**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 25**

**Episodes 3064–3152**

# Episode 3064

**Greyson**

We all let out a collective sigh of relief as we walked through the pack house door.

*Wow, does it feel good to be back. I never miss this place as much as when we’re away fighting a battle.* Maybe it was because whenever we were going up against a major threat, there was no guarantee that I would ever see the pack house again.

For the first time in a long time, I felt sort of… light. We were finally safe from any immediate, looming threats, which was a rare thing for us these days. The only thing I wanted now was shower, a whiskey, Cali by my side, and sleep—not in that particular order.

My mom, Tom, and everyone else who hadn’t come along descended on us as soon as we were through the door.

“Is everyone okay?” my mother asked, her eyes on me as if searching for wounds. “You look okay, but are you really good?”

“I’m fine, Mom,” I said quickly, brushing her off.

“Does anyone need healing?” Torin asked, pushing to the front of the group and scanning everyone’s bodies for injuries.

“Charlie needs you,” Rishika said. She, along with Violet, helped a limping Charlie over to Torin, who immediately went to work on him. Kid couldn’t catch a break.

“What happened with the Samaras?” Tom asked. “We were all so worried. I was starting to wonder if I needed to try to find you.”

I realized then that before I could fully relax, I was going to need to have another pack meeting so that I could debrief everyone all at once. *Guess that whiskey will have to wait.*

“Everyone, gather around. Let’s have a quick meeting,” I called out. People poured in from every direction, and I ushered them into the living room.

“Don’t leave us in suspense!” Big Mac called out as she took a seat beside my mom. “Is everything good? Is that Samara Alpha six feet under?”

My mother smacked Big Mac on the arm. “That’s harsh, MacKenzie.”

Big Mac shrugged. “What? Knox was a pest. What’s the problem with being honest about wanting him… eliminated? This is a werewolf pack, right? Or am I mistaken?”

“We’re all okay,” I said quickly. I waited for a break in the clapping and cheering before I continued. “We fought hard, and in the end, we had Knox and his people right where we wanted them. Unfortunately, we weren’t able to take care of Knox ourselves, because the werewolf council stepped in.”

“What? The werewolf council? Where the hell did they come from all of a sudden?” my mother asked, looking shocked.

“I know, we were surprised to see them, too. But the good news is, Knox is officially no longer our problem.” There was so much more that I wanted to say, but I decided to keep things as positive as I could.

I saw Xavier out of the corner of my eye, shaking his head slightly and gritting his teeth. I felt exactly the same way about the council’s interference, but there was no way I was going to question their decision in front of the entire pack. That was something that we would do in private.

“We’re safe now,” I continued. “We can take down any and all defenses we put up, and I hope that maybe we can salvage our holiday.”

Everyone exchanged hesitant looks, obviously thinking that it would be too difficult to switch gears that fast from fight mode to celebrating and being happy.

Big Mac stood up and looked at Torin. “Okay, Fae. I think that’s your cue to do your Christmas crap, or whatever.”

That seemed to break the spell, and everyone jumped up, finally looking excited. I was sure that some of the wolves were finding it easy to shift from battle mode to party mode, since many of them were probably still on an adrenaline high from the fighting.

The pack went off in all directions, some racing into the kitchen with Torin, others arguing about which Christmas playlist to put on, and others setting about removing the boards from the windows.

Satisfied that everyone was at least partially occupied and calm for now, I slipped out of the room to grab that whiskey. Before I could make it to where it was stashed, Cali stopped me.

“You want some eggnog?” she asked, holding up a glass.

I smiled at her. “I was actually after something a little stronger.” My gaze slid toward the study, where my bottle of whiskey was waiting for me.

Cali smiled at me. “Well, you deserve it. You did such a great job today.”

I sighed, remembering how close we’d come to losing people today. I was pretty much healed up from the injuries I’d sustained during the fight, and from what I could see, almost everyone else was, too. Cali had complained about being a little sore while we made our way back to the pack house, but even she’d admitted that it could have been worse, considering that we’d gone up against a bunch of werewolves with amplified powers.

Cali put a hand on my wrist. “Greyson, seriously, I really mean it. You did everything you could to de-escalate things, and you gave Knox so many chances. Even though I know you wanted to kill him outright for what happened with Tanner and Blaine, you kept your cool. Up until the very end, you did everything you possibly could to reason with Knox and his pack. What you did probably saved a lot of lives, and that’s something to be proud of.”

I felt a warm glow at Cali’s words, but also a little awkward at the admiration shining in her eyes. She rose up to her tiptoes and gave me a quick kiss on the lips.

“You’re an amazing Alpha, Greyson. I just want you to know that.”

I smiled down at her, wanting to pull her into my arms and kiss her deeper, but there were too many people swirling around us at the moment, and this wasn’t quite the right place or time.

“Looks like Torin is dropping the ball on placing the mistletoe. We could definitely do with some right now,” I said, looking up at the rafters above us.

Cali smiled back. “I don’t need to use mistletoe as an excuse to kiss my mate.” She gave me another hard kiss but pulled back too soon. I wanted more.

*What I wouldn’t give to take her upstairs right now and continue things…*

Artemis appeared at Cali’s side and looped an arm through hers. “So, are you two done making out? If so, Mom wants to see you, Cali, and make sure you’re okay.”

Cali nodded and threw a meaningful glance over her shoulder at me as she let Artemis lead her away.

*If I can’t be with Cali right now, might as well get that drink.* I went into the study and was surprised to see my brother already there. He had two glasses on the desk and was filling them almost to the brim with whiskey.

“You read my mind,” I said.

“Technically, I can do that as a werewolf, but this time, I just figured we both needed this,” Xavier said, handing me one of the glasses.

I sat down in an armchair as Xavier picked up his own glass and dropped into the armchair beside me. We sat in a companionable silence for a few sips before Xavier said exactly what I’d been thinking.

“If the council doesn’t do what needs to be done with Knox, what will you do?”

I frowned as I thought really hard about what our options would be. “I won’t let Knox continue to be a threat to our pack, I can promise you that much.”

Xavier nodded. “I’ll have your back on that.”

We clinked glasses and drained the rest of our whiskey. I sat my empty glass on the desk and leaned forward with my elbows on my legs, suddenly lost in thought about the battle. I was a little annoyed about how it had all turned out, now that the smoke had cleared. “If we’d been able to follow through and take care of Knox, it would have been clear to everyone that the Redwood pack can take care of its own. But since the council intervened, there’s nothing we can do about it. For now.”

Xavier scowled. “I don’t like unfinished business. Makes me uneasy.”

“Let’s just consider it on pause,” I said.

Xavier nodded. “It’s not like we don’t have other problems to occupy our time. Big ones, at that. Like the ashes.”

“Yes, you’re right. That’s something we need to focus on, but I think the pack deserves to just be together and happy tonight. We can continue the search for Seluna’s ashes in the morning.”

Xavier gave a slow, distracted nod. “Whoever’s fucking with us is going to pay—and even more so now that I need somewhere to put all this frustration about the whole Knox thing.”

I nodded. “I’ve been thinking the same thing, actually.”

I was just about to tell Xavier how happy I was that we were on the same page when a scream tore through the air.

Xavier and I were on our feet in moments, and we raced into the living room.

# Episode 3065

Lola, Artemis, my mother, and I spun around to see Violet slap Charlie’s hand after he’d apparently snuck up behind her and made her scream. They both collapsed into giggles but stopped short at the sound of footsteps thundering down the hall.

“What’s happening?” Greyson yelled as he and Xavier came running into the room, their teeth bared like they were ready to fight.

I held up my hands in front of them, trying to defuse the situation. “Wait, it’s okay! It was just Charlie and Violet goofing off. Nothing to worry about.”

I gave Charlie an exasperated look, but I was happy that he was healed enough to horse around after the hits he’d taken during the battle. Torin was a godsend.

“You can’t do that! Not so soon after a battle,” Greyson snapped. “We thought something had happened—that someone had been attacked, something!”

“Sorry,” Violet and Charlie muttered, lowering their eyes in apology.

“They didn’t mean it, Greyson. They were just having a little fun. They deserve that after today, right?” I said, stroking Greyson’s arm. *He’s really tense right now. Alphas must have a hard time relaxing, especially after a day like today. He’s wound so tight, it can’t be good for him…*

Greyson sighed. “Fine, fine. Just be careful, okay?”

“Yeah, of course we will. Sorry again,” Charlie said before he and Violet shuffled off, exchanging embarrassed glances before they disappeared together.

I turned to my mates. “You two really don’t have to be so on edge. You did it. You helped take care of the Knox problem. You can both breathe a little easier now. We all can.”

Xavier’s jaw tightened, and I realized that they were probably still on edge about the werewolf council interrupting our battle. Things hadn’t gone as planned, and there was nothing my mates hated more than a loose end.

“Why don’t you both go clean up?” I suggested. “Have either of you looked in the mirror? You’re both kind of a mess. I’ll have two tall glasses of eggnog ready for you when you get back, and by then you’ll hopefully be in a more celebratory mood?” I didn’t really say it like a question—more like an expectation.

They both nodded.

“Yeah, we are a little worse for wear.” Xavier sighed. “And a hot shower sounds like heaven right about now.”

“Definitely. And we do want the pack to let off a little steam and be happy and together, now that the threat is over,” Greyson added.

“See you in a few?” Xavier said, plying me with a lingering glance.

I blushed and nodded at him, then at Greyson. “Yes. Now go!”

I turned back to Artemis and my mother once my mates had gone. “What were we talking about, again?”

My mother took my hand. “We were talking about you! I’m just glad that you’re okay after what you went through.”

I nodded at her. “Yes, I feel much better. Torin healed my head and shoulder. I feel like a million bucks, to be honest, which is hard to believe after everything that’s happened. I just hope people will really be able to enjoy Christmas, now.”

Mom nodded. “But what about you? Are you sure you’ll be able to? You know, with the other thing still going on?”

I resisted the urge to put a hand on my shoulder where the handprint was.

“I’m fine,” I said. “Everything’s okay. Nothing hurts, I haven’t had any Seluna hallucinations, Knox is taken care of for now… Everything’s fine.”

I glanced across the room, where Kira stood talking to Mrs. Smith.

*I wonder if I should give the meditation thing a try again…* *No, I don’t need to do that right now. I can wait one night. Tonight is for happy things, not worrying about the threat of missing demon ashes.*

“Good, well I’m glad you’re feeling okay. Your father and I were so worried.” Mom gave me a pointed glance. “And if at any time you start to feel under the weather, please don’t be brave. Not with me here. I’ll take care of you if you need me. Just say the word.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I said as she gathered me into a hug. “I’m so glad that you’re still here for the holidays.”

“Are we giving out hugs?” my dad said as he walked up to us. “I want one.”

“Of course.” I laughed, opening up one arm so that the three of us could embrace all at once. I closed my eyes and could almost pretend like it was like old times—when it had been just me and my parents. But when I opened my eyes again and saw Artemis laughing with Lola and Rishika, I realized that I didn’t really want to go back to that time.

*I’m much happier now.*

“It’s almost midnight!” Torin cheered, walking into the room. “You know what that means!”

“That it’s way past my bedtime?” Big Mac said dryly.

“No, that it’s almost Christmas Eve!” Torin said excitedly. “Ten, nine, eight, seven…”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him that he’d gotten his holidays wrong and counting down to midnight was more of a New Year’s thing, but it didn’t matter in the end. Everyone seemed more than happy to go along with Torin, and before long, everyone was counting down to Christmas Eve.

Xavier came walking down the stairs with an amused look on his face and his hair still wet from his quick shower.

“Eggnog, as promised,” I said, handing him a glass.

“What did I miss? Is it already the new year?”

I laughed. “No, Torin’s just getting his holidays mixed up again, but it’s kind of sweet, right? Maybe it can be a weird pack tradition to do these holiday mash-up celebrations.”

Xavier laughed, obviously in a lighter mood.

“I can’t wait to see what he does with actual New Year’s Eve,” I said.

“As long as he doesn’t set the house on fire with fireworks, I’m down for anything.”

I smiled and rested my head on Xavier’s shoulder, and it felt like all the fatigue of the day came rushing in at me at once. Standing like this with the warmth of Xavier against my body, I was suddenly struggling to fight off my own exhaustion.

Xavier planted a soft kiss on the top of my head. “Should I maybe take you upstairs?”

“No, no, I’m okay. I can stay,” I said around a big yawn.

“Okay, that’s it. To your room you go! You need to get some rest. It’s been a long day for everyone, you especially.”

“Fine,” I grumbled as I followed Xavier upstairs. “I do want to get out of these dirty clothes.”

Xavier looked back at me with a mischievous grin on his face. “I wasn’t going to say anything, but yes. That’s a good idea.”

I swatted him on the butt. “Stop teasing me!”

“What? You said Greyson and I were a mess—I can’t do the same?”

“No!” I said with mock defiance as we walked into his room. I raised an eyebrow as Xavier handed me a robe.

“Let me take care of you, Cali.”

I took the robe from him and snuggled into it as Xavier went to the bathroom and returned with a cloth.

“Come sit on the bed with me.”

“No, I’m fine, you don’t need to do anything,” I said. “Torin healed me. I’m good as new.”

“Maybe so, but you still have a little dirt and blood on your face—unless it’s a fashion statement.”

“What’s gotten into you?” I asked, plopping down on the bed beside him.

“I don’t know. I guess I’m just in a good mood now. We’re all safe, you’re safe, we can relax for a moment, and I’m taking advantage.”

“Well, you deserve to have a little fun,” I said as I let my head drift backward. “Just don’t let it all be at my expense.”

Xavier chuckled as he set about wiping my face with the soft, wet cloth. It was way more intimate than I’d expected it to be. I felt so close to him in that moment, so unguarded, that I did what I usually tried to avoid doing: I brought up Ava.

“So, what did Ava want to talk about earlier?” I asked.

Xavier’s hand paused mid-wipe, then he continued. “She just wanted to thank me for helping her out during the battle.”

I nodded. “I have to admit that Ava’s really changed. She helped me, too. A few times, actually. Knox and his boys threw us into a pit, and she helped me get out, and then Knox cornered me during the battle, and she got between us before he could do anything… Or before I had to. I know it sounds crazy, but I think maybe she and I could have an actual friendship someday.”

“You don’t have to do that for me, Cali. You don’t need to force it. I’m done with Ava.”

I stopped Xavier’s hand and looked at him. “You don’t have to be.”

# Episode 3066

**Violet**

Charlie and I were snuggled on the couch in the living room, soaking up the holiday cheer unfolding around us. It really felt good to be relaxing for once without a threat hanging over our heads. The only bad part was that I was still a little worried about Charlie. He’d had a rough time during today’s battle, and I wasn’t completely convinced that he was a hundred percent.

“Are you sure you’re not hurt, even a little bit?” I asked, looking him over. “No bumps, bruises, cuts, anything like that?”

“I’m fine. I’ve told you that a million times. Stop worrying,” Charlie said. “Torin did his thing and healed me, then gave me a clean bill of health. I’m good!”

I rolled my eyes. “I can kind of tell after you played that prank on me and got me in trouble with Greyson. That wasn’t the behavior of an injured man.”

Charlie scrunched up his nose. “Sorry about that.”

I shrugged. “I forgive you, of course, but we should take it easy after a fight like that. Everyone is always on edge afterward.”

Charlie nodded. “I feel that way myself. Even now, I still feel so amped. It’s like I still have all this extra adrenaline left over that I need to spend.” Charlie jumped up and down on the couch a few times and flexed his muscles.

I smiled at him. “I can help you with that.”

I slid my hands up the back of his neck and pulled him into a deep kiss. He leaned into it, pressing me back against the couch and snaking his tongue into my mouth. I wrapped my arms around his neck, prepared to let the kiss go on as long as he wanted. It was just what I needed after the trying day we’d had.

Charlie suddenly pulled back. “I have a surprise for you.”

“Ooh, a surprise? I love surprises! What is it?”

“A present.”

“Charlie, no! It’s way too soon. It’s only Christmas Eve! You heard Torin’s countdown!”

“I know that, but in my family, it’s tradition for everyone to open one present on Christmas Eve.”

I grinned. “Sounds like a family tradition I can get behind.”

I held out my hands for my gift, unable to stop beaming at my boyfriend, who was not only a fierce fighter, but a complete sweetie to boot.

Charlie slid off the couch and reached under the tree to extract a large, flat gift.

“Yay it’s one of the bigger ones!” I said, absolutely delighted that he’d been so thoughtful.

Charlie watched me anxiously as I ripped off the paper and lifted the lid off the box. Then I paused, confused. It was a sweatshirt, but it was obviously used. I looked up at Charlie, who was staring at me with excitement in his eyes.

I forced a smile. “Oh, it’s so nice! It’s a little worn, so I’m sure it’ll be really comfortable.”

Charlie’s face fell.

*Oh no, did I just hurt his feelings? Did I ruin Christmas?* I wanted to be more excited so that I didn’t disappoint him, but I was just so… confused. “Um… Why *did* you give me a used sweatshirt?”

His face fell even more. “Don’t you recognize it?”

I frowned and looked back down at it. It was just a nice-looking sweatshirt from his school in Minnesota. I didn’t get it. Then a memory hit me like a ton of bricks, and I quickly looked up at him. “Wait a minute. Is this the sweatshirt you were wearing when I saw you for the first time?”

Charlie smiled and ducked his head. “Yeah! It’s my lucky sweatshirt, because it brought us together.”

I grinned. *See? So damn sweet!*

“So… Do you like it?”

“Like it? I *love* it!” I leapt up from the couch and kissed him. “It’s perfect.”

I immediately put the sweatshirt on. It was just as warm and comfy as I thought it would be, *and* it still kind of smelled like Charlie. *I’ll have to get him to wear it every once in a while, so it’ll keep smelling like him.*

“Good, glad you like it. Do you want a refill on your drink?” he asked, holding up my empty glass.

I nodded. “Yeah, that would be great.”

Charlie left, and I started cleaning up the wrapping paper. I looked up as Marta came walking over.

“Can I sit with you for a minute?” Marta asked.

Things between Marta and me were still a bit awkward after our last little argument—not to mention everything that had happened with Lilac—but I knew that it would be rude to outright refuse her. I nodded, anxiously balling up the shredded wrapping paper in my hands.

Marta sighed and sat down, but she didn’t speak right away. The silence between us was beyond awkward, and I was grateful for the Christmas music that was playing, since it helped just a little to take the edge off the awkwardness lingering between us.

“I’m sorry again for accusing you of kissing Okorie,” I blurted out.

Marta nodded. “Thanks, I appreciate that.”

I hesitated for a moment. “Did you happen to tell Lilac about that? About me accusing you?”

Marta frowned and shook her head. “No. I know how close you and Lilac are. I’d never do anything to come between you two.”

I frowned. *Well if she didn’t tell him what I did, how did he find out?* Marta telling him about my little accusation was the only explanation for him blowing up at me.

“Why haven’t you and Lilac been talking? I noticed that you two seem to be kind of avoiding each other,” Marta said.

I shrugged. “I don’t know, really. We got into a fight, and I’m still not even really sure what it was about.”

“Oh… Well maybe you should try to talk to him. It’s Christmas Eve, after all.”

“I’m not sure Lilac wants to talk to me right now.”

Marta scooted closer and lowered her voice. “Do you mind if I tell you what I think?”

I shook my head, realizing right then how much I’d missed my friend. I’d felt pretty lonely the last few days without my brother or Marta to talk to, but it hadn’t felt right to complain about it with all the bigger things going on. I hadn’t even told Charlie about what was happening, because he’d had to focus on doing the tracking for the pack, and then the fight had come not too long after that, so there just hadn’t been much time.

*Besides, it’s my fault that Marta and I have been so awkward lately. I was the one who jumped to conclusions about her kissing Okorie.* I felt so guilty about doing that, and I really regretted it. *What kind of person accuses their friend of cheating on their brother without any real proof?*

Sure, I thought I saw what I thought I saw, but I’d been wrong and made a huge mess of things. I hated being at odds with my brother—but again, that was on me. Maybe Marta was right. Maybe things between Marta and me would’ve been resolved sooner if I’d just sucked it up and talked to her, so maybe that was what I needed to do with Lilac—no matter how scared I was.

“I think that if you just talk to him, you two will realize that there wasn’t really a reason for you two not to be talking in the first place,” Marta said.

“Thanks. You’re probably right. Sorry again about all that other stuff. I hope you and my brother are okay,” I said.

Marta sighed. “I hope so, too.”

I wanted to push and ask for more information about why they might not be okay, but it didn’t seem like the right thing to do when I’d *just* made up with Marta for butting into her relationship and making assumptions.

“I’m glad we got a chance to chat,” I said, getting up. I felt nervous already. “Now, I guess I need to go make things right with my brother. I’m going to find him.”

Marta nodded. “Good. He’s in the kitchen talking to Dani.”

“Thanks.” I turned to walk away, but before I got too far, I turned back and pulled Marta into a hug. Marta wrapped her arms around me and hugged me back. I melted into my friend, feeling a boost from our little make-up.

*Hopefully, it goes this well with Lilac.* I thought back to how mad he’d been at me, and a tiny little sliver of doubt cut through my positivity. I shook it away quickly. *Lilac and I are blood. We love each other. We just had a little disagreement. We’ll get over it.*

Marta and I gave each other a quick, hard squeeze before letting go, and then I went to find Lilac. He was exactly where Marta had said he would be, in the kitchen talking with Dani.

“Hey, Dani, how’s it going?” I asked as I approached.

Lilac stood up, and for a second, I thought he was about to storm off, but then he said, “We have to talk.”

He grabbed me by the hand and dragged me into the powder room. I took a deep breath to steady myself, then I prepared to do it all: grovel, apologize, beg, whatever it took. I just needed things to be good with my brother again.

Before I could get a word out, Lilac spoke.

“I need to tell you about something. I…” He took a deep breath and looked at the floor, then back up at me. “I saw my mate today.”

# Episode 3067

**Xavier**

I was completely confused by what Cali had just said to me.

“What do you mean by that?” I hoped this wasn’t a resurgence of Cali encouraging me to hook up with Ava to “get her out of my system.” *I thought we were well past that…*

“What I mean is, I’m not trying to befriend Ava just for you. It’s for me, too. I genuinely think she’s a better person now. I kind of like her, sometimes.”

I shook my head. I felt like we’d gotten off track somewhere along the way. *How did we even start talking about Ava in the first place?* Though I couldn’t help but notice that the mere mention of Ava’s name didn’t cause the tension it used to. There had been a time that the mere mention of Ava’s name had sent us into a funk.

“You know, for now, I don’t think we should talk about, or worry about, Ava,” I said. “Cali, you’re my one true mate. That’s why I told Ava that we needed some space, and that I wasn’t going to see her for a while.”

Cali frowned and took my hand. “I know you’re done with her as a mate—that’s what I want, of course—but the Samaras need us, and you’re the one they trust the most. Don’t turn your back on them.”

“I don’t intend to turn my back on the Samaras, but I have to do this my own way. I have to set boundaries between me and Ava.”

Cali nodded. “I agree with that. I’m just talking about you being there for them as they try to rebuild. They don’t have an Alpha yet, remember. You might not be the official Alpha of the Redwoods, but you *are* an Alpha. You have the Alpha mindset, and the Samaras could really benefit from your counsel.”

*Wow. It sounds like she’s really been thinking a lot about this.*

I nodded. “If it makes you feel any better, I’ll make a point of calling Zeke in the morning to check in with him.”

Cali smiled at me, and my heart warmed, just like that. “That sounds great.”

I used the rag to wipe the rest of the blood and mud from Cali’s face. I hated the sight of blood on my mate, but at least it was just the remnants that remained after Torin’s healing, and not something worse. Even so, I leaned forward and pressed a kiss to where the gash on her head had been. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there to protect you.”

“That’s okay. You kind of had your hands full,” she said. “Plus, you can’t always be watching me twenty-four seven.”

“True, but I still wish that you were never in danger.”

Cali cupped my face in her warm, soft hands. “I’m strong, Xavier. I can take care of myself. I promise.”

I nodded. “I know, you’re right. You’re one of the strongest people I know. But that doesn’t mean I’ll ever stop worrying about your safety, baby.”

