about random stuff. I just wanted to eat and find Cali. But I knew that as Alpha, I needed to listen to the worries of my pack, and people who were pack-adjacent. Besides, how could I turn down Torin?

He’d healed us more times than I could count, his food was amazing, and he didn’t even really get mad. Ever. Not even when someone—not naming names—promised him they’d make caramel apples and then completely ghosted him.

“How can I help?” I asked, placing my fork down.

Torin exhaled sharply, and then the words came out of him in one breath. “So, I’ve watched a lot of episodes of *The Bachelor*, and *The Bachelorette*, and *Bachelor in Paradise*—oh, and I also watched a season of *Real Housewives*! But I am starting to think that maybe those shows aren’t actual ‘reality,’ even though they claim to be. You know?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Okay, so what’s the question?”

Torin sighed. “Well, I’ve been talking to Kevin…”

My brow furrowed, but then realization dawned. “Sound bath Kevin?”

Torin perked up. “Yes! And he wants to meet up.”

“Right,” I said, picking up my glass of water.

“And I thought it would just be hanging out,” Torin continued, “but Violet was telling me that it means a *date*. A real one! And, well, I just don’t know what a real-life date is supposed to look like.”

I almost choked on my water. Torin patted my back as I asked him, “Wait, you want *me* to give you dating advice?”

Torin looked sheepish, excited, and like he was about to throw up—all at once. “I just think I really like him! But I don’t know if I should tell him that. Or what to wear. He likes blue, so should I wear all blue? Also, he’s human, so where do humans like to go on dates? And what do I do if he tries to—”

“Whoa there,” I said, cutting him off. “I’m sorry, but I’m not a great person to ask for dating advice.”

Torin pouted. “But why? Cali says you know everything!”

Literally where the fuck did anyone get that impression?

“Torin, listen,” I said patiently, “Dating is… it’s kind of its own artform. There’s a lot of ins and outs, and I’m not the best person to ask.” Especially because before Cali, I’d only really ever dated Maren. Before that I just *got* with people. Cali changed everything about that for the better.

Torin squinted at me, obviously not happy with my answer. “But what are the ins and outs? How did you get with Cali?”

I let out a laugh that was both awkward and alarmed. “Please don’t try to mirror the beginning of my relationship with Cali. Just don’t.”

“What I should do, then?” Torin’s voice started to sound squeaky. “I’m so nervous! What if I have nothing to talk about?”

“I’m sure you’ll find things to talk about,” I reassured him. “Besides, maybe you two should go out with a group first, to see how you click.”

Torin gasped, his face brightening up. “Oh my gods, like a double date? They did those sometimes on *Desperate Housewives*!”

I did not comment on Torin’s sources of information. Just nodded. “A double date sounds good. Just ease into things.”

Torin clapped his hands in excitement. “That’s perfect! You’re amazing, Greyson!”

I smiled. It kind of felt good having successfully helped Torin out with his problem. Despite being a little too high energy for my tastes, he was a genuinely good guy who had gone through a lot after Astrid’s passing. I was glad to make him feel better.

I ate his delicious food as he rambled on about Kevin, then he suddenly said, “I’ll actually text Kevin right now about our double date.”

I nodded, getting up to place my empty dish in the sink. A second later, Torin’s phone vibrated.

“He says yes!” Torin enthused. “And he’s so looking forward to meeting you!”

I froze. “Wait, *what*?”

Torin grinned at me, delighted. “For our double date! Me and Kevin, and you and Cali!”

# Episode 2818

**Xavier**

I took Cali’s hand and covered it with both of mine. “I get why you’re worried about this deal with the Courier—and the fallout from it.”

She looked down at our hands. “I just don’t want anything bad to happen to you, Xavier,” she said quietly.

There was something about the way she said my name that made my heart thud. “Nothing bad is going to happen,” I assured her. “And I can handle anything the Courier throws at me.” I squeezed her hand. “As long as I’ve got you by my side, I can face anything.”

She looked up, her eyes bright. I hoped to god it wasn’t from tears. She’d already cried enough.

“You know that we’re stronger together, right?” I asked her.

She nodded, and I felt her body relax a little next to mine. “I know. I just want to figure out what’s really going on with this deal, so we don’t end up being surprised by anything.”

I nodded. “I know, and it’s not a bad idea. I’ll talk to Okorie, and we’ll try to find out more, okay? But for right now, you’re safe, and—it worked, right? I mean, the Courier took the ashes and you’re not having those Seluna nightmares anymore, are you?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Good. I just want you to be able to relax and sleep and eat and… just be happy, baby.”

She smiled. “Thank you, Xavier. And I do feel better. I’ve even been looking forward to some of Torin’s Christmas plans.”

“Really?” I asked, surprised.

“What’s that look about?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “All Torin’s plans just seem so… intense.”

Cali laughed at this, and I was glad to hear the musical, happy sound of it.

“Christmas used to be one of my favorite holidays when I was a kid, and I really want to enjoy it this year after everything that’s happened. At least this year I get to celebrate it with all the people I love.”

I pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Then we’ll make sure it’s a great holiday for you.”

Cali squeezed my hand. “I’d better go check on Lola. I need to make sure she’s not annoying Jacs so much that the poor vampire acts out,” she said, getting to her feet. “We probably don’t need any more bloodshed around here.”

I stood from the bed and pulled her into my arms. “Try not to let yourself worry too much about this. Okay?”

Cali looked up at me. “Okay. I’ll try.”

Looking up at me, Cali was so beautiful, and her lips were so close, I couldn’t help myself. I bent and kissed her, feeling her sigh as our lips met. Kissing her was like drinking white chocolate mocha—warm and sweet and packed with a punch of energy. My hand slid into her hair, and she clutched the front of my shirt, hanging onto me tightly.

When I pulled away, Cali was blushing and seemed flustered, which I always found adorable.

“Okay, I’m going to go find Lola,” she said quietly, and—releasing her hold on me—she headed out.

I watched her go, then ran a hand through my hair. I guessed I should keep that promise to Cali and try to find out more information about the deal I’d made with the Courier. And now was as good a time as any. I hadn’t wanted to mention it to her—she was scared enough—but I was more worried about it than I’d let on. The three-year obligation did sound kind of ominous, and it was probably a good idea to find out as much about this Courier person as possible.

I headed out of my room to find Okorie, who’d put us in touch with the guy in the first place. For better or for worse.

He wasn’t upstairs, so I went downstairs to check the kitchen. Torin was the only one in there, humming along to Christmas carols as he frosted what looked like thousands of cookies.

I didn’t find Okorie in the den or any of the offices, and I was starting to feel frustrated when I stuck my head into the living room.

“Does anyone know where Okorie is?” I asked. “Where is he practicing with Marta and Dani?”

Ravi looked over. “I think I just saw them go outside,” he said, gesturing toward the front door.

When I opened it, I saw Okorie at the bottom of the steps with Marta and Dani, and it looked like he was saying goodbye.

“Hang on!” I called, hurrying down the steps. “Are you leaving, man?”

“Yeah,” Okorie said. “My Airbnb rainfall shower is calling my name.”

“Can I talk to you for a minute before you go?” I asked.

The warlock looked surprised but nodded. “Sure.”

Marta and Dani headed back up the porch steps, leaving us alone.

I turned to the warlock. “I was wondering what more you could tell me about the Courier.”

Okorie furrowed his brow. “Why? I thought you already made your deal with him. Why do you want to know more about him now? He’s gone.”

“I just want to figure out if there’s any fine print with the Courier’s deals I should know about,” I explained.

“What do you mean?”

I was starting to get annoyed. “Exactly what I said. Maybe you haven’t noticed, but there’s been a lot of shit going on around here, and I’m looking to prevent more unexpected problems from popping out of the woodwork.”

Okorie blew out a breath. “Yeah, well, it just seems a little late to be asking about this. I mean, if there is any fine print, you’re already obligated to it.”

I rubbed at the back of my neck, where I carried my tension. “I know I’ve already made the deal,” I growled, “but I just want a little more information. What’s so bad about that?”

Okorie shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you, man. I’m not an expert on the Courier. I just knew he existed and offered to contact him for you.”

“So you don’t know anything?” I said, frustration starting to mount.

“Sorry,” he said, not sounding sorry. “But if you were worried, maybe you should have done more research *before* you made a deal with him.”

I didn’t like being chastised like a kid by this warlock. And the worst part was that he was totally right. I hated being told that I’d been too rash in making a deal with the Courier, because I was worried that I’d been too rash in making a deal with the Courier. But I had done it for Cali. And I didn’t regret it. I would do anything for that woman.

And her dreams had been getting so bad. She was tired all the time, and losing weight. She couldn’t concentrate. She could barely think. It had felt—at the time—like we didn’t have any time to waste. We’d *needed* to get rid of Seluna’s ashes.

“Fine,” I said, trying to sound reasonable, “I know I’ve already made the deal, and I accept whatever comes with it. I’m not trying to get out of it. I just want more information, so if you have it, cough it up.”

Okorie sighed in a resigned way, which I hoped meant he was going to give in and help me out.

I tried to sweeten the deal a little. “I don’t want to do this for myself. I want to make sure my pack is protected. And my mate. That’s what matters to me.”

Okorie looked thoughtful. “I don’t know much, but what I *can* tell you is that magical deals that involve bartering time are… sensitive.”

“Sensitive how?”

“You just never know when the years will be taken,” Okorie explained. “And if the Courier is clever enough, he’ll make it so he can take the years any time he wants.”

I frowned. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Sometimes these deals aren’t always about the years off your life, but the usefulness of time. And that means different things to different people.”

I stared at him. I was barely following this, but I knew I didn’t like the sound of it. And I was more convinced than ever that I needed to talk to the Courier again and iron out some of the conditions of our deal. “I need to talk to the guy. Call him again, will you?”

But Okorie was already shaking his head. “Can’t do it.”

“Why not?” I demanded.

“It’s a bad idea, man,” Okorie said.

“I need to talk to him. Just call him.”

Okorie looked around, like he was trying to figure out how to say what he had to say. “Xavier, a guy like the Courier… He doesn’t do anything for free.”

“What do you mean? I just want to talk to him.”

“It doesn’t matter what you want. If we call him back, he’s going to expect some kind of compensation,” Okorie said. He looked grave. “Is that a price you’re willing to pay again?”

# Episode 2819

I sat on the floor of Lola’s room, watching as she packed her bag for the lake house. She seemed to have calmed down a little—much to my relief. Jay was with her, rubbing her back. He’d probably helped.

“So,” I started slowly, “how are you doing?”

“I’m feeling better now that I’ve made all my lists,” she said, tossing socks into her bag. “I just want to make sure everything’s perfect.”

I nodded. “Yeah, perfection might take some doing, but we’re all here for you, Lola.”

She looked up from her bag and smiled. “Thank you. I’m really grateful that you—and everyone else in the pack—have been willing to pitch in for this.” She gave her head a shake. “I know I’m being crazy, but promise I’m going to be much less ridiculous after my dads are gone.”

“We’ve got it handled,” I said quickly, noting that her voice had taken on that anxious note again. “It’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

Lola nodded. “I know. I’m trying not to. The last piece I need is your parents. Have you talked to them yet?”

“I haven’t,” I admitted, and I flinched as Lola’s eyes widened with alarm. “But I’ll go do it now!” I said, jumping to my feet before Lola could freak out.

I rushed out of the room before she could start yelling and went looking for my parents. It was late, and they were usually early to bed, but they weren’t in their room, so I went looking downstairs. I found them in the kitchen, drinking tea. The kitchen was quiet for once, and clean—all evidence of Torin’s cookie factory had been put away. The tea they were drinking was chamomile—I could tell from the smell of it. They liked to drink it before bed, and the smell reminded me of home. I stopped in the doorway and smiled at the sight of the two of them sitting together quietly.

It was strange to have them here, and it still surprised me sometimes. There were a lot of things I couldn’t have predicted about my life, and this was one of them. Who would have thought I’d have both my parents here with me at the pack house, so loving and so supportive of this crazy-weird life I’d built for myself?

True, my dad was a werewolf now, and that probably made a difference, but he seemed to be handling that okay.

A sudden thought occurred to me, and I frowned. *My dad is a werewolf*. Which no one gave a second thought to here, of course—but was it going to be an issue when Lola’s dads were here?

Well, there was no way to tell what was going to be an issue for my parents until I asked them, so I stepped into the room.

“Hi, you two,” I said.

They looked up, surprised.

“Hey there, pumpkin,” Dad said, smiling at me. “Come on in. Pull up a chair. Come talk to your old mom and dad.”

“Cali, sweetheart, how are you? Would you like some tea?” Mom asked, starting to get to her feet. “It’s chamomile. It’ll help you sleep.”

“No, I’m fine, thanks, Mom.”

“Are you sure? It’s no problem.”

“I don’t need any tea right now. I actually have a favor to ask you,” I said.

Mom frowned as she took her seat again. “What is it? Is everything okay? Is it the dreams?”

“No, no, I feel a lot better now,” I assured her. “This favor is actually for Lola.”

“Is Lola okay?” Dad asked quickly. “What’s going on?”

“Well,” I hedged, “she’s mostly fine, except her dads are coming into town, and they don’t know anything about wolves or vampires or… the fact that Lola isn’t still in college.”

I eyed them both to see how they’d take this news.

Mom did not look happy about this. “So, let me see if I’ve got this straight: Lola has been lying to her dads about being in school this whole time?”

I stared at her for a moment, then swallowed the wild laugh that was bubbling up in my throat. “Wait, *that’s* what bothers you, Mom? Not the demon attacks or the magical orbs possessing people? But that Lola’s been less than truthful with her dads?”

I mean, same, but still.

Mom waved an airy hand. “Oh, Cali. Demons and orbs are a fact of supernatural life. They’re like the weather. You know this by now. There’s nothing we can do to stop them. But Lola shouldn’t lie to her dads.”

As I struggled to comprehend the insanity she’d just voiced, my dad spoke up.

“Why hasn’t she been honest with them?” he asked. “I mean, I know it might be a little awkward at first, but what’s the harm in telling them about her life?”

“Um, for one, I think she thinks that conversation would be more than just a *little* awkward. Besides that, we’re not really supposed to tell humans about supernaturals,” I reminded him. “You just don’t know how they might react, and then there’s the whole issue with LIPS.”

“Okay,” he said slowly, then took a sip of tea. “Well, I’m a dad, and I think they’d love her no matter what. I mean, look at me. It took me some time to adjust, but I think I did pretty well.”

“You adjusted *too* well,” I said with a smile. “You became a werewolf.”

“It’s not like I had much of a choice about that,” he pointed out. He looked over at my mom. “I know you don’t like the idea of lying to the Spillanes, but if anyone knows about the importance of keeping supernaturals a secret from humans, it’s you.”

Mom looked like she was thinking hard. “I know that it’s important to keep these two worlds separate, so, even though I don’t like doing it, I understand the need. We’ll do what we have to do to keep it secret. And if this is what Lola needs, we’ll play along.”

I breathed a sigh of relief, happy that my parents were onboard with the idea. “There’s going to be a parent dinner that we’re all going to. Can you both make it?”

Dad nodded. “We can be there.”

“And you won’t say anything about all the supernatural stuff, or that Lola isn’t in school?” I asked.

Dad mimed locking his lips with a key. “My lips are sealed.”

“Cali, there you are.”

I looked up at Greyson, who’d just walked in. A wave of guilt swept through me when I saw him, remembering that I’d asked Xavier to go with me to the parent dinner, and not Greyson. I had to tell him about that. Like, now. It wasn’t that I was trying to keep it a secret—I just hadn’t had a chance to tell him about it yet.

“We’re going to head to bed, pumpkin,” Dad said, getting to his feet.

Mom kissed my cheek. “Goodnight you two.” Then they both carried their cups to the sink and headed out of the kitchen.

Greyson sat down at the table and looked at me.

“I need to talk to you about something,” we both said, speaking at the same time.

I laughed. “You can go first.”

Greyson hesitated for a moment, which made me instantly nervous. What did he have to tell me? Was it something big?

“I might have accidentally agreed to go on a double date with Torin and a guy he met on Tinder,” he said very matter-of-fact.

I laughed again. “Is that it?”

Greyson nodded.

“That’s fine,” I said, grateful that it wasn’t something about the apocalypse coming or something along those lines. We’d had quite enough of that. “I like double dates. They’re fun. When is it?”

He frowned, thinking. “I think it’s tomorrow night?”

Shit. That was the same night as my parent dinner with Xavier.

“Wait, are you serious—”

“I was thinking it’s so stupid, right? I mean, why would we go on a double date with Torin and a complete stranger? But then I was thinking it actually might be nice. That bit of normal you wanted, right? And Torin isn’t a bad guy to hang out with, once he’s calmed down a little.”

I nodded along, wondering how the *hell* I was going to explain the parent dinner situation.

“Anyway, he’s really looking forward to it.” He smiled. “And as the Alpha, I’m supposed to take care of my pack.”

I smiled back at him. “It’s really nice of you to do this for Torin.”

“What do you say, love?” he asked. “Want to go on a date with me tomorrow?”

“Yes!” I said with a laugh. “But—”

“Great,” Greyson said, grinning. He leaned across the table and gave me a quick kiss. “I’ll let Torin know.”

And before I knew it, he had gone, leaving me looking after him, the rest of my explanation still on my lips. *Shit!*

How was I supposed to be in two places at once tomorrow?

# Episode 2820

**Marta**

I was worried about Dani, so when I knocked on her door, I had a cup of tea in my hand. Tea always made me feel better, and I hoped it would do the same for her.

“Come in,” she called.

When I opened the door, she was lying on her bed, and there was only one small lamp turned on, making the room dim.

“This looks relaxing,” I said. “Are you going to sleep? I can leave if you—”

“No, I’m just resting for a while,” Dani said, her voice small. “I’ve just been so exhausted lately. It’s hard not sleeping well.”

I nodded. “I brought you some tea. Chamomile.”

“Can you just put it on the desk?”

I set the cup down and looked at Dani, who looked small on her bed. “Are you feeling better at all after Kira’s meditation session?”

Dani sat up. “Actually, maybe I will take that tea. Thanks, Marta,” she murmured, as I handed it to her. “I do feel better. It was definitely better than whatever Torin did.”

I laughed. “Torin means well. He’s a nice guy, but a little clueless sometimes.”

Dani nodded. “That’s true. Most everyone here is nice. But it’s a bit… overwhelming.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Dani’s eyes went wide. “There are just so many of them, and they’re all up in each other’s business.”

I gave her a wry smile. “What you’ve just described is the definition of a pack.”

“Yeah, maybe… But I’m just not used to it.”

I nodded. “Believe me, I’m not either.”

“At least you have Lilac,” she said. “I’ve been alone, and even when I was younger it was mostly just my sister and me.” Her eyes went hazy. “Just us against the world,” she finished sadly.

“Do you miss your sister?” I asked quietly.

She nodded. “I just wish I knew where she was. I want to tell her that I’m okay. I’m sure she’s worried about me, and I hate for her to worry.”

“We’ll find her,” I assured her. “Maybe we can ask Okorie for help.”

She nodded sadly. “Maybe.”

I hesitated for a moment. “You know, Dani, for what it’s worth, I’m really glad you’re okay.”

When she looked up at me, her smile shone on her small face. “Thanks.”

“And maybe you don’t see it all the time, but I’m overwhelmed by the pack a lot of times, too.”

“Really?” Dani asked, looking surprised.

“Absolutely. I mean, I was alone with a poltergeist and his ghost friends for decades. So this was all really weird when I first got here. You’re not wrong about Lilac though… I’m really lucky to have him,” I felt myself blush. “He helped bridge that transition for me—what with him being a ghost at the time.”

Dani smiled. “You two are really cute together.”

I returned her smile. “I’m really happy I found him,” I said, and it was true, but the joy that I usually felt when I thought of Lilac felt smaller than normal. Ever since we’d talked about it, I thought about Lilac’s true mate—whoever she was—whenever I thought about my relationship with him. I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t help it.

I’d been trying to throw myself into my training with Okorie to distract myself from this uncomfortable fact. But that dedication had also meant I hadn’t spent much time with Lilac. I had been hoping that agreeing to go the lake house with him to help out Lola would give us time to reconnect.

But the reality was that I just wasn’t all that good at this relationship stuff. I wasn’t sure how I could fix this.

I shook myself out of my thoughts and looked at Dani. “I’ll let you rest. I know Lola expects us to be up really early tomorrow.”

Dani grinned. “Well, I’m excited to finally get a good night’s rest tonight. Hopefully.”

“You will. Sleep well,” I said, and crept quietly out of the room.

As I stepped into the hallway, I looked up to see Violet storming toward me. I opened my mouth to say hello, but I stopped when I saw the dark look on her face.

“Violet?”

She stopped in front of me. “If you’re going to break my brother’s heart, you’d better be honest with him about it.”

I stared at her, baffled. “What are you talking about?”

Violet’s eyes flashed. “You *kissed* Okorie!”

“*What?*” I gasped. “What are you talking about? No I didn’t!”

Violet looked flustered. “But I *saw* you!”

“What did you see, exactly?” I asked.

“I saw you through the window. You were in the yard, and you were standing really close to each other. I saw you *kiss* him!”

I shook my head. “Violet, that wasn’t a kiss! I’ve never kissed Okorie!”

“Then what were you doing?” Violet demanded.

“I don’t know! He was probably just taking off my bracelets or correcting my posture or something,” I said. I was scrambling, even though I hadn’t done anything wrong. I just felt so on the spot. Then a terrible thought occurred to me. “Did you tell Lilac about what you *thought* you saw?”

Violet shook her head. “No, I didn’t. I had to hear it from you first. But I always have my brother’s back.”

“Of course you do,” I said quickly. “I know that. But I hope you believe me when I tell you that I didn’t—and have never—kissed Okorie.”

Violet looked at me for a long moment, then dropped her gaze to the floor. “Okay,” she mumbled. “Sorry about accusing you. Good night.”

I watched her disappear down the hall, then walked to my own room. As I shut the door, I wondered if Violet really did believe me.

I liked Violet, and I knew she was a good sister to Lilac, but she definitely jumped to conclusions sometimes. And if Violet didn’t believe me, was that going to be one less friend I’d have?

Opening a drawer of my dresser, I pulled out an old T-shirt I’d scavenged from the laundry room that I liked to wear to bed. It had been washed to softness and felt like a hug, which I needed, because I was feeling stressed.

What the hell had Violet been thinking? Just the idea of Okorie and me together was ridiculous. He was just my mentor. The only relationship we had was a student-mentor thing. Nothing else. And—besides that—he drove me crazy. He was so difficult and sarcastic and snarky with me. I wasn’t even sure I liked him as a mentor, sometimes.

But… deep down, he did have a really good heart. He was always trying to cover it up, but he’d helped Dani and Cali, and he’d blipped everyone to safety after the fight with the demons at the Vanguard palace. He worried about everyone here, I could see it.

But still, he drove me nuts.

I pulled back my covers and slipped into bed, hugging myself tight. I was looking forward to the lake house, and I hoped that Lilac and I could get closer again over the next few days. I’d been too busy to really think about it, but I realized that I missed spending time with him that didn’t involve an exorcism, or a battle, or any of the other insane things that happened to this pack.

It had just been so amazing when we’d first started getting together. When we’d both realized how we felt about each other. I thought of the butterflies I’d always felt in my stomach, and then our first kiss—back when he was a ghost. I loved kissing Lilac.

Closing my eyes, I pictured him in my mind. Walking toward me, his sweet smile curving his mouth. The feel of his hand on my cheek as he lowered his lips to mine.

I could feel myself smile as white-hot sparks of electricity shot through my body.

Then he pulled away to smile down at me—and it wasn’t Lilac.

It was Okorie.

*I feel such a connection with you, Marta*, he said, his voice rumbling low. *Don’t you feel it too?*

I nodded dreamily and wrapped my hands around the back of his neck, pulling him down so I could kiss him again.

His hands slid around my waist, pulling me tight into him, and I felt my body melting against his. Every part of me was warm—warmer than warm. I was burning up, and as he slipped his tongue into my mouth, I felt like I was going to burst into flames. He pushed me until my back was against the wall, and then he kissed me even harder, the intensity growing as his hands slipped down, lower and lower…

I jerked awake, so startled I almost fell out of bed. I was hot and sweating and breathing hard. My room was dark, and when I looked at the clock it read 2:03 a.m.

That was a dream. It was just a dream.

But why was I dreaming about Okorie?

Shit. Was Violet sort of right? Did I have a thing for my mentor?

# Episode 2821

When I woke up the next morning, I spent a moment in dreamy unconcern, relishing the good night’s sleep I’d had. And then I remembered that we were going to the lake house today with Lola, and there was still a *ton* to do.

This realization woke me up in a hurry, and I stretched my arms over my head.

There was a crinkle of paper, and I turned my head to see a slip of paper on my pillow with bulleted notes. It was another list from Lola, a to-do for the day, and it was completely filled—front *and back*—with tasks.

I groaned when I saw it. Lola’s intensity was so much sometimes, but I remembered that I’d promised to help her with organizing, and I’d meant it.

Glancing at the clock next to my bed, my body gave a jerk. I’d overslept! What the hell had happened to my alarm?

I grabbed the clock and checked it, but the alarm was still set, which meant that I must have slept through it. I must have been completely out to not hear it blaring in my ear, but that made sense. I’d been so exhausted lately because of the nightmares. It had been days since I’d slept well.

My door burst open, and Lola stood in the doorway, looking frantic.

“Cali! What are you doing?! Why aren’t you up? We’re supposed to be ready to go!” She looked around the room with wide, panicked eyes. “You haven’t even packed yet!”

“Lola, Lola, calm down,” I said, jumping out of bed. “I’m on top of it, I swear. Give me like, two minutes.”

I dashed into the bathroom and brushed my teeth at the speed of light, then grabbed a duffel bag from my closet and started throwing clothes into it. But I needed more than just clothes! I needed to bring things for my room that would make it look like I had really lived there for a semester and not like we’d moved houses because the lake house had caught on fire from an evil guy with an orb.

I grabbed another bag and threw in books, my alarm clock, my laptop, water bottles, and a lamp. Then, just for good measure, I dumped all the granola bar wrappers from my trash can into the bag, so my room at the lake house would look really lived in.

There were four full bags on my bed when I was finished, and I looked at them with concern. I was going to need to get someone to help me carry these out to the car.

When I made it outside, Lola was already there. She was standing next to one of Xavier’s bigger trucks, ordering Jay around and pointing emphatically.

I was shocked to see bookcases, a desk, and a couple of other large shapes in the back of the truck, covered with a tarp. *Furniture?* We were taking furniture over to the lake house?

Xavier was standing a bit back, his arms crossed, looking annoyed. “This is insane,” he said when he saw me. “I know she’s your friend, but I can’t handle this. It’s too much.”

I laughed at that. “You fought a demon, and *this* is too much?”

“It’s psychological warfare. If Lola orders me to bring her one more lamp only to reject it two seconds later, I’m going to fucking lose it.”

Lola looked over at us, and the look on her face made me wonder if she wasn’t going to start requesting lamps, so I stepped forward to stop her before it started.

“Lola, can you help me carry some of my stuff down?”

Lola nodded and hopped down from the back of the truck, looking determined. In my room, she loaded three of the four bags onto her shoulders and almost sprinted down the stairs.

Outside, someone had pulled around another car to carry Jacqueline, Dani, Violet, Charlie, Marta, and Lilac. These were the pack members who’d agreed to pose as roommates at the lake house. We’d decided we could convince Lola’s dads that the rest of the rooms were empty because people had gone home for the holidays.

Torin came down the porch steps, carrying a box filled to the brim with holiday decorations, and wrestled it into the trunk of the second car. He dusted his hands off and looked around.   
 “I’m going to come along to help set everything up,” he announced. “You need some holiday cheer, or none of this will be believable!”

He was coming? Good. Lucky even. I desperately needed to talk to him.

I needed to see if he could move his date for tonight. It was just going to be way too much to try to be in two places at once. And I’d promised Lola first. Besides, if I bailed on Lola, she might have a heart attack.

“Hey—” But just as I stepped over to talk to Torin, Lola grabbed my arm.

“Christmas tree!”

“Lola, I think you’re losing it. I’m *Cali*.”

“No! We didn’t get a Christmas tree! My dads will wonder why!”

“Calm down, it’ll be okay,” I said, trying to keep my voice soothing. “We’ll send Greyson out to chop one down or go to Target or something, okay?”

“Okay, okay,” Lola said, loosening her grip on my arm. “I guess that works.”

I put my arm around her shoulders and gently guided her toward the truck. The faster we got to the lake house and settled in, the better off we were all going to be.

I rode in the car to the lake house, which was probably for the best, what with Lola’s panic levels.

As soon as we pulled up, she jumped out and started unloading the truck, yelling at everyone she saw.

“The desk goes in my room!” she yelled at Charlie. “The bookcase needs to go in the living room, right by the windows,” she said, shoving a large bookcase at Violet.

I tried to ignore her as I walked into the house. Inside, I was hit with a wave of nostalgia. It had been ages since I’d been here, and memories of all the things that had happened in this house came rushing back to me. This house was where I’d truly come into my powers. It was here that I’d first starting bonding with Artemis. My parents had accepted me as Fae in this house, and gotten used to the idea of my two mates. It was here that Torin had come up with his silly *Bachelorette* idea. This house—Greyson’s house—was as special to me as Xavier’s house.

Xavier walked up behind me and slipped a hand around my waist. “Please tell me you have something for me to do that keeps me far out of Lola’s line of sight.”

I laughed and turned to look at him. “You can help me unpack.”

Xavier picked up my bags, and we headed upstairs.

In my old room, everything looked basically as I’d left it, except there were no sheets on the bed and there was a thin layer of dust over everything.

When Xavier dropped my bags, I unzipped them and started pulling stuff out. I put some clothes away in the dresser, and left others lying around to give the room a lived-in feel.

Xavier went off in search of sheets and a comforter from the linen closet, and together we spread them on the bed. Then he immediately flopped down on top.

“Stop,” I laughed, giving him a playful slap on the leg. “You’re going to get it all wrinkled when I just made it up so nicely.”

He laughed and, grabbing my arm, pulled me down on top of him. “I just thought of an activity that would wrinkle these sheets even more, and definitely does *not* involve taking orders from Lola.”

I giggled as he pulled me into a kiss. I knew I should go downstairs and help Lola push furniture from one room to the next—and then back again—but instead I just let myself sink into Xavier’s kiss.

*Just for a moment*, I told myself, but I think I knew I was lying.

When Xavier kissed me, it sent a shockwave through me. It was this strange rush of near helplessness, like I was yielding to something I’d been waiting for. As he flipped me over, hovering above me and kissing me harder, I felt this surging tide of heat that left me melting beneath him.

Without breaking away from the kiss, his hand moved down to the button of my jeans, his fingers sliding—*almost* accidentally—up the seam before he unbuttoned me.

But we both froze when we heard an ear-splitting scream from downstairs.

I pushed Xavier off me and jumped to my feet, rushing downstairs to see what had happened.

Lola was standing in the middle of the entrance hall, her face red, breathing so hard it sounded like she was about to pass out. She looked like she was in the middle of a full-blown panic-attack, and Jay stood at her side, speaking quietly.

“What’s going on? Who screamed? What’s wrong?” I demanded, my heart racing.

Lola looked up at me, terror in her eyes. “My dads are here early!”

# Episode 2822

**Lola**

I couldn’t breathe. I was hyperventilating. I’d never done that before.

Violet raced over to me with a paper bag. “Breathe into this,” she ordered.

Cali ran to my side. “Lola, breathe, you’re okay.”

I couldn’t believe this. All my careful plans were about to be ruined.

“What’s going on?” Cali asked, looking up at Jay.

“She just got a text. Her dads’ flight landed early, and they’ve been on their way here.” He looked around. “They’re a half hour away.”

I knew what he was looking at. The house was a wreck. And not a convincing college-life-wreck. This was a clearly-just-moved-in-wreck.

I gasped. “There’s no way they’re going to believe people have been living here for days, never mind months.”

“Okay, okay, Lola, try to calm down,” Cali said, her voice soothing. “We can do this. We can get rid of the boxes, but we don’t have to put everything away. We can just say that we live with a bunch of slobs.”

“I guess so…” I said slowly. “That might work.”

“Of course it will,” she said cheerily. “We’re not out of the game yet. And look.” She pointed out one of the windows flanking the door. “Here comes Greyson with your Christmas tree. Things are going to be just fine.”

Greyson wrested the tree into the house, showering the floor with pine needles. He set down the tree and looked around, his expression annoyed. “Where do you want this?”

Torin rushed toward him. “Just in here, Greyson,” he said excitedly. “In the living room. I’d forgotten how big this house was!”

As I watched them maneuver the tree into the living room, I started to think that maybe this might not be the end of the world after all. I picked up a box and started pulling books out of it, stacking them on the entry table in a way that I hoped looked natural.

“Hey, Lola,” Jay said, stepping next to me. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” I said quietly. “And I’m sorry I’ve been so intense the last few days. This is just a really big deal for me.”

“I know that, Lola.”

“My dads’ opinions just matter so much to me.”

Jay put his arms around me and pulled me close. “I’m here for you, you know that right? I’m not going anywhere.”

“Well,” I said, my voice muffled against his chest, “that might actually be a problem, because my dads kind of hate you.”

Jay laughed, the sound good-natured. “Don’t worry about that. I’ve got it covered.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Just what we talked about. I’m going to show your dads that I’m the most supportive boyfriend ever. I’m going to be so accommodating that they won’t even know what hit them.”

“Yeah?” I asked dubiously.

“It’s going to be great. I’m finally going to bond with your dads and make it so easy for them to like me, they won’t be able to *not* approve of me.”

I nodded along and kept my doubts to myself. I loved Jay’s attitude about it, but I just wasn’t sure everything he’d planned was even going to be possible with how much my dads seemed to object to him.

But, then again, Jay did have a way of winning people over. And I wanted to trust him. Besides, what other choice did I have?

And maybe he was right. Maybe my dads were finally going to realize what an incredible guy Jay was. They had to notice at some point, and if nothing else came out of this visit, maybe that would happen. They hadn’t spent all that much time with him up to this point either. This might be a really good thing…

And Cali’s parents liked Jay. Maybe I could ask them to mention how much they liked him at the dinner tonight. Maybe they’d convince my dads to like him, too.

With this thought in mind, I was starting to feel better. More hopeful and more energized about life. This didn’t have to be a disaster!

I strode into the living room and looked around. The Christmas tree was set up, but the rest of the furniture was in total disarray. The wing chairs near the fireplace were resting on their sides for some reason, and it just didn’t look like anyone lived here.

Out in the hallway, I spied Xavier hurrying by.

“Xavier! Will you help me?” I called after him.

He slunk into the living room, looking thunderous. “What?” he asked flatly.

He was obviously annoyed, but I didn’t care. I didn’t have time to care. I had to get this house looking presentable—fast.

“Can you move that chair over here?” I said, pointing. “And put that little table next to it.”

Xavier heaved a heavy sigh and started moving the furniture around. He grumbled under his breath the whole time, but I ignored that, too.

“Move the couch over here,” I directed. His eyes flashed, and I added, “Please.”

Xavier groaned with annoyance, and when he moved the couch, he used too much of his werewolf strength, leaving a deep gouge in the wood floor. The scraping sound was loud, and we both looked down at it in silence for a moment.

I frowned, then shook my head. “It’s fine. We’ll just put a rug over that. And maybe,” I added, “let’s not tell Greyson about this.”

“Yeah, if I were you I wouldn’t,” Xavier said.

Reassuring. I pushed the thought of Greyson freaking out about his precious floor out of my mind. There was so much still to do.

Fifteen minutes later, I was racing back and forth between rooms. Every time I did something, it seemed like there were a million more things to do—I was putting my clothes away, trying to get the bathrooms set up, and checking on each individual “roommate.” And I needed everyone to throw random clothes, books, and blankets in the empty rooms to make it look like other people were living there.

“Hey, are you two unpacked?” I called, pushing open Violet’s door.

Charlie rolled off her and got to his feet, looking embarrassed.

Violet looked annoyed. “Lola, try knocking!”

“This isn’t a staycation!” I shrieked. “You need to be working, not canoodling! Kiss on your own damn time!”

Then I slammed the door and stormed down the stairs. It was *impossible* to control these people, and I was never going to make this work if everyone kept lazing around.

But when I got downstairs, I was pulled up short, and I gazed around in surprise. The Christmas tree was up and decorated. Lights shone from it in a very Christmassy way. There were garlands hung from every wall of the living room, and a garland of evergreens wound up the banister of the staircase.

“Torin,” I said, coming into the living room. “This looks great.”

He grinned. “Thanks, but I’m not doing it alone.” He nodded toward Greyson, who I hadn’t seen until that moment. He was decorating the back of the tree with a very irritated expression on his face.

Greyson caught sight of me and frowned. “Torin, I don’t have time for this. I didn’t have time to the bring the Christmas tree over, come to think of it. I have things to take care of back at the pack house. You know, *Alpha* stuff, for the pack.”

Torin smiled. “It’ll just take a couple more minutes to get everything done. And Greyson? You’ve put way too much tinsel on that side. You need to spread it out more.”

I almost laughed at the shocked look on Greyson’s face.

“Torin—” he started, and I turned to leave.

I didn’t have time to listen to them bicker all day. I ran into Jay just as he was stepping out of the kitchen.

“What smells so good?” I asked, looking over his shoulder.

“I just put a batch of cookies into the oven as a thank you for Torin,” he said with a smile. “But they’re not as good as his. They’re just from one of those cut and bake rolls.”

“And everything else?” I asked.

“Everything’s all set.”

As I looked at him, it felt like my heart was growing. I was *so* grateful for Jay, and for Torin, and for everyone working on this insane project with me.

“What would I do without you?” I asked, wrapping my arms around him.

He hugged me back. “Well, you’re never going to have to find out.” He pulled away from me and looked up. In the doorway above us, Torin had hung a sprig of mistletoe.

I laughed at the corniness of it all. “I don’t have time for this nonsense,” I said halfheartedly.

Jay grinned at me. “There’s always time for mistletoe,” he said, and drew me closer.

I didn’t even bother protesting as he pressed his lips to mine.

“Lola?”

The voice froze my blood, and I yanked away from Jay and spun around. Standing in the open doorway were my dads, staring at me in shock.

“Dad! Pops!” I said, shocked to see them here in the pack house like this. I was at a total loss for words, but before I could go on, Dad stepped forward, his expression hard.

“Lola, are you *living* with this guy now?”

# Episode 2823

Lola had frozen in place after her dad’s question, and the silence stretched. Lola sputtered, clearly trying to form an answer. Of course she was living with Jay, but that wasn’t something she could admit to her dads. I knew she didn’t want to. She wanted them to like Jay, and things were already icy.

So I moved forward, practically leaping toward Lola’s dads.

“Hi!” I called happily. “It’s so nice to see you again Mr. and Mr. Spillane. How are you?”

Daniel pulled his angry gaze from Lola and Jay and looked over at me. “Hi, Cali. It’s nice to see you.”

Both he and Danny gave me a quick hug, but it did nothing to ease the tension in the air, which was nearly palpable. When I looked back over my shoulder, I could see that Lola was still standing still, like a deer caught in the headlights of an approaching semi-truck.

I swallowed hard. If Lola wasn’t going to answer her dad’s question, I was going to have to. “Jay doesn’t live here. He just visits all the time. He’s *so* attentive,” I couldn’t help adding.

“During the day!” Lola shouted.

We all turned to stare at her.

“What?” Danny asked, looking confused.

“He visits during the day,” Lola shouted, almost robotically.

*Oh my god*. I had to stop myself from wincing. This was so, so, *so* awkward.

Torin—who was the worst reader of vibes of anyone I’d ever known—stepped toward the men. “Hi!” he said jovially. “I’m Torin.”

“Hi, Torin,” Daniel said. “Nice to meet you. How are you doing?”

“I’m doing fine. Would you like a sample of my mulled wine?” he asked. “It’s a special recipe that I created with herbs gathered from my homeland.”

“Homeland?” Danny asked. “Where are you from?”

“Oh, the Fa—”

“Finland!” I shouted, speaking over Torin. “He’s from Finland.”

I glanced over at Charlie and Violet, who had joined us downstairs, and stared at them until they got the message and walked toward Torin.

“Let’s go check on that mulled wine,” Violet said, putting her arm around Torin’s shoulders and leading him away.

“*Can* I get you something to drink?” I asked, looking at Lola’s dads. “You must be exhausted from your flight. How’s the hotel?”

They looked at each other for a moment.

“The hotel’s just fine. I think we’d rather have a tour of the house,” Danny said, looking around. “Seems like a great place.”

Wow, that was *not* a great idea. What if they saw one of the unfinished, empty rooms and they wondered why there wasn’t someone living there? What if a tour of the house ruined the whole lie?

I cleared my throat nervously. “Actually, some of our roommates are kind of slobs. I don’t think a tour would be very fun. Why don’t I take you out and show you the lake?”

Lola’s dads looked at each other again, their expressions dark. They were clearly in foul moods, and I had no idea how to fix it.

“Jacs!” I called, waving her down as she headed down the stairs. “Jacqueline, come meet Lola’s dads. This is our roommate, Jacqueline.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I felt a knot of dread in my stomach. Why—of *all* people—had I chosen Jacs to introduce? She was *not* the one I wanted these men to get to know better.

But Jacs was holding out her hand to shake, so it was too late now.

“It’s nice to meet you,” she said politely.

“You too,” Daniel said. “Jacqueline, right? What do you study?”

Jacs smiled and without missing a beat said, “I’m double majoring in philosophy and psychology, but my real interest is in clinical work, maybe with children. I’m hoping to decide after I finish my internship and have some experience in the field.”

I could barely stop myself from gaping at the vampire. She sounded so confident and so smooth that for a moment even I believed her and wondered when she’d found the time to get to classes.

Lola’s dads were apparently similarly impressed, and I could see them visibly relax.

“We were actually thinking of checking out the lake, Jacqueline,” Daniel said with a smile. “Would you like to show it to us?”

“I’d love to!” Jacs said with uncharacteristic enthusiasm. She tossed a look over her shoulder at me that seemed to say, *See? I’m great at this.*

But I wasn’t even annoyed at her smugness. I was just grateful that Jacs had come along to distract Lola’s dads.

When they were gone, I breathed a sigh of relief. Lola had disappeared while her dads were speaking to Jacs, so I went off in search of her. But I found Greyson first, getting a drink in the kitchen.

“Hey,” he said, rinsing his glass. “Is everything okay with Lola’s dads?”

“Actually, I’m not sure,” I admitted. “Lola’s in a bit of a daze, so Jacqueline is showing them the lake. But I think it’ll turn out all right.”

“I’m sure it will be, love. And I’d love to stay, but I have to get going. I need to take care of some stuff for the pack,” he said, looking apologetic.

“Of course,” I said quickly. “You need to go be the Alpha. I understand.”

He stepped to me and kissed my forehead. “I’ll see you tonight for our date.”

I stared after him as he headed quickly out the kitchen door. *Shit.* I’d meant to speak to Torin about changing the date to another night, but—with everything else—I’d forgotten to mention it. And now I had no idea where Charlie and Violet had taken him because they certainly weren’t in the kitchen with the mulled wine anymore.

Okay, now I had to find Torin.

I was about to head upstairs when Lola emerged from the bathroom, looking green. Jay—who’d been waiting outside the door—handed her a glass of water.

“Drink this,” he urged.

“Oh, Lola,” I said, patting her shoulder. “It’s not that bad—”

“Where are my dads?” Lola demanded, looking around wildly, like she’d only just noticed they were gone.

“Checking out the lake. Didn’t you see Jacs charm their collective pants off?” I asked, and Lola shook her head. “She convinced them that she was a student, and they just took to her.”

Lola looked confused but relieved. “At least there’s one thing that’s going well.”

“Everything else we’ll fix with dinner tonight, okay? You’ve just got to snap out of this and act normal,” I said. If she didn’t, the jig would be up if it wasn’t already.

“Cali’s right. We’ll have some wine and good food, and everyone will relax,” Jay assured her. “And I’ll really pour on the charm.”

Lola rounded on him. “What you need to worry about is making it clear to them that you do *not* live here, or spend the night here, or—do anything except chastely hold my hand on occasion.”

Jay’s eyes widened, but he’d apparently heard the desperation in Lola’s voice, and he nodded. “Okay.”

Figuring Lola was as handled as she was likely to get, I turned to find Torin. I *really* needed to find him. I couldn’t be distracted from the parent dinner tonight. It was too important to Lola.

But I couldn’t find Torin anywhere, even though I searched every room. Frustrated, I headed outside, but instead of finding Torin, I found Xavier.

He was sitting on the porch and looking out at the woods beyond the lawn.

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

He gave me a sheepish smile. “Honestly, I’m trying to escape Lola.”

I sighed. “I know. This is all such a mess already, and we’ve barely begun.”

Xavier shook his head. “Lola’s just told so many lies at this point. It’s ridiculous. I just don’t see any way this is going to work out.”

I didn’t exactly disagree, but I didn’t like to hear it put this way, and I punched his arm. “Hey. Even if you don’t understand it, you should at least be supportive. Lola is our friend. She needs to do this.”

He shrugged, looking unbothered by my punch. “I’m here, aren’t I?” he said. “And I’m not making fun of her or anything, but it’s just so stupid. One wrong move and all of her lies are going to crumble around her.”

I leaned against the porch railing with a deep sigh. “It is getting to be a lot, isn’t it?”

Xavier nodded. “Yep, but that’s her problem, really.”

“I’m worried about her,” I admitted, “but I know this is Lola’s process. I think she kind of needs to go through all of this before she can get to a point where she’s able to tell the truth.”

Xavier still looked dubious. “Maybe we can just take a moment away from all the madness. I mean, tonight at dinner, we’re going to really be in it.”

“That’s true,” I agreed. I reached for his hand, and together we walked down the steps and onto the lawn.

Even though the air was cold, the sun was shining, and it was almost nice out. Until now, I hadn’t taken a moment away from the madness, and it was nice to walk quietly with my mate.

But suddenly, Xavier tensed beside me.

“What is it?” I asked, looking up at him.

His face had hardened into a scowl. “Ava’s here.”

I looked toward the woods, unable to see anyone or anything. Then, after a moment, I saw her, walking where the trees began to thin, completely naked.

Then, distantly, I heard the sound of Lola’s dads. Their voices were far away, but they were getting closer. *Shit!* They were coming back from their walk.

I squeezed Xavier’s hand. “We have to do something before they see her!”