Cali smiled, then leaned forward to kiss me. “We’re both safe right now, though. We should be glad about that,” she whispered against my lips.

I kissed her back, trying to infuse every bit of love I felt for her into it. I just wanted her to know how much I loved and cared about her.

As if reading my mind, Cali pulled me closer and lay back on the pillows. I climbed on top of her and nudged her robe apart. I propped myself up on my elbow so that I could pause to admire her naked body, which was still a little bruised, despite Torin’s healing. “Are you sure nothing hurts?”

“I’m sure,” Cali whispered breathlessly, her eyes on mine. “Torin said the bruises should fade pretty soon. But no, I’m not in any pain.”

I pressed my lips to hers and urged my tongue into her mouth, enjoying the sweet warmth of her on my lips. I moaned when I felt her hands on my chest before they slowly trailed down to my waistband. She popped open the button on my jeans and maneuvered her hands down into my boxers.

“I love you,” Cali said, her lips against my neck as she took me in her hand and began to pump up and down.

“I love you, too. I’m so glad you’re okay. I don’t know what I would’ve done—”

Cali pressed a finger to my lips, silencing me. “You will never have to know. I’ll never leave you, Xavier.”

Energized by her words, I yanked off my pants and shirt and lay down on top of her, still teasing her mouth with my tongue. She wrapped her legs tightly around my waist, and with her hand, she guided me inside her.

“Cali,” I moaned as I slid into her hot warmth all the way to the hilt. My entire body went weak, and I all but collapsed on top of her. She felt so good, and I was so happy to have her all to myself, safe and sound.

She wrapped her legs tighter around my body and began to move her hips, controlling the speed of our lovemaking. I buried my face in the pillow and matched her movements, losing myself in the sensation of her warm tightness sliding up and down my length.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asked.

I lifted my head from the pillow and looked into her eyes. She was staring at a particularly ugly wound on my shoulder that hadn’t completely healed yet.

“Of course. That’s just a scratch.”

“Good,” Cali breathed as I took over, pinning her hands against the bed and thrusting into her with gentle force. I pressed my lips to hers again as I slid in and out of her, slowly at first, then faster as the momentum built between us.

“Xavier,” Cali said, her voice breathless and low. “Keep doing that.”

Her hips jerked against mine, and still, I kept up the speed of my thrusts. I couldn’t wait to feel the pulse of her climax, and when it came, my own pleasure reached a fever pitch and my own release wasn’t far behind. Seconds later, I came too. I jerked against her, running my fingers through her hair and sliding my lips against hers until all the energy drained from my body.

I collapsed on top of her, then shifted so I could pull her into my arms. I held her close and ran my fingers through her hair, replaying every heated moment that had just passed between us and resisting the urge to take her once again. She was quiet, and I thought she’d dozed off before she spoke again.

“I should shower off the rest of the dirt and grime from today.”

“Do you want me to join you?” I asked, willing her to say yes.

“You already took a shower! You’re bad!” she said, swatting me on the arm and smiling.

I shrugged. “For you, I would take a million showers. As long as I’m with you, nothing else matters.”

“I’m flattered, but let’s save the hot water. We have no idea if another storm might come and knock us off-kilter.”

I sighed, kind of disappointed that I wouldn’t be able to feel her body moving against mine one more time. There was no place I’d rather be than between Cali’s thighs—though I didn’t want to embarrass her by admitting that.

She slid out of bed, and I held onto her hand until she tugged it away gently, casting a heated glance at me over her shoulder. She disappeared into the bathroom and shut the door behind her.

It only took a few moments for me to start feeling antsy. After a while, I didn’t want to just lie in bed anymore, so I got up and went over to the dresser and opened one of the drawers, searching for a pair of sweatpants to throw on. I found a pair that looked promising, and I reached for them, but then I saw something glinting in the corner of the drawer, and I picked it up.

*It’s the medal. The one I found at the site of the car crash. The one the witches tried to use to track down the Duquettes.*

As I held it, I distinctly remembered putting it away in a box in my closet. *How did it get here in this drawer?* I looked at it closely, thinking that maybe I’d only *thought* that I’d put it away in the closet. There’d been a lot going on lately, and something like where I’d placed the medal would be easy to forget.

I realized in that moment that the sight of the medal angered me. It was a stark reminder that the ashes situation was connected to my past—which meant that my past was the reason why Cali was dealing with this whole Seluna ashes thing at all.

Wanting to get to the bottom of whatever was going on, I went into my closet and found the box where I thought I’d stashed the medal, and opened it. To my surprise, the medal from the car crash was sitting inside. I stared between the two matching medals, trying to make sense of what was going on.

*What the fuck? Who left this here, and how did it get into my room?*

I felt something scratchy on the back of the new medal, and I turned it over to see something etched into it.

*The fun has only just begun.*

# Episode 3068

**Xavier**

How the hell had this medal gotten in my dresser? Was this some kind of joke? Because if that was the case, I wasn’t fucking laughing. I was pissed off and stressed out. Cali and I had been in my bed, together, while this thing had been lurking just a few feet away like a weird-ass Peeping Tom.

Who could’ve done this? Knox? The Samaras? But that didn’t make any sense—the Samaras had no knowledge of the medal or what it meant. Except for Ava. But I doubted she would’ve done something like this just for fun, or told anyone about the medal. This was an intimidation tactic, loud and clear, and the worst thing about it was that the culprit had just walked into the pack house and into my room, undisturbed.

*Fuck.*

Just then, I heard the shower stop. Cali was finishing up in the bathroom, and I did the first thing that popped into my head. I quickly slipped into a pair of sweatpants and slid the medal into my pocket.

I’d just finished knotting my waistband when Cali walked into the room, snuggled in the plush robe. She checked me out, eyebrows raised. “Are you cold?”

I shrugged. “Not really.”

She laughed. “What’s up with the sweatpants, though? Aren’t you always going on about how werewolves never get cold?”

I refused to worry Cali about all this after the day she’d had. I needed to distract her, so I put on my best smile and shivered exaggeratedly before reaching out to pull her closer. “Perhaps I oversold my invincibility.”

She grinned, getting on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on my jaw. “Sounds like you.”

I offered a pretend offended huff as she sauntered over to the bed, waving a hand.

“Why don’t you climb in?” she said. “We can warm up together.”

She slid off the robe, tilting her head to the side. For a second, all I could smell was her scent, all I could see was her naked body, her breasts and the valley between her thighs and all that skin that I wanted to lick. We could probably be up here for a little while longer. But then…

The medal felt heavy in my pocket. I was pulled back to reality.

“Why are you just standing there?” Cali asked, flipping the blanket and gesturing at the mattress. “Come join me.”

My brain started screaming at my dick to get a grip. I had to go talk to Greyson about the medal right now. But what kind of excuse would Cali buy if I just randomly left? She had to rest, and I wanted her to be able to do that without any nightmares.

In the end, I just said, “You keep the sheets nice and warm. I’m going to get something to drink… Hydration and stuff.”

Cali looked both surprised and amused. She didn’t argue. “Don’t take too long watering yourself, or I’ll fall asleep.”

I snorted, leaning over to kiss her lips. “That’s okay—I know how to wake you up.”

A moment later, I was out in the hallway, closing the door behind me. I shoved the image of a warm, soft, naked Cali snuggling my pillow and told myself to focus. Greyson’s room was empty, so I headed downstairs. A few pack members were milling about, cleaning up, but Greyson wasn’t one of them. I found him where I’d left him—sipping whiskey in one of the studies.

His face was unreadable when he saw me. “I thought you’d gone to bed.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the medal, tossing it at my brother. “Check this out.”

Greyson stared at the thing, frowning. “I’ve already seen this.”

“Flip it over, read the back,” I said.

I watched as Greyson’s expression darkened. He glanced at me, then back down at the medal. “What the hell is this?”

“I was hoping you could tell me,” I said. “I found it in my dresser.”

I didn’t mention Cali. There was no need to rub that in my brother’s face when there was a crisis going on, tempting as it always was to piss him off. When he sniffed the medal with a scowl, I hoped to hell that he couldn’t pick up Cali’s scent. There was no room for rivalry or jealousy right now.

“It smells like nothing,” Greyson said. Thankfully. “Maybe it’s got the same masking charm?”

I shook my head. “Charlie and I did pick up witch and vampire scents at the sight of the crash, though. So this could be the same witch, and that would be—”

“A huge problem,” Greyson said, glaring at the medal. “Whoever did this managed to get inside the house and roam around undetected like a fucking cockroach. That means so many bad things, I don’t even know where to begin.”

We didn’t speak for a moment. The silence felt heavy.

Greyson’s gaze darted up from the medal, then. “Thanks for telling me,” he said. He was acting so civilized, you’d have thought we’d never been at each other’s throats.

“I haven’t told anyone else,” I noted after hesitating for a beat.

Greyson nodded. “Good. No need to raise the alarm until we know more. We should talk to Big Mac about it, but let’s wait until morning. She’ll probably blast us for bothering her after the day she’s had.”

“What about Cali?” I asked. “I mean, I didn’t tell her anything either, because—”

“Cali deserves a chance to enjoy the holidays,” Greyson said, cutting me off. “I think she’s almost died, like, five hundred times in the past month alone.”

I scoffed. “Five hundred is a bit of an exaggeration—”

“Five hundred times,” Greyson declared. He looked like he wanted to murder something or someone, so I decided not to get hung up on the semantics. “She needs some peace.”

“True,” I said. “Same goes for everyone in the house, really.”

Greyson’s silent agreement told me the conversation was over. I made a move toward the door, but then Greyson’s spoke up again, his voice even. “You should take a shower, Xavier.”

When Greyson and I locked eyes, he looked calm, but I could tell that something intense was brewing underneath his composed exterior. My brother had realized I’d been with Cali. It wasn’t like I’d had the time to clean up before coming to see him, though, so…

With a shrug, I walked out of the room.

\*\*\*

I was startled awake a few hours later.

It was Christmas Eve, and we were all alive. Thank god.

Cali was still snoozing. I realized I should probably check everywhere in my room—under the pillows, under the bed, the other drawers—just in case I found another medal with a threat written on it. It was almost like an evil tooth fairy was behind this bullshit.

I hadn’t slept well at all. My dreams had been paranoid reflections of last night’s discovery, of witches sneaking into my house and vampires attacking. At least Cali had a smile on her face as she slept, and any doubts I’d had about not telling her about the medal were erased right then. She’d had a good night’s sleep, and that was a mini Christmas present and a miracle, all in one.

Back to the task at hand, I checked under my pillow and found nothing. That was a relief. I reached for hers very slowly, then. It was as if she had some sort of antenna, though, because the second I rested my palm on the sheet, she stirred, opening one eye.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her voice still heavy with sleep.

I blurted out the first lie I thought of. “You looked uncomfortable. I was just adjusting your pillow—go back to sleep.”

I kissed her forehead, and she snuggled closer, smiling again as her eyelids drooped.

I waited until she was snoozing again before continuing my search. She nuzzled closer to me and wrapped an arm around my neck, mumbling something about a grumpy cat. I ignored both her closeness and her bare tits brushing up against me, swallowing a groan as I felt out the mattress under her pillow. How was it I’d had sex with her a couple hours ago and already wanted to do it again? I was insatiable.

I deserved a medal for keeping myself from waking her for another round.

A *real* medal, obviously. Not another one of the fucking cursed ones.

When I was certain the underside of her pillow was empty, I hugged and rolled her toward her side of the bed. I’d gotten pretty good at lying to her, I realized, which was kind of alarming. I’d never been so smooth in my life—Greyson was supposed to be the slick one, but look at me now.

Shaking my head at myself, I got out of bed and peered out of the window. The storm had abated. Even in the dark early morning, the yard looked like a Christmas card, with thick snow covering everything, making the scenery look bright. I felt too antsy to go back to bed—the medal situation and Seluna’s missing ashes and everything *burned* inside my head.

I got dressed and headed downstairs for some coffee.

I found Greyson there already, sitting at the kitchen table.

“Good,” he said gravely. “You’re awake.”

I frowned. “You’ve been waiting for me?”

“I thought more about the medal,” he said, standing up. Heading toward the front door, he called over his shoulder, “You’re coming with me, Xavier.”

# Episode 3069

When I woke up, Xavier was gone. How could he just leave me on Christmas Eve without a morning snuggle? This was preposterous—nay, offensive!

*Okay, Cali, dial down the drama.*

Snorting to myself, I got out of bed and checked out the window. The wind and snowfall had eased, but there was white everywhere. I felt a shudder run through me at the memory of walking through the storm, thinking I could die out there.

*It’s okay now, Cali! You’re safe.*

The pack was okay, anyway—still sleeping, probably, because the house was quiet, any noise dampened by the snow. I was pretty sure Torin had to be out and about somewhere, though. This was the holiday he’d been so excited for, after all. I couldn’t wait to see him all excited.

*It feels like we all deserve nice things today.*

Back in my own room, I washed my face and brushed my teeth. Then I put on my PJs, a warm robe, and a pair of slippers before heading out to the hallway. The aroma of pancakes instantly smacked me right in the face. That kind of violence, I’d welcome any day, every day. Rushing downstairs with a grin, I found my dad at the stove.

“Pancakes!” I said in a not-so-quiet squeal. He chuckled.

“You know how the tradition goes, sweetheart. We can’t have Christmas Eve without a proper breakfast,” he said.

Dad always said something like that, every time Mom and I walked in and found him preparing the morning feast on our very favorite holiday. It was a Hart family tradition, and I couldn’t wait to share it with both my mates. The thought made me gasp, reaching up for my neck. I wasn’t wearing the necklaces they’d given me.

“What’s wrong?” Dad asked me. “Don’t worry, I got the Nutella you asked for. I made a new sauce with it for the pancakes—would you like to try it out?”

“Oh my god, that sounds—” I cut myself off before the chocolatey goodness could distract me. “Wait, no, I’ll be right back!”

I almost ran upstairs—I didn’t want the food to wait—and rifled through my drawers to find the necklaces. Which one should I wear? I’d thought about wearing one for Christmas Eve and the other for Christmas Day… Or would it be better to layer them, wear them both?

I decided on both—the only kind of decision I seemed able to make in general, actually—and went back downstairs to the kitchen. Mom was standing beside Dad, chopping up strawberries as they smiled at each other and chatted. Dad let me try out the chocolate sauce, which was the best thing ever, then the pancakes too. I ate and just looked between them, feeling so lucky to have my family here to celebrate.

*But wait! Someone’s missing!*

“Where’s Artemis?” I asked Mom.

She smiled. “It’s still quite early. I think she must be asleep with Rishika.”

“Not for long!” I ran back upstairs—I was giving myself a rare workout here—and knocked on Artemis’s door. Loudly.

“Go away,” she grumbled.

Walking into the room, I declared, “You have to get up! I’m not taking no for an answer!”

I reached the bed and shook Artemis’s shoulder, and she groaned.

“Too early, go away,” she said into her pillow. She swatted me away like a fly, surrounded by a very fluffy comforter. Where was Rishika? No matter, I was on a mission here.

“No, you have to get up, Artemis! You’re going to miss a very valuable Hart family tradition, otherwise.”

Artemis yawned. “You can tell me about it later.”

I huffed. “It can’t wait, you savage—it involves pancakes!”

I was surprised when the fluffy comforter moved. Rishika flipped it over to stick her head out of her little nest.

“Pancakes?” She sat up quickly, rubbing her eyes. “That sounds amazing.”

I grinned. “See? Come on now!”

“I want snuggles,” Artemis grumbled, grabbing Rishika by the arm to pull her down with what had to be quite a lot of strength. Thankfully, the werewolf didn’t budge.

“And I want pancakes,” Rishika said playfully. “Please?”

Artemis whined the entire time Rishika dragged her out of bed and forced her to get dressed. When they were both presentable, we sauntered downstairs, Rishika herding Artemis as if her girlfriend were a grumpy sheep. I, on the other hand, was ecstatic. This family time was exactly what I needed after yesterday. And the entire past month.

*It’s been A Lot.*

“Oh my god, this smells amazing,” Rishika told Dad with reverence. “Even better than your usual pancakes!”

“They have a secret Christmas ingredient that elevates the entire breakfast experience,” Dad told Rishika.

She chuckled. “Well, I won’t be surprised if the entire pack comes running in once they get a whiff of it.”

I hoped that the pack didn’t come in quite yet, though. I wanted to enjoy this cozy little moment between my parents, sister, and Artemis’s girlfriend. Yes, Seluna’s ashes were still missing, but nothing was going to ruin this special moment. The only thing missing was Greyson and Xavier.

Speaking of—

“Where are my mates?” I asked Dad, fiddling with the necklaces around my neck.

“I think they both went out earlier, but I can’t be sure,” he said.

*That’s weird*, I thought, squinting through the window. *They should be here, celebrating, not freezing off their perky asses outside.*

I was thinking that the boys must’ve gone on a standard patrol round when I felt a pair of hands land on my shoulders and heard a familiar voice in my ear. “Good morning, bestie!”

Lola was here, right along with Jay. Then the rest of the pack started drifting in, drawn by the smell of pancakes and coffee. I realized that I’d been silly, earlier—I thought of my family as just Artemis and our parents, but the truth was that the entire pack was family.

*And I wouldn’t have it any other way.*

A few moments later, we were all at the dining table. As I looked around, I could only smile. Lola was stuffing Jay with pancakes, giving him a peck on the mouth after every bite. Sage and Zainab were already on their second plate. Elle was making a quiet, high-pitched noise as she ate her breakfast, her eyes wide with excitement, while I wondered if it was *really* that good an idea to give her that much chocolate.

As if she could hear my thoughts, Marta said, “Do you guys think it’s a good idea for Elle to eat so much sugar? What if she gets the jitters and starts climbing the walls?”

Elle shot Marta a challenging look and said, “*Mine*.”

Then she stuffed her face with another pancake.

“I guess we’ll just have to see what happens,” Dani said.

Marta snickered, and I joined in just as Violet asked what we were laughing about. Charlie and Lilac picked up on the conversation as well, and everyone seemed to be having a good time. Even Jacs took a bite of her breakfast and said, “Well, then. This is very much acceptable.”

My dad smiled at the vampire. Coming from Jacs, that was the biggest compliment ever. I was feeling pretty proud here—this Hart family tradition was sort of a pack tradition now. Or at least it had the potential to become one.

“What kinds of plans should we make for tonight?” I asked.

“There’s going to be a feast!” Torin said excitedly. That sounded amazing, and I was pretty sure a family dinner could easily become another Redwood pack tradition.

Jay grinned. “I like the sound of that.”

“It’s not fair that Torin keeps doing all the cooking all the time, though,” I said. Turning to Torin, I added, “I can be a sous chef—if you tell me exactly what to do.”

“I can help too!” Lola exclaimed. “Like, I’m seventy percent sure I won’t fuck this up. You can just sit back and enjoy—it can be one of our gifts to you!”

Torin fiddled with his napkin. “I don’t know…”

“Oh, come on, what’s on the Christmas Eve menu?” I asked.

Before Torin could reply, Dad started waxing poetic about the Fae’s many amazing recipes.

A moment later, Jay groaned and cut in. “All this food talk is making me hungry all over again—can we stick to one meal at a time?”

Lola gaped at him. “Babe! You just ate enough to feed a small army—”

“You probably ate more than us,” Sage piped up while Zainab nodded.

“—you can’t be hungry again,” Lola said, nodding decidedly.

Jay frowned. “Hey, don’t underestimate my stomach!”

Everyone started laughing at his pretend offended expression, just as Ravi came rushing in. “You guys better have saved up some pancakes for me.”

Jay, declaring himself the pancake authority, helped Ravi fill his plate while I grinned around at everybody, counting heads. We were a lot of people, and not everybody was here yet, so I wondered how we’d be sitting for the dinner tonight, and if we’d all fit at the…

*Wait!*

A sudden thought hit me. Looking around, I asked loudly, “Should we invite the Samara pack to dinner tonight?”

# Episode 3070

There was a collective groan at the mention of the Samara pack.

“Absolutely not,” Jay said, loudest of all. Jay was usually pretty chill, so to see him so vehement about something startled me. “Why would we bring in the Samaras? You know that plenty of them probably don’t like us.”

“My baby is right,” Lola said seriously.

“And weren’t we fighting with some of them just hours ago?” Jay asked. “We risked our lives to get the Samaras’ excuse for an Alpha hauled off by the council.”

“I know that, but not all of them were fighting us,” I said. “I’m not talking about anyone who hates us. Just the Samaras who were on our side—”

“Plus, Knox almost killed you,” Lola interrupted, eyebrows arched. “I don’t wanna be dramatic, but he’s lucky we didn’t kill him and everyone else. The Samaras can have their own Christmas.”

I looked between the two of them. “Can I finally speak now?” I asked wryly.

Lola waved a hand at me. “You may, you beautiful reindeer.”

I rolled my eyes. “Lola, Jay.” I looked around the table. “*Everyone*. I am aware of all the facts you guys just mentioned. But it *is* Christmas. It’s a time to put aside our differences and celebrate. We eventually want the Samaras to be our allies, right?”

“Indeed,” Artemis said, taking a sip off her coffee. “We should invite them over and—”

“—have a nice dinner!” I said, as Artemis concluded, “—poison them just for being annoying.”

Rishika choked on her pancakes. Everybody else was half-laughing and half-serious. I was, of course, aghast—this was madness!—and my mom agreed with me.

“Artemis, this isn’t funny,” Mom said to my sister, shaking her head. Looking around, she added, “Cali’s right. We should honor the holiday spirit and start the season off on the right foot.”

Ravi shook his head. “Being nice is nice and all, but I think there’s a fine line between being nice and asking for trouble. No offense, Cali.”

“What Ravi said,” Rishika agreed. “I understand your intentions are good, Cali, but if the Samaras are here, won’t we just be reminded of all we’ve lost? I was ready to kill half of that pack just a few hours ago.”

“Which makes making up with them even more important,” I insisted. “Isn’t that what the holidays mean?”

Artemis raised an eyebrow. “I thought the meaning of this holiday was to be around loved ones and make nice memories, not deal with pack politics or babysit our former enemies.”

“Fine, fine,” I said. “Look, it was just an idea.”

“Maybe next year?” Jay asked.

“You have a good heart, my friend,” Lola said, turning to me. “But seriously, tell me, did you *really* want to invite Ava back here? To the same house as Xavier, with all these mistletoe kissing traps everywhere?”

Torin grimaced. “I did go a little overboard with the mistletoe.”

I looked between him and Lola and sighed. Deeply. I’d told Xavier I was okay with being friends with Ava, but perhaps that friendship should take a little break right now. Either way, the Samaras did try to start a pack war. Even if it had been Knox’s fault, it had still happened.

“Yeah, that’s a good point.” I sighed. “Okay, let’s just keep this Christmas to the Redwoods. Sorry I brought it up.”

Besides, I’d been going on and on in my head about making beautiful, relaxing memories and traditions for the Redwood pack. The others were right anyway; I doubted having the Samaras here would be relaxing when the wound of the fight was so raw. Maybe inviting the Samaras over was something I should bring up closer to the new year, when people made resolutions about starting anew.

*There, that’s a good idea*, I thought*. I’m a busybody who wants everyone to be friends with everyone all the time, and I’m not afraid to admit it!*

“Now that that’s out of the way,” Torin said after taking the final bite of his breakfast, “everybody finish up your food! I have a big meal planned for Christmas Eve, and it’s going to take a miracle to finish it in time.”

“What’s the menu gonna be?” Jay asked Torin.

With a flourish, Torin dropped a large notebook on the table. “I’ve been building it. These are my recipes.”

I realized these were the recipes that Dad had waxed poetic about. The book was as large as a thick dictionary.

“When did you collect all this?” I asked.

Torin blushed. “I guess I’ve been cooking a bit…”

“A *bit*?” Lola started rambling on about Torin’s skills, waving her hands around as I recalled something that made my heart twinge. Torin had been stress-cooking his way through his grief after Astrid’s death.

*He’s been working so hard to please everyone*, I thought, my chest heavy all of a sudden. *It’s time he got a break.*

“Let me look at this,” I said. “I’m sure there’s something in here I can make.”

I reached for the notebook, but Torin snatched it away, holding the heavy book close to his chest as if it were the most precious thing in the world to him. “Thank you very much for your offer to help, but let’s not forget that I shall be the one to oversee and assign chores.”

“Of course,” I said, just to appease him. “Can we please take a look now?”

“Please?” Lola said, putting her hands together in a plea. “We’ll be very careful with it.”

We both gave him puppy eyes at the same time. He sighed heavily and plopped the book back down on the table. “Fine.”

Lola and I high fived.

“Okay, but how the hell are we supposed to help with any of this?” Lola hissed in my ear a moment later as we flipped through the pages. Some of the recipes were so elaborate and detailed that I felt just a bit intimidated.

To make matters worse, Lola added, “I don’t understand half of these terms! What does *folding* the dough even mean?”

“We’ll figure it out,” I hissed back, waving her off.

“Everything okay over there?” Torin asked, coming to sit across from us at the table after taking off his apron.

“Sure,” Lola said, lying her ass off.

Torin raised an eyebrow, pointing at the margins of the pages. “As you can see, I’ve included lots of notes—I’ve been binging every cooking show I can get my hands on.”

“I’ll be happy to assist as well, by the way.” Dad popped up next to me, resting his hand on my shoulder.

“That would be great,” Torin said officiously, “but let us not forget that I am the head chef.”

“Of course,” Lola said. “Though don’t worry—I can mash a mean potato.”

That was true. Even if Lola had no idea how to work with dough, and cooked without measuring things, her mashed potatoes were legendary. She chattered with Torin about them as I stared at the Fae. I wondered if Torin was truly as okay as he looked, or if he wanted to do all this just to distract himself from his still-lurking grief over Astrid.

When he’d killed Tanner after he’d bitten me, Torin had been devastated. I couldn’t get the image out of my head. Making a mental note to keep an eye on him, I helped put the dishes in the dishwasher as everybody finished their food.

“I’ll be going upstairs to change into something more appropriate,” Mom said a moment later, taking off her apron after everything had been tidied up.

I gasped. “Thanks for reminding me—I have the perfect Christmas Eve outfit!”

Mom gave me a fond look. “Do you?”

“Yes,” I said. “I bought an ugly Christmas sweater at the mall.”

“Sounds unattractive,” Jacs said from somewhere behind me. When I faced her, her nose was wrinkled.

“Don’t be a spoilsport, Jacqueline,” I said. “Torin, I’ll go upstairs to change—don’t start without me.”

“I’ll come with you!” Lola enthused.

Jacs rolled her eyes as Lola and I walked past her. “I can’t believe you guys are going to dress up—you’re like children at Halloween.”

“It’s one of the fun Christmas things to do,” Lola told Jacs primly, twining her arm through mine as we paused in front of the vampire. “I’m putting on something that’s both Christmassy and sexy.” She waggled her eyebrows. “I bought it for Jay.”

Jacs gagged. “I don’t *ever* want to think about you being sexy for Jay, Lola—keep that to yourself!”

I laughed at Jacs’s dramatics as Lola and I headed upstairs. Lola rolled her eyes and said, “It’s not *very* sexy. Just a smidge.”

I snorted. “I sure hope so—my parents are going to be there.”

Lola giggled, and we separated to go put our outfits on. I found my ugly sweater in the closet. It was even more hideous than I remembered, all glitter and bells. No wonder I’d hidden it in a shopping bag. But it was bright and cheery, perfect to keep our spirits up.

Grinning to myself, I took off my robe and T-shirt, but then I noticed the Seluna mark in the mirror. It was bright red against the pale skin of my back. It had stopped hurting, but it was still there. A not-so-subtle reminder of what had happened and what could be coming.

Swallowing roughly, I hesitantly touched it.

*Shit.*

A sudden burning sensation made me gasp, the feeling shooting straight through my head. I sat back on my bed, fighting to catch my breath.

*It’s fine! I’m just FINE! Or I’ll be fine, I’m not hurting, nope…*

I braced myself and stood up again.

That was a mistake.

The second I took a step, I stumbled, and then—

Everything went black.

# Episode 3071

**Violet**

I was going through my closet, and I literally had nothing to wear. Not a single thing. The twenty tops, ten pairs of pants, and six dresses I had in there shot me a dirty look, but this wasn’t my fault.

The fact that we’d almost gone into battle—again—just a few hours ago had made me forget all about my outfit for the day. It was Christmas Eve, though, and I was supposed to look good. It wasn’t like I could just wear a simple sweater or a little black dress. I needed something green. Or red. And cute! It had to be cute. Charlie would want us to take some pictures for sure, so I had to make a nice impression.

Did I even own anything red, though? Realistically? Most of the things in my closet seemed to be beige, of all colors.

Oh my god, was I *boring*?

Shaking that scary thought away, I kept looking through my stuff. My mind trailed off to breakfast. I’d hidden it well, but I’d felt so awkward when I’d seen Marta come downstairs with Lilac. Last night, Lilac had actually told me that he’d run into his mate. Which was a problem, but also a good thing for so many reasons I couldn’t even begin to count.

Before we’d been able to continue our conversation, though, Marta had interrupted, and Lilac had quickly changed the subject. He’d looked as guilty as a dog who’d chewed his human’s favorite shoe. Thankfully, Marta hadn’t picked up on that. I’d been itching to ask Lilac more questions about the situation, obviously, but we hadn’t had a moment alone.

Of course, I hadn’t told anyone what Lilac had confided in me. Not even my own mate. I didn’t want to keep any secrets from Charlie, ever, but I wasn’t even sure if Lilac had been telling the truth. My brother was prone to stupid jokes and exaggeration.

But even if he did mean what he’d said, I knew I had to learn the full story before blabbing to my mate. I couldn’t jump to conclusions like I had with Marta and Okorie, because look how *that* had worked out.

Sighing deeply, I laid out my final outfit contenders on the bed. A green sweater dress with black tights, or a pair of dark wash jeans with a burgundy cashmere sweater that I’d never worn before. Burgundy was a type of red, right? Not purple?

Lola or Jacqueline would be so mad at me for not immediately knowing the answer to that question.

A knock on the door startled me—was it Lola? Could she hear my thoughts?—but when the door opened, my twin barged in.

“Lilac—”

“Shh!” He shushed me, his index finger over his mouth. I rolled my eyes as he hissed, “I’m not here! You’re alone!”

“So you’re back to being a ghost?” I asked dryly.

Lilac huffed and plopped down onto my bed—almost sitting on my potential outfits before I caught him and saved them. “This is a crisis, Violet,” he whispered. “What am I supposed to do about my mate?”

I paused, all the annoyance draining out of me. “Wait, so you’re not joking? You *really* think you found your mate?”

Lilac sat up, scoffing. “Why would I joke about something like that?”

“Because you joke about anything and everything,” I whisper-hissed back. “You literally take nothing seriously!”

Lilac’s jaw was set. “I take Marta seriously.”

My stomach dropped. That was true. And Lilac finding his mate… This would be *devastating* for Marta.

As if he could read my mind, Lilac muttered, “Please don’t tell her anything about this.”

I shook my head vehemently. “I have no intention of doing that—you’re the one who needs to tell her, ASAP.”

He looked torn. “I was thinking…”

“Lilac, *no*,” I said. “You can’t let this become a huge secret. I’m not keeping it; it’s gonna blow up in your face.”

He huffed. “I know that. I just want to make sure I’m right, you know?”

I stared at him dubiously. “But you told me you saw your mate yesterday. Now you’re saying you’re not sure?”

Lilac rubbed his face. “It was only for a moment, so—”

“*Who* do you think might be your mate, though?” I asked. “When did you find the time to take a look at them? We were literally in a pack war yesterday!”

Lilac cringed. “It was during the battle—one of the Samaras. We sort of looked at each other for a moment.”

I paused. The only thing that came out of my mouth was, “Wow.”

“How did you know that Charlie was the one?” Lilac asked, running his hands through his hair. “How were you certain?”

I thought back to the moment when I’d first seen Charlie. He’d been jogging when I’d passed by in the car, and he’d had this otherworldly glow about him, this incredible pull I’d never be able to resist. My heart was pounding just at the memory of it.

“It was like lightning,” I told Lilac. “I knew the second I saw him. Did you feel anything special when you locked eyes with this person?”

Lilac’s eyebrows shot up. “Let’s just say I was pretty busy at the time.”

I frowned. “Doing what?”

“I told you, we were in the middle of a battle,” Lilac said. “I was trying to kill and not *be* killed. Not very romantic. I have no idea how I felt about anything right then.”

The door flew open. Nobody knocked around these parts; Colton’s legacy was apparently very powerful. But it wasn’t Colton who walked in—it was Charlie.

“Violet, we have to talk!” He pinned me with wide eyes, taking two strides toward me. He looked as beautiful as ever, so excited that any worries I had about this being an emergency vanished.

“What’s happening?” I asked, a little dazed.

“I just got off the phone with my mom. She’s thinking we can get our flight changed, maybe even get one for tonight. What do you—” Charlie cut himself off when his gaze landed on Lilac. “Oh, sorry. I didn’t know you were here, Lilac.” He looked between my twin and me, clearly confused. “You guys were so quiet before I walked in. Is everything okay?”

The following pause was so awkward, I felt it in my bones. Lilac gave me an all too familiar “please don’t betray me” look. I hated the idea of withholding anything from Charlie, but I couldn’t tell him Lilac’s secret after my twin had specifically told me not to. I had to push through this until Lilac settled his affairs. Literally.

“We were just picking out an outfit for tonight,” I said, thinking quickly. I picked up my two choices and presented them to Charlie. “Which one do you like?”

Charlie gave me a sweet smile that had my heart fluttering. “You’d look good in anything, but I do like that sweater dress.” I was about to thank Charlie for his input when he added, “It will make you look as beautiful as a Christmas tree—before it’s decorated.”

Lilac covered his mouth to stifle a laugh, the monster. I frowned and dropped the dress, grabbing the burgundy sweater. “In that case, I’m wearing the other set.”

Charlie looked confused. “Wait, what?”

“Do you really think I want to look like a tree?” I asked.

Charlie raised his hands in an appeasing gesture. “A Christmas tree, sunshine. A beautiful Christmas tree.”

“But it’s still a *tree*, Charlie! That’s not—”

“Oh my god, this isn’t even funny anymore,” Lilac interrupted. “I’ll talk to you later, Violet.” He shot me a look before walking out, clearly unhappy.

“What’s going on with Lilac?” Charlie asked, crossing his arms and tilting his head to the side as he stared out the open door.

“What do you mean?” I asked, pretending to be casual.

“He’s grumpy,” Charlie said, facing me again. “Lilac’s never grumpy, and it’s Christmas Eve—I’d expect him to be more cheerful. Especially since we just defeated the Samaras.”

I sighed. “Did we, though?”

Charlie shook his head, moving closer to me. His eyes were warm. “We defeated their horrible Alpha, and that’s what matters.”

I had a feeling that we’d see Knox again, but I kept my thoughts to myself for now. In the end, I just said, “I guess Lilac’s not in the holiday spirit yet.”

“But you are, right?” Charlie smirked, the mirth in his gaze making butterflies flap their wings in my stomach.

I paused, recalling what he’d said earlier, why he’d looked so excited when he’d burst into the room. I felt instantly anxious. “What did you want to talk about, exactly?”

“Like I said, my mom called, and we had a chat about the weather getting better.” He reached for my hands, holding them as he looked into my eyes. “So, if you wanted, spending Christmas with my parents could be a thing… Should I get tickets for tonight?”

# Episode 3072

**Greyson**

Xavier and I were in wolf form, patrolling the perimeter. The snow was still thick. Whoever had put the medal in Xavier’s dresser was no amateur, so I doubted we’d find any traces of an intruder’s scent out here. Better to check, though. I hadn’t been able to sleep, anyway.

I’d gotten restless, antsy out of my mind after Xavier had shown me the medal with the phrase “The fun has only just begun” etched into it. I was obviously doomed not to enjoy even *one* night without worrying about something. It was part of my personality at this point—worrying, obsessing, and being fucking jealous to boot.

Xavier had been with Cali last night. I’d smelled it when he’d walked into the study. My brother and I were always careful about shit like that—it didn’t take a lot for an Alpha’s visceral instincts to snap—but Xavier hadn’t stuck to protocol last night.

I knew the medal had upset him, so I’d let that bullshit slide. Instead of, you know, grabbing him and bashing his head against the wall, because of the general disrespect of it all.

At least Xavier had had a shit night as well. I could tell. Not to brag, but at least I could pull off the dark circles look. I looked tortured and distinguished, like I’d spent all night reading and brooding, kind of like a Byronic hero. Xavier just looked like a tired asswipe.

Anyhow, I reminded myself to push all of that aside and concentrate on the bigger problem here. How had the medal gotten into Xavier’s bedroom, and who’d put it there?

*We’re almost done with the perimeter check, and I haven’t come across anything suspicious*, Xavier mind linked, interrupting my thoughts. *Of course, it’s hard to say with all the snow.*

*Patrolling is better than doing nothing right now*, I replied. *A vampire and a witch were on our property a few days ago—don’t forget about that.*

*You think one of them brought the medal into my room?* Xavier asked.

*You smelled vampire at the accident site; I smelled vampire and a strange witch on our land*, I said. *It all must be connected.*

*But how the fuck could they get inside the house?* Xavier asked. *Especially a vampire—they have to be invited in.*

*I suppose there might’ve been an opportunity when Artemis and the others joined the fight*, I replied. *Unless it was the witch.*

*Right, but even so, at no point was the house entirely empty*, Xavier said. *How could someone enter a boarded-up, heavily guarded pack house and then leave without being seen or heard?*

I scowled internally, still running.

Before I could say anything else, Xavier added, *As crazy as it seems, could it be that someone from the pack put it there?*

*That…* I swallowed roughly. *That would make sense. But I’m not convinced. Who in the pack would do that, and why? Is there anyone you don’t trust right now? I don’t think anyone in the pack would invite a vampire in, either.*

Xavier’s wolf huffed. *I don’t know. Even Jacqueline has proven herself. And I doubt it could be Elle. For a feral girl, she’s not easily manipulated. And she doesn’t like anyone much, other than you. Which is fucking weird, all on its own.*

I ignored his jab. *Elle wouldn’t let anyone who smells like vampire anywhere near her. She struggled to feel comfortable with both Jacqueline and Lola, so it’s pretty unlikely that she could be tricked into inviting a vampire in.*

*Who’s left, then?* Xavier mused. He started listing people, and I pictured the face of every single person. It didn’t matter, though—I trusted my pack. That was final. Even as I thought about everyone who’d been staying at the house lately, Ava included, I came up short. Ava had been in the battle the entire time, fighting right next to the Redwoods and against Knox.

*It’s got to be someone outside of the pack*, I told Xavier after he’d finished speaking.

He nodded, not saying another word. Agreeing with him was still foreign to me, but I’d take it.

*Have you heard from your mercenary contact?* I asked. *He was supposed to find that family for you, the Duquettes? You did make that call, didn’t you?*

Xavier scoffed, *Of course I did. But no, I haven’t heard back. I’ll try to follow up and see what the deal is.*

*You have to pin him down, Xavier*, I replied. *Don’t let him ghost you.*

*He’s not fucking ghosting me*, my brother snapped.

*You called, he didn’t call back—sounds like ghosting to me*, I said with a mental shrug.

He shoved me*. I swear to god, if you don’t shut up…*

Flicking my tail in his face, I said, *Let’s finish up the patrol, asshole. We have to get back for breakfast.*

Xavier cussed me out, but then we both shut our traps and finished the rest of our round. We didn’t come up with anything, which—again—was expected, but also very bad. Whoever had left that medal was covering their tracks pretty fucking well.

God, I needed a drink. Or something to eat with tons of chocolate. It was a holiday, wasn’t it?

“What are you thinking?” Xavier asked once we’d reached the front porch and shifted back to human.

“What do you think?” I plastered a fake smile onto my face that made him roll his eyes.

We started getting dressed, the quiet between us full of tension.

I couldn’t resist breaking it. In a lower voice, I said, “We have to fix this, Xavier. Because if we don’t, it’s going to grow, and when it grows, Cali’s going to be in danger again. She’s *constantly* in danger, and we’re just standing there like a couple of useless dipshits who—”

“I know,” Xavier said between his teeth as he zipped up his pants. He glared at me as he repeated, “*I know*.”

I looked behind me, fighting the urge to go back on patrol. I wanted to enjoy the holiday, dammit. We’d been through so much, and we all deserved a worry-free break. I would do all I could to give that to my pack. Shoving down all my frustration, I grabbed my brother by the shoulder before he could walk inside.

“No matter what, keep this between us,” I said.

He nodded emphatically.

“And try not to look like such a grump,” I told him. “Cali can tell when you’re upset. We all can.”

Xavier rolled his eyes, and we entered the pack house. It smelled like pancakes, which automatically seemed to make both our moods better. I was fucking starved, but when we got to the kitchen, there were no pancakes to be seen. Tom and Torin didn’t even spare us a look, either—they were arguing about some recipe. I’d never seen either of them look so intense.

Xavier frowned. “You do smell pancakes, right?”

I frowned too. “Yes. But where are they?”

Xavier looked… actually hurt? In a throaty voice, he asked, “Did they eat them all without saving us a plate? Did Cali forget about us?”

“Boys!” My mother walked in, all smiles. “I’m so glad you’re back—I saved pancakes for you both!”

Xavier looked at Sabine like she’d hung the moon. Gesturing for us to take a seat, she pulled out two plates stacked with pancakes from the oven and placed them before us on the table, along with a bunch of toppings and syrups for us to choose from. She’d also made a fresh pot of coffee, just for the two of us.

“Here you go,” she said happily. “Enjoy.”

My brother and I looked at Sabine in a way that secretly made me worry about both our emotional states. But I shoved all my feelings down and rubbed some dirt on them, because we were men and stuff. Not just men, *Alphas*. Beat that.

The pancakes helped, at least—they were delicious.

But then they were gone.

“Are there any more?” Xavier asked, looking up at my mother hopefully.

“Aw, unfortunately not,” Sabine said.

I glanced at Torin, contemplating begging for some, but he was still fighting with Tom.

Xavier scowled, standing up. He glanced at me. “I’ll go take a shower.” He looked at my mother. “Thanks again for saving us a plate.”

He walked away, and my mom shot him a funny look. “What’s up with him?”

“He just really likes pancakes,” I semi-lied.

Sabine chuckled, pouring me more coffee. “What were you two doing outside at the crack of dawn?”

I wasn’t about to worry my mom on Christmas Eve.

“Xavier and I were just making sure that the pack enjoys an uninterrupted Christmas. Just did a perimeter check, but we didn’t find anything to worry about,” I said, which was another half-truth. We *hadn’t* found anything. At least not outside.

“I’m looking forward to tonight,” Mom said with a sigh. “I convinced MacKenzie to wear the sweater I knitted for her.”

The mental image of that made me chuckle. I instantly felt lighter, grateful for Sabine and her cranky bride-to-be. “I can’t wait to see her in it.”

My mom grinned, squeezing my shoulder. Someone called for her then, and she headed to the living room. I stood up and put my—and sloppy Xavier’s—dishes away, and then my phone rang. Safe to say, I wasn’t in the mood to talk.

I considered tossing the phone in the dishwasher, but curiosity got the better of me. The screen flashed with Mace’s name. I doubted he was calling to wish me a happy holiday. I remembered that I’d given Maren Mace’s number, and I was now on alert.

“More garlic!” Tom was telling Torin in the background. “You can’t ignore garlic, Torin!”

I stepped away from the mad chefs of the pack house to answer.

“Mace, what’s up?” I asked.

“I spoke to Maren,” he said, skipping the pleasantries. “We know where Fenrir is, but we’re going to need your help.”

# Episode 3073

When I woke up, I was on my back with the ugly Christmas sweater draped over my head. Frowning, I sat up.

*What on earth happened this time?*

I focused for a moment and remembered. I’d felt dizzy, then probably fainted and plopped down onto the floor. Swallowing roughly, I stood up slowly and checked the Seluna handprint in the mirror.

*Is it getting worse? Am I getting worse? Why am I not freaking out more about this?*

I felt a little bit numb. As if this was my new normal. Like, I existed in a constant state of stress, so passing out and nearly dying was just another Tuesday instead of a rare occurrence. I recalled how badly violence and death used to freak me out when I’d first entered the supernatural world, and how jarring it had been to see how unfazed the werewolves were about it all.

*Look at me now! I’m becoming one of them!*

I wasn’t sure if that was a good or a bad thing, so I just ignored the thought. I peered at the Seluna mark—it was the same, but I wasn’t going to ask for trouble and touch it again. I had to wonder why the hell I’d fainted this time, though. Was this some sort of message from Seluna? Or from Seluna’s ashy remains?

How long had I even been lying there?

I checked the clock on the wall and figured it had to have been just a few minutes. Fainting was never a good thing, but fainting for such a small amount of time was fine. Right? I didn’t feel tired or anything. I hadn’t had any weird dreams or visions. Could my fainting spell have just been a reaction to all the stress I’d been under lately?

*The MENTAL GYMNASTICS I’m doing over here to justify literally passing out are truly outstanding*, I thought, cringing. But also, why should I let this matter? I refused to allow such a minor incident ruin my Christmas. It wasn’t like a pterodactyl had broken into my room or something.

*Everything is fine. FINE.*

Determined, I pulled on the ugly sweater and checked myself out. Wow, it really was ugly. It looked like someone had put Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer in a blender with Frosty the Snowman. I would win all the awards with this.

“Cali?” Lola’s voice came from behind the door before she burst into the room. “What the heck is taking you so long?”

I took in my best friend, and I realized why she’d called her outfit sexy earlier. She was wearing black leggings and a bright red top with black and white details. It looked like a corset at the bust, then it flared around her hip area. She also had a black belt around her waist and a black choker around her neck. Definitely a Naughty Mrs. Claus situation that should’ve been ridiculous, but on Lola it looked great.

“What did Jay say when he saw your outfit?” I asked with a grin.

She scoffed. “He offered to rip it off me—it’s too early for that!”

Lola then complimented my ugly sweater, and we spent a beat admiring each other before Lola blurted, “Wait, no—enough about how awesome we look! We have to go to the kitchen. Torin’s been totally stressing me out.” She grabbed me by the hand, pulling me downstairs. “You need to make him chill, otherwise I have no idea what we’re going to do.”

A few moments later, we were in the kitchen. I knew I was supposed to help Torin settle down, but Greyson was there. He was reading the back of a cereal box, looking oddly distinguished today for some reason, his eyebrows furrowed with concentration. He was so tall and strong, I wanted to run up to him and bury myself in his arms. So I did just that.

He let out an “oof” after my attack hug, looking down at me fondly.

“Where you been?” I asked.

He smiled, wide and sparkly of course. But when his eyes trailed down to my sweater, his lips pursed. “Why is there a glittery sloth on your sweater?”

I grinned. “Not a sloth, but decent guess. Ugly, right?”

He snorted, kissing my cheek. “Nothing you wear is ugly, love. Let’s just call it ‘different.’”

I smirked. “I appreciate the diplomacy, but it’s supposed to be ugly. In fact, it would be a compliment if you called it ugly.”

Greyson raised an eyebrow, looking down at the thing again before he said, “It’s hideous. I love it.”

“See how easy it was to just be honest with me?” I teased. But then my stomach dropped at my very own words. I’d told Greyson to be honest, *so*…

*Does that mean I should be honest with him about fainting earlier?*

But he was in such a good mood, and he looked so beautiful for no particular reason. Did I *really* want to spoil his otherwise impeccable Christmas vibes by telling him that his mate had passed out? We were supposed to be truthful, though, and it would be a bad start to the holidays if I kept this from him.

“Check this out…” Greyson trailed off, interrupting my thoughts as he trailed an index finger over the double necklaces around my throat. “I’m glad you put that on.”

“Thank you—I love them,” I said.

“The necklace I got you looks better,” he said.

I raised an eyebrow. “They’re literally the same.”

“Nope, I can totally tell which one’s mine,” he said, his eyes glinting with mischief.

“Which one is it, then?”

Smirking, he wrapped his arms around me tighter. Then, he leaned down and kissed my collarbone, over the necklaces, making me squeak. He laughed at my reaction, the sound a rumble that vibrated through me. I felt so safe and good with him that I decided to just rip off the Band-Aid and tell him about the Seluna mark. Before I could say a word, though, his smile faded.