# Episode 2824

**Greyson**

As I drove away from the lake house and back toward the current pack house, my mind flipped through all the things I needed to take care of before tonight. It was a long list. There had been so much going on lately—between the situation with the Vanguards and the constant presence of LIPS—that I’d been letting a lot of stuff pile up. I was also starting to feel a little burned out, but the thought of a double date with Cali, Torin, and his Tinder date was keeping me going. Just getting out for some social time sounded like a welcome change.

Torin and his date notwithstanding, a few hours with Cali—doing anything—sounded just about perfect to me.

Then it would be back to my list of Alpha duties, which included making sure Lucian didn’t sell his land to the LIPS people. This was especially important now that my pack was split into two locations. Any separation would always make us more vulnerable.

Glancing down at my phone on the passenger seat, I saw I had no notifications, and I felt a quick flash of anger. I’d been trying to call Aysel, but she hadn’t picked up. This hadn’t exactly surprised me—she only used her phone when it suited her, but it made her very hard to get ahold of. But I figured she was onboard enough to keep her eyes open and make sure Lucian didn’t pull anything stupid without telling me about it. At least I hoped so.

As I pulled onto the road, I noticed a couple of trucks with the LIPS logo painted on the side, racing along the highway. I wondered what they were doing around here and, after a moment’s thought, figured it might be a good idea to follow them for a while, just to see what they were doing. I needed to know what they were up to so I could figure out how best to deal with them.

I followed them for about ten miles, keeping a few cars separating us so they wouldn’t see me and get suspicious. But then they turned onto a smaller road, and I realized with a jolt that I knew where they were going. They were driving onto Vanguard land.

Holy shit. Had they really bought the land? Had Lucian *actually* sold it? Even after the discussion we’d had?

This wasn’t good.

I followed them down the road a while longer. When they reached a clearing, the trucks stopped, and a couple of guys got out of one. Looking around, I realized they’d set up a brand-new camp in a clearing of trees that was *definitely* on Vanguard land.

Fucking hell. I had a very bad feeling that Lucian had done something he wasn’t supposed to do.

I had other shit to deal with, but it was clear I was going to have to investigate this nonsense. I pulled the car to a stop and threw it into park, frustration and worry coursing through me. I got out and, just as I started toward the trucks, Rhonda climbed out of the second truck.

“Oh, Greyson,” she said in a friendly way. “What are you doing here?”

“Just in the neighborhood,” I said vaguely. “How are you doing, Rhonda?”

“Great,” she said, grinning widely. “Really great, actually. We’re getting a lot of new data. Brand-new movement patterns around this area. It’s like a puzzle, but we’re all excited to figure it out. All very exciting stuff.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. I looked around like I was seeing the place for the first time. “New location, huh?”

“Yep,” Rhonda said, smiling proudly.

“Why did you move? Was the last place not working for you?” I asked, trying to keep my voice casual, like the answers couldn’t have mattered less to me.

“Oh, the last location was fine, but we made a great agreement with the owner of this land that lets us set up base camp and take new readings of the wolf pack movement in this part of the forest, which we haven’t gotten to record yet.”

I frowned at her. “LIPS *bought* this land?”

“Oh, no, no,” Rhonda said, laughing. “Nothing that big. Not yet, anyway. No, we just made an agreement to set up camp here for a bit.”

I breathed a sigh of relief to hear this. At least Lucian hadn’t officially sold the land yet. But this was still bad news—the fact that he was letting the LIPS people set up camp on his land was a bad sign. The old Lucian never would have allowed it. He’d really changed if he was letting humans onto his land for research. It was that or…

A dark thought hit me, and I looked around at the camp and the people milling around the campfire.

Was Lucian planning to kill them?

The thought made my head ache, but I knew I was going to have to take care of this. If Lucian had really gone off the deep end, I was going to need to go on the offensive here.

“Well, good luck,” I said to Rhonda. “I hope you get all the data you’re looking for. Very quickly,” I couldn’t stop myself from adding.

Rhonda almost smiled, then frowned, like she sensed that I’d implied another meaning. She looked like she was about to ask me about it, but I didn’t have time to answer her, and I didn’t even know what I’d say if I tried. So I stepped over to my car.

“Take care, Greyson,” she called after me, still looking confused.

I thought hard all the way home, and when I got there and parked the car, I stood outside for a moment, looking around. It felt like the LIPS people were getting closer and closer, and I wanted to see for myself if there were any of them in the area. When I was satisfied that there weren’t any in my trees, I shifted to my wolf form and sprinted into the woods.

I was going to need some help to take care of LIPS.

I raced through the woods, keeping my eyes open and my nose down. I was trying to find a scent trail, but it wasn’t easy. There just wasn’t much to work with. It seemed as though the real wolves in our woods were being more cautious that usual. I wondered if that was because of LIPS, or because of my last conversation with them.

I really hoped it was because of LIPS and not what I’d said, because I was going to need to convince them that we needed to band together. Anyway, I just hoped this conversation went better than the last one.

Though they *had* helped hide me and Xavier when we’d been running from the drones. That had to have been a good sign, right?

Finally, I picked up a scent and raced after it. It seemed that the wolves had moved to their den. Which was strange. If they were retreating home, that definitely meant they were being cautious about something.

After a long time following the scent, I saw a scrap of fur sprinting next to me. Then I saw another out of the corner of my eye. Then another. Then another. They kept joining in until there were at least half a dozen wolves running beside me.

It took me a moment to figure out what they were doing. They were *escorting* me, like I was an intruder they needed to keep an eye on as I got closer and closer to their pack.

Finally, I reached the clearing where the Alpha of the real wolf pack stood, watching me closely. He was flanked by half a dozen more wolves, who all had their teeth bared, ready to attack.

I slowed my pace, then stopped, dropping my head so he could see I meant no harm.

When I looked up, he was still staring steadily at me.

*The humans who are here to study wolves are a bigger threat than ever, now*, I told him. *I had hoped they would move on, but they haven’t.*

*No*, the Alpha agreed. *They are everywhere. It has been hard to avoid them.*

*I know we’re two different kinds of wolves, but—now more than ever—I feel that we must work together to defend ourselves.*

The Alpha gave me a long look*. We will work with you.*

Relief flooded through me. *I will do everything I can to make sure that your pack is protected. It will be our highest priority*, I promised.

*We will work with you—*if *you do a favor for us*, the Alpha stipulated.

I looked at him, surprised. A favor? What the hell kind of favor could these real wolves want from me? What could I possibly do for them?

*What is it?* I asked. *I’ll give you whatever you need.*

The Alpha’s eyes were dark as night. *I want you to give my daughter the Bite.*

# Episode 2825

**Xavier**

I raced forward, into the trees, and pulled Ava back into the protection of the thicker woods. I was just hoping Lola’s parents hadn’t seen anything.

“Xavier, what—”

I signaled furiously for her to be quiet, then listened hard, using my werewolf hearing. Cali was speaking to them, and I held my breath as they spoke.

“How was the walk?” Cali asked casually.

“It was lovely. This area is beautiful,” said the one Cali had pointed out as Daniel and Lola had called Dad. “Jacqueline is a delight, isn’t she?”

*Is she?* I wondered to myself, but Cali only hummed a response.

“Why don’t we head back inside?” she said, and I could hear the forced cheerfulness of her voice. “It’s cold out here. We should get some cider or some eggnog or something.”

“That sounds great,” the other one—Danny—said. “It really is a damp cold out here, isn’t it?”

I breathed a huge sigh of relief as their voices faded. They were headed back to the house. They hadn’t seen Ava trying to emerge naked from the woods.

“What the *hell* do you think you’re doing?” I asked, rounding on her. “Why are you shifting in broad daylight?”

“I didn’t realize there were humans around,” she snapped.

“Have you completely forgotten about LIPS? You knew they were around in some capacity, didn’t you?”

Ava waved her hand, looking agitated. “We can’t worry about that right now.”

“Why not?” I asked, a knot of worry forming in my stomach. “What’s going on?”

“Knox is gathering the remnants of the Samara pack together today, and they’re going to talk about getting the pack back together. With Knox as Alpha.”

I groaned. I didn’t like how fast any of this was moving. “Okay. So what do you want to do?”

“I think you need to be there,” she said.

“*Me?* Why would I need to be there?” I asked.

“You need to talk to the others in the pack. See if you can get them to be more reasonable than Knox.”

I heaved a heavy sigh. “Why are you so insistent I get involved in your pack’s problems?” I narrowed my eyes. “This isn’t some kind of trick, is it?”

Ava looked annoyed, and I thought I saw a flicker of pain flash across her eyes. “You know, Xavier, even if you think I don’t care about anything else, at least know that I care about my pack. It’s the most important thing in the world to me, and I refuse to stand by and watch its legacy be ruined by a megalomanic.”

I thought about this for a moment. “You know, Nolan was just as bad as Knox, and you supported him.”

Anger flashed in her eyes. “He was my *brother*, Xavier. What else did you expect me to do? Plus—in case you forgot—I’d literally just come back from the dead, so I wasn’t exactly thinking straight. But fine. If you’d rather see the Samara pack come back under Knox’s rule, then I can just let things move forward as they will. And if Knox chooses to attack the Redwoods, I guess I won’t be able to stop that either.”

I felt a twinge of guilt as I looked at her angry face. I had to acknowledge—even if it was just to myself—that Ava had been continuously trying to do the right thing by the Redwood pack. And by me. I just couldn’t bring myself to fully trust her. Not a hundred percent.

I ran a hand through my hair. “I just need to make sure everything’s on the up and up here. I want to understand why you’re going to such great lengths to get me involved in Samara pack business.”

She huffed a sigh. “Because, despite the fact that you are trying to trick yourself into believing we’re nothing to each other, we’re still mates. I don’t want anything to happen that would put you in danger. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

I had flinched when she’d said *mate*. I knew she was right, but I was hoping to ignore that particular bond, especially now that I could control my own shifting again.

“You know, the last time we were mates, you chose your pack over me.”

She narrowed her eyes. “And maybe I want to avoid having to make a choice like that again.”

“Another way to get rid of that choice is just to unmate from me,” I pointed out.

A bitter smile twisted her lips. “Oh yeah? And the last time you tried that, how well did that work for you?”

Annoyed, I ground my teeth. “Fine,” I hissed. “I’ll talk to the other Samara wolves and try to broker some kind of truce with them. Go into the woods. Stay hidden. I’ll be back.”

She looked at me for a moment, then nodded. “Fine.”

When I walked back to Cali, she looked tense. “I’m going to go with Ava. I need to take care of an issue that’s come up with the Samara pack.”

Cali frowned. “Are you sure Ava’s got good intentions here, Xavier?”

“No, I’m not,” I admitted. “But I’ve thought it over, and I don’t know that I have a choice.”

Cali nodded. “Yeah… If it’s for the safety of the pack, then you have to go. Just stay safe, okay?”

I smiled at her. “I will. And I’ll be back in time for dinner.”

She nodded and reached up to give me a kiss.

Ava was waiting for me when I reached the trees. Shifting out here wasn’t ideal with LIPS around, but I couldn’t resort to what we’d been doing with Lola’s dads in the house. We moved quickly through the forest together. I let Ava lead the way, my thoughts on the wolves and who would be there tonight. I just hoped they would be more reasonable than Knox.

After all, Knox was practically a kid. It was likely that some of the other wolves wouldn’t want to follow someone so young. Especially now, when their pack was basically nonexistent. If there was one thing that was universal with werewolves, it was that they wanted a strong, capable leader. And so far, the only thing Knox had proven to be was a whiny brat. At least in my eyes.

I could hear the low rumble of voices before we reached the clearing where Knox kept his Airstream, but before we stepped into it, Ava stopped me.

“What?” I asked, looking over at her.

She looked uncharacteristically nervous. “Wait here for a minute, will you? Let me go talk to Knox first. He’s not going to be happy to see you here.”

I glanced into the clearing. We were only a stone’s throw away. “I’m sure he’s already picked up on my scent.”

“You were here earlier. Your scent’s probably lingering. Anyway, with all these other wolves here, I’m hoping it’ll take him a minute to pick up on you. I’m hoping it’ll give me enough time to talk to him first.”

I shrugged. “This is your show, Ava.”

She nodded once, then stepped into the clearing.

There was a call of greetings from a few of the other wolves, and I stepped backward, into the shadows.

As Ava pulled a blanket from the laundry line to wrap around herself, I looked around, trying to see anyone I recognized through the trees. There were a few familiar faces—a couple of older people who must have been part of the Samara pack for a long, long time.

Ava was looking at them with a smile that was so kind and so warm, it almost took my breath away. For a moment, she reminded me of the young girl I’d fallen in love with, all that time ago.

I shook the thought from my head. That was a different time. I was here to protect Ava’s pack, not for a stroll down memory lane.

As I watched, the door to the Airstream opened and Knox stepped out. He was bizarrely dressed in a suit and tie, like he was about to give a presentation about quarterly earnings to a board of directors, rather than talk to a group of werewolves about reinstating their pack.

He didn’t step all the way down to the ground, so he was standing on a little rise as he spoke. “Welcome, Samara pack members! I’m so glad you’re here! Here to help me return our pack to its former glory!”

I glanced around at the pack, wondering how they were taking this, and was glad to see a couple of eyerolls. That was a good sign.

“Our pack was founded many moons ago and grew to be the strongest, fiercest, and most loyal pack in the land. We grew strong as we built our pack up to be feared far and wide…”

Knox’s speech had gotten off to an unsurprisingly smug start, and I suspected he would have kept going for a long time, but at that moment, the wind shifted, ruffling my hair.

Knox stopped mid-sentence and lifted his nose into the air. His eyes narrowed, and he stared directly into the trees—exactly where I was standing.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

# Episode 2826

**Lola**

I sat awkwardly at the dinner table with my dads as they spoke enthusiastically to Jacs. Jay was there too, but of course, they were completely ignoring him. They had taken to Jacs, though, due in no small part to how incredibly well she could lie about the college courses she *wasn’t* taking.

“—and I almost dropped that biology lab, but of course I finished it. I’m just a finisher, but I was sure not to get the same professor when I signed up for the chemistry lab the semester after that,” Jacs was saying.

“So you’re just powering through those science courses,” Dad said admiringly.

Jacs shrugged modestly. “I’m just trying to be really focused. I want to get though quickly, but make sure I’m really getting everything out of the experience.”

“That’s great,” Dad said, his eyes shining as he smiled at her.

“I had a funny experience in high school during biology,” Jay started. “We were just about to dissect our frogs when mine hopped off the table and out the open door. Everyone went crazy, and I had to chase it all the way down the hall before I finally caught it.”

Jay laughed at his own story, but he was the only one who did. Pops looked mildly amused, but Dad gave him a long, evil look, and Jay dropped his gaze to the table.

“So,” Pops started, breaking the terrible silence. “How was it that you found this house so quickly, Lola-bean?”

“Um, I saw it advertised on campus. It’s so big that they’ve always got roommates moving in and out, and a room had just opened up.”

Pops smiled. “That’s really nice,” he said sincerely. “I’m happy you found such a nice place, especially since you’re so far from home this year.”

Dad looked less pleased about my living situation, and he turned his attention to Jay. “And how often are *you* over here? If there are so many rooms, do you ever end up crashing in one?”

This felt like a trap, and I tried to signal to Jay to avoid it, but he seemed to have realized the same thing.

“I live a few miles away,” Jay said, apparently referring to the actual pack house. “And Lola and I have an understanding about space and boundaries, so I never stay here overnight. I know that her number one priority is studying, so I always steer clear when she needs her time.”

Jay’s answers were picture perfect, and though Dad narrowed his eyes, he apparently couldn’t find anything to fault in his response, so he looked away.

“And what’s your house like?” Pops asked Jay. “Is it as nice as this one?”

“It’s pretty big, too,” Jay said. “But it’s different.”

It finally occurred to me that I’d barely spoken since my dads had arrived. I’d just been so nervous. Under the table, I felt Jay’s hand slip around mine and give it an encouraging squeeze.

“Dinner tonight!” I blurted, practically yelling.

Pops looked surprised at my outburst, but he smiled. “We’re looking forward to it, sweetie. We’ve been missing you so much,” he said. “And it’ll be nice to see Cali’s parents again.”

Cali reappeared at that moment, carrying an armful of mugs with cider, coffee, and tea. “My parents are looking forward to seeing you, too,” she said, passing around the mugs.

“How are you liking Oregon, Cali?” Dad asked.

“I love it,” Cali said, smiling warmly.

“It’s nice that you two girls were able to move in together,” Pops said. “I was pretty worried about letting Lola move so far away, but I felt better about it because you were with her, Cali.”

Cali looked over at me, but I quickly dropped my gaze. I *couldn’t* look at her right now, not after that comment. I just prayed Cali wasn’t going to crack.

But Cali just smiled blandly at Pops. “My parents were really worried too, but it’s been great, and they’re loving it too. Kind of like an adventure. You never know what each day will bring.” She laughed.

Dad frowned. “What does that mean? How can you not know what each day will bring? Do you not have a set class schedule?”

My stomach lurched. *Cali!* Why would she say something like that?!

“Oh, no,” Cali said. “I just meant in terms of… *nature*,” she finished lamely. “There’s just so much nature here. It’s so different from living in the city.” She laughed in a stilted way, and I joined in.

This was turning into a train wreck. I felt sick to my stomach.

“Maybe you’d like to go for a hike with me tomorrow,” Jay said with a smile, taking another brave stab at being friendly.

Pops started to nod, but Dad spoke first.

“Maybe. I don’t love getting up early just to traipse around in the mud,” he said coldly.

Jay looked flustered. I didn’t think he’d ever had to try to so hard to get someone to like him in his life.

“There’s a path and everything,” Cali offered. “You probably wouldn’t really be in the mud.”

Dad looked down at his cup. “My coffee is cold.”

“I’ll warm it up,” Cali said, jumping to her feet.

“No, it’s fine, thank you,” Dad said. “I’m tired. I think I’m going to go take a nap before dinner. No point in going all the way back to the hotel.” And he got to his feet and headed out of the room.

Pops pushed his cup away but lingered. He took my hand. “I’ll work on him,” he said, smiling at me. “I told him to take it easy on you. I’ll make sure he’s better behaved at dinner. But you’re our little girl, sweetheart. He only wants what’s best for you.”

“Thanks, Pops,” I said. “But I really am much happier here. Maybe you can convince him of that for me.”

He nodded. “I’ll try,” he said, and when he got to his feet, he gave Jay a small smile.

I watched him walk out, and I felt a little better.

“*See?*” Jay said, turning to me. “We have your pops on our side already. And soon we’ll win your dad over, too.”

I sighed and leaned back in my chair. I was exhausted, and it hadn’t even been one full day with my dads yet. I reached for the mugs and carried them into the kitchen. The counter was cluttered. There were plates and food that we hadn’t had time to put away, but there were also trowels and tools Phil and his contractors had left here after the construction. I’d had to explain it away by telling my dads the landlords had recently renovated the kitchen.

Another lie. It just felt like there were so many lies I needed to keep up with. I was confusing myself at this point.

Jay walked over with another load of cups and gave my shoulder a squeeze. “It’s all working out, babe. I think things seem a little better already.”

I leaned against his chest and tried to let his words comfort me. I probably *was* just overthinking this. It was just for a couple of days. I could do this. I’d lied before—and I’d lied bigger than this before. And this was for a good cause—it was to make my dads happy.

I looked up at Jay with a weak smile. “You’re right. This is going to be okay.”

“Why don’t we try to find something to eat?” Jay said. “You haven’t had anything all day.” He lowered his voice. “And have you fed lately? You’ve been so caught up in all of this.”

I shook my head. “I haven’t had any blood since I found out my dads were coming. I think the adrenaline has been feeding me. But I definitely need to before dinner tonight, to make sure I don’t slip up while they’re here.” I smiled up at Jay. “Thank you for reminding me. You’re such a good boyfriend.”

I stood on my tiptoes to give him a kiss, but I stopped when I heard a cough from the doorway. I looked over to see Dad standing there.

I could feel a blush heat my cheeks, and I prayed he wouldn’t get too angry at seeing me kissing Jay.

But he didn’t get angry at all. He walked slowly toward us. “Pops talked to me, and I guess I didn’t arrive with the best attitude.” He offered a hand to Jay. “I’m willing to be more open-minded if you’ll allow me to start over.”

Jay didn’t hesitate to take his hand. “I’d like nothing more,” he said eagerly.

I smiled at both of them. This was all I’d ever wanted. Them to accept Jay. Them to *try* at least a little bit.

My dad glanced away from Jay and idly picked up a trowel from the counter. “What were you using this for?” he asked.

“Oh, just some light renovation in the kitchen,” I said, repeating my line.

Dad fidgeted with the trowel. “But why would you need *this*, though? That makes no sense.”

Suddenly, he jerked in surprise and dropped the trowel. It clattered to the floor. He looked down at his palm, where a pearl of blood had already appeared.

“I cut myself,” he muttered. The blood was seeping across his hand.

My vision filled with red, and I realized I wanted to feed. *Now*. On Dad’s blood—and I couldn’t stop myself.

# Episode 2827

I’d just finished evening out the tinsel on the tree Greyson had gotten when I heard Jay’s raised voice from the kitchen.

Oh no! *Lola!*

I sprinted into the kitchen and found a strange sight. Jay was holding Lola in a tight bear hug. It looked like she was straining against his hold—like, *supernaturally* straining.

Shit.

I quickly took in the disparate elements of the scene in front of me. Lola’s dad was standing at the sink, holding his bleeding hand and looking at Lola with profound confusion. And that was when it clicked for me—Jay was holding Lola back from attacking her dad.

Double shit. This was even worse than I’d thought.

“Mr. Spillane! We need to get that hand cleaned up,” I practically yelled, grabbing him by his good hand and dragging him toward the bathroom—and, most importantly, *out* of the kitchen.

I didn’t give a shit about his hand, I just had to get him away from Lola so her vampire urges didn’t blow everything, and so Jay could take care of whatever the hell was going on with her.

Torin—who was walking down the hallway—caught sight of me dragging Daniel, then his eyes moved to the blood dripping from his hand. Torin’s eyes lit up.

“Oh, I can heal that!” he called.

“Shush,” I hissed furiously, hoping he’d shut up before he said anything he shouldn’t. “Thanks, but we’ve got this covered, Torin,” I sang out, trying to sound normal, then shut the bathroom door in his face. Then, by way of explanation, I added, “He’s a nursing student.”

I flipped on the faucet and held Daniel’s hand underneath it, watching the blood swirl around the drain.

“I appreciate this, Cali, but really, it’s nothing. Just a small cut. There’s no need to make a big deal out of it. I can take care of it on my own.”

“It’s really fine,” I said, my mind in the kitchen, wondering how Lola was doing.

Mr. Spillane pulled his hand away from me. “And I’m fine as well. Go back to whatever you were doing, hon. I can take care of this. I’ll just bandage it up, and I’ll be good to go.”

“Okay,” I said, wiping my hands on a towel. I was reluctant to leave him, but I figured I’d done all I could to get him away from Lola’s vampire urges.

And Jacqueline’s, too, though I thought she’d gone upstairs to her room. Thank goodness.

I stepped out of the bathroom and looked around, wondering where I’d be able to find Lola. I went back into the kitchen, but she wasn’t there. Just as I was about to turn, I heard a scuffle in the walk-in pantry. And when I pulled open the door, I found Lola feeding from Jay’s wrist.

“Oh my god, Lola,” I said, pulling the door shut behind me. “*Hurry up*. I don’t think your dad is going to be in the bathroom for much longer.”

Jay was wincing in pain, but I could tell he was trying to put up a brave front. He always did for Lola.

Finally, Lola let his arm go and wiped the blood from her lips.

“Are you okay?” I asked warily.

“No,” she snapped. “Not at all! This is a fucking mess!”

“It’s fine,” I said quickly. “We avoided any issues.”

Lola frowned. “Yeah, *this time*.”

And I had to agree that she’d cut it pretty close. But I kept that to myself. Lola was in a dark enough mood as it was.

“Why don’t we just start getting ready for dinner?” Jay suggested. He checked the time on his phone. “We leave in a couple of hours anyway.”

“Good idea,” I said quickly. “I’ll call my parents and confirm that they’ll be on time to meet us at the restaurant.”

I texted my mom as I followed Jay and Lola upstairs. I was hoping I’d be able to distract her for a couple of hours, and keep her from self-destructing before dinner.

Lola flopped down onto the newly made bed in her room. “I can’t deal with figuring out what I’m going to wear tonight. Not right now.”

Jay turned to me and tugged me into the hallway. “We *cannot* let tonight be a failure,” he hissed, pulling the door shut so Lola wouldn’t hear us. “We have to make sure it goes well, for Lola’s sake.”

“I agree,” I said. “I’ll make sure my parents are on their best behavior.”

“And Xavier?” he asked. “Wait. Where is Xavier? Did he leave? I haven’t even seen him.”

“He left for a bit. He had to go deal with an issue with Ava and the Samara pack.”

Jay stared at me for a long moment. “Wait, *what*?”

“What?”

“I don’t like it,” Jay said, shaking his head.

“I mean, I don’t either, but what don’t *you* like? Why are you being so cryptic?” I asked.

“Knox is a bit of a wildcard.”

Knox. I thought I remembered that name. “Isn’t he Ava’s cousin or something? Why is he relevant?” I’d been concerned about *Ava*.

Jay’s eyes went wide for a moment, like he’d just realized he’d given away more information than he was supposed to. “He’s not. I’m sure he’s not. It’s not a big deal.”

But I didn’t believe him, and I was starting to worry. “If this Knox guy is a threat, and Xavier is out there with him, I want to know who he is, Jay.”

Jay shrugged. “He’s no one. He’s just Ava’s little cousin. I mean, he’s an asshole, but he’s mostly harmless.”

“Why did Ava even want Xavier to go to this Samara meeting?” I wondered out loud, my anxiety starting to spike.

Xavier had been trusting Ava more and more lately, but what did that really mean ultimately? Especially if the Samara pack was put back together? Yes, I had originally supported the Samara pack getting back together to get Ava out of our hair, but now that it was actually about to happen—and this new guy was causing trouble, and maybe even claiming Alpha—I was starting to realize that there were more factors involved than I’d considered. Would having another pack in our area be a good thing, or a bad thing?

I chewed my lip, thinking. Maybe I should talk to Xavier and Greyson about this. The only problem with that was that Greyson was at the pack house, taking care of all his Alpha stuff. And I was here, and so worried. There were so many things happening with the pack, and I didn’t have all the information about any of it because I just hadn’t been paying attention. I’d been so stressed about the thing with Seluna, and now this thing with Lola’s dads.

I wanted to be the Luna of the Redwood pack, but I hadn’t really been pulling my weight lately. I needed to get my act together—fast—to show everyone that I could help protect the pack as their Luna.

But of course—I reminded myself—that would mean making a choice, which was a whole other can of worms that I just couldn’t bring myself to open.

Jay was staring at me, and I realized I’d been quiet for a long moment, following the journey my brain had taken as it chased down my emotions.

But I knew we didn’t have time for this. Oh crap. Speaking of choices, I realized I’d forgotten to talk to Torin AGAIN about moving his date tonight. I couldn’t go on a double date when everything was resting on a successful dinner with the parents.

“Do you have a handle on Lola right now?” I asked Jay.

“Yeah, of course. I’ve got her. You go do whatever you need to do. I’ll make sure Lola’s okay—and dressed—by the time we go to dinner.”

“Great, thanks, Jay,” I said gratefully. Now I had to go look for Torin and take care of this date business once and for all.

But before I could find him, the doorbell rang. Which was strange enough. We didn’t often get unexpected visitors at the pack house—either pack house—and when we did, they usually meant trouble.

When I opened the door, it was with a dose of apprehension. But there was just a guy standing on the step, smiling. He was tall and handsome, with short dark hair and a sharply angled jaw. He was dressed in loose-fitting jeans and a flowered shirt unbuttoned so low, I could see the top of his six-pack. He looked kind of like a hippie, and I stared at him for a moment, confused.

“I assume you want me to sign some kind of petition to save the trees or something, and I’m just going to save us both time by telling you no thanks,” I said quickly.

The guy laughed, showing a row of perfectly white teeth. “No, no petition—though devastating wildfires should be everyone’s problem. No, I’m actually here for Torin.”

“Torin?” I asked, baffled. “Why?”

“I’m Kevin!” he said brightly. “Are you Cali? I’m here for our double date.”

# Episode 2828

**Greyson**

I blinked. *What fresh hell…?*

Had I really just heard the Alpha wolf correctly? Had he really just told me that he wanted me to turn his daughter?

The Alpha wolf was undeterred, like what he’d just asked of me was totally normal, and definitely not a feat that potentially bordered on impossible.

*Do we have a deal?* he asked.

I didn’t respond. I was still trying to wrap my head around this request. Was it even possible to turn a wolf into a werewolf? I’d never heard of anything like that. So, what? This wolf would turn into a bigger, stronger wolf? Would they be part of the Redwood pack if I turned them?

The Alpha shuffled around and huffed, clearly impatient with me. But he was just going to have to wait, because I wasn’t about to commit to such an usual demand without knowing exactly what I’d be getting into. There were just too many unanswered questions.

*I want to think about it*,I finally replied. *Turning someone is a big commitment.*

Potentially a lifelong one, and it wasn’t something I was ready to just jump into. To say nothing of the Alpha wolf’s daughter. Did she even *want* to be turned? Was she ready for the commitment it would require or how it would change her life, and likely her role in her pack, forever?

*If you want my help, you’ll agree to this*, the Alpha wolf said. *We will only help your pack if you turn my daughter. If you keep your promise, we will lead the humans away from this place and keep them occupied. They will not bother you any longer.*

I paused. This was a big deal. *Seriously? You’re willing to be studied by the humans? To have them intruding on your territory all the time and to be watched by their drones? Why? I can only imagine your pack would hate it just as much as mine does.*

And unlike my pack, the wolves didn’t have the same understanding of the human ways of doing things, which could potentially help them through a situation like that. Why was he willing to put his pack through such hardship?

*Yes, I will do it, but only if you turn my daughter*, he said again.

*Why?* I asked again, a little exasperated now. *What is so special about your daughter being turned?*

*Because it is what I want, and if you turned her, I would see my daughter become the wolfwalker.*

Right. Because “wolfwalker” meant something to me.  
*Have you ever encountered a turned wolf?* I asked bluntly. *Is that even possible?*

*You have two days.* He stepped back and signaled his pack before turning back to me. *If you find you cannot meet my demand, then you and your pack will be on your own, and what the humans discover about you will be your problem alone.*

The Alpha and his pack headed off into the woods, and I was left alone with a monumental decision and only two days to make it.

*Well, that went fucking great.*

I headed back toward the pack house. There wasn’t anything left to do now but consider the Alpha’s request—or figure out another way for the Redwood pack to get out of LIPS’s crosshairs.

Was there another way? Fuck, I hoped so. Turning a wolf into a werewolf seemed extreme—and bizarre. But until we had another solution, it was our only option. So I’d have to think of others. Time permitting.

But having the real wolves lead LIPS away made a whole lot of sense. It was the simplest solution, the one that would cause the least upset and therefore create the fewest messes to clean up. And if the wolves held up their end of the deal to keep the humans occupied, the Redwood pack would finally be free of all this bullshit.

But if I turned the Alpha’s daughter, who would be responsible for her? Whose pack would she belong to? I couldn’t imagine welcoming an actual wolf into the Redwood pack—a pack member who we could only connect with while in our most animalistic forms. I guessed it wasn’t all that different from when Lola had just been a vampire, and when Xavier hadn’t been able to shift at all… Only it was the opposite situation.

I shook myself. *You’re getting ahead of yourself. First, you need to find out if it’s even possible.*

I’d never turned anyone, human or otherwise. And the only person I’d ever really wanted to turn was Cali. She was where my interest in the topic started and ended.

I slowed as the pack house came into view, and I loped across the lawn and up the porch stairs. Sage opened the door for me, and I shifted back to human as I stepped inside.

“Thanks,” I said as I walked past her, then headed upstairs to get showered and dressed. Once I was decent, I found my mother in the kitchen.

“Greyson?” She frowned. “What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be going to dinner with Cali?”

*Shit. I almost forgot!*

“I will, but I need to ask you something.” I filled her in on the Alpha wolf’s offer. “Have you ever heard of an actual *wolf* being turned?”

Her brows knit together as she considered my question. “There was a story about something like that, back when I was young. A story about an Alpha’s son turning a wolf.”

My brows rose. *So it can be done, then.*

“But the son was later killed,” she added. “And the wolf he turned ended up alienated from the pack and unable to rejoin her original wolf pack. She’d been turned by a werewolf from another pack, so her home pack didn’t think of her as one of their own anymore.”

“What happened to her?”

My mother shrugged. “The story said she became a Rogue, and she was never seen again. That’s what we all believed, at least.” She put a hand on my arm. “I know you want to help the Redwood pack, but please take the time to think before you pull the trigger on this. If you turn this wolf, you’re going to be responsible for her, and her own pack could turn against her once she’s not like them anymore.”

I wasn’t sure that would be the case with this particular wolf, since the Alpha was literally asking me to do this, but Sabine had a good point. “Thanks. I’ll think about it. But right now, I have to go pick Cali up at the lake house.”

I poked my head into the den, where Artemis and Rishika were watching *Elf*, snuggled up together. Rishika paused the movie when she saw me lingering in the doorway.

“Hey, I’m heading out,” I told her. “Keep an eye out for LIPS, and call me if there’s any sign of trouble.”

She nodded. “Don’t worry. Everyone seems to understand that shifting outside is too risky right now. I just hope it won’t be for too much longer. It’s not natural to be prevented from shifting.”

“I’m working on some solutions, and I don’t think it’ll be a problem for much longer.”

“Well, thank god for that.” She picked up the remote to resume the movie, and I headed out the door.

As I got in my car, I couldn’t help but wish that I was actually as confident as I’d sounded to Rishika. I knew not shifting was a huge strain on everyone, but until I could get rid of LIPS, it was the way things had to be.

I called Cali as I pulled out of the driveway. She answered on the first ring.

“Greyson? Where are you?”

“Sorry. I’m running late, but I’m on my way.” Just hearing her voice eased the anxiety thrumming through me.

“Okay.” She sounded kind of distracted. “Torin’s date has already arrived.”

I snorted. Torin was probably all knotted up with anxiety. This date was gonna be fun to watch. “I’m sure that you can help him through this. He’s lucky to have you there with him.”

“Mm hmm. Why are you late? Is everything okay?”

I paused before clearing my throat. Everything was decidedly *not* okay, but our luck could be on the verge of changing. “I may have found a solution to our LIPS problem.”

“I assume it doesn’t involve killing anyone?”

“It doesn’t. I promise. I’ll explain more later. I’m still working out the kinks. I’ll be there as soon as I can, love.”

“Okay. See you soon.”

As I ended the call, the urgency that had been nagging at me returned full-force. As fun as this night with Cali would be, I wanted to do more research before I decided what to do. And I only had a couple of days to get it all done.

I decided to start by weighing the pros and cons. The deal with the wolf pack would be a big plus. But being responsible for a young, recently turned wolf was a big negative.

I thought back to what my mom had said, about the turned wolf she’d heard about in her youth.

*If the Alpha wants his daughter turned, and I turn her, could the Redwood pack and the wolf pack become allies?*

# Episode 2829

After the call with Greyson ended, I slid my phone back into my pocket.

*What’s this big solution Greyson suddenly has?*

Lately, it seemed like LIPS was a problem we just couldn’t seem to solve. At least, not without murdering a bunch of innocent people, which was naturally a problem for me. So it was no small comfort to know that Rhonda and her team would be safe. That Greyson or Xavier wouldn’t be spilling any innocent blood to keep the Redwood pack safe.

And Greyson had sounded hopeful. That had to be a good sign, right? I smiled a little, just thinking about it. And then my whirling thoughts came to a screeching halt.

*Kevin.* I’d left him waiting in the living room while I took Greyson’s call!

I rushed out of the room and down the hallway. When I peeked in on him, I found him scrolling through something on his phone. His distraction gave me an opportunity to watch him without him *knowing* I was watching him. You could really get a decent glimpse at a person that way.

He was handsome, and he seemed nice enough. At minimum, he didn’t give off serial killer vibes. That was a big positive. Not that I thought Torin would invite a serial killer to the house on purpose, but I definitely wouldn’t put it past him to be fooled by someone with less than honest intentions. Torin always saw the good in everyone and everything—even people who didn’t necessarily deserve it.

Kevin looked up at me and smiled. “Where’s Torin? I’m anxious to meet him in person.”

“Right! Of course. I just, um… got sidetracked. Let me tell him you’re here. I’ll be right back.”

And then, as I turned on my heel and headed out of the room, I suddenly remembered another detail. *Torin*. I was supposed to tell him to cancel the date. But how could he do that when his date was already here? And Greyson was on his way over now. Everywhere I looked, I was getting boxed in on this double date. Which would normally be fine, except there was no backing out of the dinner with Xavier, Mom, Dad, Lola, Jay, and Lola’s dads.

My stomach twisted. This was impossible, and I had to find a way out of it—and fast.

I was heading up the stairs, looking for Torin, when Lola stepped into my path.

“Oh, hey, Lola!” I said brightly, not skipping a beat. “I’m just looking for Torin. Have you—”

She grabbed my arm. “Where’s Xavier? We’re supposed to be having dinner with our parents in a little while.”

I hesitated. “Well, um… He’s been delayed.”

I knew he was still dealing with the Samara problem and Ava. He’d mentioned his intention to be back in time for the dinner, but there was really no telling when he’d be able to make it back.

Lola’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t you dare tell me he’s not coming.”

I forced a smile. “Okay. I won’t.”

“Cali!” She groaned. “Do you have any idea how carefully I’ve planned everything about tonight? We can’t afford to screw this up. *I* can’t afford for this to get messed up. I was counting on you and Xavier to be there and to help keep the heat off me, and I can’t do this without you two!”

I threw my arms around her and gave her a tight hug. “Stop freaking out. It’s just dinner. You know how to have dinner with your dads. It’ll be just fine.”

“Okay.” She pulled in a deep breath. “But where is Xavier? He is coming, right?”

“There’s a slight chance—a very, very slight chance—that Xavier will be just a few minutes late.”

Her eyes widened again. “*What?*”

I held my hands up in front of me. “Don’t worry about it! We can still have dinner with the parents and Jay, and Xavier will join as soon as he gets back. Everything will be fine.”

Lola swallowed roughly. “Do you think I’m making a huge mistake? Trying to pull this ruse on my dads instead of telling them the truth?”

“Well, yeah. I do,” I said honestly.

She groaned again. “Cali!”

“What?!” I asked. “I already told you that. *But* I also told you I’d help you through it, and that’s what I’m doing.”

I wished I felt even half as calm on the inside as I was on the outside. Even now, trying to comfort Lola, I still had no idea how the hell I was going to pull tonight off. I had two dates scheduled for the same time, in two different places, set up by two friends who were both counting on me to help them get through something scary. Lola was afraid of her dads finding out the truth about her dropping out of school, and Torin was afraid of going out with Kevin without Greyson and me as a buffer.

It was… a lot.

And was also slightly, probably, very impossible. I mean, I was no expert on time travel, but I did know that short of teaming up with Ant-Man and wrangling the power of quantum physics, which I knew nothing about, I couldn’t be in two places at once.

But I really didn’t want to let Torin down. And Greyson, despite his reservations about going on a double date, was looking forward to spending time with me. And I was looking forward to a night out with him, too.

But I couldn’t disappoint Lola. Or Xavier. Or apparently anyone else on the freaking planet.

Lola sighed. “I’m gonna go wait in my room. Let me know when Xavier gets here, okay?”

“Sure.” As soon as she disappeared down the hall, I resumed my journey to Torin’s door and took a moment to stand outside it. He was probably in just as much of a tizzy as Lola was. Probably sweating bullets and worrying about saying the wrong thing.

To my immense surprise, when I knocked, I was faced with a very serene and seemingly in-control Torin. He showed off his outfit with a flourish. “Do you think I look okay?”

A genuine smile slipped over my face. “I think you look great.”

He smiled back. “Oh good. I thought so too. I know it’s important to look nice—I was reading up on first impressions.”

“Are you ready to make a good one? Because Kevin’s waiting for you in the living room.”

His eyes flashed with excitement. “Is he as good-looking as his picture? I bet he’s even more handsome in person.”

“I don’t want to make you biased, but Kevin is *really* good-looking.”

Torin took one last look at the mirror, straightened a stray hair, and pushed his shoulders back. “Then I guess it’s time for us to meet.” He headed out of the bedroom, passing me on the way and pausing. “What about you? Aren’t you getting dressed up or something?”

“I will,” I promised. “I’ve been dealing with a few things, but my room is my next stop.”

“And where’s Greyson?” he asked. “This is supposed to be a double date.”

A strange sense of déjà vu settled over me. “Well, about that. How would you feel if it wasn’t an actual double date?”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Wouldn’t it be better if it was just you and Kevin?”

His veneer of coolness melted away, and I was faced with a Torin I was much more familiar with. “*No!*” he gasped. “I’ve never been on a date. With a human, anyway. What if I screw things up?”

I put my hands on his shoulders. “You won’t.”

I was about to explain what had happened with the double-double date when I heard the sound of the front door opening and closing downstairs. That had to be Greyson.

“You are coming, right?” Torin pressed. “I can’t do this alone. I need you both there to keep me in check. You saw how I almost told Lola’s dads I was from the Fae world.”

Shit, he was right. After a beat, I smiled and nodded weakly. “Of course.”

He sighed in relief. “Great!” Then he practically skipped down the stairs, and all I could do was follow after him. I’d just let another chance to prevent this train wreck slip away.

When I reached the foot of the stairs, Greyson was waiting for me there. His smile lifted my battered spirits.

Torin gave Greyson a quick once-over. “I approve of your wardrobe. Maybe you can help Cali get ready?”

Greyson slipped an arm around my shoulders. “I think you look great.”

Torin stepped into the living room, his chest puffed out unnaturally far, and swept into a low bow. “Kevin, it is so nice to meet you in person.”

My eyes widened at the bizarre display, but Kevin’s face lit up. “Wow! You look incredible.”

Torin lurched upright. “Is it too much?”

Kevin shook his head. “No way. I love it. Give me more.”

They started talking and were clearly hitting it off, so I turned back to Greyson. “I’m going to change. Clearly Torin isn’t impressed with my outfit.”

Greyson pulled me into a kiss. “Torin’s wrong. Don’t change a thing.”

I wanted to believe him, but I also knew he’d love how I looked if I was wearing a flour sack. Plus, I still had to figure out what the heck to do about Lola’s dinner plans.

*Ugh!*

I made it to the landing before Kevin’s voice echoed behind me. “Shall we get going?”

# Episode 2830

**Xavier**

I stepped forward, my eyes narrowing. No way in hell was I going to back down from a challenge from an entitled little shit like Knox.

The other Samara pack members were staring me down, and a couple went so far as to shift and growl. Their hackles rose, and I knew that if I made one wrong move, they wouldn’t hesitate to attack. I was an outsider, after all.

I could probably rip a couple of them to shreds, but that wouldn’t exactly be good for our proposed alliance. Fortunately for them, I didn’t want to get into a fight. I barely even wanted to be here in the first place. But Ava was right—though I’d probably never admit it to her. Knox taking control of the Samara pack was too big a risk to ignore, hence my being here to talk the Samaras out of it.

All I really wanted was to get this the hell over with, so I could go have dinner with Cali.

“Hey, you gonna answer me?” Knox asked. “I asked you a question: what the hell are you doing here?”

I rolled my shoulders. “I came to talk some sense into you.”

He scoffed and turned to Ava. “Please tell me you didn’t invite him.”

“Can you stop being a jerk long enough to listen to him?” She crossed her arms, a sure sign that she was digging her heels in for the long haul. “Xavier’s my mate. He has a right to be here.”

I watched her comment ripple through the Samara ranks. Ava calling me her “mate” was literally the last thing I wanted to hear, and I didn’t appreciate the Samara pack being reminded of Ava’s and my situation. But ultimately, I let it slide. Ava did have a point, after all, and—more importantly—that point superseded Knox’s vanity. Technically, she and I were still mates, and that meant I had a right to be here for this conversation, even if I wanted to be anywhere else.

I turned to face the remnants of the Samara pack. “It’s true. Ava is my mate.” The words tasted rotten, but I forced myself to say them with as much conviction as I could muster. “My name is Xavier Evers. Some of you know me—I’m from the neighboring Redwood pack. I’m here to express my pack’s and my disapproval of the idea of Knox as your Alpha.”

“Are you *shitting me*?” the little shrimp bellowed. His muscles strained against the seams of his expensive suit.

*It would be a shame if he were to rip through that thing…*

I hadn’t expected the little punk to be pleased with this news, but I also hadn’t expected him to go absolutely nuclear.

He stomped up to me, his face purpling with the force of his rage. “What right do you have to stick your nose into Samara business? This is *my* pack.”

I had to give it to him. Knox didn’t do anything halfway, including being an entitled little shit.

“Actually, it’s not your pack.” I turned to face the Samara pack members. “Knox was raised in the Sycamore pack and didn’t bother to show his face until now. If he was really loyal to you, you’d think he would have at least made an appearance to help the Samara pack before it fell apart. Not just step in as the Alpha apparent now that it’s convenient for him.”

“My blood runs Samara!” he snarled. “My mother was the daughter of a Samara Alpha, and sister to Nolan’s father. I have every right to be here, and to lead this pack!”

I chuckled. I knew Knox was entitled, but I hadn’t realized he was so desperate. Didn’t he have a plan B if things didn’t work out? Didn’t he have a whole other pack to be a part of? I mean, I wasn’t Ava’s biggest fan, but at least she had some genuine skin in the game for getting the Samara pack together under a strong leader. She didn’t have another pack. If this didn’t work, she’d be as displaced as she’d been since she’d stepped out of that mirror.

I pointedly ignored Knox’s whining and focused on the Samara pack members. “Do you really want to follow somebody as young and inexperienced as him? Someone who thinks he deserves to be your Alpha but has no idea of what you’ve all been through?”

“I’ve been around,” Knox huffed. His petulant tone actually undermined everything he was saying and trying to prove, so I let him keep talking. He could keep digging his own grave without my help. “I’m not half as inexperienced as you might like to think!” Then he turned to the Samara pack. “And yeah, maybe I wasn’t there when things got hard, but you still need me! You need someone young and strong, someone who isn’t afraid to step on a few toes, someone who can rebuild what was once a respected and powerful pack.”

I stifled a laugh. *A respected and powerful pack? Seriously? What a fucking joke.* This just went to show that Knox didn’t have a fucking clue about the Samara pack, or how to lead them.

Nolan was a huge improvement on this kid, and I’d never thought of Nolan as anything but a total douche. A pack was only as good as its Alpha, and in this case that hadn’t boded well for the Samaras for a while. Nolan had led the Samara pack to ruin because he’d sided with the wrong person, and there was nothing powerful, or worth respecting, about that.

One of the Samara wolves shifted back to human. “The Samara Alpha should be a true Samara.”

“I have the fucking bloodline to be one!” Knox snarled. The kid was seriously losing his control over the situation, assuming he’d ever had it to begin with. “And for the record, I can name a dozen packs where the Alpha is from a different pack, through marriage, or mating, or other equally strong connections.”

Another Samara wolf shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. At the end of the day, you’re just a kid. You’re not ready for this, and after everything this pack has been through, we can’t survive another Alpha who will lead us to ruin.”

I liked the way this was going. I glanced at Ava, who was barely able to contain her smirk.

“Okay, but what have the rest of you been doing since Nolan was killed?” another Samara asked.

Some grumbling rippled through the group—human and wolf forms alike.

The Samara wolf who’d spoken nodded. “That’s right. You’ve done nothing. Some have turned Rogue, others have joined rival packs.” The Samara leveled a pointed look at Ava. “And the rest of us are just wandering aimlessly. Displaced. Without purpose or hope. Knox might be young. He might be untested. And hell, he might not even be a true Samara, but he’s right. We have to rebuild our pack.”

Knox grinned and puffed out his chest.

Then the Samara added, “We just have to find an Alpha who can do that.”

Knox’s shoulders slumped, and a vein pulsed in his neck. For a moment, I thought he might just keel over from an aneurysm or something. That would’ve really helped me out.

“Why are you listening to Xavier?” He jabbed an accusing finger at me. “This guy murdered Ava, not to mention is directly responsible for Nolan’s death as well! He and his family have torn this pack apart. He doesn’t deserve to be here, or to have a voice in this conversation.”

One of the Samaras turned to me with a snarl. “He is right. You should leave.”

I wasn’t going anywhere. Not while Knox was spouting all this bullshit.

He turned to the group again. “I’m the one responsible for bringing you all here today. Who else here can claim that? Who else here has Samara Alpha blood running through their veins? Who else has the energy and the hunger to lead this pack? If anyone else fits that description, then by all means, they should step forward and challenge me.”

I watched the crowd of Samara pack members. Not a single one of them stepped forward, not that I was surprised. Maybe being away from the pack had fractured them. Maybe they just didn’t care.

As much as I hated Nolan, at least he’d had command of his pack.

With a sigh, I stepped forward. “You absolutely should not let Knox become Alpha. If you do, he’ll run this pack into the ground. He’s already made it clear that he blames me and the Redwood pack for every wrong under the sun. He’s looking for an excuse to attack the Redwoods. Don’t give him that chance. Unless that’s what you want?” I looked around, making sure to make eye contact with each and every one of them. “Another pack war? Because that worked out really well for everyone last time.”

“Shut up!” one of them snarled. “This isn’t your pack. Get the fuck out of here.”

Ava stepped forward. “This isn’t anyone’s pack—not until we have a proper Alpha. You may not approve of Xavier, but he’s telling the truth.”

Knox rounded on her. “Don’t betray me, cousin. You will regret it.”

My wolf stirred with a lurch. Someone was threatening his mate, and he wasn’t going to fucking tolerate it.

“If you do anything to harm Ava, you will answer to me,” I warned Knox.

Knox stepped forward like the plucky little shit he was. His eyes narrowed. “Maybe it’s time we settled this. Right now.”

# Episode 2831

My heart raced in my chest. Should we get going? No, we definitely should *not* get going! Xavier wasn’t back yet, and, more importantly, I still had no freaking clue how to pull off this double-double date situation.

I needed more time.

I turned on my heel and beamed at Kevin. “Oh, I’m sorry! I’m not quite ready yet.”

His brows rose slightly as he looked me up and down. “I can see that.”

I bristled. *What did he mean by that? Okay, maybe Kevin isn’t quite as nice and charming as I thought.*

Ignoring him completely, I turned to Greyson. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

Then, without waiting for a response, I headed up the stairs. On the way, I passed Jay coming out of his and Lola’s room.

“Is Xavier back yet?” he asked.

“Not yet.” I frowned. “Should I be worried?”

I didn’t know the specifics of this Samara situation, but if he was taking longer than he was supposed to, could something be wrong?

Jay shook his head. “No, it’s not that. I’m sure he’s fine. Xavier can more than handle himself, I’m sure. Lola’s the one who’s getting worried. She’s pacing in our room like a caged animal.”

“Okay, well, that’s your job, right? To calm her down?”

He rolled his eyes. “When it comes to her dads, calming Lola down is virtually impossible. You know how she worries about disappointing them. This dinner is literally her worst nightmare.”

I grimaced, and a fresh wave of guilt washed over me. I *did* know all of that. And even though I personally believed continuing this ruse was only going to make things worse between them, I wanted to support my friend through this difficult time. If push came to shove and this blew up in her face—which wasn’t at all outside of the realm of possibility—I wanted to be there for her through that too.

Which was just another reason this double-double date was the craziest, most frustrating thing ever.

“So, um, what do you think Lola would do if, due to some unforeseen circumstances, I had to postpone tonight’s dinner?” I asked.

Jay stared me dead in the face for a moment before he burst out laughing. “That’s hilarious, Cali!”

I laughed nervously. “R-Right! It was just a joke!”

Then his laughter stopped cold. “But for the record, don’t even think about it.”

I laughed louder. “I was just kidding!”

I was *not* kidding. How the hell was I going to get out of this? Lola was my best friend, and she was in a crisis. I couldn’t let her down. But what about Xavier? I’d invited him along since Jay would be there and Jay was Xavier’s best friend.

But now a new worry popped into my head—which was just great, since I had so few of those.

*By not inviting Greyson along, did I make a choice? A potentially lethal choice?*

My stomach clenched. I continued to my room, annoyed by Kevin’s comment and Jay’s quiet threat, and worried about tonight and all its implications for the *due destini*. What was I supposed to do? Lola’s dads thought we were all normal, more or less. Wouldn’t it be weird to invite Xavier *and* Greyson along to that dinner? How would that even work? *Hello, this is my boyfriend, Xavier, and his older brother, with whom I also have a close relationship*?

No, it wouldn’t work. It was best to keep the invite Xavier only. And since I had another date scheduled with Greyson—at the exact same time, no less—that would surely cancel out any “choice” that this date could possibly be considered as.

The mental gymnastics of the *due destini* were exhausting, but I was slowly getting used to it. Of course, keeping the score between Greyson and Xavier even was one thing, but going on two dates at the exact same time was something else entirely. This problem was impossible to solve. I couldn’t have dinner at two places at the same time, especially not without alerting everyone else that something sketchy was going on.

I changed and ran into Lola in the hallway.

“Oh, hey! So um, remind me of the plan for tonight?” I said. Maybe if Lola and the parents were having a late enough dinner, I could sort things out with Kevin and Torin so I wasn’t double-booked.

Lola pulled out her phone and scrolled through it. “We’ll meet at Due Pizza & Pasta at six, order drinks and appetizers by six fifteen, and then move on to dinner. Dessert should be—”

I cut her off. “I don’t need a full-on schedule for eating. Just the name of the restaurant and when we’re planning to get there. Thanks!” I checked my phone. It was only a little after five. I still had time to fix this. Maybe we could go out quickly with Torin and Kevin and I could still make the dinner with Lola? Or maybe, with enough chatting, Torin would feel comfortable enough to go out with Kevin on his own?

I had time—a little bit of time—but no real method or plan of attack.

*Maybe I should just tell Lola the truth? She’ll understand, right?*

My lips twitched, and I fought the urge to laugh. Lola was a lot of wonderful things, but being patient and understanding in times of high stress was not really her strong suit.

“Cali!” Torin whisper-yelled at me from the bottom of the stairs, beckoning me closer.

“I’ll be right back,” I told Lola, then hurried down the stairs to talk to Torin. He pulled me into the den, only one door down from where Greyson and Kevin were waiting in the living room.

“Should I change?” he asked, his voice threaded through with anxiety. “I mean, you saw how Kevin was dressed, didn’t you?”

“I did. And I think you look perfect. Don’t change a thing.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded and smiled. “Totally. You’re a catch too, Torin, and you look wonderful.”

“Wonderful? Not perfect?” His eyes widened in worry. Ugh! I didn’t have time to comfort him. I had to get back to Lola.

“Wonderful, perfect, handsome. All of it. Now, I need to talk to Lola about some—”

He caught my arm as I turned on my heel. “Cali?”

I turned back to him. “Yeah?”

He threw his arms around me and caught me in a tight hug. “Thanks for coming tonight. I don’t think I could go through with this without you.”

My face was beginning to hurt from the relentless smiling. “No problem,” I lied. I wished it wasn’t a problem, that I wasn’t stuck in this position of having to choose between two people I cared so much about.

*It’s not like I don’t already have lots of practice with this scenario*.

I followed Torin out of the den, and we found Kevin and Greyson standing near the front door.

“Well, shall we get this show on the road?” Kevin asked.

He flashed a bright smile at me before I could reply or try to buy myself more time. His eyes scanned me up and down. “Oh, this is much better. I love how your top brings out the color of your eyes. Excellent choice.”

“Oh.” I smiled again, a real one this time. “Thank you.”

*Okay, I take it back. Maybe he’s just a little bit charming after all.*

Greyson took my arm. “Don’t let it get to your head.” Then he dropped his voice to a whisper. “But you do look amazing.”

That familiar flutter of joy settled over me. I had Greyson close, flattering me, and it was such a wonderful feeling—especially compared to all the anxiety and guilt I’d been dealing with—that I threw myself into it.

*What’s not to like about that?*

As we headed toward the door, I realized suddenly that my high heeled boots might not have been the best choice. Sure, they looked great, but they were hell to walk in. I grabbed a pair of my sneakers out of the entryway closet, just in case.

We piled into Kevin’s car—with Kevin and Torin up front and Greyson and me in the back— and I suddenly realized I had no idea where we were going.

I leaned forward to speak to Torin. “So, what’s the plan?”

He turned to face me, his eyes lighting up with excitement. “We’re going to a Christmas market! The restaurant is close by there.” His voice dropped to a whisper, though in the enclosed space of the car, I was pretty sure everyone could hear it. “With lots of mistletoe.”

“Sounds great.” As I sat back, a sense of horror washed over me. *What the fuck am I doing? I’m not supposed to be driving away on a date! I didn’t get a chance to talk to Lola!*

My phone suddenly buzzed—a text from Lola.

*Where are you?*

I had no idea how to explain myself, mostly because I still wasn’t sure how I’d managed to get in the car without remembering my situation.

*I’ll meet you at the restaurant*, I messaged back.

How I was going to do that, I had no idea. Then I remembered the name of the place and Googled it, just to see how fucked I truly was. As luck would have it, the restaurant where Lola, Jay, Xavier, and the parents would be having dinner was just across the street from the Christmas market.

Hope fluttered in my chest. *Is there some way for me to actually pull this off?*

# Episode 2832

**Greyson**

Something was up with Cali. She’d seemed distracted all night. It was almost as if her brain was in two places at once. Kevin had even mentioned that she’d seemed surprised to see him and had asked me if we’d been expecting him or not.

Sure, this thing had been kind of last minute, but I’d thought everything had come together pretty smoothly. But maybe I was wrong.

I glanced up front, where Kevin and Torin were discussing their favorite holiday traditions (Kevin’s: drinking wassail and making homemade treats; Torin’s: all of them), and then leaned in to whisper to Cali. “Is everything okay?”

She tried to smile, but it looked more like a grimace. “I’m a little worried about Lola, that’s all.”

To be honest, I was a little worried about Lola too. Her attempt to fool her dads was ridiculous at best, and bound to blow up in her face at worst. I probably shouldn’t have let Lola use the lake house as her “off-campus housing.”

*Well, too late now.* Whatever happened next, Lola was going to have to deal with it. Hopefully it wouldn’t turn into a full-blown worst-case scenario.

I squeezed Cali’s hand. “Whatever happens, Lola will be fine.”

And even if she wasn’t, it wouldn’t be Cali’s fault. Worrying wouldn’t help Lola now. Some family therapy, on the other hand…

After twenty minutes of awkward getting-to-know-you questions, we finally arrived at the Christmas market. Sure enough, it was like something right out of a holiday movie. Street lamps were decorated with strung lights and garlands, carols were playing from loudspeakers strategically set along the market square, and everywhere I looked, I was met with holly, candy-cane stripes, and decorated Christmas trees.

It wasn’t exactly on my travel bucket list, but I could see that Torin was absolutely in heaven. At least he’d have a good time, even if the date didn’t turn out to be amazing.

In any case, I was willing to play along with the holiday cheer. *Anything for love, I suppose.*

Plus, I still hadn’t gotten a chance to do anything holiday-related with Cali. At least, not like this—as a couple, away from the pack and the ever-present issues and danger bearing down on us. I took her hand and twined our fingers together as we started down the market street.

This was nice. It was cheery and entertaining. The kind of thing Cali and I would probably have done more often, if our lives had been anything resembling normal.

Unfortunately, if I couldn’t figure out a solution to our LIPS problem, it was possible—even likely—that we’d never get to live normal lives.

I pulled in a deep breath and tried to stay present. I still had two days to decide what to do about the wolf pack Alpha’s demand. That was future Greyson’s problem. Right now, I wanted to enjoy this time I had with my mate.

We strolled through the market, peeking in at the various booths, which sold everything from kettle corn to handmade chocolates to pine-scented bath products and Christmas decor. My nose filled with the delicious scent of cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves as we passed a stall selling cups of mulled wine.

“Do you want a drink?” I asked Cali.

She was snuggled against me, staring down at her phone.

“Cali?”

“Huh?” She looked up at me, her face pinching in confusion. “Sorry, what?”

There was that expression again, like she wasn’t fully present. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

She pasted on that weak smile again. “Yeah. I’m fine.” She stowed her phone in her pocket. “Everything is just peachy.”

*She must still be worrying about Lola. Hopefully she can take a break and enjoy herself once the holiday spirit sets in.*

Cali was like Torin in that way. I’d never seen a celebration she couldn’t get into.

“Oh, let’s get some hot chocolate!” Torin called over his shoulder, directing us to a booth. “Four cups, please,” he told the vendor.

We clustered around the booth as the vendor poured and handed out our steaming cups of hot chocolate. It smelled amazing, like dark chocolate and cinnamon and cream. I was about to take a sip when Kevin held up his cup.

“How about a toast? To new friends!” He glanced at Torin and grinned. “Or maybe something more.”

I resisted the urge to snort as we clinked our cups together.

*Take it easy, hotshot.*

I couldn’t exactly fault Kevin for flirting—that was exactly what dates were for—but I also felt strangely protective of Torin. Almost like a big brother. And the last thing I wanted was for Torin to get carried away with some smooth-talking fuckboy.

“So, Kevin,” I said. “What was it about Torin that made you want to meet him?”

Kevin swallowed his sip of hot chocolate before laughing. “Are you kidding? Just look at how hot this guy is.” He winked at Torin, who ducked his head with a grin.

I sighed. Sure, Torin was an attractive guy, but there were lots of hot guys on Tinder. Plus, picking someone entirely for their looks didn’t exactly instill much faith in me for this Kevin guy. Was he just trolling for a hookup? If so, he was sure going to a lot of extra effort, what with meeting Cali and me.

Cali must have picked up on my disappointment, because she asked, “Didn’t you two chat about sound meditation?”

Kevin nodded. “I’m a big fan. It’s helped me through some rough spots.”

*It didn’t work out so well for Cali, though.*

Torin finished his cup of hot chocolate and smacked his lips. “The hot chocolate isn’t bad, but Mrs. Smith’s mocha is so much better.”

Cali nodded. “Aw, that’s not exactly fair. Nothing can compare to her mochas.”

“You’ll have to try it sometime,” Torin said to Kevin, smiling shyly. “We have some back at the house, I’m sure.”

Kevin’s smile broadened. “Are you already inviting me back for a nightcap?”

“Oh, um…” Torin fumbled. “I suppose—”

“So, *Kevin*,” I said pointedly, trying to take the pressure off Torin, “where are you from?”

Cali pointed farther down the street. “Oh, look at all the Christmas cottages! Let’s go check them out!”

Torin and Kevin fell into step ahead of us, and when I moved to join them, Cali gripped my arm and held me back. “Let them get to know each other.”

“I’m just looking out for Torin—and aren’t we *supposed* to talk to the other half of a double date?” I asked.

She shrugged. “We can do that over dinner.” Then her expression shifted to one I knew all too well: worry.

“You’re still thinking about Lola, aren’t you?” I asked.

“I’m sorry. I can’t help it.” Her eyes lit up, focusing on something behind me. “Oh, look!” She grabbed my arm and pulled me over to an ornament stand. She pointed to an ornament of a howling wolf. “This reminds me of you. We should get it to put on the pack’s tree.”

I frowned at the small ceramic grey wolf. “I don’t see the resemblance.”

But it did remind me of the Alpha wolf—and his offer. I needed to talk to Cali about that, but not tonight. I didn’t want anything to ruin this special time we had together.

Cali bought the ornament and turned to me with a smile as she held up the small brown bag it had been packaged in. “Should I name it Marshmallow?”

“Not funny.”

She laughed. “Oh, I disagree.”

Up ahead, Torin suddenly squealed. “Santa! He’s here!”

I looked up ahead, to where a line of children were waiting for their picture with Santa Claus. “Torin, wait—”

But it was too late. He’d already broken into a run, dragging Kevin with him, toward a North Pole scene. He took his place at the end of the line of children. When Cali and I reached him, he grinned broadly. “We have to get our picture taken with him!”

I groaned. “We’re not children.”

“Well, there are no signs saying it’s just for kids,” Cali reasoned. “Plus, it would make Torin so happy.”

“Fine.” I sighed, and we got into line just behind Torin and Kevin. I felt like a complete asshole, standing in line with all these kids, towering over everyone else.

Torin leaned in and whispered to Cali, “Do you think he’s Fae? I think he has to be. How else could Santa do what he does without Fae magic?”

My eyes widened. Apparently, nobody had given Torin the talk about Santa just yet. Kevin frowned slightly. He must have overheard at least part of what Torin had just said.

Cali glanced at Kevin before turning back to Torin, playing along. “They say his magic is powered by the spirit of Christmas.”

Kevin’s frown eased into a small, bemused smile. “Do you really believe in Santa?” he asked Torin.

The Fae’s eyes widened. “Doesn’t everybody?”

Kevin laughed. “Oh my god, you are positively adorable.”

A very human person dressed as an elf walked down the line, handing out candy canes. Torin was nearly beside himself with joy. “And they give you treats too? How can I get a job working for Santa?”

The elf smiled indulgently and pointed up above us. “Don’t forget the mistletoe.”

We looked up at the huge wreath suspended above us, decorated with colored lights and mistletoe.

Kevin glanced at Torin. “Shall we?”

“Try and stop me.” He pulled Kevin close and moved in for a sweet kiss.

I looked down at Cali. “Well, that was fast.”

She pointed up above us. “What about me? What about these lonely lips?”

I laughed. “Should I feel sorry for those lips?” I tilted my head down to kiss herwhen—SNAP! A very distinctive sound of wires being cut stopped us both.

I looked up, my eyes widening as the giant wreath broke free from the ceiling hooks and plummeted straight toward us.

# Episode 2833

**Xavier**

I didn’t take my eyes off of Knox as he slowly approached. If he wanted to settle this here and now, then I was more than willing to put him in his place. Hell, I wanted nothing more than an easy excuse to introduce his oh-so-punchable face to my fist.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t exactly something I had time for. I still had that dinner date with Cali to consider. And really, this was the Samara pack. It was sort of my business if they were stupid enough to choose this little shithead as their Alpha, since he’d no doubt become a problem for the Redwood pack. But ultimately, this wasn’t my pack. And while I didn’t like Knox, and it wouldn’t be a hardship to knock his teeth in, it wasn’t my duty to fight him here and now.

I shrugged. “It’s the Samara pack’s decision whether or not to give you the chance to be Alpha, not mine.

“So you’re a chicken, huh?” Knox smirked.

Was it juvenile as fuck? Yes. Did I still take the bait? Also, yes. Everything about this kid rubbed me the wrong way, especially when he was basically asking me to knock him into the ground. Maybe it would be worth it to be a little late to dinner…

I stepped forward until mere inches stood between us, feeling my anger heating the blood in my veins. “Do you really want to do this?” I asked, my voice low.

He rolled his eyes. “Do what?”

“Incite a Lupo Finale. By trying to challenge me, that’s exactly what you’re doing. And I think we both know who would come out on top in that scenario.”

God, I hoped he backed the fuck down. I didn’t even want to think about what it would mean if I did kick this guy’s ass under these circumstances. It would be a whole new headache that I just didn’t need.

I looked away from Knox and addressed the Samaras. “Do you see who you’re dealing with, here? Some fucking impulsive child is trying take control. Are you seriously going to let him do that? Whatever you want to do, it’s your decision. But don’t blame me for the decisions your past Alphas made—decisions that burned *them* just as much as they burned you. It’s not my fault Nolan chose to side with Silas in the end. And it’s not my fault you guys got the short end of the stick when things went sideways.”

I notably avoided mentioning killing Ava. It’d already been brought up by Knox, and it didn’t serve any purpose now, not if I wanted to gain any favor with anyone. That *was* my fault, and no matter how exceptional the circumstances had been, I couldn’t see the Samaras being willing to overlook that. Not that I cared what they thought—my past with Ava was between her and myself. End of list.

A middle-aged pack member stepped forward. “Perhaps Knox should perform an Iudicium to see if he is fit to be the Alpha of the Samara pack.”

A murmur rippled through the throng again, and I felt my lips tilt up into a smirk. A Lupo Finale was a competition between two or more wolves who were gunning for Alpha. An Iudicium, on the other hand, was a trial to prove a werewolf’s mettle when they were alone in pursuing Alpha. I didn’t know how the Samara pack approached this kind of thing, but the trial was typically used for young and unproven wolves, just like Knox. It was an insurance policy of sorts, to prevent those who were weak from taking control of a pack. I’d only heard of them, since Silas, of course, had had a tight lock on Alpha for most of my life.

The Redwood pack would never force me to perform an Iudicium. They knew exactly what I was capable of, what I could offer them as Alpha. I’d more than proven myself and demonstrated my claim to the pack, unlike baby boy Knox. We were leagues apart.

I glanced over at him, my brows rising. I didn’t know the specifics of how the Samara pack held the trial, but I was certain Knox would fail. The kid didn’t have what it took to make it through this conversation without falling apart. He wouldn’t be able to prove himself as someone capable of performing under pressure—and really, what else was the mantle of Alpha if not that?

But hey, the Samara pack was dealing with itself now, rather than letting itself get swept up in Knox’s entitlement. Hopefully, he wasn’t going to be a problem. And if not? Well, at least I’d tried.

I turned to go, leaving Knox and the Samara pack members to sort themselves out. I made it about three steps before I realized Ava was hot on my heels.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I’m not needed here. I really wasn’t to begin with. If Knox goes through with the trial and proves himself, that’ll be enough.”

She scoffed. “Do you seriously think he’s got what it takes to be Alpha?”

I snorted. “Hell no. But the trial will take care of that, too. The pack will see what kind of wolf he is and that he’s ill-equipped to be an Alpha, and he’ll get the boot. That’s what you wanted, right? To show everyone that Knox isn’t good enough? It seems like that’ll take care of itself, so we’re good here. Now, I’ve got to get back.”

I was looking around to make sure the coast was clear of any prying eyes—or drones—when Ava caught my arm.

“Wait. There’s something else you should know.”

I sighed. From the tone of her voice alone, I knew I wasn’t going to like whatever she had to say. But apparently I was a glutton for punishment, because I still turned around. “What is it?”

“You have a claim to the Samara pack.”

That stopped me cold. “I—*what*?”

Her cheeks heated, and I watched that flush slip down her neck. Ava was nervous. “Didn’t you hear them before? To have a claim to this pack, you have to have a connection to it somehow. Knox was right when he said that there are packs who have Alphas who weren’t part of the pack originally, but who joined the pack because of a Lupo Finale or… a mate.” Her gaze skittered away from mine, like she couldn’t stand to watch her words land.

And good thing too, because I stiffened. I should have followed my first instinct—I *didn’t* like this. Not one fucking bit.

“I’m the descendant of many Samara pack Alphas,” Ava continued. “And with you as my mate… You could be the Samara pack Alpha if you wanted to be. You’re more than capable, Xavier.”

I shook my head. I should’ve known better by now, but I honestly couldn’t believe she was pitching this idea to me. “Was this your plan all along? You asked me to come here to prove Knox wasn’t fit just so you could convince me to become the Samara Alpha. You’re joking, right?”

I turned to leave and immediately shifted. I was more than ready to leave this mess behind me. It was a huge relief not to hear footfalls behind me. Ava wasn’t coming after me.

I seriously couldn’t believe she’d pitched that god-awful idea to me. To be the Samara pack Alpha? It was a fucking joke. And not a funny one, either.

The Redwood pack has always been the stronger pack of the two, plus it was my home. Why would I give that up and downgrade packs just because there was a vacancy in the pack leadership? So what if Greyson was currently the Redwood Alpha? He wouldn’t be in that role forever. And when I stepped in, the Redwood pack would be mine. It was that simple.

What *wasn’t* simple was Ava’s expectation that I’d just slip in and take control of the Samara pack. It was clear that a lot of the pack members still held resentment toward me and my family for everything that had happened in the past. Trying to assert my dominance in a situation like that would blow up in my face—and everyone else’s.

*The only way I could win the Samara pack’s respect would be through a Lupo Finale…*

I shook my head as I barreled toward the Redwood pack house. Why did it sound like I was actually considering Ava’s bullshit offer? I wasn’t joining the Samara pack, as Alpha or otherwise. Besides, if I did take control, I’d essentially be agreeing to take Ava as my Luna, and that was never going to happen.

The only woman I wanted as my Luna was Cali, and I wanted her to be the Luna of the Redwood pack.

And the only Lupo Finale I wanted to be a part of was the one where I kicked Greyson’s ass.

After taking the long way home to avoid LIPS drones and any other watchful eyes, I finally made it back to the pack house. As I stepped inside, I was met by Rishika.

“I’m so glad to see you,” she said.

“What’s going on?”

“Lola has been calling me nonstop. I had to silence my phone.”

“Okay? What does that have to do with me?”

Her brows rose. “The dinner thing that Cali’s parents are going to with Lola’s dads?”

“Yeah? What about it?”

“Well, Cali’s parents already left, and Lola said she’s on her way,” Rishika said slowly, “which means you’re late.”

# Episode 2834

Shouts and gasps echoed around me as the gigantic wreath broke free from its connections one by one, swung around wildly, and then plummeted toward us. I was frozen in place as I watched it fall. I had no idea where it would land, but there was no doubt it would cause a lot of damage. The thing was huge. It had to be half the size of a car.

I didn’t want to run and have it land on me, but I also didn’t want to just be a deer in headlights right until I got squished.

*What are you gonna do, Cali? Are you going to move or stay? Move or stay?*

My body jolted as Greyson grabbed my arm and pulled me into him so our chests were flush against each other. One of his strong arms banded around my waist, locking me in tight as his body curled protectively over mine. I could feel my heart thrumming hard against his chest, and his own rapidly beating heart pounding against mine.

It felt good to be so close to him, but the sweetness of the moment was pretty much shattered by the ear-splitting THUD that rocked the air around us.

I flinched and instinctively slammed my eyes shut.

“I’ve got you, love,” Greyson whispered. “You’re safe.”

I slowly pried my eyes open and looked around. The giant wreath surrounded us in every direction, like a big, pine scented, pokey donut. It had landed with us directly in the center. And the wreath was even huger than I’d originally thought. I craned my neck to look behind me, the eight inches or so away that I’d been standing when the wreath had fallen. That spot was now completely obscured by the Christmas killer. Or attempted killer, at least. Because if Greyson hadn’t pulled me out of the way, I would have been squished. Or at least broken my neck.

“Oh my god…” I shuddered as the reality of my near-death experience set in. I could have been killed! I’d almost died! Here! At the freaking Christmas market in some freak wreath accident!

Greyson’s broad hands rubbed up and down my back. “It’s okay. You’re safe now. You’re safe.”

All around us, the marketgoers burst into cheers and applause.

Greyson turned to address the crowd. “She’s okay! We’re all okay over here!”

Heat rushed into my cheeks as I followed suit and gave everyone a little wave. I felt put on the spot in the worst way possible, trapped in the center of this wreath with all these witnesses to the accident that could have ended my life.

Still, as I turned and looked at Greyson, all I felt was gratitude and love. My mate had saved my life. Without him, I would have just become some morbid anecdote.

Suddenly, the person who’d been working as Santa’s Helper at the front of the line rushed up to us as we stepped out from around the ring of the giant wreath. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes, we’re fine,” Greyson told him. “You might want to check your rigging better next time, though. Someone could have been seriously hurt.”

It didn’t escape my notice that the *someone* was probably me. Greyson probably could have endured that wreath crashing down on him with nothing more than some sore muscles.

“I’m so, so sorry,” Santa’s Helper said. “Please know that this was an unfortunate accident, we’re all up-to-date on our inspections, and you were standing beneath the wreath at the time of this happening, so the market is not liable for any damages that could have occurred.”

I blinked. I was still kind of in shock, so I could barely wrap my head around the abrupt shift in the worker’s tone. From concern and apologies to refusing liability in three seconds flat. That had to be some kind of record.

Greyson raised a brow. “Seriously? We’re not the ones who wired that thing and put it up there. And we sure as hell didn’t sign any kind of liability paperwork when we walked into this place.”

Someone in a suit, tie, and Santa hat emerged from the crowd. “I am so deeply sorry about all of this. On behalf of the December Christmas Market, would you please accept a complimentary gift basket?”

Greyson looked at me, a question in his eyes.

I didn’t want any trouble. I *was* fine, after all. All I wanted was to move on with my night—without the eyes of half the market watching me. “That would be very nice.”

A few minutes later, our double date resumed, with Greyson carrying a gigantic holiday basket filled with caramel corn, hot chocolate mix, cookies, ornaments, wrapping paper, spice blends, handcrafted chocolate, and more from the market’s stalls.

Torin eyed the basket with pure envy. “I can’t believe you got that! I wonder if anything else might fall on us?” He looked around hopefully.

Greyson patted Torin’s shoulder with his free hand. “I wouldn’t get my hopes up if I were you.”

Then he turned to look at me. “How are you doing?”

I gave him a weak smile. “A bit jittery from all the adrenaline, but now that the near-death experience is out of the way, I—”

My vibrating phone cut me off, and I let out a gasp of horror. “Oh my god.”

I’d totally forgotten about Lola!

I looked at my phone and saw that I’d missed eight calls and over a dozen texts from my best friend.

*Shit!*

Bracing myself, I opened one text after another. They were all variations of *SOS* and *WHERE ARE YOU* and *CALIANA ROSE HART, I WILL MURDER YOU IN COLD BLOOD AND SET FIRE TO YOUR LIFELESS BODY IF YOU ARE NOT AT THIS RESTAURANT AT 6!*

I checked the time. It was past six. Suddenly, being crushed by a gigantic wreath didn’t sound too bad.

My thumbs flew over the touchscreen as I texted her back. *I’m so sorry! I’m running a little late, but don’t worry! I’ll be there as soon as I can! Don’t worry and please don’t murder me. Thx.*

I looked over at Greyson, who was talking to Kevin about how he’d gotten his quick reflexes (high school football). How the hell was I going to explain to Greyson—or any of them, really—that I had to step away for a second to several minutes?

I felt horrible. Greyson was having such a good time (sans the wreath squish moment, of course), and I didn’t want to ruin his night of almost normalcy. I loved being here with him, and I wanted to help ease Torin’s nerves, but I had promised Lola and Xavier and my parents that I’d have dinner with them tonight too.

I cleared my throat. “Greyson, can we—”

Kevin’s phone chimed, and his face lit up. “Oh! It’s the restaurant. Our table is ready!”

Torin cheered as Kevin directed us down the market path toward the entrance.

“Tonight, we’re eating at Fondue for You,” Kevin said as we walked. “I picked this place because it has such good fondue. And that’s saying something, because fondue is just great vibes overall. The flow of the cheese mimics the flow of life, don’t you think?”

Greyson’s mouth twitched. “Uh, sure.” He turned back to me. “Did you say something, love?”

“I have to go to the bathroom!” I blurted out with a wince. It was a god-awful lie honestly, but I didn’t know what else to do. What I really needed was a chance to explain what the hell was going on!

“Oh, well I’m sure the restaurant will have one.”

We continued our walk to Fondue for You, and I died a little bit inside with each second that passed.

The restaurant was only a couple storefronts away when suddenly I noticed a familiar sign on an Italian place across the street—Due Pizza & Pasta.

*Oh right, that’s the restaurant Lola’s going to!*

And then I saw them. My parents were walking down the sidewalk on the other side of the street, and inside the restaurant’s glass storefront, Lola was visible in the waiting area with Jay.

*Crap!*

Lola and Jay were already there, which meant her dads probably were too. Any second now, my parents could see me with Greyson, Torin, and Kevin. I casually ducked behind Greyson’s tall form, though that wouldn’t do much to hide me, since my parents knew Greyson and Torin too.

Fortunately, my parents stopped so my dad could tie his shoes, and they turned away from my group, giving us just enough time to walk into Fondue for You and take our seats far away from the front windows.

When we reached the table, Kevin pulled out the chair for Torin, and Greyson did the same for me. I sat down, and everyone started taking off their coats and jackets. Everyone but me.

Greyson looked over at me, confusion pinching his brow. “Can I help you, love?”

“Sure! I was just going to maybe quickly go to the bathroom. I had a bit too much of that hot chocolate, I think.”

Kevin let out a very, very loud gasp and looked at me with wide eyes. “I *knew* you were going to say that!”

Greyson, Torin, and I all exchanged confused looks.

“You knew… I needed to pee?” I asked.

Kevin nodded. “Fun fact about me: I’m a little bit psychic. Do you want me to give you a reading?”

# Episode 2835

**Lola**

Cali was dead to me. D-E-A-D.

I bit at my freshly painted nails. Or at least, they’d been freshly painted before my teeth had torn them to hell. The dark red I’d painted them was supposed to contrast against the little holly and silver bells I’d added to the ends. Those cute little ornaments were now dead and buried.

Just like Cali was going to be. Just like she she’d *better* be, because I had no idea how else she was going to be forgiven for this.

*Seriously! Where. The. Hell. Is. Cali?*

I pulled up our text thread and sent another handful of knife emojis for good measure, not that I had any confidence that they were actually accomplishing anything besides giving me an outlet for my anxiety and fury.

She’d said she was running a few minutes late, but what could be more important than this dinner? She was supposed to be my best friend, and she knew how much this dinner meant to me. She knew what was on the line, and how spooked I’d been over it. Was it so goddamn hard for her to just show up on time?

Jay slung an arm around me and mind linked. *Hey, stop freaking out. You’re gonna scare the wait staff and tip off the parents. They have radars for this kind of thing, remember?*

I casually moved out from under his arm. *Wow. Have I ever told you how terrible you are at comforting me?*

*Nah. I usually get five-star reviews.* His eyes twinkled with amusement. Good for him. At least one of us was having a good time. *Besides, your dad already said he wanted a fresh start, remember? This dinner is the perfect way to do that.*

*Yeah, but if everything isn’t actually perfect and it turns out to be the usual kind of disaster, then nothing will be fixed!*

His tone was gentle, soothing. Goddammit, he *was* a five-star comforter. *That’s not true. You do know they love you and they will continue to love you no matter what, right? You don’t have to be perfect for them to want you in their lives.*

Tears stung my eyes, and I sniffed as discreetly as possible as I pretended to look over the menu. *I don’t want to talk about this right now.*

*Okay. But for what it’s worth, your dads seem perfectly content right now.* His eyes skipped across my form and onto the two men sitting on my other side, looking over the menu. I forced myself to look away from my phone—Cali hadn’t answered any of my messages anyway, the traitor.

Dad and Pops both looked very dapper in their dinner outfits. It was so strange to have them here with me and Jay. It was nice and more than welcome—all the secrecy aside—but the surrealness was kind of overpowering me at the moment. I’d spent so long building my own life, I didn’t know how to share even a small piece of it with them.

I forced a smile. “I’m so sorry that everyone’s running late. I promise I told them to be here at six.”

Pops waved me off. “Don’t worry about it. It’s giving me time to look over the menu. Have you been here before? What does it mean when it says the Pizasta? What is that? Is that a pizza pasta? Pasta on a pizza?”

“Wouldn’t that just be marinara?” Dad asked. “Or bolognese?”

Pops shook his head. “I don’t know.” He lowered his menu so that Dad could see what he was referring to. “It says here, the ‘pizasta.’”

“How about I order it, and we’ll see what shows up?” Jay suggested.

Dad gave him a stiff smile. “It’ll be an experiment.”

He returned to his menu, and the anxiety swirling in my belly doubled. I should have known better than to assume he’d leave all his prejudices for Jay behind just because we were “starting fresh.”

Pops set down his menu and turned to me. “How’s the studying going for your final?”

I felt my cheeks heat. “Studying?”

“Yeah. Didn’t you say you had a final that was happening before the new year? That’s why we wanted to come now, to surprise you so you still had time. But I hope you’re not putting it off until the day before.” His brows rose to punctuate his stern warning.

I struggled to come up with an answer—mostly because I didn’t remember all the particulars of the lie I’d told them.

“Um, no,” I finally said. “I’ve been studying here and there…”

“What class is this for again?” Dad asked.

There was another detail I couldn’t recall. *What class did I tell them I was taking?* I definitely remembered the stupid lie about the exam being before the new year. Seriously, what the hell was I thinking with that one? No schools scheduled things between holidays.

I stumbled over my answer. What class had I told them I was taking? Biology? Philosophy? Sociology? Freaking billiards?

Then, the door to the restaurant swung open, and Cali’s parents stepped inside. I grinned from ear to ear as relief rushed through me.

“Hey!” I stood to greet them. “It’s so good to see you. Mrs. Hart, you look gorgeous! And Mr. Hart, you look so festive! I love the Christmas sweater.”

They both thanked me, and Orla looked around, her brows knitting. “Where’s Cali?”

My molars ground together. “That is a great question! I was hoping you could tell me.”

They both looked nonplussed, and my dads came over to greet them before we could discuss Cali’s whereabouts any further.

My parents hugged Cali’s, then stepped back.

“It’s been such a long time since we’ve seen you, it feels like!” Pops said. “How are you doing?”

They quickly descended into small talk—I noticed the Harts were very careful to sound perfectly boring and not like a Fae-werewolf couple living in their daughters’ mates’ werewolf pack house. Fortunately, this little catch-up session provided me with a much-needed opportunity to try to remember whatever the hell class I’d said I was taking.

I mind linked to Jay. *Do you remember what class I said I was taking?*

*Nope.*

Dammit. I was totally fucked.

“We were just asking Lola about school,” Dad said. “How has Cali been doing?”

Tom cleared his throat. “Cali has actually decided to take the semester off.”

Fear rattled its way through my body. *Are Cali’s parents going to spoil the lie? Did Cali even tell them to* *lie?*

“Oh, really?” Dad asked. “May I ask why she’s taking the time away from her schoolwork?”

Orla smiled. “She’s focusing on… gaining some other life experiences right now.”

*Understatement.*

“Excuse me. I’ll go check in with the hostess.” I darted away before any of them could reply.

The hostess stood at her stand, flipping through the reservations on an iPad.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“Do you know when we can be seated?”

She smirked. “Is your entire party here?”

“Um, no. But most of us are.”

“Well, you can’t be seated,” she said, crinkling her nose, “but you may go to the bar.”

Great. The bar. More talky talky. Yeah, I was definitely going to kill Cali.

I told the parents and Jay that we’d been okayed to move over the bar while we waited, and we made the shift over. I was still racking my brain for the name of the class, but nothing was coming to mind. It was like when someone asked you for a fun fact about yourself, and then your mind suddenly went blank.

“Do you want something?” Jay asked as he flipped through the bar menu.

“Wine. Fast.”

My dads ordered cocktails before turning their gaze back over to me.

Pops frowned. “Lola, are you all right? You’re looking a little pale.”

“Oh yeah! I’m fine.”

Dad sipped his martini. “I’m still interested in learning about your class and the others you took this semester. Back in Minnesota, we always knew what you were taking, and we enjoy hearing about what goes on in your life. You’ve been pretty distant the last few months.”

*Oh my god. I’m a terrible person.*

“I’m sorry.” I grimaced. “It wasn’t intentional.”

“I know we originally blamed Jay for some of that,” he added, “and that wasn’t fair. But is everything all right?”

I forced a smile. “It’s just been a really intense semester. And with the move out here and the time difference, it just made it hard to stay in contact. I didn’t mean to do it, I promise.”

“That’s all right. I’m glad you kept your head down and worked on school more after we discussed it. Are you liking the campus?”

This part I’d prepared for. “Oh, it’s beautiful!” I gushed. “It’s in a forest and close to a river. It’s so, so gorgeous.”

“I’d love to see it,” Pops said.

Panic made my heart sputter-thump. “Oh, well, the campus is closed right now for the holidays. Everyone’s gone, so it’s all closed.”

“You said you had an exam?” Dad asked.

“Well, I do! But it’s online!”

“Why couldn’t you come home then?” Pops asked.

*Shit shit shit.*

Just then, Xavier approached. “Hey.”

I scrambled to greet him. “Oh, Dad, Pops, do you remember Xavier? Have you met him? Cali’s boyfriend?”

Both of my dads said hello, but Dad immediately turned back to me, looking stern. “Aaliyah Lyn Spillane, I need you to cut the bullshit. You need to stop lying and tell us what’s going on with school right now.”

# Episode 2836

**Greyson**

I knew better than to ask, but at the same time, I couldn’t help it. I was both intrigued and weirded out by this guy. This aggressively confident, stupidly handsome dude named Kevin, who loved meditation, thought fondue “is just great vibes overall,” and genuinely believed he was psychic.

There was no way in hell that this guy was psychic. I’d met real psychics—witches and mediums—and Kevin didn’t seem like them at all. I doubted he had what it took to form a genuine supernatural connection. But that didn’t mean I was going to pass up the opportunity to discover what this human considered “a little bit psychic.” And then I’d tell Big Mac and Marta about it later, and we’d all have a good laugh.

Torin, ever prepared to be pleased and impressed, beamed at his date. “Really? You’re a psychic! What are the odds?”

Kevin nodded and thankfully didn’t ask why Torin had brought up odds. “Ever since I was a child, I’ve been able to sense things.”

*Just like I’m sensing some bullshit right about now.*

“What kinds of things?” I asked.

“I’d be able to walk into a room and read the energy of the space, sense things that weren’t always there.” Kevin told a story with a smug sort of look on his face, like he knew he had our full attention and he was reveling in it. “I went to school in Eugene, and one of my apartments up there was haunted.”

“Really?” Cali asked. She was still halfway out of her seat, politely giving Kevin her attention, but I could tell she really wanted to be away from the table. *She must really have to pee.*

“Yes! I felt a presence in the apartment almost constantly, and my roommates and I would always have things go missing—scissors, shampoo bottles, one time a pair of shoes—but then we’d inevitably find those things months later in a different place than any of us remembered. Not a single one of us could account for how or why.”

Right. Clearly the ghost was stealing his shampoo to wash its non-corporeal hair. I tried to imagine Lilac’s ghost doing something like that, back when he’d been dead. No, it was much more likely that Kevin had a bunch of forgetful roommates. Nothing particularly supernatural about that.

But… ghosts and other paranormal entities *did* exist. And they were prone to causing havoc for humans and supernatural beings alike. Maybe I should try to give the guy at least a little credit. It wasn’t like I’d been there to see what had happened for myself.

On the other side of me, Torin was listening with rapt attention. “Wow. That sounds so scary! I don’t know how you lived like that.”

I rubbed my mouth to smother my laughter. Torin had faced tons of things way scarier than a ghost with a penchant for moving things around so humans had a hard time finding them later. The Fae world wasn’t exactly a warm and fuzzy place, and it wasn’t like things had been smooth sailing since he’d come to the human world.

Cali cleared her throat. “Cool story, but I actually really need to go to the bathroom.” She turned to spear me with a look. “Didn’t you say you had to go too?”

I frowned. “What? No?” I was pretty sure I’d said no such thing.

*Does Cali seriously want me to go to the bathroom with her?*

I hadn’t realized she was that shaken up by the wreath falling. It had been scary as shit, of course, and now I was going to have to add “falling holiday décor” to my list of risks to my mate’s safety. But she’d seemed fine after the initial adrenaline and shock had worn off. Distracted maybe, and in need of a bathroom, but fine.

*Maybe she’s not fine.*

Fuck, I was such an idiot.

Cali’s expression turned pleading. “Are you sure?”

I turned to Kevin and Torin. “Oh, that’s right. I wanted to wash my hands. I spilled a little hot chocolate earlier.”

They didn’t care. In fact, Kevin was continuing to regale Torin with more of his fake ghost stories, something about how he’d intuitively known the name of his last boyfriend’s grandmother, even though they’d never been introduced.

I got up from the table and followed Cali across the restaurant to the hallway leading to the restrooms. She stopped just outside the ladies’ room and turned to me. “Thank goodness. I thought we’d never get away.”

“Did you want me to wait for you, or…?”

It was Cali’s turn to look confused. “Wait for me to what?” Then she looked over her shoulder at the bathroom door and shook her head. “No, I don’t actually need to use the bathroom. I just wanted to talk to you in private.”

“Oh.” Well now I was even more confused. What could possibly be going on right now that she hadn’t been able to bring up in front of Torin and Kevin? “What’s going on? Is something wrong? Do you like Kevin? He’s a little much, isn’t he?”

“What? No, I don’t hate him. Kevin’s fine, I guess. I just have to tell you something.” She took a deep breath, like she was about to confess something truly horrible, and my mind spun with worst-case scenarios. “I accidentally promised to go to two dinners tonight.”

I froze. Then blinked. Then frowned. Then, my lips twitched as I began to laugh.

“What’s so funny?” she growled.

I couldn’t help it. She was just being so serious about the whole thing—and then it turned out to be something about two dinners?