“I have some news about Maren,” he murmured.

His expression made my heart drop. “Is Fenrir okay?”

Greyson winced. “I just got off the phone with Mace. Maren went to the apartment Fenrir was supposed to be at, and they were gone—him and his dad. Though we do have a lead on where they’re going.”

“So this really *was* a kidnapping,” I said slowly, feeling sick to my stomach. “That’s horrible. Are you going to help return Fenrir to Maren?”

“First we need the Redwood pack to intercept Aiden,” Greyson said.

I got all pumped up, scared but mostly angry. The emotion flared inside me. “When are we leaving? If he gets out of line, I’ll blast the asshole. How dare he just snatch a child like that? If I were Maren, I would be beside myself.”

Greyson nodded darkly. “The only upside is that we know he won’t actually harm Fenrir. Maren’s the one who’s always told me Aiden’s good with the kid.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “That’s no way to raise a child, taking him away from his mother by force. And if anyone knows about kidnapping, it’s me.” I pointed at my chest. “Trust me, it’s scary.”

“If we’re lucky, Fenrir won’t have realized he’s been kidnapped and he’ll just think it’s a surprise trip or something,” Greyson said.

“*If* we’re lucky,” I repeated. *That poor kid!*

Greyson squeezed my shoulders, staring deep into my eyes. “I’m waiting to hear from Mace again. I hope it’ll be after Christmas, but it could be anytime. I don’t want to spoil your holiday, but—”

“It’s better we save Christmas for Fenrir,” I said firmly. “He’s only a child, and it’ll be awful if he starts associating the holiday with being kidnapped, away from his mother.”

Greyson nodded, opening his mouth to speak, but I beat him to it. I felt myself buzzing with energy.

“Where are we going to intercept Aiden?” I asked. “Are you going to form a rescue team? Can I come? Should we—”

“One question at a time,” Greyson said, interrupting me with arched eyebrows. “We suspect Aiden will be passing through our area soon on his way to Vermont. We’re lucky—the snow slowed him down. I don’t want to confront him and turn it into a battle—mainly for Fenrir’s sake.”

I nodded in agreement. “So how are you going to do it?”

“I’m hoping we can distract Aiden enough so we can grab Fenrir. And you won’t have to blast anyone,” he said. “Though Maren would probably beat you to it.”

*Poor Fenrir, and Poor Maren. Fucking Aiden, ugh!*

“Tell me as soon as you know when we’ll be leaving,” I told Greyson.

He took in my dark expression. “Are you sure about this? I don’t want to pull you away from Christmas.”

“Christmas can wait. I’m going,” I declared. “And if we manage to bring Fenrir back to Maren before tomorrow, that would be the best Christmas present ever.”

Greyson sighed, smiling a little as he pulled me into another hug. He trailed his lips over my cheek, then brushed them over my mouth. His grey eyes were fixed on mine as he whispered, “*You’re* the best Christmas present ever.”

Heat rushed into my face, but then I heard my dear friend Lola make vomiting sounds. Frowning, I turned to see her fake-puking.

“What?” I said defensively. “He’s adorable!”

“I’m adorable,” Greyson deadpanned, and I giggled, giving him a peck.

Lola rolled her eyes, then told me, “You’re supposed to be helping Torin cook, Cali, remember? Not canoodling with your boyfriend!”

I sighed, kissing Greyson on the cheek before excusing myself and making a beeline for the stove. It was covered in pots and pans with various things boiling or sautéing.

“Okay, what should I do?” I asked Lola.

“I have no idea,” she said. “Torin just said to watch them, but he never explained what we were supposed to watch for.”

“Remove that saucepan!” Torin shouted right then, making both of us jump in surprise. “It’s overcooking!”

I nodded. “I got it!”

I grabbed the handle, lifting the boiling pan off the flame, but then suddenly, the room swayed.

My grip loosened, and I watched, helpless, as the hot pan started to fall.

# Episode 3074

**Xavier**

I walked into the room just as Cali picked up the pot. I watched, as if in slow motion, when her wrist bent and trembled, her grip loosening on the handle. My reflexes kicked in instantly. Just a second before the thing would’ve dropped on the floor and likely given Cali third degree burns, I steadied her with one hand and snatched the pan handle away from her grasp with the other.

“What the hell?” I said under my breath, still holding her while placing the pan on the counter. My heart was pounding. “Are you okay?”

“Xavier,” she mumbled, grabbing at her forehead with a wince.

“Does your head hurt?” I asked, ushering her to a chair. “What’s going on?”

“What happened?” My brother’s voice came from right behind me. I glanced up at him as he said, “I left the kitchen for literally a minute, what the—”

“It’s nothing,” Cali blurted out, glancing between us anxiously. She was embarrassed, and she was lying, too. I could tell, and that made everything ten times worse. “It’s just—the pan was heavier than I thought.”

I dropped to my knees in front of her, taking her hands in mine. “Cali, it looked like you were going to pass out.”

I could actually feel my brother go rigid. “She *what*?”

“Guys, chill,” Cali said with an awkward laugh. “It wasn’t quite like that. Not nearly as bad as it was before.”

I instantly shot up on my feet while both Greyson and I blurted out, “*Before?*”

Cali huffed, looking between us. “Okay, that was creepy!”

“Cali,” Greyson said slowly. “What happened?”

She sighed. “It’s not as dramatic as you think—I just had a little episode when I was in my room.”

My chest started to feel a little too warm. Like my heart was fucking boiling.

“Why didn’t you say something?” I asked.

“I was going to, I promise,” she said, looking between us again. “But I got distracted.”

“By what?” Greyson asked.

“You!” She flailed her hands in his direction. “You were so sweet you distracted me!”

My jaw tightened.

Greyson gave me a look. “You should just…” He cleared his throat. “Go lie down, love.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “You must be sick or something.” I looked around. “Torin! Can you make Cali feel better?” While Torin ignored me, continuing his argument with Lola—he was having many arguments today with many different people, which was odd—I turned to Cali. “Cali, this isn’t—”

“No, it’s fine!” She sprang up and started doing jumping jacks. “Look, I’m A-okay!”

Greyson’s face was blank as he watched her. I didn’t need to ask him to know how he was feeling. This wasn’t good. This was madness.

And I was going to stop it.

“Cali, *no*,” I said, taking Cali’s hand. “I don’t want to hear that you’re fine when you’re not. You have to explain—what is this all about?”

She glanced at Greyson before mumbling, “I think it’s all tied to the Seluna handprint. I touched it earlier, and that’s when this started.”

I felt like I’d been punched. We’d wasted so much time dealing with the little shrimp. We might have been able to find the ashes by now, and put an end to Seluna, but no, Knox had monopolized our attention. In the meantime, someone had walked into my fucking room and put a medal in my dresser with my mate right around the corner.

Cali was in danger, and I…

I was to blame.

“I’ll be right back,” I told Greyson. We’d talked about me calling Slugger, and I couldn’t waste another minute. Even if the fucker seemed to have ghosted me, like Greyson had said. I took a few steps away from Cali and Greyson to dial, but it went straight to voicemail.

“Slugger, it’s Xavier. Call me back as soon as you fucking can.”

This smelled like a dead-end, and I had no idea how much longer I could take it. We were no closer to getting to those ashes than before. Not only had we failed Cali, but we hadn’t even had the pleasure of killing Knox. The entire situation was fucked.

“Are you sure you’re feeling better?” Greyson was asking Cali when I returned to the two of them.

“Yes,” she said, nodding a lot. “I’m okay. It seems like the incidents become less intense as they go—I’m sure if I have another one, it will be minor. The thing with the pan wasn’t even that serious.”

I bit my tongue to stop myself from saying that if she had dropped the pan, it would’ve been extremely serious. Burn injuries were fucking excruciating. Torin would be here to heal Cali, but still, the Fae—

Was currently yelling at Lola.

“No, you’re doing it all wrong! Oh my gods, this is a nightmare!”

I frowned. “Does anyone have any idea what’s going on with Torin?”

“Yeah,” Greyson said, turning to Cali. “Is there a reason why he’s suddenly no longer his normal wholesome self?”

“It’s going to be a rough Christmas Eve if he doesn’t start mellowing out,” I added.

“I’m on it,” Cali told both Greyson and me with authority. Then she headed over to Torin and Lola, her head held high. I watched her as she moved, just to make sure that she was walking steady. Yeah, she’d done some jumping jacks, but that didn’t mean we knew when the next fainting spell would drop.

Greyson, his arms crossed over his chest, seemed to be thinking the same. Neither of us said a word, but I could feel us both boiling with worry. The stoic way that we were dealing with this entire situation was probably not very good. It wasn’t like we had a choice, though.

“You guys!” Cali had stepped between Lola and Torin, waving her index finger at them. “It’s Christmas—you should be working together, not trying to kill each other with cooking utensils!” Cali seemed pretty strict and alert as she scolded her friends. So at least that was something.

“Cooking is how I relax!” Torin told Cali tartly. “I can’t have anyone in my kitchen if they don’t follow directions—it stresses me out!”

“So you don’t want us to help?” Lola asked, gasping. She met my eyes and said, “Xavier, are you listening to this?”

I squinted at Lola. “How about you two just let Torin do his thing? He’s proven he’s a great cook—why fix something that isn’t broken?”

Greyson nodded in agreement. “Let the guy cook if he wants to cook. Don’t fuss over him.”

Cali turned to Torin, her eyes wide. “Torin, is that what you want?”

As my mate, Lola, and Torin dealt with that whole debacle, I pulled Greyson to the side.

“I put in a call to my contact, but I only got voicemail,” I said in a low voice. “I’ll keep trying.”

“Good,” Greyson said. “In the meantime, I need your help.”

I wasn’t even surprised at this point. Rolling my eyes, I asked, “What is it this time?”

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Ten minutes later, Greyson and I were outside on the porch. He’d just finished explaining the situation with Maren, Fenrir, and Aiden.

“So?” Greyson said. “Will you help?”

I scoffed. “You want me to help you with your ex?”

“The entire pack just helped out with *your* ex,” Greyson said in a cold tone. “In fact, the situation with your ex almost got Cali killed.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. I wanted to punch Greyson, tell him he was wrong, but he wasn’t. The guilt felt heavy at the back of my head, but I ignored it.

“If I agree to help,” I said gruffly, gesturing toward the kitchen, “you know Cali’s going to want to go.”

“She already told me she wanted to,” Greyson said. “And I agreed, but that was before I knew about her fainting.”

I kind of hated the idea that Greyson had already talked to Cali about all this. I should’ve expected it, though.

“We agree, then,” I told him. “This is one mission Cali is not coming on.”

“I think it’s going to be a pretty easy one,” Greyson replied.

“I’ve had enough so-called easy jobs that turned into nightmares. Nothing is easy.”

“Hope you didn’t just fucking jinx us,” Greyson told me. “This is important. Fenrir needs to be with his mother.”

I swallowed, nodding. Fenrir was a decent kid. I knew that Greyson was attached to him, and that the kid had been attached to Greyson. Perhaps this Aiden character wasn’t as bad as Silas—there wasn’t a father alive who could be—but being kidnapped and banned from seeing his mother wasn’t exactly great. Maren must’ve been going out of her mind with worry, and the kid had to be missing her too.

We needed to bring Fenrir back to his mother, and that was that.

“I’ll let you know as soon as I hear from Mace,” Greyson told me.

I nodded curtly. “What do we do now?”

“Let’s see if Torin’s still fighting with Lola,” Greyson grumbled. “I didn’t want to play mediator, but I might need to if this keeps up.”

I snorted, shaking my head. We were about to head back inside when my phone rang. Both Greyson and I stared at the screen.

“It’s the guy I just called,” I told my brother. “My old contact.”

“Answer,” Greyson said, tension radiating off him.

When I picked up, I didn’t recognize the man’s voice on the other end of the line.

“You called this number?” he asked.

I frowned. “I called for Slugger. Who is this? Where is he?”

There was a pause.

Then the man replied. “Slugger is dead.”

# Episode 3075

**Greyson**

The look of surprise on Xavier’s face said that this couldn’t be good.

“He’s dead?” Xavier said. “How?”

Great. This was just fucking *great*.

“What the hell happened?” I asked after Xavier hung up.

“Our one lead to the Duquettes is lying in a ditch with a railroad spike in his head,” my brother said. “I doubt it was suicide.”

“Or a coincidence,” I said, rubbing my forehead.

“This is the second person to die after I asked about that family,” Xavier said. “At this point, I don’t believe in coincidences. Someone is trying to cover up any trail that leads to the Duquettes.”

I eyed my brother, shaking my head. “You should be careful. If someone out there is willing to kill just because someone asked a few questions, you could be next.”

Xavier scowled. “I obviously know that. But what’s our next move supposed to be? It seems like every time we think we’re making progress, we hit a wall.”

“We can’t give up, though,” I said. “Cali’s condition is only going to get worse, and we have to keep looking for clues.”

Xavier’s expression darkened. “I suppose the appearance of a few dead bodies must mean we’re on the right path. We must be making the Duquettes or whoever is behind this nervous.”

“Agreed. I just hope the body count doesn’t get any bigger,” I said, glancing at the kitchen window.

Xavier picked up my movement. “What do we do about Cali?”

The idea of Cali having a calm Christmas was dead and gone by now. She’d been honest with us when she’d mentioned the fainting, so we had to follow her lead and be as straightforward with her as she had been with us. Even though my every instinct was to keep some of the bad news from her.

“We should tell her what we know,” I said. “Which admittedly isn’t a hell of a lot. But she has a connection to all of this too—the ashes—so beating around the bush will probably backfire sooner or later.”

Xavier nodded. “I’ll tell her.”

“Um, I don’t think so,” I said. “*I’ll* tell her.”

Xavier glared. “Seriously?”

“Fine, we’ll both tell her,” I said. “Together. Just so she knows we’re both in agreement. She tends to prefer that.”

“But not when it’s got to do with keeping her from throwing herself in danger,” Xavier said, eyebrows raised.

“I’ve gotten used to it by now,” I said. “But telling her the truth will give us another reason to keep her here when we go to rescue Fenrir from his father.”

It felt funny to say that—rescuing Fenrir from his own father. I would’ve been thrilled to have someone rescue me from Silas years ago. The circumstances were different—Silas had been a monster while Aiden was just an asshole, but there was still something about this that landed too close to home for me. Fenrir, much like I had been as a child, was trapped.

I couldn’t let the kid fall prey to someone like Aiden.

Xavier and I went back inside without another word. We found Lola sitting in a chair with her arms crossed, glaring up at Torin.

“It’s a gentle sauté, not a deep fry! Do you understand the difference?” the Fae asked.

“Cali, please tell Torin not to yell at me,” Lola said.

“Torin, remember we’re here to help you,” Cali reminded Torin.

Torin gave her an exasperated look. “I know that, but how many times do I have to explain this to Lola?”

“You still haven’t explained it in a way that makes sense, though,” Lola said, huffing.

Torin took a deep, calming breath. “You know what? Come watch me. Maybe that’ll be better.”

Lola grumpily followed Torin to the stove, where he started explaining his technique. Cali caught my eye just then, and she made a beeline for me and my brother.

Awkwardly, she said, “Sorry you had to see that. Lola can be a little…”

I snorted. “Don’t worry, we’re both well aware of how Lola can be.”

“I’m not sure how it doesn’t bother Jay,” Xavier joked.

Cali sighed dreamily. “I think it has something to do with the fact that they’re mates.”

Xavier wrinkled his nose. “I guess.”

“They balance each other out,” I told my brother. “I bet too-calm Jay secretly enjoys all the drama that comes with being around Lola.”

“I think it’s all the crazy sex that’s got him trapped,” Xavier said with a shrug.

Cali gasped, smacking him on the arm. “*Xavier!* My best friend is not a trap!”

Before Xavier could dig himself into a deeper hole, I cleared my throat loudly.

“*Anyway*,” I said, reaching for Cali’s hand. “Cali, love, Xavier and I were talking—”

Her eyes narrowed. “That sounds ominous.”

“I know, agreeing with my brother is always a nightmare,” I deadpanned, then added, “But the point is that we both think that it’s best if you don’t come with us when we go to get Fenrir.”

Cali huffed, pulling her hand away from mine. “Is this it, then? Is this the price I have to pay every time you two decide not to kill each other?”

“Cali,” I said patiently. “Please don’t—”

“You fainted,” Xavier said firmly. “Twice. What if it happens again?”

“I didn’t faint the last time!” she argued. “I just lost my balance for a moment.”

I took a step closer, resting my hands on her shoulders. “Cali, it’ll be better this way. If we get into a fight—which is likely given our track record—we can’t worry about you fainting. It could endanger both you and Fenrir. At least if something happens here, you’ll be with the pack.”

Cali stared up at me, her lips pressed together in a stubborn line, until she finally nodded.

“Okay,” she said, turning to Xavier. “I suppose you’re right.”

“We are. Though Greyson is only right when he agrees with me,” Xavier said seriously.

I scoffed at his words while Cali said, “Maybe Artemis can go with you? She’s a great tracker and has Fae magic to boot. It might be a little wonky, but it’s better than nothing.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Two Alpha werewolves aren’t nothing, love.”

“I know that!” she exclaimed. “But if you two protect Fenrir, who’s going to protect you?” She reached for Xavier’s hand.

“I don’t know—Maren?” he said. “Though she’ll probably save Greyson before me.”

Cali gasped, and I shot a glare at Xavier. He replied with an innocent look of his own. I’d always known he was a little shit.

“Ignore Xavier, love. Mace will be there as well. It’s going to be fine,” I told her. “We can handle Aiden on our own. It’s not like he’s on werewolf steroids. Besides, too much of a show of force could backfire. I don’t want Fenrir to get stuck in the middle.”

Cali took a deep breath at that. “I get it. The less traumatic this is for the child, the better.” She gazed between us. “But what about Christmas?”

“It’s not going anywhere,” Xavier said.

“Yeah,” I said. “We both know you’ve been looking forward to having a real Christmas with your family. You should stay here and enjoy that.”

“But how will I enjoy it without you two?” she said in a small voice.

“You can always remember how much we annoy you sometimes. Primarily Xavier, because we both know I’m an angel,” I said, and she laughed. The sound of it made me feel better, even when Xavier elbowed me hard.

“Either way,” I told her, “as soon as I get the call from Mace, I don’t think it will take long to find Aiden and bring Fenrir home.”

“We could be back by dinner time,” Xavier said.

“I will do my best to make sure we don’t miss dinner,” I said. “It’s our first Christmas Eve together, after all.”

Cali offered me a smile. “You’d better not. Lola might kill you both if you’re not here to eat her food. She’s been trying so hard.”

I glanced over to see that Torin and Lola were finally working together without arguing. My, my, it was a Christmas miracle.

“Hey, look at that,” Xavier said, then, reaching for Cali’s neck. He traced the pendants. “You’re wearing the necklaces.”

Cali grinned. “Aren’t they cute?”

Xavier squinted at them. “Mine looks better.”

I’d made the same joke earlier, so I snorted when Cali did. Xavier wasn’t even smiling, though, so I realized that he *wasn’t* joking.

“You do see that they’re identical, right?” I asked Xavier slowly.

“Mine is still better,” he said stubbornly.

My brother had *one* working brain cell in that thick head of his.

“That’s not how this works, they are literally the same—” I cut myself off. Some things about Xavier would never change, and one of them was his irrational streak. I took a deep breath, smiling tightly as I turned to Cali. “I shouldn’t even bother.”

Cali stifled a laugh with her hand. Xavier rolled his eyes, opening his mouth to say something, but he was interrupted when my phone vibrated.

“It’s Mace,” I said, and instantly picked up.

“Drop what you’re doing,” Mace said in lieu of a greeting. “We have to hustle if we’re going to get the kid.”

# Episode 3076

**Violet**

Charlie wanted us to go visit his parents. Like, tonight. I knew how much he’d been looking forward to seeing them, but I wasn’t happy about that. If I was being honest, I’d been secretly relieved when the flight had been canceled. Spending the holidays with Iris wasn’t exactly at the top of my Christmas wish list.

Even if Iris won Parent of the Year three years in a row, though, I still would have preferred to stay here. Lilac needed me, only I couldn’t explain why to Charlie. Mustering as much enthusiasm as I could, I said, “Sure, go ahead. Hopefully you can get a flight for us.”

“Awesome!” He grinned, leaning in to kiss my cheek.

I didn’t want to burst his bubble, but I had to add, “Aren’t some of the roads still closed, though? And aren’t most of the flights canceled? What are the odds of us finding two seats?”

“Pretty poor,” Charlie conceded. “But if I don’t at least try, my mom is going to kill me.”

Oh, the irony. You know, because Charlie’s mother had, indeed, tried to kill him once before. I’d have made a joke about that, but it felt like it was probably too soon. Charlie was already scrolling through flights on his computer anyway, so that ship had sailed.

All the flights were booked, as I’d predicted, because it didn’t take too long for Charlie to huff in frustration.

“Everything is practically gone,” he grumbled.

“Oh, no,” I said, hiding a smile.

He shook his head. “I’m going to call the airlines directly,” he said, determined. “Maybe I can sweet talk them into a couple of seats.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not how this works,” I told Charlie.

But he was determined. I knew what Charlie could be like when he had an idea in his head. He was already dialing numbers. I thought, *God, please no*, and watched as Charlie was kept on hold for a while. When an operator finally picked up, he started waxing poetic about me.

“Yes, it’s my girlfriend! She’s wonderful, and I’m trying to bring her home to meet my family for Christmas.”

He sounded so sincere and besotted that I felt just a teensy bit bad about not wanting to deal with his parents. Deciding not to worry about it right now, I slipped out of the room to look for my brother and worry about him instead. A great plan.

I found him pacing in his room, looking freaked out.

“What are you even doing in here?” I asked, closing the door behind me. “Everybody’s downstairs.”

“I know,” he said, looking forlorn. “I’m afraid to go downstairs—Marta’s there.”

“Lilac,” I said patiently. “You can’t keep hiding in your room—it’s Christmas Eve. You should be spending it with the girl you love.”

“That’s what I want to do, believe me.” Lilac flailed his hands. It was times like this that he reminded me of a male combination of Lola and Cali. That was a slightly terrifying thought.

“What am I supposed to tell her, Violet?” he proclaimed. “‘Hey, Marta, Merry Christmas! Look what I got you for your present—*my mate*’?” He slumped into a chair after delivering that horrific punchline, groaning. “This is going to be the worst Christmas ever.”

Even though Lilac was semi annoying most of the time, I loved him with all my heart, and at this point I felt bad for him.

“Are you sure this Samara person is really your mate, though?” I asked, sitting on the bed across from him.

“I didn’t have sparks or anything, but it’s kind of like what you described. Something deep inside me knew.” He frowned. “Maybe it was Plum telling me.”

I took a moment to think. “I mean, that is a little odd. You should have felt something—”

“The sparks?” Lilac asked, raising an eyebrow.

I huffed at his tone. “Yes, Lilac. Sparks, lightning, tingles—*something*. That’s how it usually happens,” I said. “But I suppose it’s different for everyone. Maybe it’s because you’re a guy.”

He frowned. “And what does that mean? That I have no feelings?”

I ignored him. “Or maybe it’s because you were a ghost only a few weeks ago. Like, literally dead.”

He nodded seriously. “I do feel dead inside occasionally. The stress of being a werewolf is exhausting—sometimes I just want to nap, you know?”

I ignored him again. “Or maybe you didn’t feel anything because you’re actually wrong, and that wasn’t your mate,” I said finally. “You could be getting all bent out of shape over nothing. You tend to do that on occasion.”

Lilac’s eyes narrowed. “Are you saying I’m dramatic?”

I didn’t dignify that with a response.

He sighed, shaking his head. “This is the most serious I’ve been about anything ever, Violet. Finding my mate was exactly what Marta was afraid of…”

I cringed, feeling for Marta in that moment. Of course, she would be worried about that. I thought about how I felt about Charlie, how any other relationship I could have possibly had would have paled in comparison.

As if he could hear my thoughts, Lilac continued. “I know what you’re thinking—a true mate is supposed to be sacred, but I… I’ve been hoping it would never happen.” He rested his elbows on his knees, taking a deep breath. “I’m happy with Marta. I don’t need a true mate.”