“Nothing.” I snickered, then cleared my throat and tried to compose myself. “I just didn’t expect you to say that.”

“Well, what *were* you expecting?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “Bad news?”

She rolled her eyes. “This *is* bad news! I’m supposed to be having dinner with Torin and Kevin right now, and there’s a simultaneous dinner I’m also supposed to be at going on *right now* across the street.”

“With whom?”

“Lola and Jay, her parents, my parents, and… Xavier.”

*Ah*. So Lola had pulled Cali into her scheme to lie to her dads. And that wasn’t even the worst part. “So you’ve got a date across the street with Xavier? Were you planning to mention this dinner to me at all, or did Xavier just weasel his way into it?”

“The whole thing is just a big misunderstanding!” Her cheeks reddened, and her fingers clenched on the fabric of her blouse. “It got out of control so fast, and now I have to somehow be at two places at once just because I promised everyone and I don’t want to let anyone down.”

“Hey.” I grabbed her hands and gently freed her shirt from their grip. “Why didn’t you say something before? I’m pretty sure I could have asked Torin to move the date.”

“I tried! I really did. I tried to talk to both him and Lola, but I kept getting interrupted every time I went to talk to one of them.” A low buzz caught my attention, and she pulled her phone out of her pocket and flashed the display in my face. It was a series of texts from Lola, most of them made up of nothing but the knife emoji. “And now Lola is blowing up my phone, and I don’t know what to do.”

I sighed. “Do you think you can do both? I can tell Torin and Kevin you had to go. It’s not a problem.”

She shook her head. “But I don’t want to let you down.”

I smiled and leaned in to kiss her heated cheek. “I’ll help with whatever you need. Just go to the other place for now, help Lola out, and try to come back if you can. If you can’t, just text. Okay? I can come up with something to tell the guys.”

“Really?”

I nodded and brushed another kiss over her lips before she ran off to get to the other restaurant.

I headed back to the table, watching out of the corner of my eye as Cali ran out the front door and then hurried across the street. It was lucky that both of her dinners were so close. I hoped everything would be okay—and that she could make it back soon.

I returned to the table and took a seat. “Cali had to step out for a minute.”

Torin was still enraptured with Kevin and didn’t seem to hear me.

*Guess I’ll be the third wheel tonight.* It was impossible not to feel Cali’s absence. *She’ll be back soon.*

The waiter arrived. “Welcome! What a fun group we have here tonight. Are you all ready to fon-DO it?”

I just blinked, but both Kevin and Torin burst out laughing as they accepted the menus from the waiter.

Torin leaned toward me. “While you were in the bathroom, Kevin gave me a reading. He thinks my future is bright and that I have a magical aura around me.”

I sipped my water and glanced over my menu. “Does he now?”

“Greyson, you *have* to let Kevin do you!”

Kevin grinned conspiratorially. *These two make a kind of unnerving couple.* “Would you like your fortune told?” he asked. “Or I could read your aura?”

“Uh, the first thing, I guess.”

“Hold out your palm.”

I watched as Kevin made a show of studying the lines in my hand. “I’m reading your energy right now and—” He stopped suddenly and frowned. Then he slowly looked up at me. “Something isn’t fixed. A problem you thought was solved is going to come back to haunt you.”

# Episode 2837

I rushed across the street so fast I only narrowly avoided a car coming down the road. It honked at me as I cleared the curb.

“Sorry!” I called out without looking back.

Did that make two near-death experiences in one day? I should have looked both ways, but I was so damningly late for this now, and I knew Lola was waiting on me. If those knife emojis were half as scary as they seemed, then I could very well be in for a third near-death experience tonight.

Thank god for Greyson. He was so understanding, so helpful—even though I knew he’d been looking forward to our date tonight. I’d have to get back to him as soon as I could.

Realization hit me then, and my stomach lurched as I reached the door to the restaurant at which I was meeting Lola, Jay, Xavier, and the parents.

*Am I going to have to eat two full meals tonight?*

My stomach didn’t feel prepared to handle even one right now. I pushed that concern away and rushed inside, looking around for a familiar face. I didn’t see anyone in the waiting areas, so I headed over to the hostess. “Excuse me. I’m here for the Spillane party of eight?”

She looked me up and down and sneered. “Are *you* who they were waiting on?”

*Well, first of all, ouch.*

“They’re all at the bar right now,” she continued. “I’ll get the table set up, and we’ll be ready to seat you in a few minutes.”

“Thanks.” I beelined over to the bar area, where my parents, Xavier, Lola, Jay, and Lola’s dads were all clustered around a cocktail table.

I pasted on a smile and was about to greet everyone with a big, emphatic hello, when I stopped short at the look on Lola’s face. My best friend, who had faced down vampires and werewolves and revenants and an actual demon, looked like she was going to cry.

*Oh god. What did I just walk into? Am I too late?*

I quickly sidled up to Mom, Dad, and Xavier.

“What’s going on?” I whispered around my bright smile. To anyone looking on, it would’ve looked like a happy family reunion, not a meeting of co-conspirators.

My mom slipped an arm around me and pulled me into a hug, then whispered, “I think Lola’s plan has started to unravel a little bit.”

I let go, my eyes widening. “Already?”

Maybe that wasn’t such a kind response, but what was there to say? Planning had never been Lola’s strong suit, and with the stakes so high, I didn’t see that changing anytime soon.

Xavier nodded. “Yeah, it’s turning into a bit of a shitshow.”

His words stopped me cold. “Oh no.”

The guilt was overwhelming. *How could I let this happen? Lola needed me, and I wasn’t there to help! If I’d been here, would I have been able to prevent this from happening?*

There was no way of knowing. But I was here now, and I was determined to help. To make up for being late and generally just messing up the whole night. I strode over to the Spillanes with my best version of a brave but cheerful face.

I smiled. “Hey! It’s so good to see you, Mr. and Mr. Spillane.”

When Lola turned to me, fire was blazing in her eyes, and I knew then that I was in deep, deep trouble.

“I’m so sorry I was late,” I said, fighting to keep my smile intact. “But I just spoke with the hostess, and she said they’re getting a table ready for us.”

“It’s good to see you, Cali,” Lola’s dad said, though he didn’t look particularly pleased to see me. “But right now, we’re having a bit of a family discussion, if you don’t mind.”

Lola shook her head. “No, we’re not having a discussion right now.”

“Daniel,” Lola’s pops said. “Why don’t we leave this for another time?”

Daniel shook his head with a stubborn will identical to Lola’s. It was easy to see where she’d picked up that trait. “No. We’re doing this now. Lola has been acting so strange ever since she left for Oregon. It’s the elephant in the room, and it’s why we were upset the first time she came to visit home, and ever since we told her we were coming and since we’ve arrived, she’s been acting really strange.” He narrowed his gaze at Lola. “I know my daughter, and I know when she’s lying. We’ve waited more than long enough for the truth, and we won’t allow you to put it off any longer. What’s going on?”

Lola huffed out a breath and pushed her shoulders back. “I’m not in school right now. I haven’t been for ages, and I’m not even signed up for another semester.”

I felt my own stomach drop as I waited for Lola’s dads to respond. I could only imagine how freaked out she was. She wanted so badly to make her parents proud, and she was in the impossible situation of trying to have a relationship with them while simultaneously being forced to keep almost every aspect of her life a secret.

Her dads couldn’t know that she was a hybrid, a vampire *and* a werewolf. They couldn’t know that Jay was her werewolf mate and I was her Fae best friend. They couldn’t know anything, and it wasn’t until right now that I fully understood just how hard this had to be for her.

Lola’s dads wore twin expressions of shock, hurt, and disappointment.

“Is this true?” Daniel asked, his voice eerily even.

Blinking back tears, Lola nodded.

I hated this. And I hated that I couldn’t do anything to help. That I’d done exactly zero things to help. I could only imagine how scary and painful this was for Lola. I knew this was the last thing she’d wanted to have happen when her dads showed up to surprise her.

Lola had been trying so hard to make sure that things went smoothly, and instead I’d just gotten a front-row seat to watch the whole thing blow up in her face.

I wished I could say something to take the heat off Lola, but short of blurting out the existence of vampires, werewolves, Fae, and everything else that went bump in the night, I was coming up empty-handed.

Lola sniffled. “I’m sorry I’m such a disappointment to you.”

With that, the tears started tracking down my friend’s face in full force, and she beelined toward the bathroom with Jay hot on her heels.

I was frozen. Torn between running after her and trying to comfort her, or staying here and trying to comfort her dads. Xavier, too, looked awkward and unsure of what to do next, and my parents seemed to be mulling over the same thing. They, more than anyone else, had to understand what Lola’s dads were going through. But they also knew Lola and the details of her life even better than her dads did. And they couldn’t exactly blurt out the truth about what was happening, either.

“Way to go, Daniel,” her pops muttered.

“Do not blame me for this,” he snapped.

Okay… I definitely didn’t want to stick around for another domestic.

I turned to Xavier. “I’m going after Lola.”

I made quick time toward the bathroom and saw as Jay faltered just outside the women’s room. Lola must have just slammed the door in his face. Another woman stepped out of the bathroom as Jay was about to barge in, and she gave him a dirty look.

“Um, sorry. Wrong bathroom,” he muttered.

I patted his shoulder. “Don’t worry. I’m going in.”

He sighed. “Good luck. You’re gonna need it.”

I gulped. I knew just as well as he did how powerful Lola’s anger could be, but I forced myself to enter the bathroom. She needed my support right now. It was time for me to be there for her. I was long overdue.

Inside the bathroom, only one of the stalls was shut, and I heard a familiar voice crying softly from the other side.

“Lola, are you okay?” I asked.

She sobbed in reply. *Okay, dumb question.*

I gently pushed on the stall door. It wasn’t latched, so the door slowly swung open to reveal Lola. She was standing up, hugging herself, and crying. I’d never seen my friend look so small and vulnerable.

“Oh, Lola.” I sighed. “I’m so sorry.”

I ventured into the stall and wrapped my arms around her. Lola hugged me back tightly, crying into my shoulder.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen,” she said, wiping tears away. “My dads probably hate me now! I was just trying to keep them safe from all this supernatural stuff, and I still have no idea how to explain why I’m such a disappointment about school! Do you know what they’re going to say when I tell them I dropped out so I could hang around at a big house in the woods with a bunch of random people? Because that’s what their version of events is going to look like, and they’re going to think I’m some kind of burnout!”

“You’re not a disappointment,” I said gently. “You’ve done so much badass stuff. You were the bravest half-werewolf anyone had ever seen, and when you became a vampire, you took it all in stride. Then, when you became a hybrid, you rose to the occasion there too. You’ve done a lot to be proud of. You’ve fought against some very scary, powerful beings and have helped keep the world safe. You’re not a disappointment, by any definition of the word.”

Lola sniffled, and I hugged her tight.

“Just go out there and be honest with them,” I said. “Tell them you needed to take the semester, the year, I don’t know, but just tell them what’s going on. They’re probably freaking out and worried that it’s something else. But no matter what happens, we’ve got you, okay?”

She nodded. “Thanks, Cali. I’m sorry I threatened to murder you all those times.”

I laughed. “And I’m sorry I was late.”

Finally, she walked out of the stall, and I followed behind her. Lola’s eyes widened when she looked in the mirror. “Oh god. My eyeliner is a mess.” She dabbed at it to tidy it up and then took a deep breath. “Be honest?”

I nodded. “You can do it. I’ll be right out.”

She disappeared through the door, and I turned to the mirror to check my reflection.

I stifled a scream. Behind me, looking hollow, bloody, and decaying, was Seluna.

# Episode 2838

**Xavier**

I glanced toward the bathroom for the tenth time, wishing that Cali would hurry up and get back to the table already. This dinner had quickly turned into the most awkward meal of my life, and I didn’t want to endure it alone.

Lola’s dads were conferring together and were speaking too quietly and too fast for me to hear what they were saying. I could only assume they were talking about Lola. Which left Cali’s parents with very little to do. They looked deeply uncomfortable, but they were still trying to make small talk. Thank god at least one of us was good at that, at least.

“So, are you excited for the holidays, Xavier?” Tom asked.

“I guess,” I muttered. Then, after a pause: “How about you two?”

“Of course,” Orla said, nodding. She shot a glance at Lola’s dads.

“Wait,” Daniel said to Danny, his voice loud enough that we could all hear him. “So Jay *knew* all about this? About Lola not going to school, and making all this up?”

I shifted in my seat, happy as hell that I wasn’t in Jay’s position at this moment. I glanced over at the bathroom again, wondering if there was anything I could do for the guy. He was still waiting outside the bathroom for Lola, but maybe I could warn him or something.

“I can’t believe that little—” Daniel started, looking furious, but I cut in. I wasn’t going to let anyone badmouth my friend in front of me.

“You shouldn’t blame Jay,” I said. The dads looked over at me, surprised. “We *all* knew about it. And why would Jay have told you what was going on? I mean, he’s a good guy, but his loyalty is to Lola. It’s not his news to tell, so you shouldn’t be blaming him.”

Daniel didn’t look pleased with my interjection, and he took a deep breath, like he was getting ready to tell me off, but Danny put his hand on Daniel’s arm.

“Take a breath, Daniel.”

I took a sip of my drink and eyed the door. I felt satisfied having stood up for Jay, but at this point, I’d rather be fighting demons and Rogues than facing any more scrutiny from human parents. If it hadn’t been for Cali—and the fact that Lola was a Redwood—I would have noped out of there before we’d even sat down. This wasn’t my battle to fight—it was Lola’s.

And speaking of her, out of the corner of my eye I saw Jay leading her back to the cocktail table. But where was Cali?

Lola stepped up to the table, and Danny stood and pulled her into a hug.

“It’s okay, Lola-bean,” he said quietly.

“Where’s Cali?” I whispered to Jay.

“She had to fix her makeup or something. She’ll be back in a second.”

Danny released Lola and sat back down, but Daniel was frowning as Lola took her seat. He was muttering under his breath.

“… lies… Why would she deceive… All we wanted…”

I really hoped this whole thing wouldn’t blow up again. But the tension continued to grow as Daniel glared at Jay.

“You knew about this, right?” he demanded.

Jay nodded, but Lola leapt to his defense. “I made him keep it a secret, Dad. It wasn’t his fault.”

Over her shoulder, I saw Cali stepping out of the bathroom. I was relieved to see her, not sure how much longer I could have handled this awkwardness on my own. Maybe she could bring some peace to the table. She at least knew Lola’s dads.

But she wasn’t walking back to the table. Instead, she caught my eye and gestured frantically for me to come over to her.

“Excuse me,” I muttered, getting to my feet. Honestly, I was happy to get away from the table, but the scared look on Cali’s face worried me.

“What’s wrong?” I asked when I reached her. I couldn’t imagine what could have happened to her in the short amount of time since Jay and Lola had left the bathroom.

But Cali seemed to be so freaked out that she was at a loss for words. I’d seen this happen to her before, and I pulled her into a hug, hoping to calm her down.

“It’s okay,” I murmured. “What happened? Just tell me.”

But when she spoke, my blood turned to ice.

“Seluna.”

She pointed at the bathroom, and I stared in confusion. Seluna was in the bathroom?

Without a second thought I shoved open the door, making the woman washing her hands jump.

“Excuse me! This is the women’s bathroom,” she snapped, after she’d recovered.

I ignored her and looked around, but everything looked normal. What could Cali have seen?

“You have toilet paper on the bottom of your shoe,” I said to the woman, and let the door swing shut behind me.

“I didn’t see any demons in there,” I said, turning to Cali. “Can you tell me what happened?”

Cali seemed slightly calmer now, though her face was still pale. “I’d just talked to Lola and was fixing my makeup, but when I looked in the mirror, I could have *sworn* I saw Seluna right behind me.”

I stared at her, confused. I didn’t know what to make of this. “I know you’re stressed about tonight, but we returned Seluna’s ashes, and you said you were feeling better. I don’t understand, Cali. Seluna should be history.”

“I know,” she said, looking worried and frustrated. “And I *am* stressed… Do you think it’s possible that I imagined it?”

“I think you might have. I’m sorry it scared you, though. Maybe it’s just going to take some time for the memory of her to totally fade away.” I cast a glance over my shoulder. “And this hasn’t exactly been the world’s most relaxing dinner.”

She laughed weakly. “You can say that again.”

I was glad to see her smile, and to know that she was getting past the scare. I pressed a kiss to her lips. “Is there another reason besides Lola and her dads that you’re feeling stressed tonight?”

She hesitated for a moment. “Actually, yeah. So, I’d already made this plan with you when Greyson told me he’d agreed for us to go on a double date with Torin. So… I’ve kind of been on two dates tonight.”

It took me a minute to take this in. Then I glanced over at the entrance of the restaurant, wondering if Greyson was sitting in another restaurant, waiting for Cali to return. There was a little satisfaction in that thought.

“Why didn’t you tell me at the start of all this?” I asked.

“I tried,” she said, looking miserable, “but I didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings.”

“Does Greyson know?” I asked.

She nodded.

“I hope you know that I would’ve tried to help you if you’d told me what was going on,” I said, a little irritated she’d told Greyson before she’d told me.

“I’m sorry—” she started, but I shook my head.

“You don’t have to apologize. I’ll do my best to cover for you. But”—I gestured back to the table—“first we’d better rescue Lola.”

As we threaded our way back to the table, I whispered, “You should pretend you have a phone call and take it outside to answer it.”

“That sounds simple enough,” she agreed. She smiled up at me. “Thanks for being so understanding about this, Xavier.”

When we got back to the cocktail table, I was relieved to see both of Lola’s dads chuckling at something. Things had clearly improved since I’d left. Jay had his arm around Lola, who was only half smiling, but it wasn’t a grimace, so it was a big step up.

As I took my place, I felt more relaxed, and I was about to nudge Cali to do the phone call bit when a waitress interrupted me.

“Excuse me, your order is ready,” she said, looking right at me.

“My order?” I repeated. What order was she talking about? I hadn’t ordered anything. We weren’t even at our dinner table yet. I was about to tell her so when I looked into her eyes.

Wait. Was that *Vander*?

It was, I could tell by the eyes, and they gave me a pointed look. “Your *order*, sir? We should *really* talk about your order.”

I sensed the urgency in Vander’s voice and nodded, grabbing Cali’s hand. “Will you excuse us? We have to go take care of something,” I said, addressing the table. “My… order is ready.”

As we followed Vander away, I heard Tom call after us: “What the pizasta is going on?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, glancing back, “we’ll be right back.”

“Xavier?” Cali murmured, but stopped when she glanced at the waitress. “Vander? What are you doing here?”

Vander tipped their head toward the open door, and we followed them out.

“What’s going on?” I asked, once we were outside.

“I know you did something to return the balance after Seluna’s death,” Vander said, looking between us.

“Yeah—” Cali started, but Vander interrupted her.

“Well, whatever it is you did, it didn’t work.”

# Episode 2839

Vander’s words shook me to my core.

“What do you mean?” I managed. “No, no, that can’t be right. It can’t be. We took care of the balance, exactly like you told us to. We sent the ashes back to the demon world. Xavier shaved three years off his life to send those ashes back!”

I was starting to sound hysterical, but I didn’t care. I *felt* hysterical. It didn’t help the scare I’d recently had in the restroom. What the hell was Vander telling us here?

They shook their head. “Whatever you think you did—the fact remains that it didn’t work.”

“What does that mean?” I demanded. “What didn’t work?”

“*It!* The world remains unbalanced, and until it’s set right—set right for real—things are going to get worse for all of us,” Vander said, looking grave.

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” Xavier said, looking furious. “That fucking Courier! I knew we were idiots to trust him.”

“So what are we supposed to do about it now?” I asked Vander. “We don’t have the ashes anymore. We gave them to the Courier.”

“Well, I suggest you find out what happened to them, then,” Vander said darkly. “Because this isn’t going to end until you actually return them.”

Xavier pushed his hair away from his face and looked up at the sky, apparently looking for the strength to hold in his fury.

“Okay, okay,” I said quickly, not wanting to see my mate explode. “So we need to get the ashes back. Fine. We just have to figure out how. Which seems… not easy. Can you help us get them, Vander? Do some magic or something to help us find them?”

But they didn’t answer my question, because before I could even finish my sentence, Vander had disappeared, leaving in a poof of air.

I stared at the spot where they’d been standing. “What the hell just happened?” I muttered, feeling completely frustrated and totally terrified. A terrible thought occurred to me, and I looked over at Xavier. “Vander said things will get worse.”

“I heard,” he muttered.

“No, Xavier, think about it. The Seluna I saw in the bathroom—maybe I didn’t imagine it after all. Maybe that was real. Could that be? Am I going to be haunted by Seluna all over again?”

Fear was rising in me, and I could feel tears welling in my eyes. I could sense the bitter taste of panic at the back of my throat. I couldn’t deal with that, not again. Before, when I’d been haunted by Seluna, I hadn’t been able to sleep, to eat, to think. It had nearly consumed me.

Sensing my rising anxiety, Xavier pulled me into a tight hug. “Cali, stop. Come on. You know I’m not going to let that happen. I made a deal with that damn Courier, and I’m going to find him and demand an explanation for this. But listen, there’s not much we can do right now.” He sighed. “I think we have to go back to the dinner and just pretend this didn’t happen. Which sounds crazy, but it’s either that or Lola murders us both. Do you think you can go back in there?”

I nodded, though I was hesitant. “But which dinner?” I gestured across the street. “Greyson, Torin, and Kevin are waiting for me. Along with a pot of fondue.”

He sighed again. “I forgot about that. Hearing bad news about demon ashes will do that to you. Go to Greyson. I’ll cover for you. But don’t take too long,” he added. “They’re bound to get suspicious, and I don’t want to be grilled by *both* sets of parents. This night is already hard enough.”

I smiled up at him. “Thank you. I promise I’ll be back soon. I won’t leave you for too long.”

I gave his hand a squeeze and hurried across the street. Glancing down at my shoes, I wished I could swap them out for the sneakers I’d brought. These shoes were *not* made for running.

Bursting into the fondue restaurant, I tried to catch my breath as I wove through tables toward Greyson and the boys. I got there just as the food arrived, and Greyson leaned over to me.

“Is everything okay across the street?” he asked quietly.

My heart was still racing, and I was starting to feel dizzy with the effort of not wheezing, so I took a moment to collect myself—and to formulate an answer to Greyson’s question.

Things across the street were definitely *not* okay, but that had less to do with Lola’s big lie and more to do with Vander’s sudden appearance. *And* dire warning.

I looked up at Kevin, who seemed to be enthusiastically talking about the many benefits of meditation.

“—I mean, you can actually *feel* your heart rate slow down! It’s just amazing! We have so much more control over our bodies than we think we do; we’re just underestimating it all the time! I fully believe that regular meditation has been the key to my complete spiritual rejuvenation.”

“Wow,” Torin said, looking deeply impressed.

Greyson slipped his hand over mine and gave it a squeeze. “What’s going on?” he asked, speaking quietly so only I could hear him.

I looked down at my plate. “I think something might have happened with the Courier.”

Greyson stiffened. “What?” he hissed.

“*Shh*,” I said. “Vander just showed up. They warned Xavier and me, but we can talk about it later. Back at the pack house.”

“Did Greyson tell you his fortune?” Kevin asked, looking over at me.

I forced myself to smile. “No. What is it?”

“Greyson has some unfinished business,” Torin said excitedly.

“*What?*” I asked, alarmed. “Unfinished business? What does that mean?”

“I wouldn’t read too much into it,” Greyson warned.

He might have been right, but I couldn’t stop myself from thinking about what Vander had just told us. And how Seluna’s ashes remined *unfinished business*.

I looked at Kevin as he chatted animatedly with Torin. Was he really a psychic?

I picked at my food and tried gamely to engage in the conversation, but it was hard when I didn’t feel as strongly about sound baths as Kevin seemed to. In fact—after the disaster of the one I’d tried—I never wanted to try one again.

The fondue was probably good—Kevin and Torin seemed to be enjoying it—but I could only pick at my food. Every bite I ate sat in my stomach like a rock. I kept thinking about the ashes, the Courier, Seluna’s rotting face behind me in the mirror, and Kevin’s fortune telling. My thoughts swirled around me like a tornado, so much that when Greyson touched my arm, I nearly jumped.

“What?” I asked, looking over at him.

“Whatever Vander was trying to warn you about, we can deal with it later I’m sure. Try to relax and enjoy tonight.” He smiled. “The fondue is actually pretty good.”

I tried to smile back, but my phone buzzed, distracting me. I looked down to see a text from Xavier.

*You coming back???*

I groaned. How the heck was I going to do this? “I have to get back to Xavier,” I said, leaning toward Greyson.

“Go ahead. I’ve got this.” He started to frantically search his pockets.

Torin looked over. “What’s wrong, Greyson?”  
 “I think I must have left my wallet in the car,” he said. Then he nudged me gently.

“Oh,” I said quickly, catching on, “I’ll go grab it. I don’t want your fondue to get cold.”

Kevin looked baffled. “It can’t get cold. It’s heated by a flame. That’s the beauty of fondue…”

“Thank you,” I whispered to Greyson. Then I slipped out of my seat before Kevin could come up with any more fondue-related observations.

I tried to run across the street, but my feet were really starting to complain inside my shoes, so I settled for a fast trot. I even thought about taking a quick detour to Kevin’s car for my sneakers, but then how was I going to explain to either the parents or Torin and Kevin that I’d stopped to change my shoes?

No. My feet were killing me, but it wasn’t worth the trouble.

I paused outside the restaurant, trying to catch my breath again. If I was going to keep this up, I really needed to consider working on my cardio endurance. My stomach was still in knots, but I remembered that both my mates knew about Vander’s warning and had promised to deal with it. I was going to take their word for it—and anyway, I had to stay focused on Lola. I didn’t want to give her any reason to accuse me of not being there for her. Though, when this was all over, that girl was going to owe me. She was going to owe me *big time*.

But when I opened the door to the restaurant and charged in, I stopped in surprise.

Lola’s dads were gone!

# Episode 2840

I was already doing my best not to panic about the whole Vander and Courier issue, and now Lola’s dads were missing. Had they left after finding out that Lola wasn’t in school? Was it possible something else had gone down since I’d stepped away? How much more could possibly happen? I supposed that, given how mad they’d been when they’d found out about the school thing, it wasn’t hard to picture them storming out in anger.

I hurried over to the bigger table everyone was now sitting around. “Hey, is everything okay?” I asked Lola.

“I was actually wondering the same thing,” Xavier muttered. He nodded toward the street.

I nodded but turned back to Lola. “What happened to your dads? Did they leave?”  
 “No, Cali,” my mom said. “Danny spilled some sauce on his shirt, and he and Daniel went to the bathroom to clean it up.”

“It was a pizaster!” my dad crowed, looking pleased with himself. When no one else laughed, he tried to explain. “You know! A pizza *and* pasta disaster!”

“God, Dad,” I groaned. Then I turned back to Lola. “How are you doing?”

“Oh, other than admitting I haven’t been going to school and being certain that they hate me? Yeah, I’m great, thanks for asking,” she said, biting off her words.

“Come on, Lola,” I said. “They didn’t seem to have a horrible reaction before. I saw them.”

“No,” she admitted. “They didn’t yell or anything. They just went… quiet.”

“Quiet?” I asked.

She nodded. “I know. Quiet isn’t like them at all. And then there was the sauce incident, and Dad was just *sprinting* to help Pops with a tiny spot on his shirt. I’m sure it was just an excuse to get some alone time to talk about how they don’t love me anymore,” Lola said, looking wretched.

“Lola, you’re completely overreacting here,” Jay said gently. “You know your dads love you, and I think they’re taking it pretty well, all things considered.”

“I agree with Jay,” I said stoutly. “You shouldn’t go so dark with things, girl. They love you. They probably just need some time.”

As I slid into my seat, Xavier leaned close.

“How are things going at dinner number two?” he asked.

I thought about Kevin’s ominous fortune reading. “They don’t seem to suspect anything yet, but I don’t know how much longer I can do this.”

“Oh, here they are,” my mom said, looking up at Lola’s dads. “Did that spot come out?”

“Good enough for now,” Danny said, sporting a wet but clean spot on his shirt.

He and Daniel took their seats and, as I reached for my drink, Daniel leaned back and crossed his arms, giving Lola a long look.

“We understand that you lied about going to school, Lola. We’re sad about it, but not mad. But what we don’t fully get yet is… why? Why lie? Why couldn’t you have talked to us?”

I could see the panic flash across Lola’s face. I wished I could jump in, say something, try to explain all the circumstances that had led to her decision, but *how* could I do that without revealing that Lola was a werewolf-vampire hybrid? That she was living with a pack of werewolves, mated to a werewolf, and best friends with a half-Fae?

While that explanation would certainly explain *why* Lola was too overwhelmed to go to school, it might not be the best approach to the situation.

Lola looked down at her plate. “I just felt overwhelmed,” she said. “I was stressed out about going to college, and I just felt so uncertain. I didn’t even know what I wanted to do.”

Danny took her hand gently. “You could have told us that, Lola-bean.”

She shrugged. “Maybe, but you were pressuring me to enroll in school, and I didn’t want to disappoint you. I never do.”

Daniel took her other hand. “We love you, sweetheart. And you couldn’t disappoint us. We’re only disappointed in ourselves. Clearly you felt like you couldn’t be honest with your Pops and me, and that’s on us.” He took a deep breath. “I will admit that maybe—just maybe—I tend to overreact a bit.”

“I’m still sorry,” Lola said, sniffing. “I shouldn’t have lied to you, no matter what. You taught me better than that.”

As I watched the scene unfold, my throat felt tight. I wasn’t surprised to see how understanding Lola’s dads were being. That was what we’d all thought would happen—except Lola. Her dads loved her unconditionally.

I knew my parents loved me in that exact same way. But I was also a little worried, because as nice as it was to see this scene, I knew Lola was *still* lying. Or at least covering up the truth.

But there was no way for her to be fully honest and reveal who she really was. At least not yet. I remembered when I’d learned that Lola was a werewolf—I hadn’t taken it all that well. For Lola’s sake, though, I really hoped she’d one day be in a position to be able to tell them.

“Maybe this is just what you need,” Danny said, smiling. “A gap year.”

“What’s that?” Lola asked, looking wary.

“Just what it sounds like,” he said. “You take a year off from school and spent some time figuring out what it is that you want to do. What would make you happy. Though you shouldn’t make it any longer than a year. If you wait too long, the college window starts to shut, and your dad and I both want you to benefit from a college experience, and a degree.”

“Hello all,” the waiter said, appearing at our table.

I was relieved to see it wasn’t Vander. They were a great nature god, or whatever they were, but they just seemed like the type to get orders mixed up.

“There’s that, for when you’re ready.” He placed the check on the table, and both Daniel and my dad reached for it.

“Oh, let me, Tom,” Daniel said, tugging his end of the check.

“No, Daniel, I wouldn’t dream of it,” my dad said. “You and Danny came all the way out here. Let Orla and me get it.”

“Now Tom, I wouldn’t think of it. You two have already been so gracious. And it’s a pleasure coming out here. So many… trees.”

As they went on and on, I started to wonder why parents always seemed to do this. No one could ever agree on who was supposed to fork over the money for food. Some of my earliest memories were listening to my parents arguing in restaurants with friends about who was going to pay.

Xavier must have been growing tired of the argument as well because he reached over and, with his werewolf speed, snatched the check from both of their surprised hands.

“My treat,” he said shortly.

“Oh, Xavier, no!” my dad exclaimed.

“Xavier, that’s too much—” Daniel started.

But Xavier was shaking his head. “No, Tom’s right. You and Danny came all this way. It’s the least I can do,” he said as he slipped his credit card into the folder and handed it back to the waiter.

With the check finally settled, Danny turned to me. “So, Cali, tell me—what have you been doing on your sabbatical?”

I stared at him for a moment, trying to keep my face normal as I did some fast thinking. It wasn’t like I could tell the truth—that I’d been spending my time fighting alongside werewolves, sending demons back to their evil realm, and figuring out my Fae powers.

“Oh, you know,” I said, clearing my throat nervously, “this and that. I’m taking a bit of a gap year myself. Doing a little soul searching and all that stuff. Trying to get in tune with what I want to be doing with my life.”

Daniel raised his eyebrows as he took a sip of his martini. “When I was in school,” he said, setting his glass back down on the table, “that wasn’t called a gap year. That was called dropping out.”

“Daniel,” Danny quietly chided him. “I thought we talked about having an open mind.”

The waiter handed Xavier back the check, and he scribbled his name. “Give yourself whatever tip you want,” he muttered to the astonished waiter, and then got to his feet.

Everyone else stood as well, gathering coats and taking last gulps of their drinks.

I could see the relief on Lola’s face as she stood. The worst possible thing had happened—her dads had found out the truth—and the world hadn’t exploded. And I was sure she was glad she could stop making up stories about nonexistent classes and pretending that she lived in a share house.

When we stepped outside, everyone stopped to slip on their coats.

“Greyson?” my mom said, surprised.

Everyone looked up as Greyson, Torin, and Kevin stepped out of the fondue restaurant across the narrow street.

Lola spoke up first, her voice incredulous. “Greyson? Torin? What are you doing here?”

# Episode 2841

**Greyson**

When I heard my name, I looked across the street to see Cali, Xavier, Lola, Jay, Cali’s parents, and Lola’s dads all staring at me, baffled looks on their faces.

Shit. This was worse than I’d thought it was going to be. I’d tried to warn Cali that fondue was wrapping up, but she hadn’t responded to my texts. Hers was the only face that didn’t look confused. She just looked anxious.

“That’s funny,” Lola said, waving at me. “Greyson! It’s so funny that you’re having dinner right across the street. We were just in here.” She pointed back to the restaurant. “What are the odds?”

I forced a laugh and tried to look surprised too. I didn’t want to expose Cali’s duplicity. Even though I wanted to get the hell out of there, I forced myself to walk across the street. Torin and Kevin followed.

“Everyone, this is Kevin,” Torin said proudly.

Everyone said hello, and as Kevin was introduced to everyone individually, Xavier stepped toward me.

“That was close,” he said quietly.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “What’s the deal with Vander? Cali told me about their warning. Damn Courier.”

“I know,” Xavier growled.

“If Vander says the balance is still off, I guess we have to figure out what’s going wrong.”

Xaiver looked thunderous. “That’s easy enough to figure out. The Courier fucked me over.”

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. “I know it looks that way, but I don’t think we should assume anything right now.”

“And why the hell not?” Xavier snapped.

“We both know that when it comes to demons and magic and the supernatural world, there are millions of things that could go wrong.”

“Did you find Greyson’s wallet?” Kevin asked suddenly, turning to Cali.

Cali stared at him blankly. “What?”

“Greyson’s wallet,” Keven repeated, looking confused. “You went out to—”

“You know what,” I said loudly, speaking over Kevin. “It turned out I had it the whole time. It was just in my other pocket.”

*Thank you*, Cali mouthed at me as everyone started toward the cars.

I stepped toward her. “I don’t really know how, but you managed to do it. You defied physics and were in two places at the same time.”

Cali smiled up at me. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

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I got back to the pack house faster than the other group, and I hung around, waiting for Xavier to get back after he’d dropped off Lola, her dads, and Cali at the lake house.

Everyone was hanging around the living room, so I dropped onto the couch next to Rishika.

“How are things looking around here?” I asked.

“Good,” she said, flipping her phone over on the arm of the couch. “No problems. Nothing from LIPS or the Vanguards. We’ve been keeping our patrols going, but everything is quiet.”

That was good. A couple less things for me to worry about.

But my biggest worry was still out there, and when Xavier walked into the house with Jay, I got to my feet and headed toward him.

“So?” Xavier said, striding into the small office near the front door. “What the hell are we going to do about Seluna? We can’t go through this again. Did Cali tell you about what happened in the bathroom, in the mirror?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked him, baffled.

“She was in the bathroom at the restaurant by herself, and she looked up and saw Seluna standing behind her.”

As Xavier went on, a question occurred to me. Why hadn’t Cali told me about this? She’d told me about Vander’s visit, so why had she left this part out? Was she afraid she was going to worry me?

Either way, I wasn’t happy to hear this news. It meant that the possibility of Cali being haunted by Seluna was back, and I knew neither Xavier nor I wanted to go through that again.

“We should go back to the lake house,” I said decisively. “We should talk to Cali. See if there’s anything we can do for her that would be useful.”

“Yeah, all right. But I also want to have a very serious talk with Okorie about his pal the Courier. I want to know what the fuck happened. And, at the very least, I want those three years of my damn life back,” Xavier finished, looking furious.

I pulled my keys out of my pocket. “We should drive. With LIPS still around, shifting should be reserved for emergency purposes only.”

“Fine,” Xavier said, and followed me outside.

I was surprised that he hadn’t objected to me driving, but I kept my mouth shut.

“I asked Cali if it was possible that she’d just imagined seeing Seluna,” Xavier said, a few miles later.

“Do you think that’s what happened?” I asked, interested.

He shrugged. “Cali said she wasn’t sure, but she was so stressed about this thing tonight, and everything with Lola and her dads. She’s just been trying to please everyone.”

I took this in for a moment. “I guess it’s possible, but with this message from Vander, I think we just need to play it safe and look at all possibilities. We have to find out for sure. Vander wouldn’t just show up for no reason. If they came, it means something went wrong. And if it did, then we have to make it right. For Cali’s sake.”

Xavier didn’t say anything, but I knew he felt the same way.

When we got to the lake house, I saw Cali right away. She was outside, bundled in her coat, looking out at the lake.

I shot a look at my brother as we climbed out of the car. I couldn’t help but wish he was anyone else. If not for the seriousness and urgency of the situation, I would have gladly found a reason to get rid of him, but I could see the look on his face, and I knew he was just as anxious to see Cali as I was.

Cali gave a weary smile when she saw us walking toward her. “Hi,” she said. “Listen, I wanted to apologize again for putting you both through one very awkward night.”

“It’s fine, love, but you should have just told us what was going on from the beginning,” I said.

“A heads-up about the situation would have given us time to prepare,” Xavier said.

“But that’s not what we came to talk about,” I pointed out. “Now that you’ve had some time to think about it, do you really think you saw Seluna at the restaurant?”

Cali sighed, and I could see she looked tired. “I’ve been thinking about it since it happened, and I wish I could give you a more solid answer, but I just don’t know. I can tell you that it *felt* as real as any of the other times.”

I could see the worry on her face, and I started to step toward her, but Xavier was closer and beat me to it. I watched as he put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close.

“Try not to worry about it,” he said quietly. “Greyson and I will get to the bottom of whatever this is.”

“What do we *do*, though?” Cali asked, sounding miserable.

“The first thing we’re going to do is talk to Okorie, and see if he can put us in touch with the Courier. We need to find out what the hell went wrong,” I said.

“He left, man,” Xavier said.

“What?” I demanded.

“Okorie’s gone for the night.”

“I think he’ll be back in the morning to mentor Marta and Dani,” Cali said.

Xavier shook his head. “I still don’t think we should wait. We need to get him now.”

I thought about this for a moment. “Do we even know how to get in touch with him?”

Cali and Xavier were quiet for a moment.

“I don’t have his number,” Cali admitted.

“He’s always just *around*,” Xavier grumbled. “I don’t even know where he’s staying. Maybe we should go back to the pack house and get one of the witches to summon him. Or call him. Or whatever witches do when they need to talk to each other.”

I glanced over at Cali. She was leaning against Xavier, and I realized he was practically holding her up. She looked exhausted.

“You should get to bed,” I said, though I wished like hell I could go with her. To comfort her, if nothing else.

But we had witches to contact, so we headed back to the car. Cali insisted on walking us.

“When we get back to the pack house, we’ll find Big Mac. She basically knows everything. Maybe she knows how to get hold of Okorie,” I said, unlocking the car.

Xavier still looked troubled, but he nodded. “Hang on,” he said, stopping before he got into the car. “Have we thought about what happens if this doesn’t work?”

“If what doesn’t work?” Cali asked.

“What happens if we can’t get the ashes back?”

# Episode 2842

My eyes went wide at Xaiver’s words. “But Vander told us the only way to solve this problem with Seluna is to return the ashes. And if we can’t do that…” I shuddered, my whole body growing ice-cold. “Does that mean I’m going to be haunted by Seluna for the rest of my life?”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, love,” Greyson said reasonably. “We don’t know enough to make those kinds of assumptions. We don’t know what happened to the Courier, or to the ashes. We don’t even know if that Seluna you saw was real or not.”

“Yeah, no, I agree. I was just… wondering,” Xavier said. He shook his head. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Greyson was right about how little we knew—the problem was, admitting that didn’t make me feel any better.

“Not finding the ashes could be a *very* real problem,” I pointed out.

“And we told you we’d deal with it,” Greyson said firmly. His voice was decided and unwavering. It was so determined, I kept my mouth shut, keeping the rest of my worries to myself, and hoped like hell he was right.

He sighed. “Is there anything else I should know about anything going on?”

Xavier cleared his throat. “There is one thing. Knox.”

“Oh no, what now?” Greyson asked.

When Xavier had filled him in, Greyson shook his head. “Terrific. Is this idiot going to become a bigger problem?”

Xavier looked irritated. “If he is, it’s not *your* problem.”

Greyson gave him a long look. “I disagree. If Knox does become the Alpha of the Samara pack, he’s absolutely going to be *my* problem.”

Xavier snorted. “That’s not going to happen.”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “And why not?”

“There’s no way Knox is going to pass the Iudicium,” Xavier said decisively. “Absolutely no fucking way.”

“The ew-what? What is that?” I asked, baffled, looking between the brothers.

Xavier looked over at me. “The Iudicium is like a test, to prove Knox’s Alpha-ness.”

“Okay, but what if he does pass it?” Greyson pressed.

“Even if he does, I really doubt he’ll be able to get enough support from the existing Samara pack members to make it happen.”

Greyson thought this over. “Okay. Well, I want you to keep an eye on it. Maybe having Ava close will be helpful.”

I gritted my teeth. I hated to hear Ava’s name in this or any context.

Xavier must have felt the same, because he bristled. “There’s no reason why having Ava close would be helpful.”

I frowned. “How can you say that? What about your shifting problems?”  
 Xavier grinned at me. “It’s no longer a problem. I can shift without a hitch. I don’t need Ava anymore.”

I breathed a huge sigh of relief. Finally, Ava would have no more excuses to hang around the pack.

But Greyson looked concerned. “I’m surprised to hear you say that, Xavier. I think we might want to maintain a good relationship with Ava. At least until the Knox thing is settled.”

Xavier shrugged. “We’ll see.” Then he looked at me. “You should get to bed, Cali.”

“Yeah,” Greyson agreed. “There’s nothing more we can do tonight. If we can wake Big Mac up and find out anything useful, we’ll let you know.”

There was an awkward moment where each of them stepped forward to give me a goodnight kiss. But then they looked at each other, each realized what the other was trying to do, and got into the car in silence. Awkward really didn’t even scratch the surface.

I watched the car until the taillights had disappeared, then headed inside. The house was quiet, and I’d just started to think of throwing myself down on my bed when I caught sight of a figure in the kitchen.

It was Lola, and she was sitting alone, staring out the dark window.

“Hey, what are you doing up?” I asked.

Lola looked over. “Oh, just thinking. My dads just told me they got back to the hotel.” She paused. “Listen, I’m sorry for putting you through all of this tonight. I should have listened to you before and just told them the truth—or at least as much truth as I could get away with.”

“I know you were in a tough situation,” I said soothingly. “And in the end, it all worked out.”  
 Lola nodded, then laughed. “I can’t believe how good Jacs is with my dads.”

“Me neither.” I was quiet for a moment. “Do you know if Jacs is going to stick with the pack? It must be hard for her to be the only true vampire around here. Not that you’re *not* a vampire,” I said quickly.

But Lola wasn’t offended. “No, I get it. I don’t know, even with her enormous attitude, I kind of like having her around.”

“Yeah, I kind of do too,” I admitted. “She’s prickly, but fun.”

Lola yawned. “I’m exhausted. Despite all the supernatural strength I’ve got coursing through me, I feel very much like an ordinary human tonight.”

“Good night,” I said, as she got to her feet. Then, “Lola?”

“Yeah?” she asked, turning.

I had just thought of going into my room all alone, and I realized I didn’t want to be by myself tonight. Not after Seluna had reappeared. I kept seeing the image of her rotting face every time I shut my eyes.

“Would you mind if I stayed with you tonight?” I asked.

Lola smiled. “Of course not. And since Jay isn’t here, we don’t have to worry about him snoring.”

I laughed and got to my feet, following her upstairs. Even though it was a bit silly that she and Jay weren’t staying together for Lola’s dads’ benefit (even when they weren’t staying here), it was working in my favor tonight. By the time we were both ready for bed, I could barely keep my eyes open.

Lola laughed. “This reminds me of second semester sophomore year of college. How we’d pass out halfway through all those attempts to pull an all-nighter. We’d get all jazzed about the idea—we’d drink a ton of coffee, stay up all night, and ace our tests. How many times did that work out?”

I laughed, remembering. “Yeah, not many. It was basically useless. No matter how much I tried not to, I always fell asleep.”

“Me too.” Lola sighed. “I can’t believe I finally told my dads about not going to college anymore. It’s such a relief that they know. No more lies. Well, no more lies about school, anyway. And I still can’t believe they were okay with idea of me taking a gap year. Well, that was mostly Pops, but still.”

“Yeah, but they did kind of make it clear that they expect you to return to school after this year,” I pointed out, trying to be delicate.

“I know,” Lola said, unbothered, “but that’s not until next fall. Who knows what might come up before then? Maybe I’ll need another gap year.”

I looked at my friend. “Are you planning on ever going back to school?”

Lola sighed. “I’d rather not, to be honest. I don’t like studying, and I’ve never been in a class I didn’t think was boring as hell. I can teach myself most of that stuff anyway. Didn’t you think school was boring?”

“No, I didn’t. Parts of it weren’t fun, I guess, but it wasn’t all bad. Besides, don’t you want to *do* something?”

She looked at me, baffled. “What are you talking about? Aren’t we doing enough already? It’s not easy being a werewolf-vampire hybrid.”

“I get that,” I said, my eyelids getting heavy. “But what about once you have that all figured out? What then? When we were kids, you told me you wanted to be a professional wrestler.”

She laughed. “I was pretty into the idea when I was a kid, but even if I was still into it—which I’m not—it’s not like there’s a college degree in throwing someone out of the ring.”

“Yeah. But what about becoming a designer?” I asked, yawning. “You’ve always liked fashion.”

Lola’s face lit up. “That’s right! I *did* think about that! And I think I’d be good at it.”

“You can get a degree in fashion design. You have to study fabrics, chart trends, the history of fashion, stuff like that. Maybe you could design an app that would help people organize new fashion trends and stuff.”

Lola shrugged, “Maybe. I’ll think about it. What about you?”

“What about me?” I asked sleepily.

“What do you want to do?” she asked.

“Oh… I’m not sure,” I admitted. “The only thing I know is that I don’t want to spend the rest of my life just as someone’s mate.”

Maybe it was the sleepiness that was making me more candid, but as I spoke, I realized I meant what I said. I loved Xavier and Greyson, but I knew I also wanted to *do* something. All this talk about school and the future made me wonder about my own life and my own direction.

I’d liked school—parts of it, at least. Maybe I *should* go back. My life had been so busy lately, but maybe there was room in it for more than werewolves and Fae magic?

# Episode 2843

**Xavier**

By the time Greyson and I got back to the pack house, it was late, and I was definitely feeling the full weight of the day. But I knew our day wasn’t over; we still needed to talk to Big Mac.

We headed upstairs, and Greyson knocked softly. The door opened to reveal Big Mac, wearing a pair of plaid flannel pajamas and a very annoyed expression.

“Oh, it’s you two,” she grunted. “I’m just about to go to bed. What is it now?”

“Can you get in touch with Okorie for us?” Greyson asked.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Okorie? Why do you need to talk to him?”

“We just do,” I said shortly.

“He’ll be here in the morning if you miss him so much. He’ll arrive from his pretentious Airbnb with his espresso to-go, and you can chat then.”

She started to close the door, but I reached out and held it open.

“No, we need to talk to him now.”

Big Mac glared at me. “All I can do is send him a message. I can’t summon him. He’s not like that Siri character on my phone.”

“Fine,” Greyson conceded. “Send him a message then. But tell him that it’s urgent.”

Big Mac grunted again and shut the door.

Greyson looked over at me. In the dim light of the hallway I could see that he looked exhausted. I probably did too. “We might as well call it a night, too. There’s nothing either of us can do until Okorie comes.”

“I guess,” I agreed, but as I headed to my room, I felt dissatisfied. I had wanted to resolve this, and I had really hoped Big Mac would be able to do more. It was frustrating as hell to know what the problem was, but be unable to solve it. I hated just sitting around.

I threw on a pair of sweats and a clean T-shirt and dropped onto my bed. I could tell that—despite my exhaustion—it was going to be a rough night. My mind was spinning, and I had a feeling it was going to be hard to turn that off. I looked over to the empty side of my bed and wished Cali were filling it. I knew I would definitely sleep better with her by my side. I always did.

If it wasn’t for LIPS, I wouldn’t have minded shifting and heading out for a run. That would probably have helped clear my mind, and it was one of my favorite methods of destressing. But with those nosy humans stomping around the woods, shifting wasn’t an option.

I flipped over onto my stomach. Then, uncomfortable, I turned onto my back. I stared up at the ceiling, wide awake, and knew it was useless. Whenever I closed my eyes, I thought about Cali. I was worried about her tonight, and I wondered if she was having more Seluna dreams. Those were so hard on her. If she was with me, I could help her, but Cali wasn’t with me. She was miles away at the lake house.

Groaning, I sat up. This wasn’t working.

I got to my feet and headed downstairs. Maybe a snack would help me relax a little. Dinner felt like a long time ago, and peanut butter always helped settle my stomach. But when I got downstairs, I heard voices coming from the kitchen.

The rest of the house was quiet, and I wondered who was still awake, but as I stepped toward the door, I could see it was Torin and Kevin—his date from the fondue restaurant.

And they’d stopped speaking. Now they were making out. Big time.

As I watched, Torin swept his arm along the countertop, sending a shower of cups and cereal bowls careening to the floor. Then Kevin lifted and set him on the countertop.

Turning on my heel, I strode quickly away. Torin didn’t need an audience for this portion of his date. I headed back upstairs, laughing. Torin had some game—good for the Fae. I could wait until breakfast to eat. When I made it back to my room and dropped down on the bed again, I closed my eyes and willed morning to come soon.

When I opened my eyes, the weak winter sun was peeking through the blinds. I had no idea when I’d actually fallen asleep. It felt like it had taken forever, because every time I was *almost* asleep, images of the Courier popped into my head and startled me awake.

But morning *had* come, and I rolled over with a groan. I got up and headed downstairs, coffee on my mind.

I tried to wipe the weariness from my eyes when I walked into the kitchen, but I was sure it still showed on my face.

“Morning.”

I looked over at Greyson, who was standing at the counter. “Morning.”

“Coffee’s on,” Greyson added.

I looked over at the pot, seeing that it was almost full. I searched through the cupboard for a clean cup—carefully avoiding looking at the rest of the counter.

“You look like you slept as badly as I did,” Greyson noted, his voice a tired rasp.

I grunted a yes. “Has there been any news with Okorie?”

Greyson grunted a no.

I ran a hand through my sleep-rumpled hair. “Well, for his sake, that warlock had better show up today.”

I had just poured myself a cup of coffee and was searching the fridge for the creamer when I heard the front door slam.

I looked over at Greyson, who had heard it, too.

Together we hurried toward the door to see Okorie taking off his jacket and hanging it in the closet. Sure enough, he had a tiny to-go cup of espresso.

“Hey,” I snapped, glaring at him.

“Hey,” Okorie returned, his voice casual. He started to move past us, but I stepped in front of him, stopping him.

“*Hey*,” I said again, my voice like flint.

“Good morning, Xavier. Would you mind?”

I stared at the guy. “Didn’t you get our message?” I demanded.

He shrugged. “Yeah, I got it. I’m here, aren’t I? Now, where’s breakfast?”

He started walking past me again, but I got in his way again.

“Not so fast. What’s the deal with the Courier?”

Okorie rolled his eyes, looking annoyed. “God, we’re not going to go through this again, are we? I’ve told you—you already made the deal. Whether you regret it or not, there’s nothing more to be done.”

“I’m going to have to disagree with you there,” I said.

“Why?” Okorie asked.

“Because I think the Courier fucked us over,” I said, my anger rising.

Okorie paused. “Why would you think that?”

“Because we got a visitor last night who told us that the ashes never arrived in the demon world,” Greyson said.

This seemed to surprise Okorie. “Really?”

“Yeah, really,” I said coldly.

He thought about that for a moment. “Well, that is kind of unusual, but it’s not really my problem.”

“What does *that* mean?” I demanded.

He held up his hands. “Listen, Xavier, I’m not responsible for deliveries. I only recommended the Courier. That’s as far as my input into this little project of yours extends.”

I gritted my teeth. Good sense told me it would be problematic to rip Okorie’s smug head off, and a pain to clean up, so I fought back the impulse. “Seluna paid Cali a little visit last night. A rotting, decaying version of our old demonic friend. And without those ashes in the demon world where they belong, she’ll probably visit Cali again. And I’m not about to let that happen.”

Okorie looked between Greyson and me. “Okay. And what exactly do you expect me to do about it?”

“You brought the Courier here once before,” I pointed out.

“Yeah?”

“So bring him back,” I said, annoyed that I had to explain something so obvious. “We have a few questions for him.”

Okorie heaved a gusty sign. “Fine. But all I can do is request that he comes. I can’t make him. I don’t have any power over him. It’s not like ordering a pizza.”

“Fine, whatever,” Greyson said quickly. “Request away. Maybe you should start now.”

“Well, I was kind of hoping for some food first—” Okorie started. “But fine. I’ll start trying to get in touch with him.”

My hands curled into fists. I was trying not to get too tough with the warlock—we did need him, after all—but his casual attitude about this was really starting to piss me off. Couldn’t he just do a simple request?

“Are you going to get him or not?” I demanded.

Okorie stood still for a moment, cocking his head like he was listening to something. When he looked at me, he was shaking his head. “No, there’s no reason to.”

Fury bubbled up inside me. “Okorie, I swear to you, I will mess up that pretty face of yours so bad—”

“Because he’s already here.”

# Episode 2844

**Greyson**

What the hell was Okorie talking about? The Courier was already here? Where? I was starting to get really fed up with Okorie’s attitude and his bullshit, and I’d just opened my mouth to tell him so when I heard the low rumble of a motorcycle.

Xavier shot me a look. Wait. Was it possible the Courier *was* at our house?

Xavier and I headed to the door just in time to see a dark motorcycle pull up outside.

I glanced back at Okorie, who was looking pretty pleased with himself. Okay, the smug bastard hadn’t been wrong, but he sure as hell could have been a lot more cooperative.

As the Courier dismounted his bike and pulled off his helmet, Xavier was already down the stairs, shouting furiously.

“What the hell kind of crap are you trying to pull?” he demanded, getting right up in the Courier’s ever-changing face.

I didn’t know much about the Courier, but instinct told me that we needed him right now, so I jumped down the steps and pulled Xavier back. He was mad as hell, but the last thing we needed was to get into a scuffle with the only link we had to the ashes. On top of that, the Courier was a supernatural entity—and one that we knew basically nothing about. Ashes aside, who knew what kind of powers he might turn against us?

Not that any of that meant I wanted to let the guy off the hook. Not after what he’d done—or hadn’t done.

“Where the fuck are the demon’s ashes?” Xavier demanded.

“I don’t know,” the Courier said mildly, setting his helmet on top of his bike.

I frowned at him. “What does that mean? How could you not know? We saw you drive off with them.” There was a part of me—a big part—that wanted to release my grip on Xavier and rip this asshole’s throat out myself.

“I don’t know where they are.” He shrugged. “I honestly don’t. I was robbed.”

Xavier stopped fighting me, and we exchanged a worried look.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean I was robbed,” the Courier said, in his weirdly even tone. “Somebody stole the bag you gave me.”

I stared at the guy, trying to decide if I thought he was lying. But why would he lie about this? What could he have to gain?’

“I was coming here to tell you about it,” he went on, glancing up at the wintery morning sky. “And I wanted to ask if you had any idea who might have stolen the bag.”

“What are you talking about?” Xavier asked, looking baffled. “You don’t know?”

The Courier shrugged. “You know how these things are. My service isn’t the kind where you can go to the authorities for help. Not everyone understands what I do. So when things go wrong, I have to handle them myself. And that’s what I’m trying to do.”

“Why don’t you explain to us what happened?” I said. “In detail.”

The Courier ran his hand through his hair, which had just been white blond, but was now a flaming red. “I got the bag from you and drove off with it. All of that, you saw. And I was expecting to reach the portal by nightfall. But I never made it.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“I was about an hour away from the portal entrance when my tire was shot out from under me. I took a hard skid and crashed into a ditch.”

Xavier looked scornful. “You sure you didn’t just run over a nail? That happens to inexperienced riders a lot.”

The Courier looked over at him, his black eyes flashing with sudden anger. “Fuck you, wolf.”

Xavier didn’t like that much, and he lunged at him. I was barely able to hold him back.

“I just want to understand what happened out there,” I said urgently.

“Then tell your buddy here to take it fucking easy,” the Courier growled. “I don’t like the insinuations he’s making.”

“How do you *know* your tire was shot out?” I asked, still wanting a little more clarity about this story.

“Two reasons,” he said. “The first was that I picked up a tail about half hour before it happened.”

“A tail?” I asked.

The tall man nodded. “Yeah, I noticed someone was following me. And the second reason I’m sure it was shot out was because I *heard* the gunshot. And in my line of business, you learn to recognize the sound of gunfire real quick. Damn humans are always quick on the trigger.”

Xavier looked like he was trying to control himself, which was at least a step in the right direction. “Okay, so your tire was shot out, then what?”

“Then my bike crashed, what the hell do you think?” the Courier snapped, sounding annoyed. “I skidded for forty feet and then rolled into a fucking ditch. And while I was trying to make sure my head was still attached, someone—or some*thing*—grabbed the bag and took off.”

“And why the fuck didn’t you stop them?” Xavier demanded. “Or get your ass up and go after them? For fuck’s sake, I gave up three years of my life for this kind of shitty-ass service?”

The Courier glowered. “I was banged up pretty good. Not that you care—”

“I really don’t,” Xavier snapped.

“Can’t you remember anything specific about whoever—or whatever—took the bag?” I asked. “We need something to go on. Without any kind of description, trying to find the ashes will be like chasing ghosts.”

A cold wind blew around us all as the Courier thought hard for a long moment. Finally, he shrugged his wide shoulders. “I don’t know. I know that I could sense a shadowy figure, but I’m really not too sure. My head got a pretty good rattle.”

“Well this is just *great*,” Xavier said. “I really feel like I got my money’s worth here.”

“It’s a good thing I was wearing a helmet at the time,” the Courier said. His hair was currently a golden braid that fell all the way down his back, with a golden beard to match. “If I hadn’t been wearing one, you never would have figured out what happened to ashes, because I wouldn’t have survived to tell you. I don’t think I would have walked away from that.”

“Yeah, thank goodness,” I muttered. I was starting to get pretty worried. We’d told Cali—we’d *assured* her—that we’d deal with the problem with Seluna’s ashes, but the Courier’s story was as close to a dead end as any story could be.

What the hell were we going to tell her? She was already so stressed out, and hearing that we had no leads on the ashes was not going to help that.

“Do you have any enemies who would be after you?” I asked the guy. “Anyone you could think of who might want to seek revenge on you?”

The Courier laughed heartily. “Are you kidding me, man? I’ve got more enemies than friends. But that’s not who did this.”

“Well let me tell you this,” Xavier said, “if you don’t help us get the ashes back, you’re going to have even *more* enemies.”

The Courier didn’t look overly concerned about Xavier’s threat. He didn’t seem the type to frighten easily. “I came back to tell you about the accident and the ashes, and to tell you that unless I can recover and deliver the ashes like we agreed originally, you can have your three years back. A deal’s a deal.”

“Fine,” Xavier snapped. “But I’d rather that you hadn’t fucked up such an important job.”

The giant guy managed to look offended. “It’s not my fault. This is mostly on you guys.”

“*What?*” I asked. “How do you figure that?”

“You should have told me to be careful with the ashes, or that what you were asking me to carry to the demon world was dangerous. A heads-up might have been nice,” he added sourly.

“Fuck, man, it was just the ashes you were carrying. We killed the dangerous part,” Xavier pointed out, scoffing.

The Courier raised his eyebrows. “Clearly not. I guess there’s someone out there who doesn’t agree. And that someone went to a hell of a lot of trouble to take them from me.”

The Courier was right. There was someone else out there who wanted to do this to us. Who wanted to take the ashes.

The Courier narrowed his eyes. “Who knew about our appointment?”

Before Xavier or I could answer, the front door opened and Okorie stepped into the cold day, with Marta and Dani following close behind.

I stared at Okorie for a long moment. An uncomfortable thought had occurred to me, and though I wanted to send it far away, I knew that wasn’t an option. Okorie had been the only one outside the pack who knew what the plan was. Was it possible he was double-dealing us?

# Episode 2845

I yawned, almost stumbling down the stairs the next morning. Despite how exhausted I’d been, I hadn’t slept well, and the little sleep I *had* gotten had been restless and troubled. At first, I’d been afraid to fall asleep, even with Lola there. I was convinced Seluna would haunt me again. But sleep had finally won out. A light, sporadic sleep. And even now, in the cold light of morning, I couldn’t tell if I’d had actual dreams about Seluna, or if had just been my waking fears.

I wished I could just erase the memory of the bloodied, decaying figure of the demon in the mirror at the restaurant, but I couldn’t seem to wash it away.

Lola, on the other hand, seemed to have slept like a baby. Every time I’d glanced over at her in the night, she’d been sound asleep. I was jealous, but glad for Lola. She’d needed a good night’s rest after all the frantic running around and worrying she’d been doing getting ready for her dads’ arrival.

At the doorway to the kitchen, Lola was waiting for me, a smile on her face.

“Guess what my dads did?”

“What?” I asked sleepily.

“They came over early from their hotel, and they’re making pancakes,” she said, looking happier than I’d seen her in a long time.

“That’s really nice of them, but I’m not really that hungry,” I said. “I just want to get back to the pack house. I need to talk to Xavier and Greyson.”

Lola’s happy expression fell. “You can’t leave me alone here with my dads,” she said, her voice an urgent whisper.

“Come on, Lola. I’m not exactly leaving you alone here. Jacs is here—”

“She won’t eat!” Lola objected.

“Charlie and Violet will. Dani will. Marta and Lilac will,” I pointed out.

“Come on, Cali. I know you already went out of your way to help, but can’t you just stick around for breakfast? My dads are already talking about study abroad programs for next year. I can’t face that alone,” Lola pleaded.

“Fine,” I said, though I still felt reluctant. “I’ll stay, but just long enough for a couple of pancakes, and then it’s back to the pack house.”

Lola threw her arms around me. “Thank you! You’re the best.” Then, as we headed into the kitchen, she frowned. “Did you have a nightmare last night?”

“Why do you ask?” I asked quickly.

“You smacked me a couple of times,” she said. “And you called out in your sleep.”

“Did I?” I asked, surprised. I didn’t remember doing any of that. “Last night was kind of a muddled mess. What did I say?”

Lola shrugged. “I don’t know. Nothing I could understand. It sounded like gibberish to me.”

I nodded, glad that at least I hadn’t called out to Seluna.

Breakfast was waiting for us when we sat down at the kitchen table. The pancakes were piled high, and Lola’s pops slid a platter of sausages across the table.

“So, ladies, how have you been filling days since you’re not going to school?” he asked as soon as we sat down. “Do you have jobs?”

I glanced at Lola, my heart pounding hard. How the hell were we supposed to answer *that*?

“Pancakes!” Jacs sang out, arriving in the kitchen just in time to save our butts. “Why didn’t anyone tell me there were *pancakes*?”

I was grateful as hell for Jacs, but surprised. Since when did she get excited about food? From what I’d learned, vampires—or, at least full-blooded vamps like Jacs—didn’t think of food the same way humans or other supernaturals did. It was a “take it or leave it” situation for them. I’d heard that it depended on the emotional attachment they’d had to it before they were turned.

I was surprised to see Jacs pull up to the table and pile her plate high with golden pancakes. And even more surprised when she took a giant bite.

“These are the best ever!” she said, closing her eyes with pleasure. Then she opened them and looked over at Lola’s dad. “Where did you learn to make these? They taste just like my grandmother’s pancakes.”

Her dad looked as pleased as I’d ever seen him look. “Well, it’s actually an old family recipe. *My* grandmother’s recipe. And Danny improved them a little by adding a pinch of nutmeg—”

Jacs held up her hands. “Don’t tell me any more ingredients! If I know how to do it, I’m going to end up making them every day.”

Lola’s dad laughed, and—apparently forgetting that he’d been grilling us about jobs—sat at the table and served himself a plate of breakfast.

The rest of the meal went smoothly, with more of our “housemates” joining in as they woke up to the smell of pancakes.

When Lola’s dad and pops excused themselves for an after-breakfast walk around the lake, I got to my feet, too.

“I’m going to head back to the pack house,” I told Lola. “I’ll check in with you later.”

Jacs cleared her throat.

Lola and I looked over at her.

She raised her eyebrows expectantly.

“What?” I asked.

“I’m waiting for your thanks,” she said.

“What are you talking about?”

Jacs took a deep breath. “I wonder if it would surprise you to learn that I find pancakes boring.”

“Then why were you going on and on about them?” I asked her, baffled. “You must have eaten half a dozen. I don’t know where you put them.”  
 “I ate them because I overheard the question about the two of you having jobs and thought I could steer the conversation in a different direction. And it worked, so you two need to thank me and remember that you owe me.”

I shot a glance at Lola, who was grinning.

“I *do* owe you, Jacs,” Lola said sincerely. “Thank you. You were amazing.”

“Yeah.” I laughed, surprised by Jacs’s consideration. “Thanks. I’m going to head out. I’ll see you both later.”

As I drove back to the pack house and mentally thanked Xavier and Greyson for having so many cars, I was just wondering if my mates had learned anything useful about the ashes when I heard a deep rumble and saw a motorcycle approaching me from the opposite direction. It was going really fast and revving its huge engine. When it passed me, it was little more than a blur, but the huge, helmeted figure on the bike made me think of someone. Was that the Courier?

I jammed on my brakes, my heart pounding as I wondered if I should try to chase him down.

But he was coming from the direction I was heading—he might have just come from the pack house, which was only a few miles down the road.

My heart filled with hope. Maybe he’d come to return the ashes—which would mean that we *still* had to find a way to get them to the demon world. But that was still better than having them lost. Or maybe he’d just come to apologize for some delay, and he’d already returned them to the demon world.

I gunned the engine and raced to the pack house. But when I jumped out of the car, I found Greyson, Xavier, and Okorie on the driveway in front of the house, in the middle of a huge argument.

That wasn’t a good sign. I’d never seen Okorie look so angry. Instinct told me I had to break this up, and I hurried over and stepped between my mates and Okorie.

“What’s going on?” I demanded.

Xavier looked furious. “This warlock asshole betrayed us.”

“*What?*” I asked, completely confused. “What are you talking about? Betrayed us how?”

Greyson looked deadly serious. “The ashes are missing. They’ve been stolen.”

My stomach dropped. “*Stolen?* What? But how? Why would someone steal them?”

I felt sick and dizzy, like I was about to faint. I also felt hot, despite the freezing wind. If the ashes were gone, did that meant that the Seluna dreams were going to keep happening? My head started to spin as Xavier spoke.

“Then why don’t you explain to us how anyone could have known what the Courier was doing and where he was going?” Xavier demanded, glowering at Okorie. “Besides *you*, that is.”

Okorie’s dark eyes flashed dangerously. “I’m not going to explain *anything* to you, and I don’t have to stand here and take this. If you think for one minute that I would risk doing anything to turn the Courier—or the witch council—against me, you’re fucking nuts.”

There was something about the way he spoke that signaled to me that he was telling the truth. He just seemed so offended, rather than trying to defend himself. But whether he was telling the truth or not, it didn’t solve the very big problem of the ashes.

“What happened to the ashes?” I asked, my voice barely a whisper. “And why would anyone want to take them? I mean, it’s not like they’re valuable. They’re just demon ashes—”

“Like I’ve said ten times,” Okorie growled, “I don’t know what happened to the ashes, but I do know this.” He glared at Xavier and Greyson. “If you don’t find those ashes, your mate is screwed.”

# Episode 2846

**Xavier**

A look of terror flashed across Cali’s face at Okorie’s words.

Fuck.

Why did the warlock have to say that kind of shit now? And in front of Cali.

Okorie looked mad as hell as he rounded on her. “You should talk some sense into your mates before I have to,” he said, his voice a warning.

“Okay, okay, everyone needs to calm down,” Greyson said. “I don’t think anyone wants anything to get out of hand here.”

“Okorie, what do you mean when you say that without the ashes, I’m screwed?” Cali asked.

He raised his eyebrows. “I think you already know what I mean, Cali. I heard that Vander paid you a visit, and it’s just like they told you. If you don’t get those ashes back and into the demon world, things are only going to keep getting worse for you.”

I glared at the guy. It was like he was doing everything in his power to make Cali feel more frightened than she already did.

“What about me?” a small voice asked.

We all looked over to see Dani standing nearby. I was surprised to see her. She must have just arrived.

“Will things get worse for me, too?” Dani asked, looking scared.

Okorie’s expression softened a little. “No—I mean, not necessarily.”

“I had a bad nightmare last night,” Dani said, glancing at Cali. “It seemed so real, I wasn’t sure it wasn’t. And Seluna was in it.”

Okorie pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose for a moment. “Damn, I take it back. Sorry Dani, but that could mean trouble for you, too.”

I was starting to get really frustrated with the warlock. “Okay, so we already know the ashes didn’t make it to the demon world, and we need to get them, and it’s all doom and gloom if we don’t. But what I need to know is what the hell we should do about it. I mean, standing around here stating the obvious isn’t going to bring those ashes back.”

“You’re right about that,” Greyson said, his voice tense. “So, do you have any suggestions about what to do, Xavier?”

I blew out an angry breath and kicked the gravel on the driveway in frustration. I just wanted to *solve* this. I wanted to take that frightened look from Cali’s face.

“What if,” I started slowly, “we go to the site of the Courier’s crash? Maybe we can find some clues there as to who has them now.”

Greyson ran a hand through his hair. “I suppose it’s worth a shot,” he said slowly. “But the Courier didn’t give a lot of description about where it happened. I’m not even sure we could find it.”

I snorted with disdain. “Well, it’s better than standing around *not* trying, isn’t it?”

I knew Greyson tended to be more cautious than I was, but this was about Cali. We had to act, not just discuss.

Okorie shook his head, still looking angry. “I have to go to work. My mentees are waiting for me. If you have any questions, I’ll be around. But let me make myself perfectly clear,” he added, glaring between Greyson and me. “I agreed to help you. I didn’t have to. And if you keep turning against me, I’m not going to make the same mistake twice. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some mentoring to do.”

An instant later, both he and Dani were gone, having blipped away.

“Fuck him,” I muttered, speaking freely now that the warlock was gone. I shook my head. “I’m still not convinced we should trust that guy.”

Greyson looked strained. “I think we should talk to Big Mac. See if she has any useful insights on this. I’m going to go find her,” he said, and headed inside.

Leaving me alone with Cali.

“I’m sorry about… everything,” I said, turning to her. “I didn’t mean for you to walk in on that argument. Or hear such dark shit from Okorie.”

Cali shook her head. “No, I’m glad I heard it. I want to know what’s going on. But I still can’t figure it out.”

“What?” I asked.

“Who would take the ashes?” she wondered. “Who would want a bunch of dusty old demon bones anyway? I can’t even think of who else knows about Seluna outside of us and the Vanguards.”

“Try not to worry about it,” I said. “We’ll figure it out. And then we’ll take care of it.”

I hated the look of worry on her face. I could tell she was scared, and that her brain was working a mile a minute, trying to put all the pieces together.

“Hey, there’s some good news,” I said, trying to lighten the mood.

Cali looked up. “What?”

“I’m going to live three years longer now. My deal with the Courier is off.”

Cali smiled at that, looking genuinely glad. “That *is* good news. I hated that you made that deal in the first place, you know that.”

I was glad that I’d gotten her to smile, but I didn’t want to argue about the past, so I changed the subject. “How are things at the lake house?”

“Oh, Lola is still dealing with some of her stuff, but things are definitely better now that her dads know she’s not actually in school.”

“I missed you last night,” I admitted, my gaze ranging over her beautiful face. I pulled her close and kissed her. “Once this Seluna stuff is over, we are owed some serious alone time together.”

Cali nodded, but then her expression darkened. “But what if we don’t find those ashes?”

“That’s not an option,” I said quickly. “Someone stole them, which means that someone has them. It’s as simple as that. So all we have to do is find out who stole them.”

I wished I felt as optimistic about this prospect as I sounded, but the truth was that I had my doubts, too.

“Let’s get inside. You’re freezing out here,” I said. But just as I put my arm around Cali’s shoulder, a scent on the wind made my nose perk up.

It was Ava’s scent. Now what?

Cali and I both turned toward the driveway as Ava pulled up.

“What’s she doing here?” Cali asked.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out,” I muttered.

I strode over to where Ava was climbing out of the car. My wolf seemed pleased to see her, and I understood why. Ava looked radiant in the grey morning light. I’d never figured out how she managed to do that so effortlessly.

“Hi,” she said warily, looking between Cali and me. “Xavier, can I talk to you? Alone?”

I was about to push back on this and tell her that whatever she had to say, she could damn well say in front of Cali, but I stopped myself. I didn’t know if that was what Cali wanted. Would witnessing a conversation between me and Ava only add to her stress right now? I didn’t want to do that.

“Fine, but make it quick,” I said shortly. “Cali, why don’t you go inside and warm up? This will only take a few minutes.”

Cali hesitated for a moment, like she wanted to say something, but nodded. She gave me a quick kiss on the cheek before heading back. I felt guilty watching her go. I didn’t want to be pulled away by Ava—I never did—but I didn’t see that I had a choice. Ava wasn’t giving me one.

“Well, I’m surprised to see you here,” I said, turning to Ava.

“Why is that?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I thought you were joining the shrimp and bringing back the almighty Samara pack.”

Ava’s dark eyes flashed. “Don’t joke about my pack,” she warned in an icy tone she rarely used with me. “You know how much they mean to me. Like what the Redwood pack means to you.”

I did know, and it was a low blow to tease her about it.

“Sorry,” I muttered. “So why are you here, then? Is the Alpha-baby whining again?”

Ava sighed. “Knox has been fuming ever since you showed up yesterday.” She tipped her head as she looked at me. “He thinks you’re trying to ruin him.”

I laughed. “I’d be happy to, but I think the shrimp is doing a fine job of that all on his own.”

Ava looked away, into the trees, which looked dark despite the sunshine. “Knox is planning to pass the Iudicium.”

I couldn’t help it; I laughed again. “Well, if I were a betting man, I’d make a fortune on that one.”

She looked at me, her eyes clear and focused. “I don’t want him to succeed, X.”

“Well, that makes two of us—”

“No, you’re not hearing me,” she said, her voice urgent. “I’m asking you to make *sure* he fails.”

I stared at her. “Ava, what the hell—”

“Will you sabotage the Iudicium?”

# Episode 2847

**Greyson**

As I headed upstairs, I hoped that Big Mac was in a better mood this morning than last night. But—then again—hoping for Big Mac to be in a good mood was a little like hoping the earth would stop circling the sun. There were some things that weren’t going to change.

Before I reached Big Mac’s room, I saw Kira walking down the hallway toward me, and I figured she might be able to help.

“Hey, Kira.”

“Good morning, Greyson.”

I ran my hand through my hair. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” she said. “What’s up?”

“We have a bit of a situation.”

“When do you not?” she fired back.

“Okay, fair point. Anyway, we made a deal with a guy called the Courier to take Seluna’s ashes to the demon realm, but he says he was robbed before he could get there. So the ashes never made it, and now we don’t know where they are.”

“Oh wow.” Kira shook her head. “Talk about a bad way to start the morning.”

“Tell me about it. I was wondering if you had any idea how we can figure out who stole the ashes.”

Kira stared at me, confused. “I’m a witch, Greyson, not a detective. How do you expect me to figure this out without any leads or clues?”

I heaved a sigh. “I don’t know. I don’t even know where to start with this, and it’s frustrating as hell, but I can’t think of any reason why someone would *purposefully* steal demon ashes. I mean, I guess it could have just been a random robbery, but why would you go to all that trouble if you didn’t know who you were robbing? It’s not like the Courier exudes a rich guy vibe.”

She shook her head. “I’m not a detective,” she said again, “but I can tell you that there are some spells that require the ashes of supernaturals. Maybe whoever took the ashes either needed them for a spell of their own, or is planning on selling them on the black market.”

This was new information to me. “What kind of spells need supernatural ashes?”

“*I’ve* never used any of those types of spells,” Kira said firmly. “But it’s the kind of thing used in dark magic. Forbidden magic, necromancy—that kind of nasty stuff.”

I wasn’t thrilled to hear any of this. What I’d hoped was just a simple robbery was fast taking on a much more sinister tone.

“But I’ll talk to Big Mac about it,” Kira went on. “Maybe she has some ideas, and we can figure out what spells require specific demon ashes. It might give you a clue about where to start.”

“Thanks, that would help a lot,” I said, thinking how much easier it was to talk to this witch than the one engaged to my mother.

I headed back downstairs just in time to see Cali coming through the door. She looked unhappy, and—I noticed—was alone. I wondered where Xavier was, and if they’d had an argument.

“What’s up?” I asked her.

Cali glanced over her shoulder. “Ava just dropped by.”

Well, that explained Cali’s dark mood. Ava had a way of bringing the whole vibe down.

“I talked to Kira, and I’m working on finding those ashes,” I assured her. “I’m not going to give up until they’re safely back in the demon world, where they belong. And I know what Okorie had to say was upsetting, but I don’t even want you to worry about it, okay?”

Cali nodded, forcing a smile, and I pulled her into a hug.

“I know this is hard,” I whispered, kissing the top of her head, “but you have to be strong while we figure this out.”

“I want to be,” Cali said “But I hate feeling so helpless. All the Fae magic—mine, my mom’s, Artemis’s—my werewolf mates, my pack, vampires, witches, and none of those things can do a thing to bring the ashes back.”

“Don’t underestimate us,” I warned her. “We’ve overcome worse things than a little robbery. We’ll find those ashes.”

She shook her head. “It’s not just the ashes. What about LIPS?”

I hesitated. “Okay, I don’t want to get your hopes up, but I think I may have found a way to help us get rid of LIPS.”

“Really?” Cali’s face lit up.  
 “But it would mean I would have to turn a wolf,” I added.

Cali frowned. “Turn a wolf? Wait, you mean taking a real wolf and—”

I nodded.

“Have you ever done that before?”

“No, and I’m still not sure it’s the right thing to do. I’m still on the fence about it. But, if this does work out, it means I’ll be able to help lead LIPS away from us.”

“And that’s better than killing anyone,” she said firmly.

“I’ve already told you that I’m not going to kill any humans, and I meant it. This request to turn the wolf might be the answer.”

She smiled up at me. “I believe in you,” she said quietly. “And I’ll support whatever you decide to do.”

“Thank you,” I murmured, and pressed my lips to hers. She sank into me, but as much as I loved kissing her, I could feel that she was still tense. It was in her shoulders and her back. Cali’s body was usually supple in my arms, but today it felt like embracing a wooden plank. She was probably still anxious about the ashes.

And, truth be told, so was I.

“I can come with you to the Courier’s crash site,” she offered.

“No, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“A lot of reasons. There’s so much we don’t know about what went down. There could be someone there, waiting for us to show up,” I said.

Cali frowned. “Well, if so, then that’s even more reason to bring some backup.”

“I will, I promise,” I assured her. “And I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

She nodded and stood on her tiptoes to kiss me again. I bent, meeting her halfway.

But I could still feel the tension in her body, and I vowed to figure this thing out.

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Charlie had agreed to come, so he was in the back as Xavier and I drove the Courier’s route from the house. I’d wanted Charlie along because he was a hunter, and I was hoping he might be able to detect something from the crash site that could prove useful.

Xavier glanced up at a road sign, then pulled the car off the highway and onto a smaller road. “We’ll be there in a few minutes,” he said.

“So who are we killing this time?” Charlie asked.

“Hopefully no one right now,” I muttered, keeping my eyes peeled for anything suspicious. “Today is about reconnaissance and finding some clues as to who or what took the ashes. I don’t actually expect whoever stole the ashes to be hanging around, waiting for us. We’re just looking for anything that might give us a lead.”

Charlie nodded. “Got it. I’ll do my best.”

I glanced over my shoulder at the kid. “You know, I’m glad you joined the pack, man.”

Charlie looked surprised but pleased. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I wasn’t sure about bringing a hunter in, but you’ve proven yourself time and time again. And you sure seem to make Violet happy. Mates will do that.”

Charlie grinned. “Thanks, Greyson.”

Talking about mates got me thinking about Cali, of course, and the conversation I’d had with her earlier about turning one of the natural wolves.

“What was it like for you when you turned?” I asked Charlie.

His smile slid away. “It was terrifying. I thought I was going to die. And when I first shifted, it was so painful and just so scary. I had no idea what was happening to me.”

I nodded. That was pretty much how I’d imagined it would be. I wondered what it would be like to turn a real wolf into a werewolf. I mean, at least that would be consensual.

“What about after?” I asked Charlie. “Now. Do you have any regrets?”

Charlie’s grin came back. “No way. I love being a werewolf. I didn’t choose it, I guess, but I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

I was relieved to hear that, and I hoped—if I did it—that the Alpha wolf’s daughter would feel the same way. Turning someone was a big undertaking, and I didn’t want to be responsible if she regretted doing it.

Xavier slowed the car and peered around. “I’m guessing the accident was somewhere around here.”

He stopped the car, and we all climbed out, looking around for anything that would indicate a crash. Tire marks, broken glass—anything.

I shook my head as I kicked through the dirt at the side of the lonely road. This felt like looking for a needle in a haystack—but before I could spiral into that, Charlie started waving his arms.

“I found something!” he called out.

Xavier and I hurried over and—sure enough—there were skid marks on the asphalt, along with broken pieces of a taillight and a mirror.

I’d knelt down to look at them more closely when Xavier spoke, his voice tight with tension.

“I think I got a scent on what may have taken the ashes, and you’re not gonna like it. Whoever it was… I can smell vampire all over this place.”

# Episode 2848

**Xavier**

The asphalt was marred by skid marks, broken pieces of a taillight, and a mirror here and there. But that was barely alarming in comparison to the scent.

“Definitely vampire,” I told Greyson, my body tensing. Getting ready to attack. “No question—can’t you both smell it too?”

Charlie flinched before he looked around, his brow furrowed. Greyson got to his feet after giving the remains one last look. All three of us scanned the perimeter of the accident.

Charlie was the first to break the silence.

“I can smell it now, yeah,” he said, peering into the distance. “I’m gonna head over and investigate.”

I opened my mouth to object—Charlie was only a child, and Violet’s mate, at that. I was pretty sure she’d cry from now till the end of time—not to mention, never talk to me again—if anything happened to him on my watch.

Greyson spoke up first, though, shooting me a look at the same time. “Go ahead,” he told Charlie. “We brought you with us to investigate, after all.”

Ugh. I hated it when the asshole made sense.

“Greyson and I will check the wreckage for any clues while you scout the perimeter,” I said to Charlie. He nodded quickly and then ran off. No shifting, because the last thing we needed was more LIPS drama.

“After you,” Greyson said, gesturing at the marked road.

I scoffed, examining what was left of the wreck, but it wasn’t much.

“Who could have done this?” I asked Greyson. “And why?”

“Who or *what*,” Greyson noted, turning his back on me to scent the air in the road’s direction. “We can’t rule out the possibility that this was done by a creature instead of a person.”

Frowning, I got to my knees, eyeing the asphalt. The road had pieces of gravel at some places, and when I trailed my fingers over it, I spotted a small round thing. Like a coin. Kind of? Whatever it was, it was dirty and half charred. I picked up the thing and examined it in the light.

It didn’t remind me of any currency I knew, and I’d traveled a lot. But the truth was that the weight of it and something about the design were familiar. I couldn’t quite place it, though, so I decided to pocket it as evidence and check it out later.

I was about to let Greyson know about the coin when Charlie raced back. He was panting, looking a little alarmed. “I followed the scent, but the trail cut off a few miles into the forest. I couldn’t follow it any further.”

“You sure about that?” I asked Charlie.

He nodded. “Positive.”

I didn’t have any reason to doubt the kid. If anything, everybody knew he was a great tracker. Greyson seemed to be thinking the same thing. He glared toward the forest, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “That’s exactly what we need right now—for everything to seem way too ominous for no reason.”

We needed to figure out who’d taken these ashes and get them back ASAP.

“I don’t think there’s anything left to find out here,” Greyson told us. “We should get back—I don’t like that we left Cali alone.”

“Right, she’s at the lake house. Without any protection,” I said. “It’s definitely time to get the whole pack back together in one house. With possible vampires and demon thieves on our hands, we need to make sure everyone is in one defensible place.”

Greyson nodded, his expression grim. “Let’s get out of here.”

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Greyson, Charlie, and I had gone over to the lake house and rallied all the temporary residents there. It had gone a lot smoother than I had originally thought it would be, minus a few last-minute snags and packing. At least Cali hadn’t had any objections.

Lola, Jay, and Torin had opted to stay behind with Kevin, who was still there for some reason that I could imagine but wasn’t about to think too hard about. Greyson and I agreed that it would be better for the humans not to be coming and going at the pack house while we discussed the demon ashes situation, anyway. Pretty hard to explain that one if we were overheard.

“We should talk a bit more about the wreckage,” Greyson said to Cali. She looked so small and pale next to him. She’d been anxiously quiet ever since we’d told her about the vampire scent trail we’d found at the scene.

Being silent was so wrong for her. Her reaction made my gut throb.

She swallowed audibly. “I had a question, actually. You mentioned the vampire scent—is there a way to find the ashes through that? The witches have tracing spells, so could they have scent spells too?”

Greyson glanced into the kitchen, where there was some commotion. “Let’s talk about this in the study.”

He motioned for us to follow, but then Cali spoke up.

“Wait! Shouldn’t Dani come too?” She turned to Dani, who’d been hovering behind Cali. If Cali seemed pale, Dani looked like she wanted to find a rock to hide under. “The ashes seem to also be affecting her.”

Greyson stared at the girl. Dani hesitated at the bottom of the staircase, but then Marta stepped forward. “If Dani’s coming, I’ll come too. For moral support.”

Dani gave Marta a grateful smile. “Thank you.”

“Let’s go,” Greyson said. He looked frustrated, which was bad news—if Greyson’s patience was running thin, you knew shit was bad.

“Why would a vampire even want those ashes?” Cali asked after we got to the study. She plopped down into a chair, looking between Greyson and me. “What would they have against me? I’m practically as harmless and adorable as a fluffy bunny!”

“Adorableness doesn’t protect people, Cali,” Charlie told my mate seriously. The kid wasn’t very good at detecting sarcasm, was he? Good thing he knew how to track a bad guy.

“Let’s not forget that whoever took the ashes might just want them for some kind of ritual that has no direct connection to Cali or Dani,” Marta noted.

“I think it’s more possible that someone’s out to get us,” I said.

“Yeah,” Greyson agreed. “Literally everyone is out to get us, anyway. For no reason, most of the time. We’ve been through too much lately for anyone to believe that this is a coincidence.”

“So what? Your solution is for us all to sit down and write out a list of all the people who would want to fuck us over?” I asked.

“That’s a long list,” Greyson said under his breath.

“But wouldn’t it be someone who hates *me* specifically?” Cali asked, pointing at her chest. “Like I said, the ashes are connected to me, so—”

“You’re our mate,” I said. “By attacking you, they’re attacking us—this is connected to us too. Besides, I made a three-year deal with the Courier, and I’m an Alpha with a huge-ass track record. The theft is most probably connected to me.”

Greyson scowled, and Cali sighed and nodded. Then she looked up at Dani. She’d been hovering by the fireplace, all quiet. “What if it’s related to you, Dani?”

Greyson squinted at Dani. She looked like a frightened mouse.

Marta scoffed. “Sure. Dani’s a criminal mastermind, so it’s probably about her.”

Charlie frowned in confusion—his sarcasm button was definitely broken today—as Greyson sighed deeply. “We all need to make lists of who might have it out for us, so we can try to narrow down the suspect list.”

Like Greyson had said earlier, that was going to be a long list. For both of us Evers brothers.

“Now that I think about it, nobody even knew me before I found out that I was Fae and had two werewolf mates,” Cali said, looking thoughtful.

Her words made me feel like shit. It was like an obvious reminder that being with me, meeting me, was what had endangered Cali in the first place.

“Xavier, no,” Cali said, standing up from the chair as if she’d heard my thoughts. “Don’t overthink this. I would never blame you or Greyson for anything, ever. I’d never want to go back to the way things were before I knew you.” She took my hand before glancing at Greyson. “You two are so important to me—I wouldn’t give you up for anything.”

I would’ve preferred it if she’d left Greyson out of this. But that sounded great, either way. I squeezed her hand reassuringly.

“What happens after you figure out who stole the ashes?” Marta asked.

“We kill the thief,” I said simply.

Cali raised an eyebrow. “*Xavier*.”

I shrugged.

Greyson shook his head. “Okay, but first we’ll need to find out why they took them. Just to make sure there are no further threats.”

I’d have preferred to go straight to murder, just to get it over with, but Greyson’s line of action would have to do. At least it made sense.

“Before we jump to conclusions,” Cali said, all tense, “let’s make our ‘enemies’ lists.” She turned to Dani. “What do you think, Dani?”

The girl looked like she wanted to disappear.

“Dani?” Cali frowned. “What’s wrong?”

The girl’s face looked positively stricken. “I think—I think I may know who did this.”

# Episode 2849

I was getting that sinking sensation I always did right before someone gave me extremely bad news.

“What the *fuck*?” Xavier burst out. After his whole spiel about being a super dangerous Alpha, et cetera, it really did seem anti-climatic to have Dani be at the center of this entire theft situation.

“Dani?” I asked, walking up to her. “Who did it?”

She took a deep breath. “There’s a vampire who was in Silas’s organization.” I blinked, taken aback by Silas’s name. *That’s right*, I thought. Silas had kidnapped Dani before she ended up at the witch council, poor girl. I definitely didn’t foresee a link to *him* in all this.

“The vampire hated me intensely,” she went on. “I basically got him fired, got him into trouble with Silas, and he promised he would follow me to the ends of the earth to get back at me.” She pressed her lips together, looking panicked as she gazed between Greyson and Xavier. Her voice cracked. “What if he found me again?”

Greyson was scowling. “That doesn’t sound right.”

*That* definitely *does not sound right*, I thought. *In any way.*

“Yeah,” Xavier said. “Silas was probably only paying the guy until he stopped being useful. Our father hated vampires, so if he was working with one, it was definitely a temporary situation. It couldn’t have been your fault that the guy got fired, Dani.”

Dani fiddled with her hands, tucking her hair behind her ear. “I don’t know…”

“He’s right,” Greyson piped up. “Our father wasn’t going to give any of his lackeys a pink slip and a severance to end their relationship. He’d probably have killed the guy, especially if he’s a vampire. Just to make sure that his secrets remained secrets.”

“See?” I asked Dani. “Silas was a horrendous monster, but that totally helps with our case right now.”

Dani exhaled sharply, wincing before she nodded. “So you agree with what the guys are saying?”

Dani looked like she was going to faint, so I made sure to nod decisively, taking both her hands in mine. “There are a lot of vampires out there. Just because the wolves caught a vampire scent, it doesn’t mean it’s the guy who had it out for you in the past.”

“But—”

“And even if it *is* him,” I said, cutting her off while raising my index finger with authority, “we’ve gone up against bigger baddies before, so we can protect you. Nobody’s going to take revenge on you. Not on my watch.”

Dani gave me an anxious smile, thanking me like the sweet marshmallow that she was. And since my mates were present, I decided not to push things. I decided not to tell Dani that I was pretty sure this vampire was someone who was out to get me, or Xavier, or Greyson. Definitely not Dani.

*Call it intuition, but I can just feel that it’s the three of us that are in the middle of this messy situation*, I thought. *It’s always us!*

“Could it be Iñigo?” Charlie asked suddenly. He’d been so quiet for so long that I’d forgotten he was here.

“No, he’s dead,” Greyson said. He shot a look at Xavier. “Right?”

Xavier nodded. “He was staked through the heart, last I checked.”

“That was a good angle to consider, though,” Greyson said thoughtfully, pointing at Charlie. “Perhaps this is someone who’s still loyal to Iñigo. Like a lieutenant for something. His group was massive.”