Lilac looked so dejected and sad that my heart felt heavy for him. “Even if you have found your true mate, it doesn't mean you have to be with her. Look at how many happy couples we know who aren’t true mates—like Mrs. Smith and Big Mac. Or what about Rishika and Artemis?”

Lilac looked down at the floor. His posture was so different, so unlike him that it worried me even more. In a quiet voice, he said, “Maybe they haven’t found their true mates yet.” He met my eyes. “How would you have felt about Charlie if you’d been in love with someone else first?”

I paused. The words came out of my mouth with a wince. “I would have dropped whoever it was to be with Charlie.”

Lilac laughed bitterly. “I rest my case. This is a complete fucking nightmare.”

I shook my head, grasping at straws. “Not every mate may feel that way, though. It’s all so personal and relative that—”

“Violet! Don’t you get it? Marta and I are doomed!”

I felt so bad for my brother’s predicament, even though he was being super dramatic. I couldn’t even imagine being in his position, especially with a girl as amazing as Marta. She’d literally saved his life. What could beat that?

Only a true mate.

I took a deep breath, kneeling by Lilac’s feet as he sat in the chair. Holding his hand, I said, “I need you to tell me the absolute truth. Do you love Marta?”

“Of course I do,” he spluttered, almost offended. “I wouldn’t be tied up in knots if I didn’t! She brought me back from the spirit world—she’s incredible. She might not be my true mate, but she’s my *soulmate*.” My brother’s expression was so intense, I didn’t know how to react. I’d never seen him this way—so earnest and serious.

“What about Marta?” I asked. “Does she feel the same way?”

Lilac huffed. “What kind of question is that? Of course she does! After all, how could she not fall in love with someone like me? I’m nearly perfect. Nearly.”

And now, we were back to our usual Lilac programming.

“I told you to tell me the truth, not puff out your chest and strut around like a peacock,” I said.

Lilac clasped his hands together. “The bottom line is that we love each other.”

I got to my feet, straightening my sweatpants. “Then that’s all you need to know. Remember it next time you have doubts.”

“Thank you,” Lilac said throatily. Suddenly, though, he looked alarmed. “Wait!”

“What?”

“What if she suddenly shows up here?” he asked.

Now I was confused. “Who?”

“My true mate!” Lilac hissed.

“Why on earth would she show up here?” I asked. “Are you planning on inviting her over for a cup of tea?”

“Of course not,” he scoffed. “But Cali is disturbingly friendly. She almost invited the whole Samara pack over. And what if my mate felt like you did when you first saw Charlie?”

I froze in alarm. “I… don’t think that’s going to happen?”

Lilac shook his head, his eyes wide. “You weren’t there, Violet. You didn’t see how intensely that girl was staring at me. I was minding my business, trying to kill and not get killed, and she was eyeing me as if I were a three-course meal! *During a battle.*” Lilac sounded both offended and impressed. “She was shameless, really.”

I rubbed my temples, trying to process one ridiculous thing at a time. “You should stop worrying about this, Lilac. It won’t do you any good.”

“Right,” Lilac said, looking uncharacteristically serious as he stood up from the chair. “You’re right—I’m not going to worry, I’m going to do something about this.”

I blinked. “*What?*”

My brother turned to me, his face determined. “I’m going to go see her again to find out if she really is my true mate, and you’re coming with me.”

# Episode 3077

I checked the time—it was still early, actually. If Greyson was right and this wasn’t going to take them long, they should be able to get back by dinner.

“I hope everything goes as smoothly as possible,” I said, looking between them.

Greyson said, “I’m sure it will,” while Xavier added, “Let’s not get too cocky.”

Greyson scoffed but didn’t say anything. I stepped closer to him, reaching up to kiss his cheek. I did the same with Xavier, telling each of them to be careful. I did it separately, just to make them feel special.

*What? It’s the little things that matter!*

They seemed happy about that, at least, especially when I said, “Come on, let me walk you guys to the door.”

We were on the front porch a moment later, and I watched them get undressed. They handed me their clothes, and I made sure not to look anywhere other than their faces, so as to make this less awkward. Although it was quite the struggle. They both said their own little goodbye—Greyson with a smile that reached his eyes, Xavier with a nod and an intense look. Then they shifted and started running.

My heart was pounding.

I stood there for a moment, in the cold, on the front porch, holding their clothes. I stopped myself from doing something ridiculous like burrowing my face into their shirts and bursting out crying. They were going to be fine. Everything was going to be fine!

Swallowing thickly, I promised myself not to check the time every five minutes until they were back, or I’d never make it through the day. After securing my mates’ clothes, I put on a brave face and returned to the kitchen. Thankfully, the earlier chaos had dialed down.

My dad gave me a soft smile. “There’s my girl.”

“How are you doing?” I asked.

“Just preparing one of Torin’s pot pie recipes,” Dad replied. I came to stand by him as he chopped up some red bell peppers. He glanced over his shoulder, whispering, “Speaking of, do you think he’s okay? He seems a little prickly today.”

I looked over my shoulder as well. Torin was studying his notebook with a severity that was very unlike him.

“I wonder if all this talk about Christmas and being together is reminding him of what he lost in Astrid,” I said quietly.

Dad shook his head. “I don’t think so—I talked to Torin about it the other day. He said that he felt so lucky to have known Astrid. He told me he was certain that she’d approve of him having fun and celebrating Christmas. If anything, it sounded like he wanted to make Christmas special in her memory.”

“That makes sense,” I agreed.

“His bad mood must be about something else,” Dad said conspiratorially. “Not sure what, though.”

I frowned. “Lola was being annoying earlier, but that’s normal, and Torin doesn’t usually get worked up about it.”

“That’s true.” Dad turned to look at Torin, who was talking to Lola now. “What could it be, then?”

I nodded decisively. “I’ll go find out. Play along.”

Dad nodded back and watched as I walked over to Torin and Lola. Patting my friend on the shoulder, I said, “My dad wants you for something, Lola. Can you go help him?”

Lola—to my surprise—instantly did as I asked, without any comment. A small miracle. I was left alone with Torin, who was staring at the pot in front of him, his expression more offended than I’d ever seen it.

“The marinara tastes horrible, too much salt.” Torin grimaced after tasting the sauce.

“Torin, I don’t think—”

He thrust a spoon in my face. “Here, see for yourself!”

I tried it. “It actually tastes great to me?”

Torin huffed. “I have to start over. It’s a salty disaster!”

He was moving to grab a new pot when I gently gripped his arm.

“Torin, please,” I said in a low voice. “What’s going on with you today?”

“Nothing’s going on, it’s just the salt,” Torin insisted. “Too much of it overpowers the balance of the—”

I shook my head. “Torin, come on. I’ve never seen you get this way over a bad dish. You’re usually happy to try again, to get it right. What’s *really* bothering you right now?”

All of Torin’s bravado deflated. He looked down, pressing his lips together. “It’s Kevin.”

*Okay*, I thought. *This is finally making sense.*

I stared at my friend, waiting for him to continue.

Sighing, Torin said, “I invited Kevin to Christmas Eve dinner, but he sent me this.” He fished around in his pocket for his phone and showed me the text from Kevin.

*Sorry, but family is here.*

“That’s a valid excuse,” I said, eyeing Torin.

He looked so sad, it was heartbreaking. “But what about *my* family? You guys are it—why can’t Kevin see that? Why doesn’t he want to be part of our feast?”

I kept my voice gentle. “How long have you and Kevin known each other?”

Torin pouted. “How does that matter? We like each other. Isn’t that all that counts? It’s obvious he doesn’t want to spend this holiday with me, even though I’d cook anything he ever wanted.”

I had to stop myself from snorting. “Okay, that’s not necessarily true. I’ve seen the two of you together, and you do get along. But you’re in the early stages of their relationship—it’s normal for Kevin to put his family first.”

Torin sniffled. “Do you really think so?”

“Of course,” I said. “And who knows what’s going on with his family? Maybe Christmas is the only time they can all get together?”

Torin gasped. “I never thought of that.”

“Exactly,” I said. “So maybe you’re being a little unfair here. Why not enjoy the holiday with us? Give you and Kevin some time to build your relationship, and then you can start spending holidays together.”

Torin paused, pondering my words for a moment. Then he gave me a beautiful, hopeful smile. “Maybe we can spend Valentine’s Day together. I read about it—you’re supposed to give the person you love red roses and chocolates.”

I patted Torin’s shoulder. My tone was dry. “Let’s just make it through Christmas first, bud. One thing at a time.”

Torin chuckled, and I leaned in to kiss him on the cheek.

“I’m looking forward to dinner,” I said. “It smells delicious.”

Torin held both my hands, smiling. “Thank you, Cali.”

There he was, my wholesome Torin. I’d fixed him. Feeling very proud of myself, I looked over to see Lola and my dad working smoothly together. One crisis averted.

“Speaking of dinner, could you please bring me a bag of basmati rice from the pantry?” Torin asked.

“Of course,” I said.

As I walked away, I checked the clock over the fridge. *Ten minutes since my mates left… Cali, stop!*

If I kept checking the clock, I was going to drive myself up the wall. They’d said they were going to be back as soon as they could. I needed to leave it at that instead of obsessing over it and developing severe anxiety over something I couldn’t control.

*There! Let me focus on that!*

Breathing evenly, I walked out of the kitchen and heard music playing in the living room. Intrigued, I decided to take a little detour. Mrs. Smith and Big Mac were dancing in front of the Christmas tree. Or trying to.

“I still don’t see why we need to dance at all,” Big Mac *growled*. Like, for real. As well as Xavier or Greyson.

Mrs. Smith, with the patience and glittery energy of a saint, said, “It’s tradition, honey. You agreed to help make this a perfect wedding, didn’t you?”

Big Mac groaned. “I suppose I could do… at least one dance. For you.”

I’d never seen anyone maneuver Big Mac the way Mrs. Smith did. It was so impressive, it made me grin. The witch let Mrs. Smith lead and started counting to the music, but then the unthinkable happened.

She stepped on Mrs. Smith’s foot.

“Ouch!” Mrs. Smith said, and that was when I decided I should probably leave them to it. They had some work to do, but I was pretty sure that they’d be in good enough shape by the time the wedding rolled around. I returned to my original destination—the pantry—and picked up the rice, heading back to the kitchen.

*Everything is okay*, I told myself. *This will be a nice, calm day, and the boys will be back in time for dinner. A nice, calm—*

Someone was tramping down the stairs.

I looked up to see a buck-naked Elle making a beeline for the door.

“Hey!” I called. “What are you doing?”

Elle ignored me—rude—and shoved the door open.

I rushed after her, yelling, “Elle, I’m talking to you! Where are you going?”

Elle huffed, facing me. “I need a gift.”

I was confused now. “What? Why?”

“I. Need. A. Gift.” Elle repeated the words one by one, making a *why-is-she-not-getting-this?* face.

“For who?” I asked. “Why—”

Her face brightened all of a sudden. She grabbed my hand and pulled me out toward the snow. “I need a gift, and Cali come with me!”

# Episode 3078

**Xavier**

Greyson and I shifted as we ran out the door and raced into the snowy woods. We ran in silence for a long time, both trying to pick up any scents as we went to meet Mace and Maren. The snow was making it hard to track, but after fifty miles, I had to admit to myself that Aiden could have gotten past our lands already.

For the past few miles, I’d been glancing over my shoulder every now and then, half-expecting to see Cali coming after us, riding Lola’s wolf, but the woods behind us stayed as empty as the woods in front of us. Not that I wanted Cali out here, endangering herself—she was just on my mind.

*When we find Aiden, leave him to me*, Greyson said gruffly, speaking for the first time since we’d left the house.

*Fine by me*, I countered. Aiden was distinctly *not* my problem, and I was happy to leave him to Greyson*. But if he becomes a threat, I’m not going to hold back*.

*Agreed*, Greyson said shortly, sounding so pissed, for a half-second I almost felt bad for what awaited this Aiden guy when Greyson found him.

My thoughts went back to Cali. I just really hoped I’d be able to keep my promise to her about being home in time for Christmas Eve dinner. I knew Cali loved Christmas, and I knew being together was really important to her. And I was only away from her because Greyson needed backup. If it were up to me, we wouldn’t negotiate with this Aiden clown at all. I didn’t know the guy, but he sounded like a real asshole, and like he was fucking up Fenrir’s Christmas.

And I knew what I was talking about. I couldn’t remember many good Christmases as a kid, because that was what having a messed-up dad took from you. One of many things. Silas was never the warm and welcoming type of dad who stayed up late wrapping up toys to put under the Christmas tree. He was more the punishing and murdering type.

My mom had worked hard to shield Colton and me from him, but somehow, I’d always kind of known how dangerous Silas was.

Fenrir had seemed like a nice enough kid, and though I didn’t know him well, I knew he didn’t deserve to suffer because his dad was an asshole. Maybe Aiden wasn’t *as* bad as Silas, but I knew how hard life as a kid could be when your dad was volatile.

I’d never know for sure, but I always wondered how I might have turned out if Colton and I had been able to live with just our mom. Maybe I wouldn’t have had quite so much baggage and father issues now.

But none of that mattered. I’d taken care of Silas, and that had given me the closure I needed. But this Fenrir kid shouldn’t have to do what I’d done. I didn’t want him to have to. I didn’t want any kid to have to go through that.

A breeze blew through the frozen trees, and a scent on the wind pulled me from my thoughts. It was Mace and someone else. Maren, probably.

*We must be close*, I said to Greyson.

Before Greyson could answer me, we heard a howl—as if in confirmation—and Mace appeared out of the woods in his wolf form. Maren was on his back, gripping his fur tightly .

*We’ve got to hurry. Aiden’s trail is going cold. I’m losing his scent*, Mace said brusquely.

*Dammit*, I said, frustrated. *Do you think he’s doing something to mask it?*

*Who knows?* Mace said. *I’m not sure he would have had time to get a masking spell from a witch. It could be nothing—just the snow messing with my ability to track.*

*We should speed up anyway*, Greyson growled. *Just in case. I don’t want to lose that scent.*

Maren—who hadn’t heard any of the mind linked conversation—was looking between the three of us, her expression confused.

“Thank you for coming,” she said.

I nodded up at her. *Let’s go*, I said, and started running.

Greyson and Mace started as well, and quickly matched my pace. We were going fast, keeping our eyes and noses alert.

*It’s here*, I said quickly. *I had just picked up on a wolf’s scent—it must be Aiden.*

Greyson and Mace nodded. We all dropped our heads and moved even faster, so the cold, icy forest around us became nothing more than a speeding blur.

*How do you want to deal with this guy once we find him?* Mace asked.

*I’ll take care of him*, Greyson said again.

*Maren told me that Aiden’s got some sort of anti-Fae ward that’s making it hard for her to follow him. She can’t get close to him without getting dizzy and confused. We’re worried it might be hurting Fenrir, what with him being half-Fae*, Mace told us.

*What kind of ward?* I asked.

*Not sure*, Mace said. *We can’t get close enough to see. But whatever it is, we have to get it away from him in case it’s hurting the kid.*

*How could he do that to his own damn son?* Greyson growled.

*I don’t know, man*, Mace admitted. *But he seems to be acting pretty erratically. He’s irrational. Maren said that he really loves the kid, but he’s being rash. He probably just got it to keep Maren away and wasn’t thinking about the effect it could have on Fenrir.*

*Still*, Greyson snarled.

*In any case*, Mace went on, *we have to get that ward away from the kid as soon as possible.*

*Even if he is acting without thinking, you’d think he’d remember that his own kid is half-Fae. That was pretty fucking stupid of him*, I said, furious now. I found myself feeling more protective of Fenrir than I’d ever thought I would.

Aiden was a bad dad, and he didn’t deserve the sweet, bright little kid I’d met a few months ago.

*I’ll take care of getting the ward away from Aiden—whatever it is—and you guys can focus on making sure Fenrir is safe*, I told Greyson and Mace.

We skirted a fallen log blocking our path and continued through the trees.

*If the object is really affecting Maren, can you protect her, Mace?*

*Yeah, I’ve got it*, Mace said.

“There he is!” Maren cried, pointing.

The three of us slowed slightly and turned to see where Maren was pointing. And there, through the trees, I could see a dark shape loping through the snow.

Greyson snarled, and we all took off, sprinting toward the figure.

Aiden must have heard us, though, because he sped up too. But we were able to get a little closer, and I could see Fenrir on Aiden’s broad back. He looked tiny, and like he was holding onto Aiden’s fur for dear life.

Fury welled up inside me as I imagined how scared the kid had to be, out here in the snow, cold, totally alone, being chased by three wolves, and probably wanting his mom.

“FENRIR!” Maren called out desperately.

I heard the little boy’s voice cry out in reply, but I couldn’t pick up the words—they were obscured by his sobs. I saw red. The fact that his kid was crying right now, and Aiden wouldn’t stop? What the fuck was wrong with him?

Aiden was moving fast, but we were gaining on him, and as we drew closer, I could see that there was some kind of strap around Fenrir, securing him to Aiden’s back. At least that asshole had the good sense to make sure his son was safe while riding through the snow, but it was going to be an obstacle to rescuing him.

*You see that?* I asked Greyson.

*I see it*, Greyson said grimly. *That strap is going to make it that much harder to get Fenrir away from Aiden. Mace, Xavier, spread out. We need to flank Aiden and force his path.*

I nodded, and without a word, Mace and I raced outward so we formed a kind of inverted V. We sprinted hard, pulling level with Aiden, and I saw him look left, then right—seeing us on either side of him. He shot a glance over his shoulder and saw Greyson just behind him.

He seemed to realize the impossibility of his situation and slowed slightly, then sprinted toward a copse of pine trees. They were growing too close together for him to fight through, so he turned and backed up against them, his gaze darting from Greyson to me, and then to Maren, who was still sitting on Mace’s back.

He growled at us, foaming at the mouth from the chase he’d just led us on.

*Get the hell away from us*, he snapped.

When Greyson replied, his voice was even, but it had a dangerous edge. *Not until you give us Fenrir.*

# Episode 3079

“You really don’t want to go outside naked, Elle,” I said for the fifth time. “It’s too cold. You’ll get frostbite on your… everywhere,” I finished, quickly glancing away from her naked body and the many places frostbite could set in.

But she seemed unworried by my warnings and shook her head. “I am a wolf. Cold is not the same for a wolf and human.”

I took a deep breath. “I know that, but there’s no reason for us to go outside. Not right now.”

“I need a gift,” Elle insisted.

“Elle,” I said with a smile. “Don’t worry about that. It’s fine. No one here expects you to buy anything for them this Christmas. It’s your first holiday, and you’re so newly changed. You really don’t have to worry about it.” I looked past her and out at the front yard. The world beyond the pack house was completely blanketed in white. “Besides, I don’t think you should be going out there alone.”

Elle laughed at this. “These are my woods. I know the woods.”

I sighed. I knew I couldn’t argue with her on that—she probably knew those woods better than anyone in the Redwood pack, maybe even the Alpha—but I also knew that Greyson wouldn’t be pleased if he found out I’d let Elle go out by herself. I was supposed to be watching out for her.

I glanced over my shoulder at the rest of the house, then back at Elle.

“Okay,” I said with a sigh. “I’ll go with you. Just let me go grab some coats for us.”

Elle looked confused. “Wolves do not need coats.”

“I know, but I can’t talk to you when you’re in wolf form,” I explained. “I can’t mind link with the rest of the pack. Maybe we can just go out as humans? Together? Besides, we can carry more stuff with our hands.” I illustrated this by holding up my opposable thumbs. “Very useful.”

Elle frowned as she thought about that. Then she nodded. “Okay.”

I hurried to grab my spare coat from my room before Elle could change her mind about getting dressed, but when I got back down to the foyer, I was surprised to see her wearing a pair of sweats and a T-shirt. The clothes were so big on her they seemed to swallow her whole, and the dark grey joggers looked familiar.

“Are those Greyson’s?” I asked, tipping my head to the side to get a better look at them.

Elle looked down at the pants and shrugged. “I found them in laundry. *The* laundry,” she said, correcting herself.

“In the *clean* laundry?” I asked.

Elle looked confused. “*Clean laundry?* I do not know.” She pinched the T-shirt she was wearing and sniffed it. “This is from Ravi?”

I was a little grossed out, but I decided that now wasn’t the moment to explain why wearing other people’s dirty laundry wasn’t advisable—and more than a little awkward. At least the girl had clothes on. That was a huge step in the right direction.

I’d already pulled my own coat on, and I held out my spare one to Elle.

But she shook her head. “I do not need coat.”

I was about to argue, but I stopped myself. I was going to make the choice to trust Elle to know what she needed. And anyway, wolves did tend to run hot. She probably knew best.

We headed outside and trudged across the driveway and front lawn toward the forest. The snow was deep, and it was hard going. I was sweating inside my coat, and it wasn’t long before Elle’s joggers were soaked through and clinging to her legs.

The snow seemed to be a little better in the woods—maybe the dense canopy of trees had prevented it from falling so thickly—and I was relieved to be able to walk easier.

Elle headed forward and began to look around studiously, but I was a little less focused. After wandering aimlessly for a few moments, I looked over at Elle. “So, what exactly are we looking for?”

“A gift,” Elle said shortly.

“Yeah, you said that already,” I said, trying not to sound exasperated. “But what kind of gift?”

Elle was still gazing at the forest floor. “Gifts make humans happy. I will give gift.”

I smiled at the girl. “That’s really sweet Elle, but you don’t have to do that. We’re just enjoying your company. You’re our gift.”

Elle looked up at me, frowning. She looked confused. “I am not a gift. I am a wolf.”

I laughed, but I didn’t push the idea. I decided it was too complicated a metaphor to explain.

“Yeah, you’re a wolf,” I agreed. “Okay, what do you need for this gift?”

Elle bent and picked up a pinecone. She held it up. “This. More of this.”

“Okay,” I said, looking around, “I can do that.”

I started gathering damp pinecones—it wasn’t hard, since they were everywhere. But it didn’t take long for my hands to start to freeze. After a while Elle walked over and started to look through the pile in my arms, inspecting my pinecone choices. She frowned and started pulling some out. Those were apparently the ones that didn’t meet her standards, because she sent them flying over her shoulder.

I’d spent a fair amount of time picking those up with nothing but ice-cold hands to show for it, but I kept my mouth shut. I didn’t want to upset Elle by arguing with her. The girl clearly had a vision for these gifts.

“I want give a gift to my new pack,” she explained, “and for this—*Christmas*,” she said questioningly and waited until I nodded before she went on, “you give gifts.”

“But you really don’t have to—” I started.

“Will everyone have gifts?” she asked keenly.

“Probably,” I admitted.

“I do not want to be the one not giving gifts. That is not what a pack does.”

I nodded, and we kept walking. Elle picked evergreens, holly branches loaded with bright red berries, and fronds of dried ferns. She added feathers and a collection of small rocks as well.

She didn’t say anything, and as she gathered her supplies, I was growing more and more curious. What was Elle making?

Her arms nearly full, she crouched down to pick some winter berries from the underside of a bush, where they’d stayed protected from the snow. As she held the bright berries in the palm of her hand, a cardinal fluttered down. The bird flew around Elle’s very still form for a moment, then surprised me by landing on her hand and picking at the berries in her palm.

The sun finally came out from behind a cloud, and with its bright golden beams shining through the canopy, Elle looked almost like a Disney princess—even with her damp sweats and baggy T-shirt.

The image made me smile. Elle was a bit chaotic, but she was a nice addition to the pack. And she was so sweet for wanting to get Christmas gifts for people.

I took a step toward her—wanting to see the bird more closely—but accidently stepped on a twig. It snapped with the deafening report of a gunshot in the quiet woods, and the bird flew away.

Elle looked unperturbed. She stood and dusted her hand off on her sweats. “This is enough,” she said, gesturing to my arms.

We started back toward the house, but we paused at the tree line. Elle looked up, studying the evergreen trees surrounding the house.

“Are you okay, Elle?” I asked when she didn’t move. “Did we miss something? Do you need more stuff for your gifts?”

Elle shook her head. “Why do humans cut down trees?”

The question seemed to come out of nowhere, and I was baffled. “What do you mean? Like for building things? For firewood?”

She shook her head again. “Why decorate a tree that is dead?”