“Oh!” I raised a hand, a new piece of information popping into my mind. “Lola said that the diner has new ownership.”

“Who is it?” Greyson asked, crossing his arms.

“Another group of vampires that’s related to Iñigo,” I said. I paused, my heart starting to beat a little faster. “The thieves could also be remnants of the vampire coven that kidnapped me.”

Both Xavier and Greyson looked… Well, murderous.

I gave Dani an awkward chuckle. “See? It’s not you who’s in trouble.”

“I’ll say,” Marta said under her breath.

“Do we know if there’s anyone left from Sabyr’s coven, Greyson?” Xavier asked.

Greyson—still looking murder-happy—spoke gruffly. “We should keep that on the list, just in case.”

“So, we’re making the list, huh?” I asked. I tried not to sound too squeaky, but could anyone blame me? I had to actually write down a number of people who could potentially want to hurt me.

*How can I* not *be paranoid about this?*

“A list is our safest bet, love,” Greyson said soothingly, but I didn’t feel soothed at all. I couldn’t shake this bad feeling.

“What about Rafe?” I blurted out.

Greyson’s expression was grim. “Another dead end. Literally. If anyone tries to avenge him, they’d better stay away if they know what’s good for them.”

“That doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t put him on the list,” I said. “You guys said we shouldn’t dismiss anyone—plus, Lola and I kind of screwed Rafe over with the whole Jacs stalking thing.”

“Right,” Greyson said wryly. “How dare you ruin a creepy fucker’s favorite pastime?”

I shuddered at the thought.

Xavier sighed. “Cali—”

“No,” I said. “If Rafe isn’t really dead—and I’m just saying we consider it for the sake of the list—he has a reason to nurture a grudge against me, so yeah, this is bad! I think it’s about as bad as it could possibly—”

“Hey, hey,” Greyson said, gently resting his hands on my shoulders. His voice had dropped to a soothing baritone. He stared into my eyes. “You don’t have to keep going through all these names right now. We can take a break. You look tired.”

I laughed, but there was no mirth to it. “You’re not supposed to tell a girl that she looks tired, Greyson.”

Greyson didn’t smile at my teasing tone. “Cali, please. This is serious. There’s no way of knowing if this even has anything to do with you, and I think you need a break from stressing out.” He glanced over at his brother. “Xavier and I still need to make our lists. Trust me, those are going to be much, longer than anything you could come up with. Okay?”

I pressed my lips together, inhaling and exhaling as I looked into Greyson’s silvery eyes. He seemed so serious yet so calm, and the effect he had on me was instant. I suddenly realized that I was, indeed, feeling pretty tired.

And if not tired, then certainly one hundred percent anxious.

“I guess I do need a break from this,” I said quietly.

Greyson nodded, leaning down to kiss my forehead.

“I’m gonna go wash up.” I looked around at everyone in the room. “See you later.”

After Xavier squeezed my hand reassuringly, I went upstairs to my room. I washed my face with icy water. Maybe that would shock me awake again. Perhaps a coffee would be a better solution, though.

I decided to go back downstairs and head to the kitchen, but I was no longer alone. Xavier hovered in the hallway, staring at me. He looked as beautiful, brooding, and worried as ever.

I sighed. “You don’t have to check up on me. I’ll be okay.”

His face was unreadable. “I know you’re strong—that you can handle a lot of shit without losing it. But this is… This is for me, Cali. I need this.” Without another word, he stepped forward and wrapped me in his arms. The feel of him was as comforting and incredible as it always was.

“I need you to stay focused, though,” I whispered. “Can you do that for me?”

“I can’t even think about anyone hurting you,” he said. “Especially after all the Seluna bullshit. I hate this whole fucking situation. I’ll do everything I can to protect you and get those ashes back as soon as possible.”

My eyes felt scratchy at his admission.

*I’m so loved, though*, I thought. *I’m so lucky for it.*

I embraced him tighter. “I know you’ll do everything you can. I trust you. I know everything’s going to be okay.”

I’d barely let the words out before my gut throbbed in warning. I wondered if I was lying to both Xavier and myself right now. The bad feeling wouldn’t go away, so I had to… I had to do something, *anything*, to get rid of it.

“I don’t want to delay making the rest of my list,” I said, facing Xavier. “I’m probably gonna explode with anxiety if I keep stalling, so let me finish it up ASAP, and then we can start looking into everyone.”

He nodded, tucking my hair behind my ear. “If that’s what you need, then we should go ahead and do it.”

Xavier’s gaze was so soft that my heart went pitter-patter. It made me recall something else entirely.

“I actually have been wondering something,” I said, clearing my throat nervously. “But before I say what it is, I want to know you won’t get upset when I ask.”

Xavier frowned. “Nothing you can say would ever upset me.”

I squinted. “I mean, I think that’s a very recent development. So, I just wanted to make sure you’re still going down this path of growth and emotional maturity, and you’re not going to get all growly with me.”

“What? Me? Growly? When?” he asked with a small smirk.

*Oh, Xavier*, I thought fondly. *So much growth. Anyway. Here goes nothing…*

“I don’t want to make this sound like an accusation,” I started. “Because I know how much it’s taken to get you to trust Ava again the way you do now.”

Xavier’s frown deepened. “What are you getting at here?”

Beating around the bush wasn’t going to save me now. So I just ripped the Band-Aid off and asked, “What if Ava lied about killing Iñigo?”

# Episode 2850

**Xavier**

I paused, processing Cali’s words. I reminded myself to remain chill while I was at it, because the last thing I needed was her getting even *more* rattled.

*Don’t be an asshole to Cali, only to other people*, was my mantra these days.

“Ava said she killed Iñigo,” I said slowly. “Is there a reason why you don’t believe her?”

“It’s not like I don’t believe her, exactly,” Cali said quickly. “It’s just that I don’t know what to believe at this point. I feel like by now, we’ve learned that not all truths are black and white.”

I frowned, crossing my arms. “What do you mean?”

“Like, what makes you fully trust Ava’s story about Iñigo?” she asked.

I paused for a moment, processing. Part of me wanted to believe everything Ava said. She’d done a lot of dangerous shit to help me and the pack—one could say she’d earned our trust. But there was another voice inside me, reminding me that Ava had killed my mother, which meant she could never, ever be truly trusted.

She’d been playing nice lately… But to what end?

Could she have an ulterior motive? Because that would be just like her.

I started to get a fucking headache just thinking about it.

“Ava is Ava. Things have been better between us, and she helped a lot with Seluna,” I started. “But that doesn’t mean I can think of everything she’s ever told me as wholly truthful.”

“That’s what I’m saying too.” Cali nodded, rubbing a hand down my arm. “I don’t want to imply that Ava hasn’t been loyal to us recently, because she has. But we know for a fact that she used to lie to literally everybody in this house on the regular.”

I took a deep breath, letting out a huff. “Which means…”

“Maybe Iñigo is still alive,” Cali said, her eyes huge with worry. “And if he is, he’s definitely a vampire who has beef with practically everyone in the Redwood pack. I wouldn’t put it past him to steal the ashes. And he’s not just any vampire—he’s extremely powerful, Xavier.”

Obviously. A vampire who could survive both being possessed by the Orb and a staking would be extremely dangerous. A vampire like that might even have abilities that he had yet to explore. I definitely didn’t want Cali to be around if or when Iñigo “came back from the dead” and figured out his full deadly potential.

“You look very worried,” Cali whispered. She also looked very worried. This was fucked.

“It’s okay,” I said. Lied.

She sighed, not buying it. Then she looked hesitant again.

“Do you want to ask me something else?” I asked.

“It’s not important,” she mumbled. “It doesn’t have to do with this whole vampire-slash-ashes thing.”

I reached over and caressed her cheek as I looked into her eyes. She felt so fragile that my heart hurt. “You can ask me anything about anything.”

She held back for another moment, but then she just exploded like a popping bubble. “I was just wondering what you and Ava talked about when you made me go inside?”

I was surprised by the high-pitched tone to her voice. But then again, there was so much about the Ava-Knox-Samara situation that I hadn’t told Cali yet. Like, everything beyond the basics. It wasn’t that I wanted to keep it a secret from her—it was just that I’d been hoping it wouldn’t become as big a problem as it had. Time to talk to Cali about anything other than our personal issues had been hard to come by the past couple of days, anyway.

“Uh,” I said. “I’m not sure where to start…”

“From the beginning?” Cali offered in the most helpful and wholesome way possible. I snorted, shaking my head. The Samara Alpha situation was way too complicated, but I needed to at least make Cali realize that I wasn’t spending time with Ava because of Ava, but to track this potential threat to the Redwoods.

I started again. “The truth is that there’s something potentially big happening—”

The door downstairs creaked open loudly, and then I heard Lola’s booming voice. “Hello? Cali!”

Cali was instantly distracted, alarmed. She looked over the banister, calling, “Lola?”

Lola gasped. “There you are!” She started running upstairs, Jay on her heels. “Are you okay, babe? I was worried about you the whole time we were cleaning up the lake house!”

“That’s how things work, Lola,” I grumbled. “You stay somewhere, you clean you before leaving, so—”

Lola literally ignored me and pointed at Jay. “I had to force Jay to bring me back here—I wasn’t going to obsess over cleaning while you were going through all this!”

“Lola’s dads and I did most of the work anyway,” Jay informed me, looking resigned.

“I’m okay for now,” Cali said to Lola, smiling a little before she glanced downstairs. “Wait, where are your dads?”

“Your amazing parents took them out shopping, and then they’re going back to the hotel,” Lola explained.

“That’s much safer with all the new stuff going on right now,” Cali said seriously.

Lola pulled her friend into a hug, sighing. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

Cali looked at me over Lola’s shoulder. Then, in Lola’s ear, she whispered, “You know, I want to talk to Xavier, but I can’t figure out how to go about it.”

This was obviously about the Ava thing. I raised an eyebrow at my mate. “I’m standing right here, you know.”

Cali blushed, letting Lola go. “Um, we can talk later, right, Xavier? I just need some girl time.”

“I love girl time!” Lola clapped her hands excitedly.

“I think I need a nap,” Jay said, sighing. Cali responded with words that I didn’t focus on. I preferred to stare at her. I didn’t like the idea of letting her go right now.

But Cali rambled on. “… it’s gonna be okay! I’ll finish off my enemy list and fill Lola in about everything that’s going on. Sound good?”

Cali seemed to want to spend time to Lola, so I wasn’t gonna spoil it for her. I was pretty sure Lola’s general madness would be a good distraction, anyway. Sighing, I leaned in to kiss her cheek.

“Come get me if you need anything, okay?” I murmured. “We’ll talk later.”

She smiled and nodded, then took Lola’s hand, leading her to her bedroom. Lola looked confused and worried suddenly. “Wait, I do love girl time, but what was that thing you said about an enemy list? Who would be your enemy? You’re as adorable as a bunny!”

Cali gasped. “That’s what I said!”

“You’re kind of a badass bunny, though, because you did kill a demon,” Lola noted, and Cali scoffed.

The door closed behind them, and Jay sighed. “What’s been going on?”

I filled him in about the Iñigo factor and the ashes. Jay scowled. “Oh, great. Another problem for us to figure out.”

I felt exactly how Jay sounded right now. There were just too many things to deal with. “Since I’m working on this to keep Cali safe, I need you to take point on keeping an eye on the Knox situation.”

Jay nodded just as Greyson walked up to us.

“Knox situation?” Greyson asked, looking suspicious. “Something new there?”

I considered brushing Greyson off, but then I recalled—with great reluctance—that as Alpha, Greyson needed to know about this potential threat to the pack.

“When I last talked to Ava, she pretty much told me that Knox was going through with the Iudicium. He’s fully determined to claim Alpha status in the new Samara pack,” I said.

Greyson crossed his arms. “Can this Knox guy be trusted with that kind of responsibility? Could he be an ally?”

I exchanged a look with Jay.

“*Nope*,” Jay and I said at the same time.

Greyson’s eyebrows shot up. “Did you guys seriously just give me a duet of *nope*?”

“Also,” I added, “something I didn’t quite get to last time we spoke… Knox kind of hates me and blames me and the Redwood pack for Nolan’s death and the subsequent destruction of the Samara pack.”

Greyson groaned, rubbing his face. “Great. Just fucking—this is the last thing we need right now, Xavier.”

“I’m not sure how to stop this,” I admitted. “This situation with Knox is like a boulder rolling down a hill, and it’s already got momentum.”

Greyson looked between Jay and me, clenching his jaw. “The Iudicium has to be planned—that’s as much as I know about it—so we have some time. But not a lot.”

“I’m taking care of it, Greyson,” I said. “I’ve been talking to Ava and Knox, trying to find a way to avoid all of this.”

Greyson ran his hands through his hair, shaking his head. “Maybe I should go talk to him, as Alpha of the Redwood pack.”

I bristled at his words. I fucking despised being reminded that I wasn’t the Alpha. Because that was my ultimate goal, beyond all else. I’d gotten better at pushing back the anger, the frustration when Greyson pressed my buttons, but that wound was still gaping.

Through gritted teeth, I said, “I’m the one working on this situation, Greyson. We don’t even know what the Samara version of an Iudicium is yet. Therefore, we don’t know how to stop it. I’m going to get that intel—I have an in with Ava, remember?”

Greyson nodded. “Fair enough.”

“She asked me to stop the ceremony from happening,” I said. “She doesn’t want him to run the pack.”

Greyson paused, looking between Jay and me again, clearly thinking. Then he said, “I never thought I’d say this, but I agree with Ava. If you’re going to be the one to take on this responsibility, Xavier, then you can’t let Knox become Alpha of the Samara pack. You have to stop it. Whatever it takes.”

# Episode 2851

I was in my room with Lola. She’d been shockingly quiet after I’d told her about the list I needed to compile.

*So, this is fun… not.*

There was something terrifying and macabre about the notion of writing down the names of every single person who might want me dead or tortured. This wasn’t normal—none of it.

*It’s not like* you’re *normal, Cali!* I told myself, trying to fight through the frustration.

It didn’t exactly work. I would’ve much preferred actual girl time.

“I’m really, really sorry you have to do this, Cali,” Lola muttered, squeezing my shoulder. “I know it’s hard.”

“It’s just…” I let out a mirthless laugh. “It’s pretty fucked up to have to imagine someone hating me so much that they’d want me dead or harmed. I’ve never hurt anyone intentionally, and if I ever did anything to attack, it would’ve been in self-defense, like…” I sniffled. “Like with Seluna.”

“I know, it really is,” Lola said, sliding behind me to rub both my shoulders. She really could be so nice when the situation called for it. For example, when I was about to burst out crying like a fool. “Think of this as their problem, not yours. Of course you don’t deserve to be treated badly.”

Lola was trying to be supportive, but it wasn’t like she could fix everything here. It was disturbing enough already that we’d been bouncing names off each other to add to the list.

*This day is such a mess*.

“Do you think that’s it?” Lola asked, sitting back down on the bed to eye the list.

I scoffed, feeling my heart turn heavy. “Of course not—I forgot someone super important.”

I grabbed the pen and wrote down *AYSEL*, underlining the name multiple times and adding a few question marks. My frustration and sadness had quickly turned into anger.

“Oh, yeah,” Lola said, eyes wide. “She definitely wants you dead. Then she can move in on your man.”

I glared all around the room, thrusting out my chin. “This all started with the damn Vanguards bringing Seluna back. If they’d never come into our lives, then this wouldn’t be happening *at all*.”

Lola nodded emphatically. “True.”

I sighed, frowning. “Then again, the Vanguards didn’t make me a *due destini* mate. That was just the universe fucking with my life.”

“Also true,” Lola agreed, her face solemn. My stomach clenched at her expression. When Lola got all serious, you knew shit had hit the fan. Of course it had—I’d been *possessed*. Repeatedly. By a demon. And it wasn’t like I could leave all that behind me. This whole situation revolved around Seluna’s ashes.

*At least Kira’s meditation worked*, I thought, gripping the pen tighter as I stared at the growing list of people who potentially wanted to gut me like a fish. *At least I slept okay last night…*

But for how much longer? The ashes were missing, and the fear of being overcome by Seluna again, the way I’d been in that restaurant bathroom, returned. It had never left—it was always inside me, lurking as I waited for the other shoe to drop and crush me.

I felt small against a huge universe full of dangers. And demons, apparently. What if we never found Seluna’s ashes? Would the Seluna nightmares come back? Would they just keep growing and getting worse? Would I have to live with this demon ghost in my damn brain forever? Would I just go mad in the end?

*What’ll happen to Greyson and Xavier then? Will they just fight each other to the death, blaming each other for my tragic, early demise? Will we all JUST DIE in the end because fucking Seluna decided to walk in and fuck shit up? OH MY GOD! THIS IS SO UNFAIR I—*

“Cali,” Lola said, gripping my hand to make me release the pen. I realized I’d been squeezing so hard my knuckles had turned white. “I can tell you’re spiraling.”

“Ya think?” I scoffed, throwing the pen onto the bed.

Lola cleared her throat. “Maybe we should talk about something else.”

She delicately plucked the notepad out of my hands. I resisted a bit until she gave me a very strict look that melted my resistance.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” she said primly before placing the pad on the nightstand, out of my sight.

I exhaled sharply, then said, “Okay, that feels better.”

“See?” Lola smiled, taking my hand in hers. Then she squinted at me. “You said something about Xavier earlier… What were you two talking about when I got home? You looked really intense.”

I rolled my eyes. “God, that’s a whole other can of worms. You came at the right time. I didn’t know what to say to him.”

Lola frowned. “Really? That big a can?”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding. “There are so many cans of worms around here I can’t even keep track. But that one is a big one.”

“Why?”

“I have no idea how to feel about Xavier starting to trust Ava again,” I admitted.

Lola scowled. “Do you think Xavier is going to give in to his wolf’s desire for Ava? Because we’ve all decided that wouldn’t be a good idea.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “No, you were the one who said he should sleep with her to get her out of his system.”

Lola held up her hands. “And I have since decided that isn’t a good idea!”

I shook my head. “The thing is, I trust Xavier. That’s not the issue here. But I can tell there’s something going on with Ava that Xavier hasn’t told me. It feels like…” I pressed my lips together. “It feels like I’m always worried that my mates are keeping sensitive information from me because they’re worried it’ll upset me. Or put me in danger.”

Lola blinked. “Right… And we don’t want that, because?”

“Because I can’t be coddled forever, Lola!” I said.

She huffed. “What’s so wrong with being coddled? I love it when Jay takes care of me.”

“That’s not the same,” I said vehemently. “Protecting me hurts Greyson and Xavier more often than not. I refuse to let the people I love get hurt on my behalf.”

“Although them dying tragic deaths because of their love for you would be horribly romantic—”

Was she being fucking serious right now?

“*LOLA*.”

“—I have to admit that I totally get where you’re coming from. You want them alive and well,” she finished. But not really. Raising her index finger, she yelled, “However!”

*Oh, boy*. I braced myself for what was coming next.

“However?” I asked.

“You already said you trust Xavier,” Lola said with a shrug. “So you should trust that he will tell you everything in time. Maybe it’s not even that big a deal.”

I hummed. “Xavier did say that something big was happening before you arrived and cut him off, actually. And he’s not one prone to hyperbole like that.”

“True,” Lola said. “This must be a big deal then. A huge deal, actually.”

“That’s not helping, Lola.”

She huffed. “I’m just sharing my thoughts.”

I took a deep breath. “You’re right about one thing, though.”

“I’m right about everything, you mean,” she said, inspecting her nails.

I ignored her and continued. “I shouldn’t jump to conclusions until I can talk to Xavier again. I’m not the most rational person when Ava is involved in a situation, so I guess… I guess I should work on not having those jerk reactions.”

Lola poked my shoulder. “You have the right to have those reactions, though. Ava has done so much bad shit to you. You know I’d destroy her if you weren’t so damn nice all the time.”

I snorted, shaking my head. “I’m grateful for your loyalty, but I think we can both acknowledge that Ava’s been… better, lately?”

Lola crossed her arms. “Better seems like a bit of a stretch. I’ll admit though that she’s changed, but whether she’s better or worse, I don’t know. She’s definitely not the same person who came back to life just to ruin yours.”

“It’s really hard to see the connection she’s been having with Xavier, though,” I said quietly. My eyes burned at the thought. “It’s not easily explained away by their old mate bond like before. This is new. All of it.”

Lola’s frown was deep. “What do you mean?”

“Ava is the one Xavier turned to when his wolf was out of control, which I suppose makes some sense since his wolf abandoned him after her death. His wolf’s attached to her still somehow,” I explained.

“But you’re the one who brought his wolf back,” Lola said.

“I know, but it’s complicated,” I said. “And now Xavier and Ava are sharing some kind of big secret that they’re working on behind the scenes. It’s like they’re building this new relationship and it’s sturdier than ever.”

“She still killed his mom, though,” Lola noted, eyebrows raised. “It’s not like anyone can truly forget that. Especially Xavier.”

I opened my mouth to disagree, but I couldn’t find it in me. She was right. Taking a deep breath, I shook my head. “I hate freaking out over this. I know that Xavier loves me. I need to just focus on that.”

Lola fiddled with the throw pillow in her lap. “Maybe this wasn’t the right topic to get your mind off things.”

I snorted, shaking my head. “For real.”

“What now?” Lola asked.

“I should probably form a plan to solve my ashes problem instead of focusing on abstract maybes,” I mused.

Lola got this squinty look on her face that usually spelled trouble. Or genius. “It’s too bad we don’t have something from the wreckage, you know,” she said. “Like some sort of physical clue. Then we could ask one of the witches to do a tracking spell.”

“Wait, Lola, you’re a genius.”

“I know, I’ve been told that before.”

“Come on, I have an idea!” I grabbed my friend and kissed her cheek before running out the room. Lola babbled something and trailed behind me as I went straight to Big Mac’s room.

“Oh my god, why are we running?” Lola asked, blocking my way.

Then I abruptly stopped to pause and turned for Kira’s room instead, because I’d definitely bothered Big Mac enough lately. Kira was also scary, but much more cooperative.

“It’s what you said,” I said. “If we get something from the wreck, there could be a way for a witch to track someone with it!”

The only real question was: would it work?

# Episode 2852

**Greyson**

I spun around on my desk chair, mentally compiling a list of contacts from my Rogue days. “Contacts” meaning a bunch of not-so-great-but-also-useful people who would be able to get me any information I wanted for the right price.

I didn’t exactly trust any of them, especially considering how long it had been since I’d talked to those kinds of characters. But perhaps it would be worth a shot if it meant getting to the bottom of this demon ashes robbery.

Seriously, what the fuck was wrong with the world?

Grumbling under my breath, I decided to put out some feelers. I’d told Xavier to do the same thing with his old mercenary contacts, so hopefully something would come out of this. In the meantime, I decided to do something easier—call Mace.

“… I’ve been super fucking busy is what I’ve been,” Mace told me, huffing.

It was good to see that his charming personality hadn’t gone anywhere since we’d last spoken. But it was also good to hear him sounding more like himself after everything that had happened with his mate and Luna, Pip.

“I’m still busting my ass over here to get the Blue Bloods back in fighting shape. Morale hasn’t been the best after the Letifer battle, and then the Vanguards had to go on and fuck up alliances and territories with their manipulations and fancy-ass parties. It’s ridiculous—who the hell would want to go to a party at a palace?”

“Not me,” I said honestly. The memory of Seluna burning the princeling’s estate down popped into my head, but I wasn’t going to discuss that right now.

“How’s training going, though?” I asked.

Mace sighed. “Much better. They’re not completely useless, so that’s great.”

“I think you’re being hard on them.”

“Tough love works. They’ll be okay.”

I snorted, shaking my head. “Well, I’m glad to hear that.”

“I’m sure you are, but we both know you didn’t call me to ask how I am.”

“Good point,” I admitted.

“What do you want?”

“I need you to keep an ear out about any vampire activity,” I said. “Especially about them sabotaging pack operations in the area.”

“Is this a Redwood problem?”

“Yeah. We’re being targeted, and it’s definitely a vampire. So I’d appreciate a heads-up if you hear anything around.”

“Sure thing,” he said gravely. “I’ll let you know immediately. Vampires are cockroaches.”

I hung up with Mace a moment later, feeling oddly good about our conversation. Pretty surprising, seeing as the man was completely goddamn obnoxious. Regardless, he was definitely more trustworthy than most of the people saved in my phone.

I scrolled through the list, grumbling as I went through it, spotting each name and reminding myself of the person. “Alpha asshole, Alpha asshole, hitman, hitman, hitman, detective, detective, drug dealer, exterminator, lawyer—” I paused, thumb hovering over the first name in the letter M.

*Maren.*

Maren. Right. Was calling Maren a good idea, though? She had Fenrir, a whole-ass kid and all, and she didn’t need any trouble. Maren had always been kind of shady, though, and I knew she knew a whole lot of people who’d have all sorts of info about all sorts of things.

I did not in any way want to open up any old wounds here, but at this point, it wasn’t like I had a lot of options. No matter what, at least Maren was trustworthy. I was going to do this for Cali, and that was all there was to it.

“*Hello! This is Maren, you know what to do after the beep!*”

Leaving a message hadn’t been part of the plan, but I sucked it up and moved forward.

“Maren, hey,” I said to her voicemail. “Hope you and the kid are well. Please give me a call back when you can—I gotta know if you’ve heard anyone talking shit about me recently. There’s a chance that my past has come to bite me in the ass, and I need to deal with it. Anyway, call me. Thanks.”

I hung up, pretty happy with myself. I’d give that voicemail a three out of ten on the awkwardness scale, with ten as the most awkward and one the least awkward.

“Greyson!” Cali’s voice interrupted my awkwardness ranking process, and then I heard a knock on my door.

“Come on in,” I called.

A second later, Cali, Lola, and Kira barged in. Cali was all flushed and excited, which was cute. I’d have kissed her, but the timing probably wasn’t right, so I told myself to focus.

“What’s going—”

“We want to go back to the scene to get something we can use to track the person who caused the accident!” Cali blurted.

I frowned. “There was just the mirror and taillight from the bike.”

Cali turned to Kira hopefully. “Could we use that?”

Kira shook her head. “It would be hard. The spell works best if it’s something the person touched—even better if it’s something they owned.”

“There was nothing extra at the site,” I said. “It was literally just the burnt remains of the motorcycle, but that belonged to the Courier, so it won’t help us.”

Cali crossed her arms, her lip jutting out. “This is so annoying.”

I stood up, reaching out to squeeze her shoulder. “Hey, it was a good idea, though. Maybe Charlie found something in the woods when he was scouting. We can ask him.”

Cali looked up at me, hopeful all over again, a big smile breaking through her frustrated expression. “You think so?”

“Of course.”

She sniffled. “I’m so thankful you’re not giving up on this.”

I pulled her into my arms and kissed the top of her head. As they stared at us, Lola swooned, and Kira rolled her eyes.

A few moments later, I’d led our little group out to find Charlie. He was in the kitchen with Rishika and Xavier, and I heard the tail end of their conversation.

“… guard duty,” Xavier was saying. “That should be a pretty standard way to take care of vampires without shifting.”

Rishika nodded. “Yeah, we definitely can’t shift. Not with LIPS still out there.”

I realized that my little brother was actually out here *advising* my pack, when I should’ve been the one having this talk with Rishika. I was annoyed that Xavier was doing this in my stead without asking.

Was the asshole trying to undermine my Alpha status?

No, I had to shake that off. I couldn’t worry about it right now. Any issues I had with my brother and our power struggle needed to go on the backburner until we found those damn ashes.

“Charlie,” I said, and everyone turned to look at me. At least I had their attention now. “You looked through the woods earlier—did you find anything out there that might belong to the vampire we’re looking for?”

Charlie frowned. “It was just a scent trail, nothing else. Whoever this person is, they’re really good at what they do. They barely even left a track in the dirt.”

Xavier eyed me carefully. “Why are you asking?”

“Kira might be able to do a tracking spell on something that the attacker owned,” Cali explained quickly, pointing at the witch. “But apparently”—Cali huffed—“they didn’t leave anything behind.”

As Cali spoke, Xavier dug into his pocket and pulled out a small coin. “Would this work?”

I couldn’t believe this motherfucker. “What’s that?”

Xavier shrugged. “Dunno. I found it in the wreckage.”

“Right, of course,” I deadpanned. “I lost the reason why you decided to keep that all to yourself instead of sharing it with the class.”

Xavier scowled. “I didn’t mean to keep it a secret—I just found it and pocketed it. I thought it could be useful.” He raised an eyebrow. “And isn’t it a good thing that I did?”

“Sure,” I said sarcastically. “It’s not like we’ve wasted a bunch of time because of you while Cali’s anxiety got worse.”

Xavier huffed, but Cali said, “Greyson, I know you want to punch your brother right now, and I kind of agree that he deserves it, but he meant no harm, so let’s focus on the matter at hand right now.”

I glared at my brother. He was lucky Cali was here. He seemed to be thinking the same thing about me, because he said nothing.

Thankfully, Cali then interrupted our stare-down.

“Are we sure that this coin belonged to the attacker and not the Courier?” she asked.

“I’m not sure, but we could still try,” Xavier said.

“Can I see it?” Rishika asked.

Xavier handed it over. Rishika narrowed her eyes at the coin and rubbed at it. Her eyes widened. “This isn’t a coin.”

“What, really? Then what is it?” Cali asked.

Rishika rubbed the coin some more, and the grime started to come off. She held it up and said, “It’s one of those patron saint medals—people keep them in their cars and stuff.”

Xavier’s frown deepened. “Let me see that again.” He took the thing from Rishika’s hands and examined it closely. A beat passed, and then he spoke, his jaw clenching. “I recognize this.”

# Episode 2853

**Xavier**

As soon as I spoke, I felt everybody’s eyes on me.

“What do you mean?” Cali asked. “Where do you recognize it from?”

I scowled at the thing, tracing the edge of it. “What Rishika said—I’m sure I’ve heard about that saint thing before. I know I’ve seen one of these medals in the past, but I can’t quite place it.”

Cali’s face fell. Her disappointment felt heavy on my shoulders.

“I promise I’ll remember eventually,” I told her. “I’ll keep wracking my brain.”

Cali nodded quietly. I hated it when she didn’t speak, when she acted like less than herself.

“*Anyway*,” Kira said, breaking the silence. She picked up the medal between her thumb and forefinger. “I can do a tracking spell on this for sure. Worst-case scenario, it leads us to the Courier or a random dude who dropped the medal out of his car, right?”

“Still worth a shot,” Greyson said.

“I need a bit of time to set up,” she told him. “I’ll be back.”

“I’ll go grab something for Cali to eat,” Lola said—a little too loudly.

Cali shook her head. “I’m fine—”

“You haven’t eaten all day,” Lola said strictly. “I’m not going to argue with you about this.”

Cali looked pale and like she was about to keep on arguing, but I walked over to her and held her hand. “There’s nothing you can do right now. Please don’t make yourself sick with worry.”

Cali looked over at Greyson. My brother raised his eyebrows. “You know I agree with Xavier. Shocking, but true.”

“And everybody agrees with me, because I have the best ideas,” Lola declared, and pulled Cali away toward the kitchen. At least my mate looked mildly amused now.

When I turned to Greyson, though, he seemed anything but.

“Don’t do that again,” he said seriously. “Ever.”

“What?” I asked, annoyed.

Greyson stepped closer, getting all up in my space. I held my ground as he said, “When you find something, you need to share it with the group, Xavier. The stakes are too high for you to be keeping secrets.”

I glared at him. “I’m not keeping secrets.”

He stared at me for a long moment, then exhaled sharply. “Look. I understand the mindset of someone used to doing things on his own and taking charge. I get it, but we can’t have any egos here with all this. Not when Cali’s well-being is at stake and we have such little information to go on.”

“I understand—”

“Do you, though?” Greyson tilted his head to the side, crossing his arms. “I thought we were past debating shit like this, but here we are, back at it for the millionth time—you and I discussing something that should’ve been a given. When you find a clue that’s important to the investigation, your number one priority is to turn it over for everyone to examine. That’s it.”

I fell silent. I hated it when he had a point, and it was true.

“This isn’t like a flesh and blood enemy we can charge at. Whoever did this is a ghost right now, and every bit of information is crucial. You know it is,” Greyson said.

Despite his curt tone and general Alpha vibe—which usually rubbed me the wrong way—I had to admit that Greyson seemed to be really trying to reason with me. By the clench of his jaw, I knew that it was taking some effort, too. I kind of appreciated that. I couldn’t believe I was feeling so in-tune with my older brother right now, but I couldn’t exactly argue with his logic.

“Fine,” I said with a nod.

Greyson paused. Then he scoffed. “Was that so hard?”

I didn’t dignify that with an answer.

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Greyson vanished into his office, and I went off to the kitchen. I grabbed one of Torin’s blueberry muffins from a platter on the counter. Much like Cali, I hadn’t eaten anything in a while. I sat down across from her at the table after kissing her cheek.

She gave me a soft smile. “Everything okay with your brother?”

“As well as can be,” I said.

Lola was humming, cooking a grilled cheese sandwich at the stove. Flipping the sandwich with the spatula, she casually asked, “So, Xavier. What’s up with Ava?”

I stopped mid-bite of the muffin, gazing back and forth between Lola and Cali. Cali just shrugged, looking as awkward as I felt. I cleared my throat.

“What about her?” I asked.

Lola put the grilled cheese on a plate and spoke in that same nonchalant tone. “I just thought that perhaps there’s something about Ava that needs to be discussed.” She looked over at Cali. “Between you and my friend, I mean.”

I raised an eyebrow at Cali. She blinked at me innocently. “What? We were going to…”

“I’m just doing the BFF’s work,” Lola said happily and placed the grilled cheese in front of Cali with a flourish. “I’ll go call my dads and see what they want to do tonight.” She pointed between us. “You two should continue your nice little chat,” she said. Then she strutted out of the room, looking a bit too perky for my liking.

“Did Lola just dip out after stirring the pot?” I asked Cali.

She snorted. “That’s something she does very well, actually.”

I sighed, annoyed but also realizing that this was something that I needed to address with Cali before it got blown out of proportion. I stared at her after swallowing the last of the muffin.

“Are you really upset about this whole Ava thing?”

“I just…” She took a deep breath, fiddling with her hands on the table. “I talked to Lola about this—”

Obviously. I wished she’d just talked it out with me first, earlier.

“—and it’s been bothering me. It’s pretty upsetting, actually, that you’d keep anything from me at this point in our relationship.” She looked up at me, her gaze shifting from timid to fierce, her chin tilting stubbornly. “I don’t want or need to be protected, Xavier. I just want to know. I think I deserve that after all I’ve been through.”

“I wasn’t keeping anything from you, I swear,” I rushed to explain. “The Samara situation—they’re going to hold a trial for a new Alpha, like I mentioned, and that may cause a problem with the Redwoods, because Knox, Ava’s cousin, is a hotheaded asshole who fancies himself a leader. And also has a grudge against me and the entire Redwood pack.”

Cali’s eyes had widened. “Oh, *no*.”

“Yeah,” I said.

She pressed her lips together. “This is all so fucked up. I supported Ava getting her pack together, but I wouldn’t have if it meant more trouble brewing.”

I placed my hand over hers on the table. “You can’t think that way. None of us pulled Knox into the situation. We could never have anticipated that he’d be a factor. This is no one’s fault.”

“But—”

“But it’s fallen into my lap, and I’m sure as hell going to take care of it,” I finished.

Cali took a deep breath, nodding. She squeezed my hand, then offered a small smile. “Okay, well. That sounds good. Thanks, Xavier.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think ‘good’ would be the word to describe any of this.”

She blushed, awkwardly laughing. “I mean—whatever you’ve got going on has got to do with the Samara pack in general, not just Ava and you, *together*.”

I shook my head. “Cali, I don’t want you to feel bad about this.”

“It’s not like I can help it,” she muttered. “I have some insecurities when it comes to Ava. I hate it, but I can’t just bury the feeling after everything that’s been going on. I think it would just make me explode.”

I huffed out a laugh, stood up, and walked over to her side of the table to hug her. She embraced me tight. Into her hair, I whispered, “I get it. And I think you’ve been handling all the Ava stuff with so much grace. Definitely more smoothly than I did when I realized that Greyson was in the picture.”

Cali snorted at that. “I’ll say.”

I faced her, stroking her cheek. “I’m so grateful to you. So lucky to have you.”

She poked my chest, raising her eyebrows. “And you’d better not forget it.”

I snorted, nodding before I leaned closer. My thumb brushing over her cheekbone, I whispered, “I never could.” She glanced between my mouth and my eyes, and I was about to kiss her when Kira’s voice rang out.

“Cali! Xavier! I’m ready to do the spell!”

I ended up giving Cali only a peck, and after she quickly finished up her grilled cheese, we both went to the living room. Lola, Dani, and Greyson were already there with Kira.

The witch was sitting cross-legged on the floor—she’d set up stones, candles, and some weird flowers before her. She laid the medal in the middle of a map that she’d unfolded to help pinpoint the person’s location.

“How long is the spell gonna take?” Lola asked.

“Shh!” Kira waved her off, closing her eyes. “No questions, I need to focus.”

Shockingly, Lola didn’t protest. I watched Kira’s focused face, wondering where the hell this whole thing would lead us. I stared at the medal, fighting once more to recall where I’d seen it before. I squinted at it, and I almost had a blip of a vague image, like the medal was attached to something or being held by something.

What the hell could it be?

Before I could refocus on the picture in my brain, Kira started to chant in some unrecognizable language, very loudly. My concentration went to shit when she waved a hand over the map. Cali stared at her, holding her breath, just like everybody else in the room.

Kira’s eyes opened.

Nothing happened.

Greyson frowned. “That’s it?”

Then, suddenly, the map burst into flames.

# Episode 2854

**Greyson**

Kira shrieked, and Xavier instantly jumped into action, dragging her up and away from the fire. At the same time, Cali gasped, picked up a blanket, and threw it over the fire to dampen it. I grabbed her by the arm and pulled her back before her sleeve got charred.

She looked up at me, breathing hard. “That was close.”

“I’ve told you you’re a badass,” I said, and she laughed. It sounded low and incredulous as she asked, “What the *fuck* just happened?”

“What the fuck just happened?!” Big Mac’s voice was accompanied by running footsteps down the stairs.

“Did you smell the smoke already? All the way in your room?” Cali asked the witch, her eyes wide.

“No,” Big Mac scoffed. “I just heard Kira scream ‘fire!’ That kind of gave it away, you know? Besides, I could just sense that something was wrong.” Her nose wrinkled as she looked around. “Not that I care what you’re all doing, but I just wanted to make sure another house isn’t being burned down.”

At this point, I was pretty sure that Big Mac cared about the pack. She wouldn’t stick around and help us all the time otherwise. She was all hard edges and a gooey center, which was probably why my mother was so in love with her.

“What did you sense, exactly?” Kira asked Big Mac.

“It felt like the kick of two magics clashing,” Big Mac said.

Kira scowled. “That’s not possible. I was only doing a tracking spell. I’ve done that so many times before—it’s pretty routine.”

“What does ‘routine’ mean?” I asked. “You’re witches. Magic isn’t exactly normal to begin with.”

“That this isn’t a spell with enough magic to alert another witch, let alone set the whole freaking map on fire,” Kira explained.

I crossed my arms, turning to Big Mac. “Tell us more about this feeling you got.”

She sighed. “I was just sitting in my room, and I felt some kind of force, like two magics pushing against each other,” she said. “I knew something was wrong, obviously.” She stared at Kira. “What were you doing the tracking spell on, anyway?”

Kira held up the medal. It was in pretty bad shape, actually. It was blackened with even more soot now. Big Mac took the thing and examined it as I watched her expression.

“What is it?” Cali whispered, all anxious. “Do you feel something?”

Big Mac turned to me.

“Can you read anything from it?” I asked.

“There’s still the remnants of some kind of magic on it, like a cloaking spell. That means whoever owns it didn’t want to be found,” Big Mac said.

Cali gasped, looking up at me as she squeezed my arm. I could practically hear her yelling in her head. I turned to Big Mac. “So either this is the Courier’s, and we’re not supposed to know where he is unless we call him, or this was left by the thief. Right?”

Big Mac shrugged. “Sounds plausible to me.”

“But if we can’t track it, how are we supposed to find out whose it is?” I asked Big Mac. She frowned at the question, so I turned to Xavier. “Who’s the saint on the medal? Could that be a clue?”

“I told you I can’t remember,” Xavier said under his breath.

“Well, try,” I said. I kept my tone even, but on the inside, I was barely holding on to my temper. Could this whole theft situation have something to do with Xavier? Or could it all be a red herring?

“I’m trying,” Xavier said, all tense.

Ignoring him, I turned to Rishika. “Do you recognize the saint?”

“No, it’s way too dirty,” she said. “But I can try to find out some info.”

“Thank you,” I told her, before turning back to Xavier. “Are you done trying to remember yet?”

Xavier glared at me. “Memories don’t just pop up from one second to the next, you know, but maybe…” He sighed. “Maybe I’ll call some of my old contacts like you suggested before.”

“Oh,” I said slowly. “So you haven’t done that yet.”

“No, I haven’t,” Xavier said tersely.

“Xavier…” Cali trailed off, as if in warning.

I didn’t open my mouth to continue this in front of everybody. It would turn into a fight, and that was the last thing anyone needed. No matter that it had taken a literal magical fire for Xavier to even consider my suggestion, a.k.a. the order his Alpha had given him.

Cool. Thanks, little brother.

“It’s fine,” I told Cali, taking her hand. “We’ll fix this. We always do.”

The sucky part about this whole thing was that I’d promised her a couple of days ago that we would have a normal, happy Christmas, and now it seemed to be turning into a fiasco.

“You really think it’s going to be okay?” Cali asked, looking up at me like a hurt kitten. Break my fucking heart, why don’t you?

“Yes, love,” I said, putting an arm around her shoulders. I turned to Kira and Big Mac. “This tracking thing is obviously a bust, though, so we’ll have to figure out a different angle.”

Lola raised her hand to speak, as if this were a classroom. “It wasn’t fully a bust. Now we know that whoever did this has powerful magic.”

“Right,” I said, gritting my teeth. “And that makes things a million times worse.”

Cali nudged me as Lola said, “I’m not the one to blame here, though. Just making commentary.”

“And we sure love your commentary,” Xavier mocked, and Cali cleared her throat.

“Lola is right,” she said loudly, stepping away from me to face everybody in the room. “Whoever has the ashes has some magic, or knows someone who’s doing magic for them. That’s more than we knew before.” She looked between Xavier and me. “Right, guys?”

I nodded. I had to remind myself to follow Cali’s lead on this. She was the one who was going to be affected if we didn’t find those ashes, and I wanted to bang my head against the wall over this entire goddamned situation.

Lola said something again, and Cali responded, but my attention drifted behind Cali to where Dani was hovering. She’d been so quiet the entire time that I’d forgotten she was there. She tended to do that from time to time, just watch and never speak. But I’d seen what she could do, and how her magic had helped Okorie attack Seluna. The quiet girl was smart and capable, if she put her mind to it.

“What about you, Dani?” I spoke to her directly, and she flinched. “Have you felt anything at all that could help us?”

She shook her head. “No. But I’ve made my enemies list.” She held out a piece of paper to me. It literally just said:

*1) Silas*

*2) that vampire guy*

I wanted to snort. That was a riveting read. “Thank you, Dani.”

She blushed hard.

“You’re the only one who followed my instructions promptly.” I looked at her list again, at the name “Silas.” I was pretty sure that, at least this time, my father wasn’t involved in this. My chest throbbed at the thought, though, as if in warning.

*At least, I really,* really *hope this isn’t about Silas…*

I cleared my throat, looking around the room. Lola and Cali were talking, with Xavier watching them, while Kira, Rishika, and Big Mac were examining the medal.

I raised my voice to gain their attention. “I think everyone should just take a beat and not race into any other actions that could cause us to set stuff on fire.”

Cali nodded. “Yeah. I need to check in with my parents anyway.”

“Oh, crap, my dads!” Lola exclaimed. “I’d better call them and make sure they’re doing all right at the hotel. Let’s go!” She grabbed Cali’s hand and ushered her out of the room.

Everybody drifted away. In the end, it was just Xavier and me, staring at each other.

“You need to remember what’s going on with that medal, Xavier,” I said. “This fell on your shoulders, and you have to push through.”

Xavier scowled. “I know. I’m on it.”

At least he didn’t start a fight.

Shaking my head, I gave him one last look before walking out of the house. The smoky smell in the living room had given me a headache. Along with everything else going on, obviously. I hated how little there was for me to do right now.

Annoyed with everything ever, I checked my phone to see if any of my shady contacts had called me back. There were zero messages. Usually, I liked to shift and go for a run when I needed to clear my mind, but now I couldn’t even do that because of LIPS. *Dammit*.

It felt like there were a million threats surrounding me and my pack, all closing in at once and threatening to choke me. I looked around and considered just going for a run as a human, but could I leave the pack house right now? Probably not. Who knew what the hell could happen next? A meteor shower? Alien invasion?

I couldn’t exclude anything at this point. We were like a crisis magnet that—

There was movement in the woods, interrupting my thoughts. I looked over, my eyes narrowed. I was ready to shift and attack if I spotted a threat, LIPS be damned. But before I could channel my wolf, I heard a voice in my head.

No words.

It was only making a growling noise, and I realized that this was a mind link. A mind link that a real wolf had sent out to me—the natural wolf pack’s Alpha.

Right. I had to deal with him right now as well.

I just loved my life.

I stepped off the porch and held up my hands to show that I meant no harm. In an instant, the wolf Alpha stepped out of the forest. He looked fierce yet calm, but I knew he was boiling with anticipation underneath.

*Have you made your choice?* he asked.

*I still have another day*,I mind linked.

The wolf Alpha growled. *Not anymore. We cannot wait longer. You have until dusk.*

# Episode 2855

“I’m so glad you had fun shopping with Lola’s dads,” I told Mom over the phone. “What did you guys buy?”

My mom rambled on, sounding so content, saying how she needed a few more gifts for the holidays still. I contemplated telling her she should stay out longer, just have fun before returning home and facing the brand new mess we were all in. I felt like I had to protect her and my dad from the madness. This was…

*Actually a bit hypocritical of me*, I thought. *Didn’t I just have a conversation with Xavier about keeping secrets? I have to practice what I preach and keep my parents in the loop! Even if that loop is filled with stress.*

Still, though, this wasn’t a conversation that I could have with my mom over the phone. As we wrapped up our call, I said, “I’ll see you when you get back to the pack house, okay?”