I realized with a start she was talking about the Christmas tree in the house, but I was a little stumped on how to explain it. It *was* a little strange when you thought about it. I did know too that some traditions hung them from the ceiling. I think that would’ve surprised her even more, probably.

“It’s just traditional,” I said weakly. “Why? Does it upset you because the tree is from nature and it’s dead?”

“No,” Elle said slowly. “Death is a part of life.”

This statement surprised me. And at the same time, it didn’t. It just hadn’t been what I’d been expecting her to say, because I hadn’t expected that kind of mature, philosophical answer. I wondered if all wolves were as wise as Elle. It seemed very possible.

“Elle,” I said, struck by a sudden thought. “Can I ask you something?”

Elle looked over at me. “Yes.”

“Why did you want to become a werewolf and leave your pack?”

# Episode 3080

**Greyson**

*Give us the boy!* I demanded, taking a step toward Aiden.

*Forget it*, Aiden snapped. *He’s my son. I have a right to take my own son.*

Maren practically leapt down from Mace’s back and lunged toward Fenrir, but Aiden backed up another step and growled.

“Fenrir! Baby! Mommy’s right here!” she screamed. “I’m right here, baby!”

“Mommy…” Fenrir said, flailing a bit on Aiden’s back. His voice was slurred, and, being closer to him, I realized the reason why I hadn’t been able to understand him before was because he could barely speak. He couldn’t even keep his eyes open.

*You have to get that anti-Fae ward away from Aiden*, I said to Xavier. *It’s messing with Fenrir. Do you see it? It’s making him docile.*

As if on cue, Maren fell to her knees. She clutched her head and let out an agonized cry. She started to sway, and for a moment, I thought she was going to pass out.

Mace stepped forward and bumped his noise against Maren, pushing her back. She was too close to the anti-Fae object, and he was trying to get her to back up.

She didn’t look completely with it, but she stumbled to her feet and allowed Mace to push her back. Once she was further away, she stood up straight and her eyes narrowed on Aiden. Yeah, it was definitely the anti-Fae ward that had gotten to her.

I whipped around to glare at Aiden. I knew he was a bad dude, but I couldn’t believe he’d use a magical object like that to subdue his own son. It made me wonder if Fenrir had tried to fight back or tried to escape to get back to his mother, and Aiden had used the object as a last resort.

I wouldn’t have put it past Aiden. Hell, I wouldn’t have put anything past Aiden.

Gritting my teeth, I had to force myself to take a deep breath. I knew we were trying to avoid fighting Aiden, but that didn’t mean I didn’t want to. I knew I couldn’t—not with Fenrir here—but if the circumstances were different, I didn’t think I’d hesitate. I’d done it before, and I’d do it again.

*Greyson, look!* Xavier called out to me. *Around Aiden’s neck.* *That stone must be the anti-Fae object.*

I looked at the bright blue rock swinging from a thin cord of rope around Aiden’s neck. There was something about the way the rock glittered that made me certain my brother was right.

Maren was shuffling forward through the snow, clearly fighting the effects of the anti-Fae object.

“Aiden,” she called desperately. “Aiden, please, don’t do this. You can’t just take my son away from me!”

Aiden glared at her, but—in his wolf form—didn’t reply.

*There’s a better way, man*, I said to Aiden. *A better way to do this.*

Aiden’s glare shifted to me. *I’m his father. I know what’s best for him!*

*Are you fucking kidding me?* I asked incredulously. *Have you looked at your son lately? He looks like he’s been drugged—he’s practically falling off your back. He’s desperate for his mother. You think* that’s *what’s best for him? Scaring the shit out of him?*

*You don’t know what you’re talking about*, Aiden snarled.

He was deep in denial, and it was clear he wasn’t capable of listening to reason.

“Give me my son!” Maren demanded. She tried to move toward Fenrir and wobbled on her feet as the effects of the ward hit her. But this time she was prepared for the effect of the stone and braced herself. She took a deep, determined breath and another step forward.

I had to admit she was a complete badass for pushing past that powerful magic. It was like she was forcing her way through a solid wall, but she just kept moving. Sweat was pouring off her, but she didn’t stop. It reminded me of those stories of mothers who were so high on adrenaline in moments of crisis that they were able to lift cars off their kids.

Watching Maren, I understood I should never underestimate the power of a mother’s love.

“You can’t be trusted with our son,” Maren gasped out. “By pulling this crap, you’ve proven you don’t have that right.”

Aiden snarled at Maren as she drew closer, but she didn’t back away. She didn’t even hesitate. She was almost to Fenrir, and though it looked like it was taking every ounce of effort she had, she kept moving toward him.

And it wasn’t just me who was fascinated by her—Aiden’s attention was fully focused on Maren, too.

I looked over at Xavier. *NOW!*

I darted to Aiden’s left side, pulling his attention toward me. Xavier used that distraction and leapt toward Aiden. He opened his mouth wide enough so his teeth closed around the rope cord slung around Aiden’s neck *and* the leather strap holding Fenrir on his back. He snapped through both and pulled away the anti-Fae ward. Then he crushed the glittering blue stone between his teeth.

The leather strap binding Fenrir to Aiden swung loose, and the boy slipped.

Aiden—enraged by Xavier’s attack—began to spin. It was as though he’d forgotten his son was on his back, and he spun faster and faster. It was too fast, and in a strange, suspended moment, Fenrir was flung from his father’s back.

Maren’s eyes had never left her son, and she dove to catch him. And she did, though she tripped over a rock semi-hidden in the snow, and both she and Fenrir fell, landing in the packed snow with a bone-rattling crash.

The silence that followed rang in my ears. Neither Fenrir or Maren made a sound, and the rest of us looked at them, not breathing.

Then, to my complete relief, Fenrir began to cry. Maren scooted off him and—finally free from the effects of the anti-Fae ward and obviously still in shock—the boy *let loose*. He was sobbing so hard his face had turned red, all the way up to his blond hair.

Maren gathered him in her arms right there on the snowy forest floor and rocked him, making soothing sounds.

“I’m here,” she said quietly. “I’m right here, baby. I’m right here.”

Aiden shifted back to human with the snap of cracking bones, then took a step forward—toward Maren and their son. The look on his face was one of total devastation, and I was surprised by how upset he looked, considering he was the one who’d caused all the trauma.

I shifted back to human as well and stepped protectively toward Maren. I put a hand on her shoulder—so she knew I was here—and gave the approaching Aiden a hard, cold look.

Aiden stopped and stared down at his sobbing son. He looked at Fenrir for a long, long time. Then he lowered his head.

“I didn’t want to hurt him,” he said softly. “I just wanted him to be with me. He’s a wolf. He should learn how to be one, and that means being with me. I’m his father.”

Maren looked up at Aiden, giving him a look of pure venom. “You *took* him away from me! That *hurts* him! And he’s also half-Fae! If you can’t understand what that means, then you have no right to see him!”

Aiden didn’t answer that, just nodded, looking completely defeated. It seemed like he’d been operating in a complete vacuum—doing what he thought was best for his son, no matter what. But seeing the effect his actions were having on Fenrir seemed to have jolted him back to reality. Fenrir was clearly traumatized, and seeing that right in front of him seemed to have finally broken through Aiden’s rock-hard skull.

At least he loved his son. Even if he was a selfish prick who didn’t know what being a good dad would look like if it bit him on the ass.

Xavier looked over at me. *What do you want us to do with this guy?*

“Just let him go,” I said aloud. “He’s too pathetic to waste our energy on.”

My words made Aiden flinch.

I took a step toward him. “If I ever hear that you’ve hurt this boy, I swear I’ll make you pay.”

Reaching down, I helped Maren to her feet. Fenrir stayed clutched in her arms, his own arms tight around his mother’s neck.

Aiden took one last look at them and slunk off into the woods. And as he did, Maren breathed a sigh of clear relief.

“Thank you,” she said, turning to Mace, Xavier, and me. “I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“What are you going to do now?” I asked.

She thought for a moment. “I’m not sure. Not yet, anyway. I think Fenrir *should* be able to see his father, but that won’t happen for a while. A long while,” she added, holding her son close.

“Well, hopefully nothing like this ever happens again,” I told her. “But if it does, we’ll be here in a heartbeat.”

Maren gave me a sad smile. “Thanks, Greyson.” She took a deep breath. “Now I guess it’s time to see if we can salvage our Christmas.”

I hesitated for a moment and looked from Mace to my brother, then back to Maren. “Do you want to join us for Christmas?”

# Episode 3081

I watched Elle closely as she thought about my question. It was one I’d been wondering about for a while, but it had never seemed like the right time to ask.

“To wolves humans are dangerous,” Elle started slowly. “Humans hunt wolves. They destroy the forest. My father believes nothing good comes from humans who do this.” She paused for a moment. “But I think werewolves have something in common with a true wolf pack. I wanted to understand them—then maybe I could understand all humans.”

I took this in. “But to what end?” I asked. “Try to understand humans so you can do what?”

“I want to help my pack,” she said, as though this were perfectly obvious. “My father is…” She thought for a moment, trying to remember the word. “Traditional. He did not want me to do this. He wanted me to stay a wolf, but we have been wolves for many generations, and we have not figured out how to communicate with the humans. And in the past, there have been fights between my pack and the werewolf packs. Wolves have been hurt. Some wolves were killed.”

“That’s awful,” I said quietly, thinking for the first time what that loss must have felt like for the wolves.

Elle nodded. “I want a better way. I want to find a way to live with the werewolves. I asked and asked, and after a long time, I convinced my father it would help our pack.”

“Wait…” I frowned. “Your pack was pretty close to our land. Does that mean you were watching the Redwood pack?” I widened my eyes in pretend surprise. “You were a *spy*, Elle! A wolf superspy!”

I was laughing, but Elle didn’t.

Her eyes widened in earnest. “*Not spy!* I just wanted to understand. And to help.”

“I’m just messing with you, Elle,” I said. “I understand why you did what you did, and if this can bring peace between the werewolves and the true wolves, I totally support that.” I thought for a moment. “Maybe we can work together to prove to your father—and the rest of your pack—that there can be harmony between the Redwoods and your pack.”

“Yes, maybe,” Elle said, shifting the bundle in her arms.

“So,” I started cautiously, “how are you liking being part of the Redwood pack? Are you getting more comfortable? Do you feel like you’re getting to know us a little more?”

Elle nodded. “Yes. I liked the battle.”

*Okay…* “But how about the way we live?” I asked. “Do you think you can understand why we live the way we do?”

I was prompting her, trying to find out if she understood why the Redwood pack had gotten involved in that battle. It wasn’t just because we liked to fight.

“I hope you understand that we were involved in that fight because we want to be happy and peaceful and safe, and not get dragged into conflicts every couple of days. That’s got to be how the true wolf pack feels, too, right?”

“Yes,” Elle admitted. She thought for a moment more. “But your pack does strange things.”

“Like what?” I asked, trying not to feel immediately defensive.

“Like decorate dead trees,” she said.

“Okay, when you keep putting it that way, it does sound odd,” I admitted.

She nodded. “Human things *are* odd. Like the light in the big box of cold—”

“The refrigerator,” I put in.

“When does it go out? And the clothes.” She plucked at Ravi’s shirt. “It is odd, but I want to learn more.”

“What else do you want to learn?” I asked curiously.

“As a wolf, I saw those big things with markings on them.”

“Signs,” I said after a moment. “Trail signs? The ones hikers use?”

Elle nodded. “I always wanted to know what those markings meant. I would see hikers stop to look at them, but I did not know how they understood them. I want to know what they know.”

“You want to learn to read?” I asked, surprised.

“I know some,” she said. “I taught myself.”

“Really?”

“Yes. My favorite one is *yih-eld*,” she said.

I frowned. “I don’t think I know that one.”

“I used to stray from the pack a bit, and I would see signs. I would try to read them. It was hard, but that one was my favorite.”

I thought hard, trying to figure out what sign Elle could be talking about.

“The sign was yellow-colored,” she offered.

“Oh!” I said triumphantly. “Do you mean *yield*?”

Now it was Elle’s turn to look surprised. She repeated my pronunciation. “*Yield.* Yes. That was it.” She looked at me. “Can you teach me more?”

I smiled at her. “Yeah, I can probably help with that. Actually, the whole pack can.”

Now more than ever, I felt energized to show Elle all the positive things about werewolves and humans and the world we inhabited. She was right—building a bridge between us and the true wolves was a better way to find peace, and I couldn’t help but feel that it would ultimately help us find more safety out here in the forest.

Elle looked happy as we started back toward the house, our arms loaded with supplies for Elle’s gifts. Now that I realized that helping Elle understand humans might help the pack have better relations with the wolves in the area, I decided to be more deliberate about what I explained to her, and I started with Christmas.

“The Christmas tree is kind of a funny tradition, and I think it started in another country, but people just kind of liked it and brought it over here to this country. And it is pretty, isn’t it?”

“I like the lights,” Elle admitted.

“And there’s more. There’s this funny story humans tell children about a man who comes down the chimney on Christmas Eve and leaves presents underneath the Christmas tree,” I went on.

Elle looked more confused than ever. “Is this normal, for someone to come into the house through the chimney?”

“No!” I said quickly, so she wouldn’t get any ideas. “It’s just a story.”

“Why?” she asked.

“It’s really just a story,” I said, knowing that if I kept going it was bound to sound even weirder. “What Christmas is really about is being with your family. Spending time with the people who matter most to you.” Elle nodded at this, clearly understanding. “It’s about remembering what bonds you together. And as humans, we get a few chances throughout the year to really tell each other how much we mean to each other. And that’s a great thing about being human.”

“What *I* like about being human…” Elle started, apparently thinking it was a game. “I like the cookies Torin makes and the cakes from the pan your father makes, Cali—”

“Pancakes,” I offered.

“I like to control the fire in the fire hole—”

“Fireplace.”

“I like the box with the pictures all the time—”

“Television.”

“I really like sugar,” she said, grinning at me.

“What about the people?” I asked. “Do you like the people you’ve met?”

Elle nodded. “Yes. They are good friends, and they make me miss my pack a little less.”

“That’s great!” I said happily. I was glad she liked pancakes and TV, but it was nice to hear that we were making a good impression on Elle in other ways, too.

Suddenly, Elle drew to a stop, her eyes on the ground. I was about to ask her why when I saw that she was looking at a circle of mushrooms growing up from the ground. Which was strange to see in the snowy woods, but even stranger still was that there was no snow on the mushrooms, or anywhere inside the circle they created.

“A fairy circle,” I breathed.

Elle grabbed my arm tightly. “Let’s go.”

“It’s okay,” I assured her. “It’s not going to hurt us.”

“I do not like it,” Elle said, shaking her head. “Wolves do not deal with the Fair Folk like this.”

“What about me?” I asked.

“You are not a fairy circle.”

There were a couple of broken branches within the circle, and some sodden leaves. They’d obviously been blown there by the storm, but they were marring a beautiful space. I got the impression I needed to clean it out, as a sign of respect, but as I stepped forward, Elle bellowed at me.

“I do not *like* it!”

“It’ll be okay,” I assured her, and I stepped inside the circle.

I’d just bent down to pick up the leaves when my shoulder started to burn like white-hot fire. Lights began to flash, and I squeezed my eyes shut so I wouldn’t be blinded. My heart was beating hard, but it seemed to come to a complete stop when I heard a voice whisper in my ear.

“*Straddling too many worlds will break you.*”

# Episode 3082

I could feel my magic rising up within me, but it felt like it was swirling out of control, almost like some kind of magical whirlwind. Beneath me, I could feel my feet begin to move, but they were doing it without any messages from my own brain. I was being pushed out of the circle by some kind of unseen force.

When I was almost at the edge, something grabbed my wrist, and when I opened my eyes, I saw that Elle had yanked me out of the circle.

I was breathing hard and had to take a moment before I could speak.

“What did *that* mean?” I finally managed, though I was speaking more to myself than to Elle. The burning on my shoulder had stopped as suddenly as it had started, but it had left me feeling very, very confused. What the hell had *that* been?

And what was *up* with that message?

“Cali. Are you okay?” Elle asked, her face drawn with fear.

I didn’t want to freak her out any more than she clearly already was, so I just nodded. “Yeah, I’m fine.” Only I wasn’t fine. I was shaken to my core.

Elle’s eyes were darting around, and she looked scared. “I did not like that.”

I took a deep breath. “We should get back to the house.”

Elle nodded, and we kept walking. And as we moved, I thought about the whispered message.

*Straddling too many worlds will break you.*

What the fuck did that mean, I was *straddling worlds*? Was it talking about the human world and the Fae world? Or was it something else?

Gritting my teeth against the pain, I resisted the urge to press a hand to my still-throbbing shoulder. I didn’t want to frighten Elle, but I let the words I’d heard continue to echo in my head. Were they a reference to the human and the Fae worlds, or something darker?

Back at the house, I helped Elle deposit her treasures onto the dining room table. She sat right down and got to work, carefully organizing everything into categories. Then she reached for the pine boughs and started twisting them into wreaths and bouquets.

I watched her for a while, and after a moment I sensed someone at my shoulder. It was Sage, and she was watching Elle work. Then Zainab joined us, then Lola and Ravi. It wasn’t long before Elle had a whole audience of people watching her as she deftly worked her materials into gifts.

Satisfied that Elle was content to work on her crafts, I headed upstairs. Alone in my room, I shut the door, pulled off my shirt, and twisted so I could see my back in the mirror. I wasn’t surprised to see that the handprint looked red and angry.

I pulled in a shaking breath as I thought about what I should do. Given my fainting spell earlier, I reasoned that this incident in the fairy circle could possibly be a very, very bad sign. But before I completely freaked out, I needed to check. I pressed a finger against the angry skin and hissed as burning pain shot through me.

Okay, this wasbad. I had to figure out what it meant.

Then, suddenly, I felt a strange sense of hope fill my heart. What if that message I’d received in the fairy circle helped me figure out what was happening with the handprint?

Filled with sudden curiosity, I went looking for my mom. I found her in the kitchen, helping Lola, Torin, and my dad.

“How’s it going?” I asked, walking in. The whole placed smelled like baking sugar and the warm scent of cooking ham, and besides that, everyone had a smile on their face, so I guessed things were going well.

“Good,” confirmed my dad. “Everyone’s working well together,” he added, looking over to Lola and Torin.

I stepped toward my mom. “Could I talk to you for a minute?” I asked quietly.

But Lola overheard. “You can’t steal our sous chef!”

“I’ll be fast,” I promised. “And when we come back, I’ll stick around and help, too.”

Lola frowned. “Okay, but make it snappy.”

“What is it, sweetheart?” Mom asked as I pulled her out of the kitchen and down the hall.

I didn’t answer until I had tugged her into the small study near the front door and closed the door.

“What can you tell me about fairy circles?” I asked, rounding on her.

She frowned in confusion. “Why?”

“I found one, in the woods.”

“When?” she asked.

“Just now, when I was out with Elle.”  
 Mom smiled. “How lucky, especially with all this snow. I always love finding a fairy circle in the human world. It always reminds me of home.”

“Yeah, me too. And I stepped inside to clear out some debris from the storm—it just seemed like something you would do,” I added, making Mom smile, “but something odd happened when I stepped inside.”

“What?” Mom asked.

I hesitated. “Can fairy circles have a negative effect on a Fae?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, can they hurt a Fae?”

Mom looked troubled. “No, that’s not normal. A fairy circle is a beautiful symbol of nature, and it’s usually just that. It can be used for soft magic too, but it’s not bad. It’s not evil, Cali.”

I tucked some hair behind my hear. “Well, that’s not exactly what ended up happening.”

“Well, nothing *should* happen,” Mom said, clearly baffled.

“I stepped inside, and my shoulder burned. The handprint looks really inflamed. And I heard a voice.”

Mom sucked in a breath. “That had something to do with Seluna—I’m sure of it. Her evil mark on you must have confused the fairy circle.”

It upset me to hear Mom speak those words, but it didn’t surprise me. I’d expected something like that, but it was hard to hear my mom confirming it—hearing the words made it feel much more real.

“And the fact that the handprint effected something as pure and innocent as a fairy circle’s magic is…” She shook her head. “It’s bad. Seluna has to be dealt with. Even dead, she’s upsetting the balance of natural things.”

“The voice told me that straddling too many worlds would break me. What do you think that means?”

My mom frowned. “It might be saying that the mark Seluna left on your shoulder is causing you to be connected to the dark underworld that the demon came from.”

I stared at her in shock. “Are you saying I could get sucked into the demon world?”

My mom’s face went pale, but she put her hands on my shoulders and looked into my eyes. “I don’t think that’s going to happen, Caliana. Don’t worry, I’m here. I’m going to help you figure this out. There’s no way I’m going to stand by and let that demon grab hold of my daughter. I won’t let that happen to you.”

She leaned forward and kissed my forehead, then wrapped her arms around me. I hugged her, fighting back tears. I hadn’t realized how much I needed my mom, but I absolutely needed the comfort of her arms around me.

“I’m scared, Mom,” I whispered.

“I’ll reach out to the trees to see if I can find any information about this fairy circle, or even any fairy circle lore about this kind of situation. But in the meantime, I don’t want this to affect your Christmas. I’ll figure this out, and you deserve to relax and have some fun, okay?”

I pulled away and looked up into her face. “Do you think letting my guard down might be a mistake, though? Shouldn’t I stay watchful?”

Mom shook her head. “We won’t ever let our guard down, sweetheart. But that doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy your Christmas. You’re safe in the pack house.”

I wished that was totally true. But the reality was that I’d fainted earlier, and I’d almost fainted again when I was trying to help cook. The pack house couldn’t stop what was happening to me, but at least I was around people who could.

I took a deep breath and nodded. “You’re right. I’ve let Seluna rob me of so much—my peace, my sleep, even my own body—I’m not going to let her steal anything else from me. Especially not the chance of making memories with everyone tonight and tomorrow.”

“That’s right, Cali.”

“I’m going to try to throw myself into the celebration,” I said, mostly speaking to myself. “I’m going to enjoy myself. Seluna can’t take this away from me.”

Mom nodded, and I pulled open the door, intent on heading back into the kitchen to help out with cooking, but before I could, the front door opened.

Xavier and Greyson were standing at the door, stamping snow off their feet.

“Hi!” I called out excitedly. “I’m so glad you’re back—”

I stopped short, suddenly speechless. Xavier and Greyson had just moved to come in, and a figure I hadn’t seen standing behind them stepped forward.

It was Maren.

# Episode 3083

**Greyson**

Looking at Cali’s frozen expression as Maren walked in was like a punch in the gut—especially because I knew I’d caused it. I started forward to explain what had happened, but before I could speak, Cali took a step toward Maren with a tight smile on her face.

“Maren, I’m so glad you and Fenrir are safe. How are you doing?”

Maren was still on edge from what she’d just been through, so all she managed was a strangely formal nod. “Fine, thank you. I appreciate that members of this pack were able to help me,” she said stiffly, still clutching Fenrir to her.

Cali nodded. “Of course.”

The tension in the air was almost unbearable. It was a wonder anyone could breathe, the air was so thick with it. I wanted to do something or say something to ease it, but I worried that anything I said might make things worse, so I kept my mouth shut.

“Happy Christmas Eve to you both,” Cali continued. “I hope you’re staying here for the holidays.”

Maren gave another tense nod. “I appreciate the invitation.”

Before anyone else could speak—and make the vibe worse—Torin skipped into the hallway. He stopped for a moment, taking in the scene, then went directly to Fenrir, who was just peeking up from his mother’s shoulder.

“Hey! It’s my little buddy!”

Fenrir smiled, looking excited to see Torin, though his face was almost grey with exhaustion.

“Why don’t I get you a hot chocolate,” he said gently. Then he looked up at Maren. “And for you, Mama, I’ll scrounge up something with more of a kick.”

Maren nodded, her face relaxing for the first time. There was something about Torin that seemed to put her at ease. It must have been the shared Fae heritage.

She put Fenrir down, and the two of them followed Torin into the kitchen.

“I’m going to take a quick shower,” Xavier muttered, and headed upstairs.

Mercifully alone, I turned to Cali. “Hey, I’m sorry about this. I should have called ahead somehow and let you know I was bringing them here.”

“No, it’s fine,” Cali said quickly. “I get why you did. I’m just glad Fenrir is safe.”

I felt a wave of relief at Cali’s easy acceptance of my explanation. I wasn’t sure how Cali felt about Maren. Things had always been cordial between them, if a little tense, but I wasn’t sure how that had changed since Maren’s abrupt exit from the pack house, and me finding out I wasn’t Fenrir’s father.

From the expression on her face when Maren walked in, however, I could infer that Cali wasn’t completely comfortable around the other Fae, but I knew that she was sincere in her relief about Maren and Fenrir being safe. I knew Cali cared more about keeping people safe than about petty arguments. I’d seen that in her treatment of Ava.

“Are you okay?” Cali asked, looking me over. “How was it out there? Was there a fight?”

“It was okay,” I said. “It went more smoothly than I anticipated, but I was glad Mace and Xavier were out there with me.”

Cali smiled. “I’m glad you and Xavier were able to work so well together.”

I returned her smile. “It must be a Christmas miracle.”

Cali rolled her eyes and gave my arm a playful punch. “It’s not a miracle. I knew you two could get along. You’re brothers, aren’t you?”

I grinned and shrugged. I was grateful that our conversation had taken a lighter turn, but I also knew Cali and I needed to talk, and I couldn’t take the easy way out of this conversation. I wanted to make sure my mate was okay with this turn of events.

“Are you sure you’re good with them staying here? Maren and Fenrir, I mean. I just think with everything that happened to them, they’ll probably feel more comfortable—and safer—with people they know and can trust.”

“I totally agree,” Cali said, nodding. “Plus, if they’re here, hopefully it’ll discourage Aiden from pulling any other crazy stunts right now.”

“Yeah, that’s an added bonus,” I said. “Though I’m pretty sure we were able to send that guy a fairly strong message. He seemed to understand, and only the biggest dumbass would try to cross us again so soon.”

Cali smiled and wrapped her arms around me. “You should get washed up. I think dinner’s going to be ready soon.”

“Yeah?” I asked, sniffing the air. “It smells pretty good.”

“I hope you’re hungry, because it’s going to be a *feast*,” she promised. “I’m supposed to be in there right now, helping out. Lola’s going to skin me alive if I don’t get moving.”

I was reluctant to let go of her so soon, but she was smiling now, and I wanted to keep her that way. Making sure Cali had a good Christmas was important to me because it was important to her. And it had the added benefit of distracting her from all the Seluna stuff.

“Okay,” I said, pressing a kiss to her hair. “I’ll go shower.”

I’d just reached the stairs when Cali called after me.

“Hey, after dinner, can we talk more?”

I looked at her in surprise. “Of course, love.”

“With Xavier,” she added.

I paused. “Cali, is everything okay?”

She smiled, but this one seemed slightly thin, almost forced. “Yeah, everything’s good. I just want to talk to my mates. Anything wrong with that?”

*Yes.* I could have said. Normally she only ever wanted to speak with the both of us when something serious was about to go down, but I let it go for now. I’d find out what she wanted to tell me, and Xavier, when she was ready.

“Yeah, after dinner,” I said.

Cali nodded, and I headed upstairs.

I hopped in the shower, letting the hot water wash over my sore muscles as I thought about the chase with Aiden. When Fenrir had been thrown from his father’s back, my heart had nearly stopped.

I was glad we’d been able to help Maren and get Fenrir safely back. I had to admit, I was attached to the kid. I knew the boy wasn’t my son, but he was a good kid, and I liked him. I wanted him to have a good Christmas. And, as Maren had arrived here with nothing more than the clothes on her back and her son in her arms, she probably hadn’t been able to get any presents for him.

Maybe I should run out and grab some presents for Fenrir to open tomorrow morning. That would mean a lot to the kid, and I wanted to do that for him.

I smiled as I thought of his excitement, and I hoped there would still be some stores open after dinner. I knew missing dinner wasn’t a possibility, not if I didn’t want to be in deep shit with everyone involved in making it—which seemed like almost everyone in the pack.

So I’d just have to sneak out after dinner.

But Cali wanted to talk to me after dinner. My thoughts went to her, and as I stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around my waist, I started to wonder what it was she wanted to talk to me about. Was it about the *due destini*, since she wanted to speak to both Xavier and me? Was it the ashes? Maybe she’d had an idea about them—we could use any leads we could get at this point.

Or maybe she wasn’t as okay with Maren and Fenrir being here as she’d let on. But… no. If it was that, why would she want Xavier there to talk about it?

I pulled on jeans and a nice sweater and jogged back downstairs. I’d just turned toward the living room when I crashed right into a small figure.

“Maren!” I said, surprised.

Maren looked as surprised as I was, and she stumbled back a few steps, almost losing her footing. I grabbed her arms to steady her.

She let out a nervous laugh. “I should watch where I’m going with so many wolves racing around this house.”

“It’s my fault,” I said. “I was distracted. I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

Maren gave me a searching gaze. “I wonder if that distraction is partly my fault.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, frowning.

“For pulling you away from your pack during the holidays. I’m sure having Fenrir and me here wasn’t exactly what you had planned.”

“That’s not it,” I assured her, shaking my head. “I’m glad you’re both here. We’re happy to help.”

Maren nodded, then her gaze traveled down to my hands, which I realized with surprise were still holding onto her.

I quickly let go and looked away, up at the door frame above us. And with a jolt, I realized we were standing right underneath a sprig of mistletoe.

# Episode 3084

“Cali, I need cardamon, paprika, and more cinnamon,” Lola told me.

“You have cinnamon right there,” I pointed out.

Lola glared at me. “I need *more*!”

“Fine, fine,” I said, backing carefully away from her. “I’ll find more cinnamon.”

The pantry was just next to the kitchen door, and as I headed toward it, I glanced down the hallway toward the front door—then stopped in my tracks.

I stood for a long moment, frozen in place as I stared at Greyson and Maren. They were standing close together and looking up at the mistletoe just above their heads.

Oh my god. They were going to kiss. And even if they weren’t currently kissing, they were both clearly *thinking* about kissing. They were conscious of the *concept* of kissing. And not just in the abstract—kissing *each other*. On the mouth. Maybe with tongue—

Why was I doing this to myself? My breath was coming fast, and I could feel anxiety clawing its way up my chest.

Logically, I knew that Greyson would never cheat on me like that. I trusted him, but seeing him with Maren—*so* close—made me feel like I was going to be sick. The image of them kissing flashed into my mind, and I was sick with shame for even picturing it.

As I watched, Greyson and Maren stared up awkwardly at the mistletoe.

“Torin loves to decorate,” Greyson muttered.

Maren gave him an uncomfortable half-smile and stepped away.

Greyson did the same and, glancing away, spied me down the hall. His eyes went wide, and he began walking toward me when Rishika hurried down the stairs and headed straight for him.

“Greyson, hi, I’ve been looking for you. I’ve been thinking about the patrol shifts, and I think the overnights are too short. I think it would make more sense to have people take longer shifts, and just have them do it less often…” Rishika went on, deep into bureaucratic pack business.

Greyson half-listened to her, but his eyes kept darting toward me. He looked so nervous, and I gave him a reassuring smile. I wanted him to know that I was okay, and that he didn’t need to check on me. After all, I was the one who was mentally overreacting. *To a kiss that didn’t even happen!*

But I still needed a moment for myself, so I stepped into the walk-in pantry and shut the door after me. I leaned against the closed door and took a deep breath. The anxiety wasn’t necessary, I reminded myself. Greyson didn’t love Maren. And with everything else going on, it was silly of me to focus on something so innocuous. With all the mistletoe that Torin had put up around the house, it was practically impossible *not* to accidentally stand under a bunch.

And even if they *were* beneath mistletoe, it wasn’t like that stuff was a legally binding kiss contract.

I shook my head at myself and rolled my eyes, then caught sight of something sparkly just over my head.

I looked up and was wryly amused to see a bunch of mistletoe—tied with a silvery bow—hanging right over me. In the freaking pantry, of all places.

The door was suddenly yanked open, and I jumped in surprise.

Lola was standing in the doorframe. “Where’s the cinnamon, Cali?”

“Sorry,” I said breathlessly. “I got a little distracted.”

Lola’s hard expression softened as she looked at me. “Are you okay? What’s going on?”

“No, nothing. It’s silly,” I said, grabbing the jar of cinnamon from the shelf.

Lola tipped her head at me. “Come on, Cali. You can tell me. I’m your best friend.”

I sighed. “I saw Greyson and Maron standing under the mistletoe by the living room.”

Lola frowned. “Kissing?”

“No, no,” I said, shaking my head quickly. “No, definitely not kissing. They were just standing there, but it made my heart stop for a second.” I shook my head again. “It’s silly. I told you it was silly.”

Lola put her hand on my shoulder. “You’re not acting like it’s silly. You look a little shaken.”

“I—” I was about to say I was fine, but when I looked into Lola’s face, I knew I couldn’t lie to my best friend. “Sometimes I feel kind of jealous of Maren. She has this whole past with Greyson, and they still seem to share some kind of connection. But I’m not going to let this totally illogical jealousy affect how I treat her. Maren is a really nice person. Yes, she’s beautiful, but that’s not her fault, and I just have to remind myself that I know Greyson is committed to *me*. I know our mate bond is strong. That’s all that matters.”

“So, what is it?” Lola asked.

I thought for a moment. “Sometimes I get the feeling that Maren doesn’t like me.”

“Really?” Lola asked. She looked surprised.

“She’s not rude or anything, but I think maybe I missed my chance to have a friendly relationship with her because I held back in the past. It’s a shame, with both of us being Fae and all.”

“Yeah, but you can’t blame yourself for being cautious about her,” Lola said. “For all we knew, Maren was going to do something bad to Greyson, or the pack. You were just being protective.”

“Well, there’s no changing the past,” I said with a sigh. “She’s here, and Fenrir’s here, and it’s only for a little while, until the holidays are over. Maybe spending the holidays together will help ease the tension between Maren and me a little.”

Lola gave me a searching look. “You know it’s not your responsibility to be everyone’s best friend, right?”

“I know, but—”

“I mean, you’re already giving Ava a chance, which is a Herculean task if ever there was one.”

“I can’t help it,” I said. “I like getting along with people, and I hate being at odds with anyone.”

“I just don’t want you to make yourself crazy,” Lola said.

“Too late.”

Lola stared daggers at me, arms crossed, until I rolled my eyes, relenting.

“Okay, okay. I promise. Now, speaking of making myself crazy, let’s get back to finishing dinner,” I said, stepping out of the pantry.

Lola followed, and we headed into the kitchen, where my dad was in the process of plating the food.

“You’re in charge of the mashed potatoes, Cali,” he said, handing me a spoon.

I stepped forward and took the giant bowl he offered. At the long kitchen table, I could see Fenrir helping Torin finish setting the table. There was an array of tiny candles down the center of the table, and Fenrir was scattering what looked like hand-cut snowflakes in between the candles.

“That looks amazing, you two,” I called over to them.

Fenrir grinned up at Torin.

My dad started placing the filled bowls on the table, and I was struck by how festive and perfect everything looked. Thanks to everyone’s hard work, our dinner was going to be delicious.

But even in the midst of all the good feelings I had, and the excitement of looking forward to Christmas, I couldn’t stop myself from thinking about everything else that was going on.

I just hoped none of it was going to affect our celebrations.

And I wondered if I’d made a mistake, not telling Xavier and Greyson about what had happened in the fairy circle right away. Maybe I should have told them about the voice I’d heard, but I’d just thought it would be better to talk to them after dinner. That way we could all really enjoy the celebration without being worried.

Maybe my mother had been right—Seluna had robbed me of so many things lately, and I didn’t want to miss out on a single thing more. I didn’t want to risk missing out on making these memories with my family and my pack.

I shook my head. Waiting until after dinner wasn’t going to make that much of a difference. What could happen in two hours?

But I couldn’t help but feel like I was keeping secrets from my mates, which didn’t feel right. Was that how it was going to seem to them, too?

No, of course not. They would understand. They’d always understood how I felt about things in the past. But I couldn’t help but feel torn.

Finished transferring the potatoes from the stove to the bowl, I put the bowl down on the table and looked up just in time to see Torin sneak Fenrir a cookie. When he saw me looking, Torin gave me a guilty smile.

“I won’t tell,” I said. “I promise.”

Fenrir took a giant bite of the sugar cookie and gave me a wide grin.

His smile filled me with hope. Everything was going to be *fine*. We were going to have a great dinner, and tonight and tomorrow were going to be a blast. I was happy to be here with my parents, my sister, my mates, and my pack. I let a modicum of my stress roll off my back.

I had just turned around and dropped the empty pot in the sink when Xavier appeared at my elbow.

“Hey,” I said, surprised. “What’s up?”

“Drop what you’re doing,” he said shortly.

I looked at him, shocked. “Why?”

“There’s something you need to see.”

# Episode 3085

**Xavier**

Cali looked instantly worried. “Is everything okay?”

Shit. Now I’d made her think something terrible had happened. I was always messing up when it came to this kind of thing.

“No! I mean yes! Everything’s fine. It’s nothing dangerous. It’s a surprise. A present.”

Cali’s face relaxed, and she smiled. “A present? But it’s not Christmas yet.”

“I know, but it was just delivered, and it won’t fit under the tree.”

Cali frowned. “What did you get me that wouldn’t fit under the tree?”

“I’m not going to tell you—that would spoil it,” I said. “Just come see.”

I grabbed her hand and led her toward the front door, but just as I reached for the knob, I turned.

“Close your eyes,” I commanded.

She grinned at me and obeyed.

I waved my hand in front of her face, checking to see that her eyes were really closed, then opened the door. As I carefully led her onto the porch, I was *really* hoping she liked the gift. I wanted to make up for the Secret Santa necklace fiasco, so I’d really tried to go all out for her actual Christmas gift.

We walked slowly down the porch steps, and when we stopped, I took a deep breath.

“Okay, open your eyes.” I watched, half-excited, half-nervous, as Cali’s eyes fluttered open.

Then she gasped.

“It’s the safest car on the market. One of *Car and Driver’s* highest rated picks for safety. And I paid extra for all the safety features they had. There’s this OnStar thing so if you get stranded or something happens, you can just call someone from your car. You can never get lost, even if you don’t have your phone. And I thought you’d like the color. That deep blue had to be special ordered, but it made me think of you…”

I realized I was rambling, and that Cali hadn’t yet said a word, so I shut my mouth.

Cali stepped slowly forward, her eyes on the gleaming SUV. There wasn’t much sunlight, but the sheen of the car still seemed blinding. She walked slowly around the car, still silent, her expression unreadable.

Holy shit, why wasn’t she saying anything? My heart was pounding a mile a minute, but I resisted the urge to ask her.

Finally, Cali turned to me, her face lit with a huge smile. “I love it!” And with that, she threw herself into my arms.

Laughing, I caught her and swung her off her feet, twirling her around in the snow. My whole body felt light with relief. Why was I ever worried she’d hate it in the first place? Of *course* she liked the gift.

I set her back down on her feet and leaned down for a kiss, which she enthusiastically returned.

Then she pulled away, shaking her head. “But it’s too much, Xavier. You didn’t have to do this.”

“I know that, but I wanted to get you something that would help keep you safe, since I can’t be with you all the time. And this felt like the perfect way to do that for you.”

Her grin widened, and she looked back over her shoulder at the car. “I love that you’re able to trust me to do my own thing. I know that you get worried when I leave the house without you, but I promise I will drive very, *very* carefully.”

“Definitely do that,” I agreed.

“*Holy crap!*”

Cali and I turned at the sound of the shout and saw Lilac standing on the porch, staring at the car. He turned and shouted into the house. “Xavier got Cali a new car!”

Violet was out the door in a flash, and she gasped when she saw it. “Oh my god, it’s just like those Christmas car commercials.” She pointed. “It’s got the giant red bow and everything!”

More of the pack started pouring out of the house, staring at the new car. I laughed as they ooh-ed and ahh-ed over the color and the winter tires.

“It’s a *Car and Driver* pick,” Ravi said knowledgably. Sage looked impressed.

Then Greyson stepped out onto the porch—probably drawn by the commotion. And I could tell by the expression on his face that he was not nearly as enthusiastic about the car as Cali was.

I narrowed my eyes. I didn’t give a damn what my brother was going to think about this gift. In fact, I had to admit that part of me enjoyed knowing he was probably jealous. Petty as that was.

Greyson looked over at me. “Really, man? A car? Isn’t that a bit much?”

“Why?” I scoffed. “Feeling a little threatened? Jealous you didn’t think of it?”

Greyson rolled his eyes. “Not everyone is as car-happy as you are, Xavier.”

I shrugged. “Well, Cali loves it.”

“Of course she does,” Greyson countered. “Anyone would love to be given a car.”

“Whatever, man,” I said, waving my brother’s criticism away.

“What’s going on?” Tom asked, wiping his hands on a towel as he came out of the house.

Orla was right behind him, and she gasped when she saw the car with the big bow.

I waited for them to start admiring the amazing gift I’d just gotten for their daughter, but to my surprise, Tom frowned.

Orla looked at Cali. “Is this yours?”

Cali nodded. “From Xavier.

Orla shook her head. “Oh, sweetheart, it’s too much.”

Cali’s face fell at her parent’s reaction. I had to admit, even I hadn’t been expecting that.

Ravi looked suddenly nervous and started retreating into the house, grabbing pack members and pulling them along with him. “Let’s go… um… build a fire, guys.”

Sensing a serious conversation in the making, the pack quickly followed him inside.

Greyson stuck around though, crossing his arms over his chest and giving me a look that very clearly stated, *I told you so.*

I scowled at him.

“Xavier just wants me to be safe when I’m on the road,” Cali explained. “It was a *Car and Driver* top pick for safety.”

“It’s too expensive, Cali,” Orla said.

“That’s okay,” I added quickly. “Nothing’s too expensive for Cali. She deserves it.”

This statement only deepened Tom’s frown.

“Xavier,” he started, “I like you, I really do, but this is over the line. It’s way too extravagant—even for mates. What’s the insurance like on this thing? What kind of gas mileage does it get?”

I didn’t like the feeling of arguing with Tom. The cost wasn’t a concern, but Tom was Cali’s dad, and he wasn’t happy about this.

“I’m sorry if this makes either of you uncomfortable,” I said to Cali’s parents. “That wasn’t my intention. I just want Cali to be safe.”

“We know that, Xavier,” Orla said with a sigh. “And we appreciate it. This just isn’t how Tom and I do things. But,” she added, “we know that we’re in your world right now. Right, Tom?”

Tom didn’t say anything until Orla nudged him none too softly with her elbow.

“Oh, yeah, well, it is a pretty nice gift,” he admitted.

I was relieved that Cali’s parents weren’t going to write me off for this. And I was pretty sure I knew where I’d gone wrong: to me, money wasn’t a big deal. I liked to spend it on people I loved. But I could see that Cali’s parents were uncomfortable with me throwing around my wealth. I hadn’t realized it when I’d thought of this gift, but it had clearly rubbed Cali’s parents the wrong way. Or at least wounded their pride.

I was going to have to be more mindful of that if I truly wanted to win them over. In the end, when Cali was finally ready to make her choice between me and Greyson, I knew she was going to care about her parents’ opinion, and I wanted them on my side.

The silence that sat between us all was still faintly strained, and when Cali spoke, her voice was overly bright and cheerful.

“Well, why don’t we go inside and start dinner?” she asked.

“That’s a good idea,” Tom said, looking as eager as any of us to be getting out of the conversation.

I was about to follow them inside when a breeze blew up and I picked up on a familiar scent.

“Hey,” I said, catching Cali’s hand before she went up the porch steps. “I’ll meet you inside.”

Cali frowned at me. “Is everything okay? I’m sorry about my parents’ reaction.”

“No, it’s fine. Your parents aren’t wrong—I might have gone too big with this gift.”

Cali shot a glance over my shoulder at the car. “Well, I still love it,” she said with a smile. Then she kissed me on the cheek before she headed inside.

She disappeared just as Ava emerged from the woods.

“Is everything okay?” I asked her, moving forward. “Is the Samara pack managing all right?”

Ava nodded, but she looked awkward.

“Then what is it?” I asked with a frown. I was confused. I’d never seen Ava look nervous about anything before.

“I just wanted to stop by because…” She trailed off.

“Because why?” I asked when she didn’t go on.

Ava flushed. “Because I got you a gift.”

# Episode 3086

**Xavier**

“A gift?” I asked hesitantly. “For me?”

“Yeah,” Ava said. “Who else?”

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea,” I said slowly. “I thought I was clear with you that things are done between us, romantically.”

Ava flushed. “I’m not trying to cross a line with you here, Xavier. It’s not a romantic gift. I just thought since we were trying to move forward—as friends—that it would be nice for me to give you a gift. Maybe it would help if you thought of it as a combination Christmas and thank-you-for-your-help-with-my-pack gift.”

I thought about it and shrugged. I supposed there was no harm in that. “Okay, thanks.”

Ava smiled and held out a box wrapped in shining green paper and tied with a bow. I took the box and started to rip the paper off, but Ava stopped me.   
 “Can you not do that right now?” she asked. “Would you mind waiting to open it on Christmas? I feel kind of awkward just standing here watching you.”

“Sure,” I said. “I didn’t get anything for you.”

She gave me a small smile. “Don’t say that, X. You gave me back my pack. That’s a pretty good gift.”

I nodded. “I guess it is. Merry Christmas, Ava.”

“You too, X.” And, with a parting smile, Ava turned and strode back into the woods, melting almost immediately into the shadows.

I looked down at the box. I had a pulled off a corner of the paper, but it was just a plain white box underneath, giving no clues. I shook it, but there was nothing identifying about the sound. As I walked back inside and slid the present under the tree, I was curious about what it could be. Did I even want to open it? It was a gift from Ava, and—given our history—it just felt like a lot of pressure.

Maybe I would just think about it for now, before I made any decisions.

I walked back into the kitchen, where everyone was bustling around, getting ready for dinner. The whole place smelled like butter and sugar and baking bread, and it made my stomach rumble.

I walked into the dining room, where a beautiful table had been set, and sat down next to Cali. Greyson came in and sat on her other side. Looking around, I could see that the long wooden table in the kitchen was filled with pack members, and I’d seen a couple of other tables set up in the living room to accommodate the rest of our large pack.

Elle was across the table from me. She was looking at the spread with wide eyes, like she had never seen anything like it in her life. Which she probably hadn’t. She reached for one of the huge turkey legs, but she stopped when Mrs. Smith spoke.

“Maybe the Alpha should say a few words before we start dinner,” she suggested.

Every eye turned to Greyson at this—including mine—and Greyson looked around, surprised. He was clearly unprepared for this possibility, and he looked uncomfortable. I couldn’t help but feel a little pleasure at his discomfiture after his comments about my gift to Cali. Especially since he’d turned out to be right about it.

Greyson got to his feet and cleared his throat. “Well, it’s nice that we can all be together tonight,” he started awkwardly, “and that we’re all alive after everything that’s happened… I mean, anytime we can all come together for something other than a battle is always a good thing, right? Because that last battle was—” He stopped, looking a bit at a loss of how to continue.

Cali put her hand on his arm and pulled him downward. “Talk about family and the pack and Christmas, okay? Nothing about fighting,” she whispered.

Greyson nodded and cleared his throat again as he straightened. “This pack is a family in every way that counts. We care about each other, we defend each other, and we look out for each other. We deserve this time to celebrate after what’s been quite a year, and I’m glad we’re all here to celebrate together.

“I also want to welcome the members who are new to the Redwood pack this year.” He raised his glass, and we all did the same. “You are welcome here. And we won’t forget those we’ve lost, either.”

He looked over at Ravi, who dropped his head. He was obviously thinking about Joss, whose loss he had taken hard. Then he looked at Torin, whose eyes had gone bright with tears as he thought about Astrid.

“And we’re glad for those we’ve gotten back,” he said, looking over at Lilac. “Thank you for trusting me to be your Alpha.”

“Cheers to that!” Ravi said, his voice choked.

Everyone clinked their glasses together, and though I didn’t want to celebrate Greyson as Alpha, I figured his Christmas toast wasn’t the place to have that fight, so I let Elle knock her glass hard enough against mine that wine spilled from both of them.

“*Now* we can eat,” Mrs. Smith said with a smile, and everyone pounced on the food.