“Okay, see you later!”

If my mom could sense that something was off, she didn’t say anything. I knew she could be discreet like that, and I was grateful. Sighing, I picked up my phone and went to charge it at the desk by the window. I glanced outside, only to spot Greyson.

He was out in the yard, staring at a wolf.

*Is that a werewolf? Isn’t it a little small?* I frowned. *Wait, no. That looks like a regular wolf, from the natural wolf pack. But why is he here?*

It was almost as if he and Greyson were talking. Or engaging in a really, really intense stare-down. I, of course, wasn’t about to let this go, so I walked downstairs, ready to snoop and also mildly worried. I was mildly to extremely worried about everything these days, so that came as no surprise.

I walked into the front yard just as the wolf slinked back into the woods, its tail twitching nervously. That didn’t seem too good.

“What’s going on?” I asked Greyson.

He turned around to face me, his eyebrows arched. “Cali. What are you doing out here?”

“I don’t know, what are *you* doing out here?”

“It’s just another issue I’m dealing with,” he said, shrugging.

I crossed my arms and peered at him. When he said nothing, I started to tap my foot rhythmically. That did it.

“Remember that thing I mentioned that could help get LIPS out of our hair?”

I squinted. “Yeah?”

“Well, that’s what I was talking to the wolf Alpha about,” he said. “I thought I could get their pack to ‘migrate’ early and have LIPS follow them and give up on this ridiculous plan to buy the Vanguard land from Lucian.”

Dropping my hands from my chest, I moved closer to Greyson, hopeful. “Does that mean the wolves are going to follow through?”

Greyson nodded, rubbing his face. A little too hard, actually.

“Why don’t you look more happy?” I asked in confusion. “*Is* there something else happening? Another surprise? Because I’ve learned to hate surprises, Greyson, so you have to tell me what—”

“Their cooperation has a price,” Greyson said, interrupting me.

“A *price*,” I repeated slowly. Great. That sounded dangerous. Extra dangerous. And my mates would be at risk, and then something bad would happen to them, and then…

“Cali,” Greyson said, as if he could hear my every frantic thought. “Don’t worry. Nobody’s at risk, I promise. It’s what I was telling you about—I have to turn the daughter of the Alpha into a werewolf, but it seems like my deadline has moved up.”

I gasped. “What? Why?” Moving up the timeline didn’t seem good. “How is this supposed to work anyway? And wouldn’t someone need to, like, teach the new wolf person how to be a real person? Also, is any of it even physically possible?”

Greyson sighed deeply. He seemed to be doing that a lot lately. Not that I could blame him. “It is possible,” he said. “Allegedly. I talked about it with Sabine—she said she’s heard of it happening. Old stories. But there’s a lot of responsibility that comes with it, and I’m not sure if I want to take it on. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but there’s already a lot going on around here without adding a wolf-turned-human into the mix.”

I shook my head. “You shouldn’t do this, Greyson. We can find another way to deal with LIPS, you don’t have to sacrifice your peace of mind for—”

“It’s nothing new for me, love,” he said. “I’ve made sacrifices for this pack time and time again. It started with choosing a Luna I knew would be good for the pack instead of someone who’d be good for me.”

I winced at his words. *Damn*. I definitely didn’t need a reminder of him picking Joss, and feeling her loss definitely hurt as well. Greyson seemed to realize how I felt. His face instantly twisted with regret.

“Sorry,” he said. “I know that’s a sore subject. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“It’s okay. I don’t like it, but logically I understand your choice, even agree with it. But in this case…” I paused, alarmed. “Would turning the wolf into a human make the wolf girl your Luna somehow?”

The 1.2 seconds it took for Greyson to reply felt like a tortuous lifetime.

*Dramatic, I know, but still.*

“No,” he said. “It doesn’t work like that. It’s more that I take giving the Bite very seriously. I’ve never turned anyone.”

I clasped my hands together and twisted my thumbs, feeling quite awkward with this conversation. I’d asked Greyson to give me the Bite many times before, and he’d declined.

*Don’t bring that up right now, Cali!* I told myself. *You guys have enough to deal with already!*

But Greyson still said, “I think the reason why I’m struggling with this is because… uh…”

I looked up at him, tilting my head. I’d never seen him look so—*nervous*? Was the big-but-not-very-bad wolf getting all shy with me? How adorable.

“What?” I asked, genuinely intrigued now.

“I always assumed that the first person I’d give the Bite to would be… well, you,” he said simply.

For a moment, I was shocked—then realized that Greyson didn’t mean that he wanted to turn me right this instant, while there was chaos going on. And I knew that he definitely hadn’t forgotten about all the risks that the Bite would entail. He’d just clarified his intentions, and I felt this warm, tingly glow spread through me.

*Pardon me while I melt into a pile of goo, thanks!*

“I kind of love that you said that,” I said, unable to stop myself from smiling.

He took a step closer, smiling too. Though it was more of a smirk now. Good to see his confidence was back full-force. Before he could say or do anything that could derail my train of thought—like call me “love” or kiss me—I added, “I appreciate you being so honest with me. But if turning the Alpha’s daughter helps the pack, then you have to do it.”

He huffed. “I suppose.”

“It’s like you said before: if the Alpha wolf holds up his end of the bargain and migrates, it would be a way to take care of LIPS without hurting anyone,” I said. “Which is what I’ve always wanted when it comes to this situation.”

He stroked my cheek with the back of his hand. “At least I know this kind of solution would make you feel better.”

I slid his hand from my cheek to my neck. “Thank you. Though I do wonder how turning a real wolf would actually work… like, technically.”

“I’m not sure,” he said. “But I’ll be monitoring everything closely. I did promise you that nobody—human or wolf—would die or get hurt over this. I intend to keep that promise.”

I closed the small space left between us, resting my hands on his chest. “You always do. I’m with you no matter what you choose, because I know it’s gonna be for the best. I trust you.”

He stared at my mouth. “Say that again.”

I grinned. “I trust and love you, Greyson. So much.”

With a faint smile on his lips, he lifted my chin, then reached down to brush his lips over mine. The kiss was soft and smooth, unhurried—but I wanted more of it. I lifted onto my toes, wrapped my arms around his neck, and went for it.

He groaned, and when we kissed fully, I felt it from head to toe. I felt *him* against me, his body vibrating as one of his hands moved to my nape and the other landed on my waist, gripping tighter there. He nibbled his way down my neck, and when he hit a particularly sensitive spot, I whined and dragged his hand from my waist to the front of my coat.

His hands were warm when he trailed them under my sweater and upward, and I arched into his touch as he kissed me again, and again, and then I slid my palm under his shirt too, over his spectacular abs, and I thought that—

*Perhaps I actually shouldn’t be doing this in plain view in the front yard! Do I want another LIPS drone video situation? N-o-p-e!*

I pulled away from Greyson, panting as I looked up at him. He was breathing heavily too, his pupils dilated as he rested his forehead against mine. It looked like sheer willpower was the only reason why he hadn’t just picked me up and taken me back to his lair, caveman style. Which sounded amazing, actually, but anyway.

“Even if I can’t give you the Bite,” he murmured, “maybe there’s something else we can do…”

All the blood had left my brain and was currently concentrated in my breasts and general crotch area, so I literally had no idea what he was talking about.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

His voice was a husky whisper. “I could mark you as my mate. Officially.”

# Episode 2856

**Xavier**

I paced in my room, wracking my brain as I tried to remember where the hell I’d first seen that damn medal. Greyson, however fucking annoyingly, was right—this was crucial. It felt like this hazy memory that I couldn’t focus on would be the breakthrough that we needed to figure out who’d stolen the ashes.

“Xavier!” Lola’s shrill voice interrupted my thoughts. I turned around to see her leaning against the entryway. I’d left my bedroom door open—big mistake. “Hello, it’s me,” she said with authority.

“I can see that,” I drawled.

Jay popped up from behind Lola as she announced, “We have come to check in on you.”

“How’s it going? Any progress?” Jay asked me, with much less flourish. Which was what I preferred, obviously.

“No.” I scowled. “I’m just still trying to remember where I saw that goddamn medal before.”

Jay squinted. With his one eye, of course. “Maybe the thing was in a store or something and has nothing to do with the stolen ashes.”

Lola scoffed. “Jay, no! That’s not how mysteries work.”

Jay crossed his arms. “How do they work, then?”

“We find clues, and then we investigate, and we don’t listen to beautiful men like you when they try to discourage us!”

Jay smirked at that, because he was a sucker.

His good mood vanished, though, when Lola elbowed him and said, “Anyway, the point is that you’re not helping, and we’re here to help.” She marched into the room and stared at me, all intense. “Maybe you could do some meditation, Xavier?”

“No, thanks,” I said. “I’m not dealing with another Torin sound bath fiasco.”

Jay winced in sympathy. Meanwhile, Lola pulled out her phone and started typing furiously. There was a certain threatening air about her when she got all determined like this. I looked over her shoulder to see what she was googling.

“How to retrieve memories”

This was gonna be good. Not.

“Here’s a guide on how to remember stuff!” Lola exclaimed, then faced me, looking between the article and me. “‘Number One: Go back to the scene of the crime.’”

I shook my head. “I can’t even remember where I saw the medal the first time.”

Lola nodded seriously and scrolled down. “Scents are connected to memory, so—”

“You want me to *smell* the medal?” I asked, frowning.

“Babe,” Jay said. “I think it just smells like fire at this point.”

That was a logical argument, therefore I expected Lola to disagree with it just to remain on brand. But to my shock, she nodded again and kept scrolling.

“Ooh, look at this!” She thrust the phone in my face. “Handstands!”

I scowled. “What.”

“It says here that blood flow to the brain helps with memories, and if you do a handstand, it will make all your blood go to your head.” Her voice lowered to a reverent whisper. “It’s the perfect solution.”

I stared at Lola. She stared at me.

“No,” I said. “I’m not that desperate.”

She rolled her eyes while I mulled things over. Because if I did end up doing a handstand, I would rather do it alone. No audience. No comments. No encouragement. No endless chatter.

It occurred to me that I’d just described Lola.

“Thank you for dropping by,” I said, trying to be polite. Mostly because I knew that it would get Lola out of my way faster. “But I feel like I need some quiet right now to think about all this.”

“That’s fine!” Lola enthused. “See, Jay? And you said we shouldn’t bother Xavier—we’re helping him!”

Jay stared at her, blinking slowly, like an unimpressed cat.

Lola waved him off, turned to me again, and said, “Anyway, now that I don’t have to spend the next few days tricking my dads, I have way more time to help with this. I’ll just make you a list. Yay! We’ll be like detective pals, solving crimes together!”

Without allowing me to speak, Lola bounded out of the room.

Following his mate, Jay mouthed, “Sorry.”

As if an apology could *ever* make right everything that Lola had just put me through. A handstand? Me? *Please*, I was an Alpha, not a five-year-old. Shaking my head, I closed the door and locked it for good measure.

No more interruptions.

I sat on my bed, determined to remember. Yep. I had to remember. I would. I didn’t need to do a handstand to—

Okay. But what if I did do a handstand? How hard could it be? I was an apex predator, for fuck’s sake.

Shaking myself off, I stood up and walked over to a wall.

Fuck it. I was going to do a handstand.

So maybe I didn’t measure the distance correctly the first time. Maybe I wasn’t that good at balancing my body mass—that was where the wall was supposed to come in. Maybe I fell before I could complete the trick. So what? Accidents happened. Or not. I was a complete fucking idiot who couldn’t do a successful handstand, and I was so glad that nobody had been here to see it.

*Fuck.*

I went back to my bed and lay down. Perhaps some version of meditation would help. No sound bath nonsense, but just some quiet time to think. Thinking was good, people said. In theory, at least. Before I could close my eyes, though, my phone rang.

It was like no one wanted me to have any peace, ever.

I gritted my teeth together, considering ignoring it, but it was Ava.

“What?” I said into the phone. Perhaps I sounded a little harsher than intended, but whatever.

Ava picked up on it instantly, though. “Um, I’m just keeping you in the loop—like you asked me to.”

I sighed, plopping back down onto the bed. “Sorry, it’s not you. What’s up?”

“Knox is pretty gung-ho about this whole Alpha Iudicium thing. And what’s worse is that he’s starting to lose trust in me,” she said. “He’s all but stopped listening since I brought you to the Samara meeting.”

I winced. But that had been Ava’s idea. I hadn’t forced her to bring me. This sounded bad, either way—it made me wonder how much longer Ava would be able to keep a hold on Knox. So I thought of a different point.

“Some of the Samara pack members were reluctant to accept Knox as Alpha,” I said. “Can we push that angle? If the pack rejects him, then the Iudicium might not work. At least that’s part of it for the Redwood pack—no matter what, an Alpha must be accepted by the pack.”

“That’s part of the ceremony with the Samara pack as well,” Ava agreed. “There’s going to be a pre-Iudicium party tonight. I can probably talk to some of the Samaras then.”

“Great,” I said. “All you need to do now is convince the other Samaras not to go with Knox for Alpha.”

She scoffed. “It’s not that easy. I’m only one person, and these wolves want someone to tell them that they’ll be protected. So far, Knox is the only person willing to do that.”

“Because he’s a fucking idiot who has no clue,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter. He’s telling them what they want to hear. Don’t you know how politics works?”

“Shit.” I huffed. “Then what the fuck am I supposed to do about that?”

“Well, not you,” Ava said. “But Greyson could do something if he came to the party tonight.”

I glowered at the phone. What the actual fuck? Even *Ava* was choosing Greyson now?

“Greyson, huh?” I said. “For real?”

“I’m only saying that if an Alpha can promise his protection to the Samaras until they find a better Alpha choice, then they might be willing to forgo Knox and wait for someone else to rise up.”

That did make sense. Unfortunately. Didn’t stop me from feeling like shit at the thought that Ava considered *Greyson* the appropriate Alpha to make that offer.

“I can do it,” I said firmly. “I can come and represent the Redwoods.”

She sounded surprised. “But—”

“I’ll talk to my brother,” I snapped and ended the call, tossing the phone away.

I felt like punching something—Greyson—just at the idea that Ava saw him as *more* than me. And of course, my meditation plan was fucking shot to hell after that call. Whatever, it wouldn’t have worked anyway. I needed to take concrete action *now*. I had to show everyone that just because I wasn’t Alpha of the Redwoods, it didn’t mean that I was fucking useless.

I was *not* fucking useless.

Still royally pissed off, I rushed downstairs to find Kira cleaning up the remnants of the tracking spell.

“Kira,” I said. “I was looking for you.”

She looked both surprised and suspicious. “What is it this time?”

“I need you to help me remember,” I declared.

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Can you use your magic to retrieve my memories of the saint medal?”

# Episode 2857

**Greyson**

“I could mark you as my mate. Officially.”

I said that, and then I waited for Cali’s response. She kept looking up at me, her eyes wide, her mouth shut. She was silent for so long that I started to feel awkward—had I pushed too far?

Finally, she said, “I-I can’t do that.” She gulped. “That would potentially mean making a choice,” she rushed to explain, “which I can’t do right now. With Seluna and the ashes. Not knowing whether a choice would kill one of you, and not being able to even”—she gulped hard—“*think* about that after everything. I’m not ready to hear from Big Mac… And you know how I feel about, how I-I—”

She started to hyperventilate, and I gripped her shoulders, squeezing soothingly.

“Hey, no.” I shook my head. “I didn’t mean right now—you were literally possessed up until a few days ago. I’m not about to put you in that kind of position. I just meant eventually—at some point.”

But also sooner rather than later. Before I died from all the pining, or from being the Redwood Alpha. I didn’t say any of that last part out loud, of course, and Cali’s expression eased.

“Oh!” She laughed nervously, nodding. “Yeah, of course, I—I mean, that’s definitely something I’d be interested in, down the road. I obviously love you and want to have a symbol of that, it’s all…”

I stared at her as she kept on babbling about our love, and how wonderful I was, and other things of the sort. Nevertheless, the bitter truth was that I still felt semi-rejected. I reminded myself that I had to focus on the fact that Cali had been through hell recently.

“I get that you don’t want to make a choice right now after everything we went through with Seluna,” I told her quietly. “Don’t worry—I know that you’re trying to protect all three of us.”

And even if it was very, very annoying that I always had to factor Xavier into my relationship with Cali, it wasn’t like I had a choice.

“Are you upset?” Cali asked, looking at me with those eyes, and I knew that I was simply too far gone on her.

“Love, don’t worry. I understand,” I said. “I mean, we’ve talked about this multiple times. It’s not like it’s brand-new information. It’s the same information that keeps killing me softly, like a—”

She gasped. “No! That’s not—”

I snorted. “Cali, I’m joking. I promise it’s okay.”

She looked up at me dubiously, pressing her lips together. “Are you sure, though?”

I was sure about one thing, and that was that I would die for this woman. I would do anything, *anything*, to keep her happy, and that included tolerating my little brother as a third wheel.

I tipped her chin and gave her a kiss. A gentle, small one this time, softer than the others we’d just shared, with no rioting passion to it. Just the comfort of knowing that we were in this together.

“I see you,” I whispered. “I get you, love. Don’t worry.”

“It feels like…” She smiled a little. “It feels like you’re always on my side.”

I smiled back, brushing my lips over her forehead. “Of course.” I looked over at the forest-y side of the property. “Want to take a walk with me?”

She grinned. “That sounds nice.”

I chuckled at her enthusiasm and took her hand as we strolled across the grounds. We were quiet for a little bit, just us and the hooting owls, and then Cali spoke up. “So are you really going to turn the wolf into a werewolf, then?”

“I feel like I have to,” I admitted. “It seems like the fastest option to eliminate one of the factors affecting the pack. At least if we get rid of LIPS, we won’t be scared to shift. And then I won’t have my attention as Alpha split in so many directions.”

She sighed. “You always have a lot on your plate.”

“I’d just really prefer to focus all my efforts on finding Seluna’s ashes,” I said. “I can’t let anything threaten you.”

Cali frowned.

“Hey, what’s the matter?” I asked.

“It’s just—I feel so guilty. Both you and Xavier are prioritizing an issue that, at the end of the day, is mostly about me.”

I shook my head. “Love, no, that’s not—”

“But it is, Greyson,” she said, averting her gaze from mine as we walked. She looked ashamed, and it just broke my damn heart. “You both have bigger pack-related problems that you should be focusing on, but instead there’s just—”

“No.” The word was sharp when it came out of my mouth. I stopped in my tracks and brought her to a halt too, pulling her closer. “Look at me. Please.”

She sniffled, looking up at me. She looked hurt and upset, and I wanted to take her away, somewhere where nothing bad could ever fucking happen to her. Nothing.

“Your safety *is* a pack concern, love,” I said seriously. “You’re my mate, and a part of my pack. I would want to help anyone in my pack stay safe, and this isn’t a competition for who’s bringing in the biggest problems.”

She nodded, biting her lower lip. Of course she was hesitant—she hated to be the reason for anyone to be in danger—but I refused to let her take on this kind of burden. This was my responsibility. I was the fucking Alpha, and I… I hadn’t protected her. Not fully. I’d let Seluna take over, and I hadn’t stopped her in time. That would weigh on me, always.

“The ashes are a priority because there are huge ramifications to their theft,” I told her. “Besides, you were the reason why we got rid of Seluna in the first place. Like I said, you’re a badass.”

She blushed. “Greyson, you can’t keep complimenting me for killing someone.”

“But you did it so well.”

She snorted at my sarcasm—though it wasn’t really sarcasm—shaking her head.

“And aside from the ashes situation, I’m taking the LIPS-slash-natural wolf pack thing seriously too. I’m not ignoring anything, Cali.”

She nodded. “Well, good. But if you’re taking it seriously, then you’ll give the wolf the Bite and stop stewing over it just because of me and my feelings.”

“I never said—”

She squeezed both my hands. “I need you all to be safe. I can’t do anything about the ashes thing, and I can’t help Xavier with the Samara pack, but what I *can* do is help you make this choice.”

“Are you sure?”

She gave me a determined nod before adding, “We’re mates, we don’t need anything extra like me being your first Bite. I know that it’s going to be special, if and when it does happen, so I really don’t want it to be the reason why you hesitate to make the deal with the wolf Alpha.”

She seemed so convinced that I had no reason to dwell on this any longer.

“Okay, I’ll do it. I’ll tell the wolf as soon as he comes back tonight.”

Silently, she hugged me tight. The comfort of our contact was enough to last forever. Just then, though, I heard the sound of a familiar car engine—Orla and Tom were back from their shopping excursion with Lola’s dads.

“There they are!” Cali said, sending them a huge wave and smile. Under her breath, she told me, “I’m glad they weren’t here for that fire nonsense earlier.”

I snorted. “Go say hi to your parents. I’ll go prepare the pack for this new plan.”

She clung to me, and I leaned down to give her a peck on the lips. Then off she went toward the car. Her mood was much better, which meant I was feeling much better as well.

When I went inside to find Rishika, my energy levels were much higher—this felt like a concrete choice. Cali was right. Making the deal with the wolf Alpha was the right decision.

“It’s time to make a plan about the fake migration for LIPS. I’m going to get the real wolves on board tonight,” I told Rishika after I found her in the kitchen.

Artemis, who was sitting right next to her, grinned. “Well, that’s a turn of events.”

“Wait, what?” Rishika asked. “Didn’t they refuse last time? What’s changed?”

“I made a deal,” I said. “Not a huge deal, though. It’s definitely workable. I’m confident that this is going to work.”

Rishika nodded vividly. “I’m just ready to eliminate one of our problems. With LIPS gone, I’ll be able to shift whenever I feel like again!”

I nodded in agreement—I was also feeling the stress of not being able to shift. I couldn’t wait to have that freedom again. Especially with this potential new threat on the horizon—whoever had attacked the Courier, they were a strong opponent. We had no idea if there would be a future attack, and shifting was crucial if we wanted to come out on top.

“Gather the other wolves,” I told Rishika. “We’re going to have a war meeting soon to figure out the plan.”

Rishika practically ran out of the kitchen to get everybody else. I hadn’t seen her so excited in days, actually. Artemis seemed to share her sentiments, making a high-pitched happy noise as she followed. It reminded me of Cali, so I had to smile.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, then. It had to be Mace or Maren calling me back. When I checked my phone, though, it was someone else altogether.

Why the hell was *Rhonda* calling me?

“Rhonda?” I asked after picking up. “What’s going on?”

“I need you to come by,” she said. Her voice was low. Weird. Definitely nothing like her usual bubbly self. What the hell?

“I’m a little busy right now,” I said. “What’s going on?”

“This is urgent,” she said. And something in her tone actually supported that.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

Rhonda paused. Inhaled sharply. “I know what you are.”

And then the line went dead.

# Episode 2858

As I followed my parents from the car into the house, I couldn’t help but notice how many bags they were carrying. Each of them had two in each hand, and my dad had a brown paper-wrapped package tucked under his arm.

“What’s all that stuff?” Artemis asked, coming down the stairs.

Mom shook her head. “Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies.”

Artemis looked at me. “What’s she talking about?”

“Neither of you are allowed to ask me any questions or even *think* about peeking,” Mom went on, shifting her bags so she could shake a chiding finger at us.

“Oh.” I looked over at a baffled Artemis. “They’re Christmas gifts. She’s always like this.”

Thinking about Christmas filled me with strange, mixed emotions. I’d always loved the holidays, and Christmas was a favorite holiday for my parents too, so growing up there had always been so much to look forward to. But now it felt like there were just so many circumstances that were making it hard for me to get into the Christmas spirit.

I’d hoped that my first Christmas with the pack would be a joyous time, but now I wasn’t so sure. The ashes were still out there, which meant I was going to be haunted and terrorized by the lingering spirit of Seluna. And that was quite a Christmas present.

Not only that—LIPS was still a problem, and now Greyson was going to turn a real wolf. I didn’t know much about that process, but I had some questions. Would that wolf always have a special connection to Greyson, since he would be the one who’d turned her? Like a mate? Or would she be like a family member to him?

Either way, I didn’t love the idea of anyone having any kind of special connection to Greyson besides me. I knew it was selfish to think that way, but I couldn’t help how I felt.

“Cali?”

Pulled from my thoughts, I looked over at my mom. “What?”

“Do you promise me you won’t peek?” she asked.

I smiled. “I promise.”

“Let’s get these upstairs, Orla. You know how Cali liked to shake the boxes when she was a little girl,” my dad said, laughing, and led the way upstairs.

Artemis gave me a quizzical look. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine.”

“No nightmares last night?” she asked.

“No,” I said, feeling relieved to be able to give that answer. “No nightmares. I guess that means Kira’s meditation is still helping. But that doesn’t mean I won’t have any tonight,” I added darkly.

“Hey, don’t be negative,” Artemis said with a brave smile. “We’re going to get those ashes back.”

“Do you really think so?” I asked.

“I know so. We’ll find them, and we’ll throw them into the demon realm where they belong, and then we’ll return balance to the world. Everything will be fine,” Artemis said.

She made it sound so easy and so straightforward. I just hoped she was right.

“And hey,” she added. “As soon as we get the ashes, we can go to New Orleans.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” I said.

“I wouldn’t want to risk taking you down there until this problem with Seluna is settled, but,” she added, her expression darkening, “the longer we wait, the harder it’s going to be to find my uncle, Adair.”

“I’m sure we’ll find him,” I said, trying to be optimistic for her sake. But she was right—we had to find those ashes before we left for New Orleans. The thought of having to deal with nightmares through the holidays was bad enough—I couldn’t imagine having to do it on the road.

Artemis gave me a thoughtful look. “I’m going to talk to Rishika. Maybe she has some ideas about something we can do to find this ash thief. I know she’ll want to use her skills to help my sister.”

It still sometimes caught me off-guard that I was a sister, and tears sprang to my eyes. “Thank you,” I said, pulling Artemis into a hug. “I’m really grateful for the support.”

Artemis nodded and pulled away. “I’m going to go find her.”

I headed upstairs, thinking maybe I would try to rest my eyes for a moment, but Lola opened the door to her room and waved me over.

“What’s up?” I asked.

Lola handed me a list. Dear god, I could not deal with another one of her lists. I braced myself as she said, “What do you think?”

I looked down at the sheet of paper. “What am I looking at?”

“The top ten ways to recall lost memories,” she said proudly.

I looked up at her, baffled. “Why?”

“I think it might help Xavier remember where he saw that medal he found.”

I looked down at the list again, reading it over. “It does look like a very thorough list. But I’m not sure Xavier’s going to be up for trying hypnosis with a pocket watch.” I read a little further down the list. “Or sensory deprivation. *Or* staring at his reflection for four hours.”

Lola huffed, looking annoyed. “He should at least give them a chance. I put in all this research effort. And you could be a little more supportive, too. After all, we need those ashes.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I admitted. “Sorry.”

“Maybe Xavier would be more open to some of these if I tried them out on Jay first,” Lola said, thinking out loud.

“Yeah, maybe…” I said dubiously. What I was actually thinking was that the only way to get Xavier to try any of Lola’s techniques would be to hypnotize him *first*.

“I’m going to go find him,” Lola said, brushing past me.

I watched her go, feeling sorry for Jay, and trying—and failing—to imagine Xavier staring at his own face in the mirror for four hours.

But I appreciated Lola’s concern. And she was right about one thing—we needed those ashes. I just didn’t think a list of gimmicks was going to help us.

I stepped down the hallway to Dani’s door and knocked lightly, but the door was ajar and swung open.

“Hey, Cali,” Dani said quietly.

“Hey, I just wanted to see how you were doing.” I knew the missing ashes were making Dani feel just as anxious as me, and Dani just seemed so fragile sometimes.

She gave me a small smile. “I’m okay. Okorie and I are just taking a break from mentoring.” She gestured toward the other side of the room, and I saw Okorie sitting in a chair near the window.

Dani might have said she was fine, but I thought I saw the actual truth written on her face. She just looked tired. Older than her age, somehow—like she’d already lived more than one lifetime. Her face was thin, and she had dark circles underneath her eyes.

“Did you have a nightmare last night?” I asked.

Dani thought about that for a moment. “I don’t know if I’d call it a nightmare, but I definitely had some unnerving feelings.”

“What kind of feelings?” I questioned.

“Like Seluna was with me,” Dani said.

“I’m trying to convince her to let me cast a protection spell,” Okorie said, looking annoyed. “Maybe you can help talk her into it.”

“Do you think that might help?” I asked, surprised.

“I do,” Okorie said. “And I could do the same for you—”

“No,” Dani said quickly. “No, not for me.”

“Dani—”

“As far as I’m concerned, magic, spells, curses—they all end up causing more problems than they solve. We almost burned the house down.” Dani shook her head. “I wish I didn’t have any magic at all.”

It was clear to me that Dani was deeply frustrated, and I couldn’t fault her for that. “Magic can be a blessing, Dani—and a curse. And lately, it’s felt more like a curse. But if Okorie can do something to help, you should let him,” I urged. “Don’t you trust Okorie?”

Dani shot a look at the warlock. “Of course I do—it’s magic I don’t trust. And I don’t trust magic to take care of this.”

Okorie heaved a gusty sigh. “This is going nowhere. I’m just trying to help.”

I smiled at him. “I appreciate the offer, but, to be fair, I’m not sure a protection spell would stop Seluna. I mean, not this manifestation Dani and I have been experiencing. But we’re doing all we can to find the ashes, and that seems like the best way to take care of this. Once and for all.”

“Really?” Dani asked hopefully.

“But it could take some time,” I said quickly. I didn’t want to get her hopes up. I thought about Okorie’s offer again. “Dani, don’t you think it would be better if you had Okorie’s protection spell, just until we find the ashes and get them back to the demon realm?”

“No,” Dani said, with uncharacteristic firmness. “I think the best thing would be for me to leave the pack house.”

# Episode 2859

**Xavier**

Kira gave me a surprised look, then shook her head as she looked back down at her work. “I don’t think magic can help with memories, Xavier.”

“Why not?” I demanded.

“For one, both Big Mac and Greyson told me to cool it with the magic for now.” She looked up at me. “So it might not be the best idea to cast any other spells without running it by them.”

“Are you telling me you seriously need Big Mac and Greyson’s permission to do something you were born to do? That’s fucked. We’ve done this kind of thing before,” I said dismissively, “and I need to remember where I saw that damn medal. I don’t see how jarring loose a few memories in my head is going to be dangerous for the pack.”

“I didn’t think a tracking spell would be dangerous either, but…” She gestured down at the mess from the fire. “And then there’s just how effective I could be. I don’t think—” She stopped herself. “I’m just not sure if this is really what’s best for everyone right now.”

I looked down at her. Something was strange about Kira. She seemed… nervous about casting the spell.

“Have you cast a memory spell before?” I asked.

“Um…” She looked down at her hands. “Well, yeah, I have, but it was a long time ago.” She looked up. “And you should know that memory spells can be really unpredictable.”

“What do you mean? What’s unpredictable about them? It’s a memory I already have, I just can’t access it.”

She shook her head. “No, it’s more complicated than that. Trying to recall lost memories can have unforeseen side effects.”

“That’s fine,” I said, without worry. “I mean, unless these side effects are actually going to murder me, then I’m willing to take the risk.”

“Xavier—”

“Kira, listen to me,” I said urgently. “We need those ashes, and right now, this medal I can’t remember is the only clue we’ve got to go on. Cali’s life—and Dani’s—might depend on it. *Please*.”

Kira gave me a long look. “Okay,” she said reluctantly, but as she got to her feet, I couldn’t help but notice she didn’t look confident.

But I wasn’t going to back out.

“You can do this,” I said firmly, trying to instill a little confidence in her. “You’re a powerful witch. I know you are. This kind of spell is child’s play for you.”

My pep talk didn’t seem to be doing much for Kira, and part of me wondered if her reluctance had anything to do with the feelings she’d admitted to having for me.

“Are you afraid you’re going to hurt me?” I asked her.

She looked up quickly. “I’m always concerned about hurting someone with my spells,” she admitted.

“I trust you, Kira. I really do. I wouldn’t have asked you to do this if I didn’t trust you. I’ve seen what you’re capable of, and I really need your help.”

Kira chewed her lip. “Okay, I’ll do it, but if I sense that anything weird is going on, I’m going to stop immediately.”

“Deal,” I said.

“Sit over there,” she said, pointing to a chair. She handed me the medal. “Now close your eyes.”

I closed my eyes, but I was really hoping this spell wasn’t going to involve meditation or those sound baths Cali had told me about.

“Breathe deeply,” Kira said, her voice low and soothing. “Breathe in and out, slowly. *Slowly*.”

I tried to slow my breathing as much as I could without passing out, and as I blew out a breath, I heard Kira begin to chant. There was a rustle, and the smell of herbs and oils hit my nose.

“Rub the medal between your fingers,” Kira said.

I did as she asked, and almost immediately, I saw an image behind my eyes. It was fuzzy and distorted—I could barely see it. It was the outside of a house. There was a figure standing in front of the house, but I couldn’t see who it was.

*If you find them, you’ll get paid*, a voice said.

I screwed up my eyes, concentrating as hard as I could, trying to remember who that voice belonged to. I knew it was familiar.

*If you tell, I’ll come after you*, another voice said.

I couldn’t place that voice either, though it sounded familiar as well.

Maybe I should try to focus on the house. Maybe if I could figure out where I was, I’d remember who was talking to me. But it was just all so vague.

The voices faded out, and the image dissipated until I was back at the pack house, listening to Kira’s voice.

“Xavier? Xavier?”

When I hoped my eyes, Kira was next to me, holding the hand with the medal clasped in it. Quickly, before it disappeared, I tried to remember the house, and the figure standing in front of it, but it was too late. The memory was gone.

“What do you remember?” Kira asked. “Did you see anything? Hear anything?”

I gritted my teeth in frustration. I felt like I was *so close*—like I’d seen the threads of memory, but it just hadn’t been enough to piece anything together.

“Can you try it again?” I asked. “I think I could—”

But Kira was shaking her head. “No, I’m not going to do that.”

“Kira—”

“Remember, Xavier, whoever possessed the medal put a cloaking spell on it.”

“A what?” I asked.

“A cloaking spell. That’s what caused my tracking spell to backfire, and that’s what’s probably making it resistant to us probing for memories. No, I’m worried that doing anything more with this medal could be really dangerous.”

Part of me wanted remind her that I laughed in the face of danger—or at least didn’t back down—but I kept that to myself. “Thanks for being willing to try,” I told her. “And I really am fine. My brain is just as screwed up now as it was before,” I joked.

Kira gave me a thin smile. It wasn’t much, but it was something, and I was glad to see it. I hoped that her worries would abate.

I headed upstairs to my room, my frustration building with every step. Kira’s spell had been infuriating, because I’d felt so close to remembering something that felt really important. And that was either the identity of whoever had the medal, or a connection to the owner.

The medal carried a symbol I *knew* I’d seen in the past, and those voices were haunting me. I kept hearing them in my head. They were familiar, but not familiar enough to pinpoint.

I ran a hand through my hair. Maybe the situation wasn’t as dire as I’d first thought. The voice I’d heard had said that if I found them, then I’d get paid. So that helped narrow it down. Whoever the voices belonged to, they were people that I’d known from my mercenary work. That narrowed it down somewhat, but it still wasn’t enough to help me identify who it was.

I thought of Gabriel, and I wished I could call him. He might be able to help, but maybe not. There was clearly some kind of magic preventing me from being able to talk to him.

When my phone rang, I looked down at the screen in surprise. The number didn’t have a name attached, but it did look familiar, and after staring at it for a few moments, I realized it was a guy I’d done a few mercenary jobs with.

I accepted the call. “Yeah?”

“Xavier. It’s Rocky.”

“Hey. What’s up, man?”  
 “I’ve been hearing some stuff about you lately. Wanted to see how much of it was true,” Rocky said.

“You’ve been hearing stuff? What kind of stuff?” I asked warily.

“I heard you’re asking around about old friends of yours. You know, the kind of friends who wanted you dead.”

Rocky always had a way with words. “Yeah, maybe I am. What about it?”

“I was just thinking, you know Victor is dead, right?”

*Victor*. The name rang a bell for me, but distantly. I hadn’t known the guy that well. He was tall, with dark eyes that always looked dead to me. Like he was looking at you, but never really seeing you. I’d only done a couple of jobs for him because I didn’t like the way he did business. Even in the mercenary game, there was a right way and a wrong way, and I’d never trusted Victor.

“Okay, so he’s dead. What do I care about him?”

Rocky exhaled through the line. “I just wanted to remind you that Victor worked for a helluva lot of people, and in our business, that means that you have an even bigger pool of enemies. Dudes you might not even have met. That’s why you should care about him.”

“Rocky, why’d you call, man?” I demanded.

“Just to tell you this, Xavier: you’d better watch your back, because you could be next.”

# Episode 2860

**Greyson**

I looked down at my phone, feeling worried. Either Rhonda had hung up on me, or something had happened on her end that had suddenly ended the call.

*I know what you are.*

I kept hearing her words in my head, and the more I repeated them, the more ominous they sounded.

*I know what you are.*

If she truly did know what I was, then that meant that all my planning was too little, too late. I was supposed to prevent LIPS from discovering werewolves. Doing that would protect my pack, and my kind.

*I know what you are.*

If Rhonda knew about us, who else knew? And was I going to be able to contain the information before it spread to the rest of LIPS—and then to the wider world?

I called her right back, but it went to voicemail without even ringing. I stared down at my phone, worry creeping up my chest. I couldn’t just stand here, waiting for something to happen to us. And I couldn’t wait for her to call back. I wasn’t even sure she was going to. That only left me one choice: I was going to have to go see her and find out exactly how much she knew.

But first I had to find Cali.

She was in the kitchen, and the smile she gave me when I walked in faded when she saw the look on my face.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“I just got a call from Rhonda. She said something strange—”

“What?”

“She said ‘I know what you are’.” I watched as Cali’s eyes grew wide. “I need to figure out if she knows more than she should. I just wanted you to know where I was going, so you wouldn’t worry.”

“Of course I’m worried,” Cali said. “But no matter what she knows, Greyson, you’re not—”

“I’m not going to hurt her,” I promised. “I’m hoping this call was a sign that she’s willing to talk—about whatever she knows.”

“What’s going on?” Xavier asked, striding into the kitchen. He looked between Cali and me curiously.

There was no reason not to tell Xavier what had happened, so I filled him in. “I’m going to go see her now.”

Xavier nodded. “Yeah, you probably should.”

“Maybe I should go with you,” Cali offered. “Maybe it would help to have a non-werewolf with you to explain to her that werewolves aren’t a threat. And, failing that, maybe I can get the Fae magic I did on her to kick back into gear.”

“Thanks, love, but I’ll handle it,” I said, pulling her into a hug. “I’ll be back as soon as I can,” I added, pressing a kiss to her hair.

Xavier followed me outside to my car.

“I’m going to the Samara pack tonight,” he told me. “I have to deal with Ava and Knox.”

“Okay. Just do what you have to do,” I said, unlocking the doors.

“There’s something else.”  
 I looked up at my brother. “What?”

“I got a phone call. It was… not great.”

My shoulders tightened. “What was it?”

Xavier shrugged, but I could see that he looked worried. “Maybe nothing. But someone from my past could be a problem. I don’t know if it has anything to do with the ashes, but one way or another, it’s something that could be trouble for us.”

I thought about this. “Okay. Have Rishika beef up the patrols, but we still need to be very careful with LIPS.”

I opened the door and was about to slide into the car when Xavier spoke.

“If Rhonda does know about us, what are you willing to do?”

I’d already asked myself this question, but I thought about my promise to Cali not to harm a human and shook my head. “I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it.”

As I drove toward the LIPS camp, my mind spun. Had the Fae magic that had made Rhonda forget what she’d seen really worn off? Could that happen? Or was it something else? Rhonda was a scientist, and she and her team had been scouring the woods for information. Had she discovered more evidence that had helped her figure it out again? Maybe another drone image?

Whatever it was, the cat was out of the bag now. Or the werewolf, I supposed. The question was, was I going to be able to put it back in?

I knew Rhonda was certainly sympathetic to wolves—but what about werewolves? That was hard to tell. Experience had taught me that most humans didn’t take the knowledge of our true identities very well at all.

My thoughts moved to Xavier and the phone call he’d told me about. He’d been trying to cover, but I could tell it had shaken him up. And if someone from Xavier’s past was coming back to haunt him, it wasn’t out of the realm of possibility that someone from my past could do the same.

Back when I was a Rogue, I’d never worried about that kind of stuff. I’d only had me to worry about, and I’d figured I could handle anyone who came after me. But that had been a different life. I’d had no responsibilities to anyone but myself. Now I had the pack. And my brother. And Cali.

I turned off the highway onto a small access road the led into the woods. When I reached the LIPS camp, I was relieved to see that Wigbert’s car wasn’t there, and I hoped to hell I would find Rhonda alone. This wasn’t the kind of conversation I wanted to have in front of an audience.

I was about to pull right into the camp when I stopped the car, thinking better of it. I backed up and pulled into a small clearing that was mostly hidden from the road. I didn’t know what I was heading into, and I didn’t want to walk into a trap. I didn’t know why Rhonda had ended our call so abruptly, but if she’d been forced to end it, that could mean she was under threat.

I stepped toward the camp, but everything looked quiet. I stopped outside her trailer and listened. I could hear someone breathing inside the trailer. I could smell Rhonda’s scent. There didn’t seem to be anyone else inside with her, so I knocked.

Rhonda appeared at the door. She pulled it wide open. “Come on in, Greyson.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, looking at her closely. She seemed to be full of nervous energy, and I tracked her as she moved around the trailer.

“Yeah, thanks for coming,” she said. “I know I was a little cryptic on the phone, but Dick was here.”

So that meant whatever she knew, she was keeping that knowledge from Wigbert. That was a positive. If there was any kind of positive in this situation.

Rhonda turned and looked up at me. “I sawyou.”

I cocked my head. “Saw me what?”

She was sweating. It was cold in the trailer, so she had to be nervous. “I saw you turn into a wolf.” She swallowed hard. “A *werewolf*.”

My stomach dropped. How could she have seen that? I wondered wildly if she was bluffing, and I tried to laugh.

“Wow. Okay. That’s a wild story.”

But Rhonda shook her head. “I know what I saw, Greyson. I’ve always suspected that this new, larger breed of wolf we found weren’t just wolves, but something else.” She peered at me. “You’re Marshmallow, aren’t you?”  
 I bristled at the name, but I wasn’t going to let her trap me into admitting anything. She could assume what she wanted, and I would play along. “What do you plan on doing?” I asked evasively.

Her eyes went wide. “I want to learn. All about werewolves. Everything I can. I know most people think they’re only mythical creatures, so this is the most exciting scientific discovery in lupine study the world has ever known!”

“And how do you think Wigbert will take it?” I asked.

The excitement on Rhonda’s face faded. She cleared her throat, looking uncomfortable. “Dick’s interest in our research is not *purely* philanthropic.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

She coughed. “I mean that if he found out, he might want to exploit it. Turn the sanctuary into a zoo, featuring the megawolves. You know, something out of *Jurassic Park*.”

I didn’t like to hear this, but I wasn’t surprised. Rhonda and her team were scientists, but I’d always pegged Wigbert as a phony. But I’d been in a zoo once, and I had no intention of ever letting that happen to me again.

“Right, and if all of that were true—if I am what you think—what do you want?” I asked, her, cutting right to the chase.

“Well, first, I want to know if you’ll let me and my team protect you and your pack.”

I didn’t like the sound of that, but it didn’t seem like I had much choice. Especially with Wigbert running around.

I shrugged. “Anything else?”

Rhonda’s eyes lit up, and she bounced on the balls of her feet like a child. “Yes. I want to see Marshmallow. Will you show him to me?”

# Episode 2861

**Xavier**

“So you’ve got this, right?” I asked Rishika.

She nodded as she headed down to the basement. “Yeah, it’s no problem. I’ll look at the schedule that’s already up and add an extra patrol every hour. No one will mind. Everyone’s glad for a chance to shift.”

“You’re making sure people are shifting in the house, though, right?” I asked. “I know it sucks, but we’re still on the lookout for LIPS, on top of everything else.”

“Yeah, we’ve figured out that the basement is best, because it’s got that door that leads to the path behind the shed. That way we can avoid the porch.” She shrugged. “It’s not perfect, but it’s the best cover we’re going to get.”

I wasn’t surprised that Rishika had it covered and was getting right to work. That was just her way. We were lucky to have her in the pack. That piece taken care of, I headed upstairs. I had to get ready for Knox’s stupid party.

“Xavier?”

I turned to see that Cali had followed me upstairs.

“Hey,” I said, happy to see her. “What’s up?”

“I’m worried about Dani,” she said.

“Why?” I asked, confused.

“I don’t like her going off without protection.”

I tried not to roll my eyes. “Ease up, big sister. Dani’s an adult, and she can do what she wants. Besides, doesn’t she already have a sister?” I smiled as Cali frowned at me. “She’s going to be fine.”

But Cali didn’t look convinced. “I don’t know. But I’m also worried about Rhonda and LIPS. Do you think she really knows? What would happen then?” She chewed her lip nervously. “I really hope Greyson’s going to be able to figure that out.”

“*Cali*,” I said, taking her hands. “You have to stop doing everyone’s worrying for them. You’re going to drive yourself crazy.

“I know, I know, I’m not,” she said, blowing me off. “But do you know why Rishika is strengthening the patrols? Is something going on? Is there a specific threat, or is it just because of LIPS?”

I hesitated. I didn’t want to lie to Cali—not when she’d asked me a question directly—but I also didn’t want her to tell her about the call from Rocky. She was already worrying about everyone; I didn’t want her to keep obsessing over my safety.

“We added extra patrols because of the attack on the Courier,” I said with a casual shrug. “He was coming from our pack house, so it makes sense to assume someone might be coming for the pack. So we increased the patrols, just to be safe. They’re being careful of everything and everyone.”

I’d left out the part about me potentially being a target of someone from my past—and, by extension, maybe putting Cali in those crosshairs, too. But there was nothing for her to do about it, and it would only scare her. Besides, omission wasn’t the same as lying.

“You shouldn’t read too much into it,” I assured her. “It’s just a safety precaution. It’s always good to have a couple of extra sets of eyes out there. And until we get those ashes back, we’re just going to be extra cautious.”

She nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense.” She looked up at me. “Would you mind hanging out with me for a while? At least until Greyson gets back. I’m worried about him, and if Rhonda does know, what that could mean for the pack. I’m just nervous, and I’d feel better if you were with me.”

I pulled her into a hug. “I’d love nothing more, but I can’t tonight.”

I felt Cali tense against me, and I cursed Knox. Fucking shrimp. Not only was he a pain in my ass, but now he was coming between Cali and me.

She looked up. “Why? What’s going on? Is something wrong?”

She couldn’t stop, could she? I hated to tell her when she was so worried about so many things already, but I hoped she’d understand. “I have to go to this Samara pack thing. Ava asked me to come.”

Cali didn’t respond to this, but I could read her face, and she looked unhappy to hear it.

“I wouldn’t be going if I didn’t think I had to,” I said quickly. “I know it’s awkward because of Ava, but I’m really hoping you’ll understand why I’m doing it.”

She nodded. “I do understand,” she said quietly. “I know you agreed to help Ava deal with the Samara pack.”

For a moment I thought about how I hadn’t told Greyson about the party, even though Ava had asked me to get Greyson to attend. I didn’t need my brother to be there to do what I had to do. Besides, I had talked to Greyson, and he’d told me to do whatever it took. I was basically just following orders—not that I took my brother’s orders. Plus he was dealing with Rhonda right now.

But most importantly, Cali trusted me. She knew I wouldn’t be going unless I had to. Ava had gone out of her way to help me and the pack, and it was time I repaid some of that loyalty.

Putting my finger beneath Cali’s chin, I tipped her face up to mine. “You know I love you.”

She nodded. “I know.”

I pressed my lips to hers. Kissing always filled me with heat, but there was a cold corner of my heart that felt bad for leaving out parts of the story. I hadn’t told her about Knox, or the party, or the Iudicium. But she wasn’t in a position to help with any of that. It wasn’t her burden. And it wasn’t like I was risking myself by going. I was just going to try to get Knox to fail—it was pack business, nothing more.

And getting him to fail? That shouldn’t be too hard. Hell, that shouldn’t be hard at all. The chances were high that the idiot was going to fail all on his own, but a little extra prodding wouldn’t hurt.

“How long are you going to be gone?” Cali asked, leaning back to look up at me.

“I honestly don’t know, but I’ll come find you as soon as I get back. Maybe we can still spend some time together then.”

She nodded, but it pissed me off that I had to waste an evening I could’ve been spending with my mate for Ava and her petulant little cousin. Even if it was for a good reason. I wanted to be with Cali, but that just meant I was going to have to make the most of my time when I got back later.

Thinking about how exactly I would do this sent heat down south, and I gave Cali an extra long kiss before I said goodbye.

Then I went in search of Big Mac.

“What do you want?” she demanded when I found her downstairs in the den.

I ignored her attitude. “Can you add a protection ward to the pack house? At least until Greyson or I get back here.”

“Why?” she asked, immediately suspicious. “Did something happen that I should know about?”

“No—”

“Protection wards aren’t nothing, you know,” she warned. “Doing them requires a lot of energy from me. So if there’s a reason you want one, you’d better tell me.”

I heaved a sigh. “I got a call from an old friend. From back in my mercenary days. It was kind of a warning. And since we know that the person who stole the ashes used magic, I would just feel a lot better if there was some level of magic protecting the Redwood pack.”

Big Mac gave me a long look. “I know you went to Kira to help you recall some memories.”

“Don’t go after Kira,” I said quickly. “I asked her to. She doesn’t need your permission to do magic. Don’t blame her—”

“I’m not blaming her,” she said steadily. “I just want to remind you that magic is useful, but it’s not the answer to everything. And I don’t want you to start taking our magic for granted.”

I ground my teeth. “If I had my way, I’d never have to ask you for a spell ever again. But until that day arrives, will you provide some protection for this house? The house in which you reside?”

Big Mac looked at me for a moment longer. “Fine. But don’t expect it to last all night.”

“Fine,” I said. “Thanks.”

I turned and headed for the door. Big Mac could be reasonable when she wanted to be, but she was just so damn prickly.

As I headed back upstairs, I thought about my closet, wondering what I should wear to this thing. Not that it fucking mattered. I didn’t even want to go, and I resented that I had to. But I knew that if I was going to go, I had to make a statement. I had to exude authority.

I looked down as my phone rang. It was Ava. *Now what?*

“Yeah?” I asked sharply.

“Where are you?” she asked.

I bristled. “I’m getting ready for your little cousin’s party,” I snapped. “Why?”

I could hear the tension in Ava’s voice even through the phone. “Because guests are starting to arrive, X. You’d better get here fast.”

# Episode 2862

**Greyson**

I stared at Rhonda, completely stunned by her request. I couldn’t have heard her right. She couldn’t have just asked to see me shift.

Actually, truth be told, there was a hell of a lot about this that I couldn’t believe was happening. Rhonda now knew that werewolves existed—which was big enough on its own—but she was actually interested in helping us. A sinking realization came along with this, though, and I knew I was on dangerous ground here. Any time a human became aware of anything in the supernatural world, there was danger involved, and I needed to manage this carefully.

“Are you sure about that?” I asked warily. It was a legit question, but also a test, because I needed to see if there was any way I could convince Rhonda that she was delusional about the werewolf stuff. If the option of convincing her that she was wrong was still available—*at all*—I was going to take it.

But Rhonda nodded in a determined way. “I’m sure. I want to see you. The real you,” she added.

My gut twisted. “This is the real me,” I said.

“No, no,” she said, waving my words away like bothersome flies. “The whole you, I mean. Both sides.”

She had no idea how dangerous what she was asking for was.

“*Rhonda*—”

“Ever since your brother came to visit me with his girlfriend—” She frowned. “Or is she your girlfriend? Anyway, ever since then, I haven’t been able think of anything else except werewolves. The thoughts are consuming me. I’m not going to give up on this,” she added fervently.

I could see from the look on her face that she was telling the truth. And that she had somehow remembered everything from that day, so there was no point in trying to convince her that she had this wrong.

“So,” she said, interrupting my thoughts. “Will you show me Marshmallow? *Please?*”

Fucking hell. This wasn’t good. I glanced around the small trailer. “I can’t do that, Rhonda.”

She seemed to deflate, like someone had let the air out of her. “You can’t? Or you won’t?”

“You *really* don’t understand what you’re asking,” I told her.

“What am I asking?” she said. “Explain it to me.”

“For one thing, LIPS has cameras everywhere. I know that, and you know that.”

“But—” she started, but I held up a hand, stopping her protest.

“More importantly,” I said, speaking over her, “it’s forbidden for us to show ourselves to humans.”

Rhonda frowned. She seemed to be taking that in. “What could it possibly matter now? I can understand if you were trying to hide yourself, but I know the truth. The horse has left the stable, Greyson. What’s the harm in it now?”  
 I shook my head. I had to get out of this conversation. “There’s so much about this that you don’t understand.”

“Like what?” she challenged.

“Shifting in front of you wouldn’t just be a gross taboo—though it would be that—it would also put you in danger.”

She shook her head, looking stubborn. “I don’t care, Greyson. I don’t care about the danger.”

I almost laughed at the expression on her face. Her stubbornness reminded me of Cali when she put her foot down. But I kept my expression neutral and shook my head. “You don’t want to be in my world, Rhonda. Trust me on that.”

“Greyson, you don’t understand what I’m trying to do here. I want to help you! I want to protect you. I want to be part of the world you inhabit—”

“I do understand,” I said quickly. “It’s *you* who’s not understanding *me*.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“What I want you to understand is that you still have a chance here, Rhonda. You could put this all behind you and just walk away. You could pretend that none of this ever happened to you and go on with your life. And that’s what I really hope you choose to do.”

“Why would you want me to do that?” she asked, looking stunned. “After I already know.”

I pushed my hair out of my face. The air outside was freezing, but the trailer was airless, and my blood was starting to boil. “What I don’t think you understand is that being a werewolf isn’t some kind of novelty. It’s not a joke, and it’s not some kind of magic game. You don’t understand what my life is like. The world I live in is vicious and dangerous. It’s not a place of science or research, it’s a place of gut instinct and brute strength. Wolves don’t care that you’re on their side. They’re not even going to ask. Take my word for it, Rhonda—my world is not anyplace a human should be poking around in.”

Her chin jutted out. “It would be impossible for me to forget this. I already told you—I’m not going to give up on this.”

“I can see that.” I sighed, feeling defeated. Nothing I said seemed to have any effect on her. I had never had so much trouble scaring a human into backing off. Usually it just took mentioning the word *werewolf*, and humans ran for the hills. But Rhonda was clearly a different breed. I rubbed the back of my neck. “But I wish you’d see reason. You need to.”

“I *am* seeing reason,” Rhonda said stubbornly. “It’s *reasonable* to want to pursue the most important scientific discovery of my lifetime. I know what you’re saying about the danger, but I can handle it. Really. And I could never turn my back on this.”

“Think about it—”

“*I have!*” Rhonda said vehemently. “You can say whatever you want, but you’re not going to be able to scare me off.” Her eyes blazed. “I want in.”

“Rhonda,” I said, stepping closer to her. “Take my word for it when I tell you that you really don’t know what you’re asking for.”

I stared into her eyes for a long moment. The itch to shift flowed through me, but I allowed only my eyes to shift, changing from human eyes to the downward slanted eyes of a wolf, with no discernable sclera and a tiny, fierce pupil.

Rhonda’s eyes went wide, and she gasped. She stepped backward, stumbling into the rickety table built into the trailer wall. The table splintered beneath her as she stared up at me, her face terrified.

I let my eyes return to normal once again. “Do you understand what I’m saying now?” I said, letting my voice go deep, dark. “None of this should be taken lightly.”

But even as I watched, her expression went from scared to astonished, and then to excited. She looked at me for a long time, her eyes searching my face.

“*Greyson!* That was *incredible*! I know that wasn’t a full change—or whatever you call it when you shift forms—but it was *amazing*! Can you do it again?” she asked eagerly.

Shit.

I’d been hoping that would be enough to freak her out and scare her off, but it clearly had not had that effect. In fact, the effect seemed to be just the opposite. She’d wanted to see me shift, and now I’d just given her a taste of what she wanted. Had I just made a huge mistake?

“Greyson,” she said more urgently. “Will you? Will you do that again? That was astounding!”

My hands curled into fists as I steeled myself against the frustration coursing through me. I knew I had to be firm here, for Rhonda’s sake. And for her safety, I had to make sure I was thinking before I acted. I’d promised Cali that I wouldn’t do Rhonda any harm, but I knew I needed to really scare her. I didn’t see any other way of convincing her to back the hell off.

I stepped closer to her and dropped my voice. “I’m done answering your questions,” I snarled.

Rhonda’s face paled, and she took a nervous step back. I watched as her eyes flicked to the door—her only exit.

“Here’s what’s going to happen here,” I went on. “A pack of real wolves in this area is going to be moving, and you’re going to go with them. You’re going to take your whole team, and your camp, and Dick Wigbert, and the rest of LIPS with you. You are never going to contact me again, and you are never, *ever* going to come back to this area. You are going to put all of this behind you, whether you want to or not. If you know what’s good for you.”

I let the words hang in the air between us, laden with menace.

I meant them.

Rhonda swallowed nervously and shrank back, trying to widen the distance between us in the small space. It was clear that the energy I’d dialed up was affecting her.

I kept my eyes on her as I closed the distance between us again, towering over her. “You got that?”

# Episode 2863

When I heard the door open and then slam shut, my heart leapt. Was that Greyson coming back from his meeting with Rhonda?

I jumped up and hurried downstairs, but there was no one in the front hall. I pulled the door open and saw Xavier walking toward his car.

“Xavier!” I called after him, running down the porch stairs. But I stopped on the last stair, surprised to see that he was dressed nicely in a pair of dark jeans, a button-down, and a sweater. “Why are you so dressed up?”

He made a face. “I’m going to that Samara thing I told you about.”

“But why did you get so dressed up for it?” I asked. I had the uncomfortable realization that it looked like he was leaving for a date.

He sighed. “I didn’t want to tell you this before because I didn’t want you to freak out,” he said. “It’s a party, and I wanted to make a good impression with them. And considering that the last time I saw them didn’t go so well, I’m pulling out all the stops.”

“Oh,” I said, unsure of what to say. I was kind of starting to freak out. Then, “Why, though?”

“The Redwood pack is going to need their support, and I just want to make a good impression,” he explained, tugging on a sleeve of his sweater.

“Okay,” I said slowly. I guess I understood that. It was pack business. “But I thought you were meeting with Ava.”

“I am. She’s going to be there. That’s why I’m going.”

Something of my stormy thoughts must have shown on my face, because Xavier laughed.

“I hope you don’t think I dressed up for *her*,” he said.

“I guess it did cross my mind,” I admitted sheepishly.

Xavier stepped forward and pulled me into a tight hug. God, he smelled great, too. “I would never, okay?” he said. “And the next time I get dressed up, it will be for *you*, and I’ll look a lot better than this.”

“Promise?” I asked, sliding my arms around him.

He laughed again. “I promise.”

“Though, I have to admit, you look pretty great no matter what you wear… or don’t wear,” I added, my face growing hot.

Xavier grinned down at me. “I’ll keep that in mind for when I get back. Maybe you’ll get one of my private fashion shows I know you love so much.”

My whole body tingled at the thought of that, and I grinned back at him.

“Hey, you play it smart while I’m gone, okay?” he said, growing serious.

“What are you talking about?”

“Just stick around the pack house, will you? Don’t go traipsing around anywhere.”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t have any plans to go anywhere until my mates get back,” I promised.

“Glad to hear it.” Xavier kissed me and headed for his car.

I waved at him as he drove off, feeling more than a little envious that Ava got to spend the whole evening with date-night Xavier while I was left alone. I stood in the cold December air, watching, until the taillights of Xavier’s car disappeared from sight. Then I headed back inside.

I stood in the hall for a moment, and I had just started to wonder when Greyson would be back when I glanced over and saw Lola sitting in the living room with Jay. She was waving a pocket watch on a chain in front of Jay’s face, and it occurred to me that she was trying to hypnotize him. But it clearly wasn’t going well, as Jay looked bored and Lola looked frustrated.

“Jay! You’re not taking this seriously,” Lola snapped.

“I’m trying,” Jay insisted. “I’m looking at the watch, and I’m trying to clear my mind, just like you told me to. It’s just not working.”

“Maybe your brain is broken,” she said sourly. “It should be working. So why isn’t it?”

Jay rolled his eye. “Did it ever occur to you that maybe werewolves just aren’t susceptible to hypnosis?”

Lola made a face. “No. I mean—no. I did some research, Jay, and it is possible. I think you’re just a bad subject.”

“You’ve never hypnotized anyone before,” I pointed out, leaning against the doorframe. “Maybe you just need some training.”

“Thank you very much,” Lola huffed.

“And couldn’t it be dangerous, messing with Jay’s head like that?”

Now it was Lola’s turn to roll her eyes. “Listen, Cali, if anyone’s allowed to mess with Jay’s head, it’s me. I am his mate. Now shush!” She turned to Jay. “Okay, follow the watch very carefully.”

Jay obediently followed the movement of the watch as it swung back and forth.

I couldn’t tell how much it was working for him, but I had to look away. I was worried that if I wasn’t careful, *I* was going to be the one who would fall under hypnosis. But after a while, I snuck a peek back at Jay.

He had lost his bored look, and even as I watched, he blinked, and then his eye got hazy, like it had glazed over.

Lola stopped swinging the watch. “Jay?” she asked quietly. “Jay? Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” Jay said, his voice barely a mumble.

Wide-eyed, Lola turned to me. “I did it! I think it’s really working!” She looked back at Jay. “Maybe I should try something on him, just to be sure. Maybe I should ask him something.”

“You should be careful,” I warned. Knowing Lola, she’d want him to do something ridiculous.

Lola waved my warning away. “Stick out your tongue, Jay.” Jay stuck out his tongue. “Put it back.” Jay obeyed.

Lola grinned, looking triumphant. “Now I want to try something bigger.”

“Lola—”

“Jay, who is your one and only love?” she asked, ignoring me.

Jay jumped to his feet and took a step toward me. “Caliana Hart is my one true love. It is not *due destini*—it’s *tre destini*!”

Then, to my utmost shock, Jay leaned forward, like he was going to try to kiss me.

I stumbled backward, stunned.

“What the hell? *Jay!*”

Jay turned and burst out laughing. “I’m just kidding.”

“JAY!” Lola and I yelled.

This made him laugh harder. “The hypnosis didn’t work.”

Lola smacked his shoulder. “Jay Taylor Young, that was not fucking funny!” she yelled.

He grabbed her and pulled her into a hug. “I don’t need hypnosis to know that you’re my only true love.” And to prove it, he kissed her.

I could read a room as well as anyone else, and this felt like my cue to leave, so I spun on my heel and plowed right into a tall, solid barrier.

Surprised, I stumbled back, and Greyson caught me before I fell. “Careful, love.”

“Greyson!” I said, surprised. “You’re back.”

He smiled, then looked over my shoulder and raised his eyebrows. “What’s going on in there?”

I followed his gaze and saw Lola and Jay still lip-locked. I put my hand on Greyson’s arm and led him down the hall. “Oh, Jay’s just reminding Lola how much he loves her.”

Greyson grinned and pulled me close, then pressed a kiss to my lips. “That’s a good idea. Maybe I’ll do the same,” he murmured.

I kissed him back for a moment but pulled away. I loved kissing Greyson, but I was too anxious. “What happened with Rhonda?” I demanded. “Does she really know about you?”

Greyson’s smile faded from his face. “Yeah, she does. She must have gotten her memories back somehow.”

“*What?*” I asked, stunned.

He nodded. “I know. But she did. She remembers seeing me shift.”

My mind raced. “So what does that mean? What’s she going to do? Is she going to expose you?”

Greyson passed a hand through his hair. “That’s what I was worried about, of course, but Rhonda agreed that if I can get the real wolves to migrate out of the area, LIPS and Wigbert will follow. And Rhonda said she’d do her best to keep them as far away from Redwood territory as possible, going forward.”

“That’s good news,” I said, relief flooding through me. “Wait,” I said, stopping myself, “so does that mean you’re going to have to use the Bite on the Alpha’s daughter?”

Greyson nodded, looking grave. “It looks that way. I really wish there were some other way, but it seems like the Alpha won’t budge without me biting his daughter. And we need the pack to cooperate of we want to get rid of LIPS.”

I bit my lip. “So you’re going to tell the Alpha tonight? Get everything worked out?”

Greyson looked tense. “I’m not just going to tell him tonight. I’m going to do it.”

“Do what?” I asked.

“I’m going to turn his daughter tonight.”

“Greyson!” I stared at him. “*Tonight?*”  
 “I don’t have a lot of choice, love. This is what the Alpha wants, and if I don’t go through with it tonight, I’m going to lose their cooperation. Which means that LIPS won’t leave, and Rhonda won’t be able to protect the Redwood pack. It’s all connected.”

I thought about this for a moment, taking it all in. Greyson was going to administer the Bite. *Tonight.* He was going to turn a wolf into a werewolf.

I looked up at him. “Can I go with you?”

# Episode 2864

**Xavier**

When I pulled up at Knox’s pitiful excuse for a pack house—his rusty Airstream trailer—I saw that there was a large white tent pitched beside it. Well, half-pitched anyway. One side of it was sagging in a pathetic way. Inside the tent there were some lights strung up and a teenager standing behind a folding table with a couple of speakers. I supposed that was the DJ. I was in the relative privacy of my car, so I allowed myself to smirk—this was a *very* impressive beginning for the would-be Alpha.

At a glance, I saw that Ava had been telling the truth about people arriving early. There were a dozen or more cars parked around the edge of the clearing, and I could see about twenty party guests milling about in the cold night air. There was a plume of smoke, and as I watched, a fire caught in the middle of the clearing, where someone was crouched down, building a bonfire.

As I got out of the car, I looked carefully at the group. I saw a few people I knew from way back, and a couple familiar faces from the times I’d met with Knox.

“Xavier.” Ava walked over to me, her dark hair fanning out behind her as she moved. “There you are. I’ve been waiting for you.”

My wolf stirred within me, clearly happier to see her than I was. I gritted my teeth, gladder than ever that I didn’t have to rely on Ava anymore for help with my shifting. That was one less headache I had to worry about.

Ava slipped her arm through mine, and I had to fight the impulse to pull away. I was here on business—and that was it—but I didn’t feel like getting into it with her right now. She needed my help, and I needed hers.

“What’s been going on?” I asked, nodding toward the guests. “Did I miss anything?”

“Not too much.” Up close, Ava looked tense. “Just what you’d expect. Knox is talking a big game about his so-called leadership and kissing everyone’s asses to get their votes.”

“I can’t fault the guy for trying, but it takes more than ass-kissing to become an Alpha. He’s not running for mayor here. It takes more than votes,” I said. I looked around. “Does he have any idea I’m coming tonight?”

Ava raised her eyebrows. “I didn’t go out of my way to tell him, no. I figured it would piss him off more to be surprised by you.”

I grinned at her. I had to admit that I liked her way of thinking, and anything that would throw Knox off his game was going to be helpful. And a surprise attack was just perfect. The shrimp wouldn’t know what hit him. Looking around the clearing, I spotted Knox on the far side of the bonfire, leaning close to some pack members, speaking animatedly, drink in hand. Was that kid even old enough to drink?

I tugged Ava along as I strode toward him. “Let’s get this party started, I guess.”

“—and those damn Rogues didn’t know what hit them. They hadn’t even had time to shift when I pounced on them. They were like—*WHAT!*” Knox mimed a shocked face. “And then I was like—*BAM!*—and they were dead before they hit the ground. The girl I was with lost her mind. She was so freaked out and just fawning all over me”—he showed some pretend embarrassment—“but I was just glad she was safe.”

I rolled my eyes. Was anyone buying these stories of his? If I hadn’t hated this guy before, the sight of him telling his pathetic tales of courage and strength would have done the trick. Real Alphas never talked like this. Real Alphas didn’t have to puff out their chests and force people to listen to stories about how brave they were. A true Alpha simply *was* brave and strong and powerful. They didn’t have to tell people about it—they exuded it.

This shrimp exuded nothing but idiocy, incompetence, and bone-deep insecurity. And if *I* saw that clearly, then I was sure the other wolves would see it too.

Knox had just taken a slug of his beer when I tapped him on the shoulder. When he turned, he nearly spat out the drink.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he spluttered, coughing and wiping beer from his face.

“I invited him,” Ava said casually.

“*Why?*” Knox asked.

“Because I did, and he’s my mate,” she said smoothly. “And I don’t know why you’re surprised. It’s not like he’s the only non-pack member here.”

And because I couldn’t stop myself from twisting the knife in just a little more, I smiled at the guy. “Why do you care, Knox? It’s your party, and I’m here to celebrate. You don’t feel threatened by me, do you?”

Knox started to reply but stopped himself and pasted on a big, fake smile. On top of his look of fury, the effect was unsettling. “Of course not. I’m not threatened by you at all, Xavier. And I’m glad someone from the Redwood pack is here.”

Wow. Ava was right. Knox was kissing ass like his life depended on it. Too bad he wasn’t any good at it.

He slapped me on the shoulder like he was greeting an old friend. “Have a drink. I hope you enjoy yourself tonight, Xavier,” he said through gritted teeth. Then he turned back to the small knot of people clustered nearby. “Did I ever tell you about the vampire I staked? That was nuts! That vamp didn’t know what hit him…”

“What a tool,” I muttered.

Ava pulled on my arm, leading me away from Knox’s fabricated story of daring.

“You’re impressive, X,” she said quietly. “As always.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” I asked.

She smiled up at me. “You just have a way of getting under my cousin’s very thin skin.”

I smiled back. “Is it that obvious?”

“It is. But we’d better be careful. I already told you that I lost Knox’s confidence, at least partially. With you around, he probably doesn’t know whose side I’m on. It can’t look too much like we’re conspiring, or he’ll get even more suspicious.”

Ava led me toward the tent, where a few couples were revolving on the “dance floor” of packed earth as a slow Bon Iver song played from the small, tinny speakers. She draped her arms around my neck and leaned close.

I stiffened. “I didn’t come here to dance, Ava,” I said stonily.

I started to pull away, but she held fast.

“Relax,” she said, her voice low. “I have a few things I want to tell you. Knox knows we’re mated, so he won’t get suspicious if he sees us dancing. Dancing and conspiring aren’t the same thing on the outside.”

I didn’t manage to hide my scowl, and Ava looked irritated.

“Fuck, Xavier, is it really that bad to dance with me for a minute? Do you really despise being with me that much?”

“I’d just rather be somewhere else,” I said stiffly.

The speakers crackled, and the pair next to us stumbled as the guy stepped into an old gopher hole.

“Knox really knows how to throw a party,” I muttered. “He really went all out.”

Ava chuckled, and when she moved closer to me, my wolf stirred again. I really hoped my wolf wasn’t going to be a problem. She leaned toward me, and my senses filled with her scent, nearly making me light-headed.

“Watch what you say,” she whispered, her breath tickling my cheek. “I don’t know who around here might be sympathetic to Knox.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said. “Now what did you want to tell me?”  
 Ava didn’t answer right away, but she leaned her head against my shoulder. I wondered if she was taking things a little too far, but I kept my mouth shut.

“I got a potion from a witch,” she said, so quietly that only I could hear her.

“What witch?” I asked suspiciously.

“A witch who sells on the black market,” she explained.

I frowned. I wasn’t sure I was happy that Ava could so easily find a witch who sold on the black market. That didn’t bode well. Who was this witch?

“What does the potion do?” I asked, glancing at Knox, who was waving his arms around as he told another story. “Tell me it’s an arsenic dupe.”

She shook her head, sending another wave of her scent washing over me. “No, it’s a type of werewolf sedative—a weakening potion of sorts—that will ensure that Knox fails the Iudicium.”

“A werewolf sedative?” I asked. I’d never heard of one.

“The witch told me it’s strong enough to weaken him for the next several days.”

I took this in. “Okay. So what does that have to do with me?”

“I need you to distract Knox so I can slip the potion into his drink.” She looked up at me, her dark eyes flashing. “Can you do that?”

# Episode 2865

In the darkness of the quiet car, I looked over at Greyson. I was surprised he’d agreed to let me come with him to meet the Alpha wolf. When I’d suggested it, I’d figured he would argue against bringing me along. Both my mates usually did when it came to stuff like that.

But Greyson had actually wanted me to come this time. It was nice, but it made me wonder if he was more nervous about giving the Bite than he was letting on. I wondered if he’d allowed me to come along to support him—not that he’d ever have admitted that if it were true. I doubted any Alpha would. But either way, it felt good to know that he wanted me there.

“Are you worried the Alpha wolf won’t hold up his end of the bargain?” I asked. I hated to think of it, and of Greyson going through all this just to be stuck in the same position with LIPS, but it was on my mind, and I wanted to know if Greyson was thinking about it, too.

“No,” Greyson said quietly. “I trust the Alpha.”

“Do you?” I asked him, a little surprised. “Why?”

He frowned, but not at me—more like he was trying to figure out the answer to my question. “I don’t know, I guess. I can’t really explain it. I just get the sense that the Alpha wouldn’t go back on his word. I don’t think regular wolves do betrayal.”

I took this in. “What about Rhonda?”

“What about her?” Greyson asked, fiddling with the heat.

“Do you think she can really help keep LIPS away from us? And deal with Wigbert? And,” I added, thinking about it, “do you feel like we even need her help, now that you’re going to turn the Alpha’s daughter?”

I had to admit to myself that I was still uneasy about what Greyson turning this wolf was going to mean for him, long term.

Greyson glanced over at me, a small smile on his lips. “You shouldn’t worry so much, Cali. You sound like you’re carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders. I haven’t performed the Bite before, but it’s not a new practice. It’s been around a lot longer than I have. I know what to expect. And yeah,” he added, looking back out at the dark road, “until we can roam on our land without worrying about LIPS or men like Wigbert, I’m going to keep Rhonda in my pocket.”

I nodded, satisfied with Greyson’s plans. I’d always liked the way he approached problems. He always looked at them in a straightforward way and thought them through logically, without ego. Or, without much ego. He *was* an Alpha, after all. But his calm approach was one more reason why he was the Redwood Alpha. Not like Lucian, who was a lunatic who lived like a king in a castle. That guy didn’t have a logical bone in his body. I wondered how the Vanguards would approach this situation. Would they handle it logically? I seriously doubted it.

“Do you think we should let the Vanguards know what we’re doing?” I asked, my mind on the other pack.

“Hell no,” Greyson scoffed. “They made it clear that they don’t want to help us, and I have no intention of offering any help to them, either. No.” He shook his head decisively. “Let them deal with their own problems from now on. I’m done with the princeling and all his bullshit.”

I nodded, unsurprised by the strength of his response. After everything they’d put us through, I felt the same.

“What was in that bag you threw in the back?” he asked. “You planning to stay overnight with the wolf pack?”

“Oh, well, I got to thinking about the Alpha’s daughter,” I explained. “Will she shift and then be, like, human?”

Greyson turned the car from the main highway and onto a winding road. “I don’t know. I hadn’t really thought about it, but I guess so.” He was quiet for a moment. “It would make sense if she did—if this works, anyway.”

I took this in. “Well, once she shifts from werewolf to human, she’s going to need clothes. I didn’t know what size she was going to need, so I grabbed some of my own, and some from Lola, Artemis, and Violet. Just in case.”

Greyson smiled at me. “I’m glad you’re with me, Cali. Even for just that reason. That hadn’t even crossed my mind.”

I smiled as he gave my hand a squeeze, then thought back to how easily he’d agreed when I’d asked to come. “Happy I came with you?” I asked.

He laughed. “Of course I am. Just having you with me is the best feeling,” he said, his eyes on the curving road. “I wish we could always be together. You know that.”

“I do,” I said, leaning down to press a kiss to his hand that was entwined with mine. I did know it, and it made me feel good that he loved being with me. The feeling was mutual.

I turned to look out the window, noticing the trees were close together now, and the woods were growing thicker. My stomach gave an anxious lurch.

“Where exactly are we supposed to meet the Alpha?” I asked.

“It won’t be just the Alpha,” Greyson explained.

“Who else?”

“The whole pack will be there.”

“Oh.” I looked out at the darkness. I shouldn’t have been surprised about that, but somehow, I was. “I’ve never faced an entire wolf pack before. I hope they’re not too hungry.”

Greyson laughed. “Don’t worry about that, love. They wouldn’t dare touch you. Not when you’re with me.”

“Well, if things don’t go as smoothly as you’re thinking, I always have my magic,” I noted.

“I highly doubt that will be necessary.” He made a sharp turn from the dirt road onto another road, this one much rougher than the last. Even gripping my seat, I bounced up and down until Greyson brought the car to a stop. The headlights of the car revealed a small clearing in the woods. And beyond the clearing was a pond, the water a sheet of ice.

“It’s beautiful,” I whispered.

“It is,” Greyson agreed. Then he leaned over and kissed me. “I’m glad you’re here, Cali. I’m not sure what tonight’s going to bring… if the Bite will work or what, but I know having you here with me makes me feel like I can do anything.”

I smiled, my heart going out to him. I couldn’t help but detect a hint of uncertainty in his voice. If the Bite didn’t work… the alliance with the wolves might be finished.

“You can do this,” I said before kissing him again.

We climbed out of the car, and as I slung the bag of clothes over my shoulder, I looked around the clearing.

“Why aren’t there any wolves?” I asked. “I thought you said they’d be here? We’re all alone.”

Greyson peered into the dark trees. “You’re wrong there, love.”

I frowned at him. “Huh? What do you mean?”

“The entire pack is watching us,” he said, his eyes still on the trees.

I looked around, surprised. “I don’t see anyone. Or hear anyone.”

Greyson smiled. “That’s because you’re not a wolf.” He looked at me quickly. “I’m sorry, Cali. I know you’re okay with not being my first Bite, but I didn’t mean that you *had* to be a wolf or anything. I love you the way you are. You know that, right?”

I nodded. His comment had stung, but I shook it off. “No, it’s okay. I know that’s not what you meant. I’m just… amazed.” I looked around again but saw nothing but the blackness of night. “I didn’t know wolves could make themselves invisible.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Well, it’s time to change that. I’m going to mind link with the Alpha and let him know I’m ready to do this.”

I nodded and held my breath. I kept my eyes on the trees, waiting for any sign of the pack. I was looking closely, but it seemed like a long time before I saw a flicker of movement in the shadows. If it hadn’t been for the full moon hovering above us, I wouldn’t have seen anything. But then, one by one, the real wolves stepped carefully from the shadows.

I was amazed to see them—and a little scared. But mostly I was just blown away by the beauty of them. And the sheer number. All I could do was stare in wonder.

“It’s okay,” Greyson said soothingly, taking my hand.

But just as he said that, two wolves turned their eyes on me, their teeth bared in a snarl.

My heart pounded, and I could barely draw in a breath. “What’s happening?” I asked.

Greyson seemed to listen to something for a moment, then he stepped in front of me. The gesture was defensive, and he moved me behind his back, keeping his hand at my waist. “It’s the Alpha. He doesn’t want you here.”

# Episode 2866

**Xavier**

I couldn’t help but laugh. Ava was as devious as they came. Some things never changed. But at least this time, we were on the same side. “You’re playing dirty, you know.”

Her mouth curled up in a smile. “I thought you would appreciate that. After all, you are going to make sure Knox fails tomorrow. I just thought this magic potion would make things a little easier. Increase our chances of success. So—dirty or not—you’d be a fool to turn it down.”

“I agree,” I said, still amused. “I’ll do what you want me to do.”

“Just distract him,” Ava said.

“Happy to. Just let me know where and when, though I’m thinking the sooner the better.” The rest of that thought was that the sooner this was over, the sooner I could get back to Cali—but I didn’t share that part with Ava.

Ava looked over at Knox. “I think he did some pre-gaming before the party, and if this is anything like a barbecue, he’s just going to keep drinking.”

“So?” I asked, confused. “What does it matter? He can handle it, can’t he?”

Ava shook her head. “Something tells me he might go a little too far. To prove himself. All I need is for him to be a little distracted—just a *little* unfocused—and I can slip the potion into his drink.”

“Okay, what’s the plan?”

Ava thought about it for a moment, looking around the room in an assessing way. “I think the best way to do it is to give him a little more time before we make our move.”

I nodded, reluctantly impressed. “It seems like you’ve really given this some thought.”

“I had to,” she said, flushing. “The thought of Knox taking control of the Samara pack has been keeping me up at night. All I’ve been doing is thinking about how to stop him. I just can’t let him take over. He’s reckless, undisciplined, immature—”

“Obnoxious?” I offered.

“Exactly,” Ava said, laughing.

I smiled back at her, and there was a strange beat of tension between us. Then someone tapped on my shoulder, and I turned to look at a big, beefy guy standing next to me.

He gestured to Ava. “Can I cut in?”

My first instinct was to tell the guy to go fuck himself. *Cut in?* What the hell was he talking about? This wasn’t the eighteenth century, and this wasn’t a fucking cotillion.

But before I could say anything, Ava smiled and stepped forward, toward the man.   
 “Of course,” she said smoothly. She glanced at me. “Maybe you could go get a drink, Xavier.”

Confused, I hesitated for a moment.

*Remember*. Ava’s voice appeared in my head. *We have to play nice.*

She was right. and I forced myself to step away as the guy swept Ava into his arms.

Why the hell did I care who Ava danced with, anyway? But I knew the answer to that question—my wolf cared. He cared a hell of a lot. I’d felt it within myself the moment Ava had walked toward me tonight.

I grabbed a beer from the rickety card table that was serving as Knox’s bar and noted that the bottle should have been at least ten degrees colder. But shitty beer didn’t surprise me. Not at this party. Knox couldn’t even get beer temperature right, and that clown wanted to be Alpha. He was a fucking joke.

“Hey, there,” a guy said, walking over. “Good beer.”

Oh no. Not small talk.

“Best I ever had,” I muttered, taking a swig. I grimaced as it went down.

“Know who you’d want us to go with?” he asked.

I looked at the guy. He was shorter than me, with hairy arms and a five o’clock shadow that was nearly a beard. “For what?”

“For Alpha,” he said. “I’m still undecided about Knox, but I’m trying to be open-minded.”

I shrugged and took another ill-advised swig of beer. “If Knox has what it takes, he’ll show us at the Iudicium.”

“I guess that’s true enough,” the guy agreed.

I wanted to say that Knox wasn’t worthy of being Alpha. That he wasn’t worthy of being the assistant to the Alpha of this pack. I wanted to say that he wasn’t worthy of anything, but I remembered what Ava had said: Knox probably had his spies. And if this guy thought the beer was good, then what else was he lying about? I was going to play it safe and keep my answers neutral.

“Excuse me,” I muttered, and walked back toward Ava, who was still dancing with the big dude.

I knew my wolf was unhappy to see that, and I’d be lying to myself if I didn’t admit that I felt a twinge of jealousy at the sight of her in another man’s arms. But those feelings were probably just carry-over. Like a residual trace from way back.

The song ended, and Ava smiled up at the guy, then strolled back to me.

“You shouldn’t worry, Xavier.” She smiled, taking my beer from my hands and taking a sip. “You’re a much better dancer.”

“I wasn’t worried.”

Ava gave me a long look. It was searching, like she was trying to see beneath my skin—trying to read my thoughts.

“What?” I asked, growing uncomfortable under her gaze. “Don’t you believe me?”

She handed back my beer. “I just wondered how it felt for you to watch me with another man.”

I’d just taken a drink, and I nearly spat it out in surprise. “Seriously?” I asked, wiping my chin.

She nodded. “Yeah. There was a time when I would have felt your jealousy, but ever since the night with the incubus as the Vanguard palace, I’ve noticed that I can’t sense things like that anymore. I think the mate bond has been lessoned, somehow.” She gave me a steady look. “Have you noticed anything like that?”

I allowed myself to examine how I’d felt while I’d watched Ava dance with that guy. My wolf had reacted, but Ava was right—it wasn’t that uncontrollable pull I’d felt before.

She looked at me, her expression wistful. “I know you’re in love with Cali, Xavier. I know you’re mated to her.”

“Yeah, I am. And I hope you don’t still expect me to come running back to you in the end. As I’ve made clear a few times, that’s not going to happen,” I said. Part of the reason I was even at this shitty party was to help build the Samara pack as a future home for Ava.

There was an earsplitting outburst of laughter, and Ava and I both looked over. It was Knox, clearly drunk. I saw what Ava was talking about when she said he took things too far. He had a glass in each hand, and he chugged the glass that was filled to the top with what looked like straight vodka. Then he threw it to the ground. I suspected he thought it would shatter, but it just bounced, chipping the glass.

“He’s a real class act,” I commented, shaking my head.

But Ava wasn’t listening to me. Her eyes were darting quickly around the tent. “I think it’s time to do this.”

I nodded and started toward Knox, wondering what I could do to distract him without causing too much of a scene, but Ava caught my arm, holding me back.

“What?” I asked.

Her eyes were big as she looked at me. “Remember, we may only have one chance. Let’s get it right.”

“I know, I know,” I said, and strode toward Knox.

He was surrounded by pack members, and someone had given him a new glass, so he was still double-fisting it.

“So,” I said, stepping up to him, “you really think you have what it takes to pass the Iudicium?”

Knox turned on me immediately. He might not have been fully drunk, but it was clear the alcohol had had some effect on him. How much would he have had to drink to look so red-eyed and flushed?

“Why do you always doubt me, Xavier?” Knox asked. He was sneering, but his question seemed almost sad.

“I’m not doubting,” I lied, pouring on a little charm. “I just know the Iudicium is hard as hell. Have you been preparing for it?” I didn’t know what the Samara pack had planned for him, but it likely wouldn’t be anything easy. For Knox, anyway.

I looked up at Ava, who was moving slowly toward Knox, her hand inside her purse.

“Of course I’ve been training,” Knox snapped, but he looked nervous, and I suspected he was starting to doubt the piss-poor effort he’d been putting in.

“That’s good. Can’t over-prepare for something like the Iudicium,” I said, watching as Ava prepared to make her move.

But just as she pulled out the bottle and stepped toward Knox, the big dude she’d been dancing with grabbed her arm.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

# Episode 2867

**Greyson**

I knew my words had frightened Cali. Her eyes grew wide and darted around.

“Should I leave?” she asked quietly.

“No,” I said quickly, turning toward her. “It’s going to be all right. No matter what the Alpha says, nothing can happen to you when I’m with you.”

She gripped onto my jacket, watching the wolves still moving toward us. “I know you’ll protect me, Greyson, but this doesn’t feel like a very promising beginning.”

“Let me talk to him,” I told her. “You’re not going anywhere. We need to be on the same page, or we’re not going to get anywhere.”

I mind linked to the Alpha. *This is my mate. She is a member of my pack. If anyone harms her, I will kill every last one of you.*

“What are you telling him?” Cali asked.

“That you’re not someone to be messed with,” I said, knowing she probably wouldn’t like to hear that I’d threatened them if they hurt her. “And if they don’t let you stay, there’s going to be a problem.”

Cali nodded. “Okay.”

“You know you can trust me, love.”

“I have no doubt in my mind that you mean exactly what you say,” Cali said, her eyes on the two wolves baring their teeth.

*I understand*, came the voice of the Alpha. Then he spoke quickly in a language I didn’t understand, and the two wolves stopped moving forward. They looked into the shadows, where I guessed the Alpha stood, then slunk away into the darkness of the trees.

When the wolves were gone, Cali released her breath. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Now another wolf approached, this one much larger than the two angry scouts.

“Is that the Alpha?” Cali asked.

I nodded. “He’s acknowledging you.”

Even as I spoke, the Alpha bowed his head.

Cali looked up at me, looking a little nervous. “Am I supposed to curtsy or something?”

“I don’t think so,” I said, trying not to laugh.

She didn’t curtsy, but she did offer the wolf a cautious smile. “Hello,” she said, her voice barely audible.

The Alpha wolf looked over his shoulder and gave a soft yip. A smaller red wolf appeared from the shadows and walked toward us.

“Is that her?” Cali whispered. “Is that his daughter?”

“That’s what it looks like. Listen to me, Cali, I want you to stay close to me,” I said quickly. “Right here. Don’t move, and whatever happens, don’t interfere. It might look strange to you, but don’t worry about me, okay?”

Cali looked at me for a moment, then pulled me close and kissed me. “Now you listen to me. I know you can do this,” she said quietly. “Don’t worry about it. You’ve got this.”

My heart was pounding, but I grinned at her, grateful again that I’d brought her. “Thank you, love. Now I’m going to get this over with.”

I stepped forward and, with a cracking sound that echoed through the trees, shifted into my wolf form.

I stepped over the frozen ground, coming closer to the Alpha and his much smaller daughter. I knew what I had to do, but my thoughts went back to Cali, who was still standing behind me. I wondered what was going through her mind right now, watching this all go down. I could only imagine that she was thinking about the same thing I was thinking about—revisiting the conversation we’d had, when we’d both talked about wanting the first person I turned to be Cali. I had dreamed of it—and Cali had too, as it turned out.

But here I stood, and that dream was not to be.

I looked down at the young wolf, studying her closely. By the light of the moon, I could see that her coat was auburn red, and her muzzle was lighter, almost strawberry-colored. I realized I was trying to read the expression in her eyes. It was hard to tell with a wolf, but I thought she looked determined. That was something, but even if she was determined about this—even if this was something she’d longed for her whole life—I thought she had to be frightened, too.

*Are you sure you’re ready for this?* I asked her.

*Yes*, came the answer, without hesitation.

There was a space in the back of my brain that wondered if Cali still wanted to be turned, even if she couldn’t be my first. But—even if she was open to it—the process could still be dangerous for her. She was half Fae. With her, it wasn’t cut and dry. There were so many unknowns—no one knew what kind of effect the Bite would have on her.

Part of me wished that things could be different for Cali and me. I knew things simply were what they were, but if I could choose, I would only give the Bite to Cali.

But I had to let that go. I had to focus on the matter at hand, so I forced myself to quiet my racing thoughts.

Looking up at the Alpha and his daughter, I gave them a warning. *There is no guarantee that this will work. I know stories of the Bite being given to a wolf, not any real cases of it, and I don’t know what the results will be. Are you sure you want to go through with this? It may be dangerous.*

*I understand, Alpha*. The Alpha looked at his daughter. *It is up to you*.

The smaller wolf looked at me, and now I was sure I could see the determination in her eyes. *I am certain. Do it.*

I nodded. Then I circled the small wolf. A cold wind blew through the clearing, making the wispy clouds race across the velvet black sky. They looked like cobwebs around the full moon. It was so bright I could see my shadow on the ground in front of me. I approached the wolf from behind, then threw back my head and howled up at the moon. My eyes were filled with the brightness of the moon, and at my howl, all the wolves—including the Alpha—dropped to the ground.

Without allowing myself time to think, I lunged forward and bit down on the red wolf’s neck. I could feel my teeth pierce her skin, and I tasted her blood in my mouth. I released her in an instant and stepped back, wincing as the young wolf howled in agony, pawing uselessly at her neck. I felt terrible watching her distress, and I could only imagine the pain that was causing her to cry out like she was.

I swallowed down a bitter taste in my mouth. I hated this. I might have been a tough Alpha, but I wasn’t cold-hearted, and this felt like torture to watch.

The small wolf fell to the ground. She was quieter now—her howls didn’t pierce through the cold night, but now she twitched and moaned, and the sounds were more agonized, like the pain had grown much worse.

I looked over to Cali, who was watching—standing still, like I’d asked—but horrified. Her face was pale and her hands were clasped over her mouth, like she was trying to keep herself from screaming. I knew Cali, and I knew this had to be difficult for her. She couldn’t stand to watch anyone in pain. It always broke her heart, even if she didn’t know the person in question.

The taste of the wolf’s blood lingered in my mouth, and I shook my head, trying to rid myself of it. Despite all my earlier musings, I was glad as hell that I wasn’t watching Cali in this moment. I didn’t know if I’d be able to stand watching her go through that kind of pain. And it would drive me to the brink of madness to know I was the one who’d caused it.

I threw back my head again, howling up to the moon. And this time, the other wolves joined in. The sound grew and grew, bouncing around the clearing. More wolves joined in, and the sound grew so loud I saw Cali cover her ears. This was a call and response—between the wolves and the moon—and the sound was deep and resonant. It came from the most fundamental part of the wolf.

Watching Cali cower against the crash of sound, I wondered how she was handling watching this. It was… intense, and I started to regret agreeing to let her come. Cali had the softest heart of anyone I knew. She was so compassionate, and I knew that watching the young wolf in pain was upsetting her.

But my thoughts were interrupted when the young wolf clambered to her feet, whimpering with pain. She stood for a moment, swaying, and I wondered if she would fall again. But she managed a couple of tortured steps toward her father, and then she collapsed onto the frozen ground.