It did look delicious. Tom and Torin and everyone else had clearly outdone themselves. They needed one of those cooking TV shows or something. There was a golden-brown turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy, rolls glistening with butter, stuffing, and sweet potatoes crusted with coconut and pecans.

I looked around the table at the happy faces and the platters being passed around and realized that this was the first Christmas I’d been able to truly celebrate with my pack in years. There had been times in the past when I’d thought this kind of thing would never happen again. And my chest felt tight as I thought about how grateful I was to have all the people that I cared so much about close to me.

Next to me, Cali took a sip of her wine, and I put a hand over hers. She squeezed my hand with a warm smile. Seeing her smile was everything.

More than ever before, I wanted to be able to do my all to protect this pack, because Greyson was right about one thing—this pack was my family. Now that the Redwoods were back and stronger than ever, I was going to do everything I could to ensure we were never broken up again.

And one day when I was Alpha, I would continue to do that.

I glanced over at my brother. When I was in the mood to be honest, I had to admit that Greyson wasn’t a *bad* Alpha—not like Knox or anything—but I still thought I was the Alpha that the Redwoods needed and deserved.

I was just going to have to prove that to everyone else. And ideally to Greyson as well, though I had no idea how I’d manage to do that. Not with my hardheaded brother.

That made my thoughts go to my *other* hardheaded brother. I missed Colton, especially now, during the holidays. But I knew that Colton was where he needed to be.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Cali said quietly, giving me a gentle nudge in the ribs.

Knowing I’d be opening a whole can of worms if I admitted to everything I was actually thinking, I hesitated. “I’m just thinking about Colton,” I finally said.

Cali smiled sadly. “You miss him. I do too.”

I nodded. “Yeah, but I’m okay. I’ll call him later.”

“Can I be there when you do? I want to say Merry Christmas to him and Maya.”

“Of course,” I said, giving her hand a squeeze. “We’ll always owe Colton. He’s kind of the reason why we got together.”

Cali laughed. “Yeah, and Lola. Even though they were super sketchy about the whole thing.”

I chuckled. “It’s definitely Colton’s M.O. to go the roundabout way with things. He wouldn’t know how to do anything otherwise.”

Cali and I both looked up when the doorbell rang. And so did everyone else. I looked around and could see that the rest of the pack was thinking the same thing I was: everyone we wanted to see was already here.

“Who could that be?” Mrs. Smith asked.

“Who the hell is it?” Ravi asked, leaning back and trying to get a look out the front windows from his chair.

“Only one way to find out,” Greyson said, getting to his feet.

“I’ll go with you,” I said, tossing my napkin onto the table. “Just in case it’s Aiden trying to start something.”

Down the table I saw Maren tense at this suggestion, but Greyson nodded at her.

“Don’t worry,” he assured her, “we’ve got this. We’ll handle whoever it is.”

As we approached the door, I felt my battle instincts kicking in. This wasn’t the time or place for a fight, but if someone wanted to start trouble, I was going to be ready.

But, when we opened the door, I was shocked to find Lucian standing on the porch.

# Episode 3087

I was trying to keep it together, but I couldn’t stop myself from wondering—okay, from *worrying about*—who was at the door. I just couldn’t imagine who would be showing up here so late, and on Christmas Eve. No one else at the table seemed that concerned about it—or at least the food was way too distracting for anyone to care. I leaned back in my chair to try to get a glimpse, but there were too many people in the way. So, tossing my napkin onto the table, I got up to go check myself.

As I stepped into the hallway, I saw that the front door was open, but I couldn’t see beyond it. Greyson’s and Xavier’s broad shoulders were blocking my view of whoever was standing in front of them. But when I stepped closer, I was surprised to hear Lucian’s voice.

“—and I thought I would check in with the Redwoods. What with the holidays and everything.”

“*Lucian?*” I asked, shocked.

Greyson and Xavier turned, revealing the Vanguard Alpha.   
 “Cali, you can go back to dinner. We’re taking care of this,” Greyson said to me.

“Taking care of what?” I asked, then took a step closer. “What are you doing here, Lucian?”

Lucian looked at me a moment, then held out the basket he’d been holding. “I wanted to drop off this Christmas gift, and you look like the most worthy recipient. From the Vanguard to the Redwood pack.”

He held out the basket, and Xavier snatched it, but I took it from him. The basket was tied with a big red bow, though I could see from their expressions that Xavier and Greyson were not pleased to be receiving a gift from Lucian. I was confused more than anything.

“Thank you,” I said quietly.

I peeked into the basket and saw a bottle of Cristal, a couple of jars of what looked like very expensive caviar, and at least a dozen beautifully wrapped cheeses. At least I thought they were cheeses. All the labels were in French.

“Thanks, Lucian. This looks great,” I said, though it wasn’t really true.

I couldn’t think of a single person in the house who was going to want to eat any of this stuff. Well, maybe Torin would—he was always up for trying new things—but for everyone else, Lucian would have been better off showing up with case of beer and some meat to grill. But I saw a sweetly hopeful look on his face, so I kept that information to myself.

“That’s really sweet of you to think of us,” I said. “Merry Christmas.”

I didn’t mean for that to sound like a dismissal, but Lucian’s face fell. “Yes, I suppose that’s it. That is why I came—to give you the gift. And now I have, so…”

There was something kind of sad about Lucian, and I glanced up at Greyson.

*I can see what you’re thinking, Caliana. Listen to me, do not invite him in*, Greyson said sternly.

*Come on*, I pleaded. *He’s obviously lonely. It’s Christmas Eve, Greyson. Where’s your holiday spirit?*

*It’s in the repair shop*, Xavier snapped. *Let this clown go hang out with his mansion and his sister.*

*Don’t be rude*, I said sharply.

I turned to Lucian. “Would you like to come in for a drink?”  
 Lucian smiled. “Yes, I’d love to, thank you,” he said as he stepped into the house.

Behind his back, Xavier and Greyson rolled their eyes.

“Why don’t we come in here?” I said, leading Lucian into the front study. There were pack members literally everywhere else, and I thought it would be nice to have a little quiet.

I poured a whiskey from Greyson’s personal stash and handed it to Lucian, just as Greyson and Xavier walked in to join us. It was clear from their expressions that they weren’t eager to entertain Lucian, but they weren’t going to leave me alone with him either.

“By the way,” Lucian said, taking a seat and a sip of whiskey, “I heard about how you all took care of Knox. I’m glad that situation is finally over.”

“Yeah, we’re glad it’s over as well,” Greyson said stiffly.

Lucian smiled. “I guess you were just planning to give me an update on that after the holidays?”

And suddenly it hit me like a ton of bricks: Lucian felt left out.

Greyson cleared his throat. “Yeah, of course we were. But it seems like your information network is pretty good, given you’ve already heard about it.”

Lucian nodded. “Yes, yes, it is. That’s one of the many benefits of being allied with me and my pack,” he said, giving Greyson a pointed stare.

“Right, the alliance,” Greyson said vaguely.

“I assume it’s still intact,” Lucian said. “Are we still allied, Greyson?”

Greyson hesitated for just a moment. “As long as the Vanguards uphold their side of the agreement, then the Redwoods still consider ourselves your allies.”

Lucian smiled at this. “Of course we will. I’ve made a study of all the packs in the area, and I do believe the Redwoods are the obvious leaders. I’m nothing if not savvy about my alliances. You can trust me to continue to be by your side.”

Xavier watched as Lucian took the last sip of his drink, then clapped his hands. “Well, great. I guess we should get back to our dinner. Thanks for stopping by, Lucian. It’s always nice to see you.”

It was clear as day that Xavier wanted Lucian to leave, and—taking the hint—he stood from his chair.

“Yes, of course. I should get going. I do have my own Christmas business to attend to,” he said, putting his empty glass down on the coffee table.

But as he prepared to leave, I wondered if that was actually true. Lucian just seemed… kind of lonely. But I kept my mouth shut as Xavier opened the study door and began to usher the other Alpha toward the front door.

I turned to Greyson. “*Are* the Redwoods really still allied with the Vanguards?”

He nodded. “As long as they hold up their end of the bargain. I keep my word, Cali. I told Lucian we’d ally with them, and unless they break that trust, I plan to uphold our agreement.”

I nodded. It was a strange feeling, and one I’d never thought I’d feel, but as I watched Xavier and Lucian approach the front door, I realized that I felt kind of bad for the guy.

I stepped closer to Greyson. “Have I told you lately that I think you’re an amazing Alpha?”  
 “Maybe not lately.” He smiled and wrapped his arms around me. “But it’s nice to hear. Where is this coming from, anyway?’

I shrugged, smiling up at him. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m just feeling the warmth of the holidays.”

Greyson chuckled, and I felt the sound rumbling through his chest. “Maybe you’re just feeling the warmth of mashed potatoes and gravy in your belly.”

I laughed. “And don’t forget turkey. Maybe that’s why I’m feeling so sleepy. Maybe we could just sit in here for a minute. I just want to be in your arms.”

“That sounds good to me,” Greyson said, pulling me down into the small loveseat in front of the fire.

I leaned into Greyson, loving the warmth that emanated from him. I still felt cold from my walk outside with Elle, and he was better at warming me than the roaring fire.

With a sigh, I looked up at him, then leaned in a little further and kissed him. He kissed me back, sliding his hand gently into my hair. Maybe it was the tryptophan in the turkey that was doing it, but I felt so peaceful, and the kiss felt slow and syrupy with sleep.

Out of the corners of my closed eyes, I could see the fire flickering. My head was empty of thoughts, but I could feel heat rising within me as the kiss between us grew more and more passionate.

Greyson’s kiss became more and more urgent, and his hands pressed me closer. They grew more insistent, and his palms felt like they were leaving trails of fire on my skin. I was hot, flustered, and turned on.

But then the heat turned to burning, and I hissed in pain. I tried to pull away, but I couldn’t. Hands pressed into my shoulders, so unbearably hot. My skin was blistering beneath them.

I couldn’t bear it anymore, and I screamed in pain. “Wait, stop!”

But when my eyes flew open, the figure in front of me wasn’t Greyson. It never had been. It was a massive, faceless demon. It towered over me and grabbed onto my shoulders with its clawed hands. An instant later, we were both surrounded by white-hot flames that sucked the oxygen from the air around me. I couldn’t breathe, which meant I couldn’t scream as the demon dragged me down.

# Episode 3088

**Greyson**

I hated to wake Cali.

Even now, fast asleep, I could make out the deep circles beneath her eyes. She really seemed to need the rest, and she looked so pretty when she was sleeping. What was the harm in letting her sleep through the rest of dinner? It wasn’t like there wouldn’t be leftovers.

I grabbed a blanket and gently draped it over her. She flinched at the gentle weight on her body and let out a whimper that went straight to my heart. I knelt down next to the couch and leaned in.

“Cali?” I whispered.

She didn’t respond, just kept shifting around under the blanket. Her chest heaved, and I realized with a jolt that a tear was slipping down her cheek.

Seconds later, she started thrashing.

“Cali!” I gently shook her. “Wake up.”

She flinched again and let out a whimper that snapped my heart in two.

I shook her again, harder this time, raising my voice to break through to her. “Cali!”

Still, she didn’t wake up. What the hell was wrong with her? I’d never seen anyone sleep this deeply before.

I was about to dart out of the room and grab Big Mac or Orla, but then Cali suddenly shot upright with a cry, her arms flying up to protect her face. Her chest heaved, and tears spilled over her lashes in full force.

“Cali?” I reached for her, and she flinched away. “It’s me. It’s Greyson. You’re safe. You’re okay, Cali. It was just a dream.”

She blinked rapidly as she caught her breath. “G-Greyson?”

Her lower lip trembled, and then, with a broken sob, she fell into my arms, her body shaking with the force of her crying.

I wrapped my arms around her, rubbing a hand soothingly up and down her back. My mind spun with worst-case scenarios, each of them darker than the one before. What the hell was happening to my mate?

It felt like I spent an eternity kneeling next to the couch, holding Cali close while she fell apart.

“I’ve got you,” I murmured. “I’m here. You’re safe. You’re okay.”

Finally, when her sobs had calmed to the occasional hiccup, I pulled back so I could look at her face. “Are you all right, love? I know it must have been scary, but it was just a bad dream.”

She shook her head, a few rogue tears slipping down her cheeks. “No, I don’t think it was. It was so awful, so much fire, and my shoulder was burning. It has to be connected to Seluna and the fairy circle.”

“The fairy circle?” I frowned.

“I was going to tell you after dinner,” she managed. “I found this fairy circle, and when I stepped inside, the handprint on my shoulder started burning and I heard a voice telling me I was straddling worlds.”

*Well, that doesn’t sound great.*

“My mom says it’ll be okay,” she continued, “but I’m scared.”

She wasn’t alone in that. I swallowed, trying to keep my expression neutral so I didn’t freak her out even more. *This can’t be happening again. I thought we had more time.*

But then again, just how much time had we wasted already when we should’ve been looking for those damn ashes? I needed to do something to find them, something to finally set Cali free, but I didn’t have the first clue where to start. We’d already hit up our contacts—and short of going through every contact in my phone on the off chance they knew something about this, I didn’t know where to go from here.

If I did, I would’ve at least been able to race out and confront whoever had taken the ashes. “Confront” meaning rip their fucking throats out and take my sweet time with it, because their theft was putting my mate through absolute hell.

“Don’t do anything rash, Greyson,” Cali said.

She could read me too well. I put on my best innocent expression. “I didn’t say anything.”

“I can read it on your face.”

I sighed and took a seat on the couch next to her. “I won’t. I just wish I could do more for you.”

“And I wish you didn’t have to do anything. I wish this was over. I hate having to rehash the same pain over and over again.”

She looked absolutely miserable, and I couldn’t stand it. I smoothed a hand over her hair. “Do you want me to get your mom? Or maybe Kira can try to help again?”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to ruin their Christmas Eve.”

I didn’t care about ruining Christmas Eve, but I kept that to myself. I did have another idea of something that might comfort her, but the suggestion stalled on my lips. It wasn’t something I relished the thought of, but since it might actually help Cali, I forced myself to ask, “Do you want me to get Xavier so we can tell him about this?”

She looked up at me, her red, swollen eyes widening. Swallowing, she nodded. “Yeah, that’s probably a good idea… Can you get him?”

Her quick agreement was more than a little disappointing, but I’d made the offer, so it was probably a waste of time to feel hurt about it.

I nodded and kissed her forehead. “I’ll be right back, love.”

I stepped out into the hallway and headed toward the kitchen to find my brother. The pack was clearing the dinner table to prepare for dessert, and Xavier was refilling his tumbler of whiskey.

He frowned when he saw me coming. “Where’ve you been? Where’s Cali?”

“You should come with me,” I said.

He must have seen the serious expression on my face, because he nodded, set down his glass, and followed me out of the kitchen without another word. When we entered the study, Xavier’s gaze snapped to Cali, and he beelined over to her, kneeling down on the couch next to her just like I had.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She nodded. “I just… I have something to tell you.”

She explained her dream and the fairy circle to Xavier, and he jumped up and started pacing. His fury was palpable. “This asshole who stole the ashes is going to pay when we find him.”

Privately, I felt that same barely controlled fury, but I tried to stay calm for Cali’s benefit. “We need to make a plan. Now that we don’t have the Samara pack to worry about anymore, we need to step up and take care of this situation before it gets any worse.”

Xavier rounded on me, his eyes wide. At first, I thought he was going to jump down my throat for trying to tell him what to do, but then I spotted another, much more complicated emotion behind my brother’s anger.

“What is it?” I asked, my stomach sinking with dread.

He swallowed. “This has to be connected to whoever is leaving those medals.”

Cali frowned. “Wait, medals? Like *plural*?”

“Shit,” Xavier breathed, and I realized then that we’d never told her about the medals. And for good reason—the last thing she needed right now was to be overwhelmed with too much information. Xavier clearly thought so too, because he wasn’t jumping to fill her in. It was still strange, being on the same side of an issue with my brother, but where Cali was concerned, we did tend to agree.

Cali shook her head. “Please don’t keep secrets from me. What medal are you talking about? The one that Xavier found at the accident?”

Xavier and I shared a look, and I could tell from his expression alone that we were thinking the same thing: Cali was right—we couldn’t keep secrets from her.

“Go ahead.” I nodded at Xavier. “You found the medal. Tell her.”

He nodded and took a seat next to Cali. His voice was much calmer now. “I found another medal in my dresser the other night. We think whoever took the ashes is stalking us and sending messages. But we don’t know why yet.”

“But that means they must be close,” she said. “We should be able to find them.”

I shook my head. “They’re too good at concealing themselves. We learned that when we tried the location spell on the map. We need to figure out how they’re using such unbreachable magic that even Big Mac can’t get through.”

Her face fell, and I rushed forward to take her hand. I twined our fingers together.

“We *will* figure it out, Cali,” I said. “We won’t let this person terrorize you.”

“I know. I trust you. I just…” She trailed off, looking away from me.

I couldn’t stand the heartache on her face, and I would’ve done anything to help her get through this impossible situation. I gently caught her chin and turned her face toward me again. “What is it?”

She looked up at me, and then over at Xavier, her eyes pleading. “I don’t want to be alone right now. Will you both stay with me tonight?”

# Episode 3089

I took my time washing up and getting dressed for bed. I set down my toothbrush and looked at myself in the mirror. It was almost painful to see my reflection these days, to see all the ways Seluna’s ashes were hollowing me out. I looked so pale, and the dark purple bags under my eyes made my face look gaunt. My lips were chapped, and I could have sworn my cheekbones were sharper. I looked like I’d been awake for days. Like I was turning into a shell of my former self.

I turned away from the mirror and grabbed my hairbrush. Maybe it would be better if I couldn’t see myself at all. As I brushed out my tangled hair and pulled it into a bun on top of my head, I couldn’t stop thinking about my dream, couldn’t help noticing the ache of exhaustion that had settled into my body even though I’d just woken up.

*Is this happening because my energy is being drained by the Seluna mark?*

That was the best guess I’d been able to come up with so far, and if that wasn’t correct, I had no clue what was happening. Ever since the handprint had reappeared on my shoulder, I’d felt terror clutching me in a tight grip. How could Seluna be doing this to me? Affecting me, torturing me from beyond the grave?

In my darker moments, I wondered what chance I even had against that kind of power. What was to say that sending her ashes to the demon realm would actually solve things permanently? Seluna was easily the strongest, most malicious force we’d ever faced. What if there was no beating her?

I didn’t want to give up hope, or lose my mind to panic, but I’d have been lying if I said I wasn’t beginning to doubt that this would ever end. I struggled to imagine a scenario in which Seluna and I weren’t joined like this. Where she wasn’t slowly driving me mad.

And that was what was happening here. I couldn’t survive under these conditions—not for long. And faced with this constant threat, the nightmares, and my burning shoulder, I would go insane.

Was that what the nightmare had actually meant? Had it been a metaphor of some kind, a warning that there was something fiery on the horizon for me? Was it some kind of omen?

If I died, would that level the playing field between Seluna and me? Or did our connection mean I’d be dragged to the demon dimension along with her? Would I spend the rest of eternity shackled to her?

A shudder rippled down my spine, and I pulled in a deep breath.

*Try not to think of worst-case scenarios. Just breathe, Cali. Don’t worry about the future.*

Ha ha. As if that were even an option. I knew that I shouldn’t let my imagination run away from me, that engaging with this kind of thinking was just making it easier for Seluna to torture me, but with everything that had happened in the last few months, were any of these scenarios truly that far-fetched?

Tears pricked my eyes, and I drew in another shuddery breath. I hated not knowing what horrible thing awaited me. What trial I’d have to overcome, what fresh hell I’d have to face. Because there was something terrible on the horizon—that much I knew.

There always was.

I glanced at the closed bathroom door. I knew that, if I opened it, I’d find both my mates waiting for me.

I felt a little guilty for asking them both to stay with me tonight, at the same time. That was going to be beyond awkward for both of them. Greyson and Xavier didn’t seem to hate each other anymore, but they definitely weren’t close. And I never failed to be a source of tension between them.

And tonight, that source of tension would literally be between them—in bed.

The fact that they were willing to do this was proof of how much they cared about me. I was almost certain that there wasn’t another person on this earth they’d willingly snuggle through the night in an Evers brothers sandwich.

And I would forever appreciate them for doing this for me, because I really couldn’t be alone right now, and I didn’t want to have to choose between them. I wanted both of them to hold me and tell me everything was going to be okay.

To their credit, they’d both agreed immediately. It almost hadn’t even been a question, and that was probably because they were both so worried for me. I hadn’t actually been thinking straight when I’d posed the question, but I didn’t want to take it back. I really did want them both with me tonight.

*Just for tonight. Maybe having them with me will keep me from having any more bad dreams. In the morning, I’ll figure out how to do this on my own. I won’t put them in such an awkward situation again.*

But for right now, for tonight? There was nowhere else I wanted to be.

Done stalling in the bathroom, I headed back into my room, where my mates were waiting for me.

Xavier stood at the window, staring out at the snowy night. Greyson was sitting on a chair in the corner of the room. They weren’t speaking, or looking at the bed. It wasn’t physically possible for them to be any farther apart, either. At least, not without leaving my bedroom.

Xavier turned and Greyson stood when I walked in. They still didn’t speak. They seemed to be waiting for me to give them a signal.

I swallowed, taking in the sight of them, and cleared my throat. “I’m just going to go to sleep now.”

They both nodded, and I climbed into bed. Moments later, the bed dipped on either side of me.

*Thank goodness I have a king-sized bed.*

Xavier and Greyson sat on either side of me, and even though this was empirically weird, I did feel a little bit better. It was so comforting to have both my mates close by.

After my dream, my headspace was totally messed up, and right now I just needed to know I was safe. Hopefully, having Greyson and Xavier here with me would help me feel that way.

Hopefully.

And they didn’t even need to stay all night if that was too weird for them. Just until I fell asleep—if I was able to. It would help. Right?

Silence settled between us, but not the comfortable kind. I lay on my back, staring up at the ceiling as the tension thickened.

Finally, I broke the silence. “Are you two okay? Is this too weird?”

Xavier shifted slightly, and Greyson said, “We’re here for you, Cali. Always.”

“Yeah,” Xavier added. “You don’t have to be alone. We’re both fine.”

I nodded, more grateful than words could say. I reached out each of my hands and found theirs. Our fingers twined, and a tiny bit of tension slipped away. But I was still afraid of falling asleep. I didn’t think I could handle another Seluna dream.

Xavier squeezed my hand. “What is it?”

I sighed. “I just don’t know what’s going to come next.”

“Whatever comes next, we’ll handle it together,” Greyson said. “All three of us.”

They were doing this for me. Their truce or understanding or whatever it was was their way of supporting me in my time of need. But it was also more than a little unsettling.

Greyson and Xavier might’ve been on better terms these days, but they hated sharing me. It was a consistent point of conflict. How long had I been walking on eggshells around these two when it came to simple things like hugs and kisses? And now we were sharing a bed? Just sleeping, obviously. But still.

If they were willing to do this for me, to pretend that this situation was okay, then I had to be in pretty bad shape, even by werewolf standards.

A wave of anxiety rose up inside me. *What if they’re both worried that there’s no coming back from whatever is happening to me? Like when feuding family members pretend everything’s okay because someone is dying?*

The air suddenly seemed thin, and I heaved in one breath, then another. It was never enough. I was suffocating, drowning on dry land.

Greyson and Xavier both lurched upright, and I couldn’t hold back the tears streaming down my cheeks. I was so tired of crying, but it seemed like all I knew how to do these days.

“What’s the matter?” Greyson asked. “Is it something we said?”

Xavier helped me sit up and ran a hand down my back. “You’re okay, Cali.”

I shook my head, and a hiccup wrenched its way out of my chest. “What if we don't figure this out? I know I need to be strong, and I’m trying. So hard. But it’s all been too much. What if this is how it ends?”

“That’s not an option,” Xavier said, his voice so hard and unyielding that I had no choice but to believe him.

“Xavier’s right,” Greyson said.

I heaved out a breath, my lungs unclenching. Suddenly, I was too exhausted to be afraid. “Thank you for being here. Both of you.” I lay back down.

“Always,” Xavier said.

Greyson squeezed my hand, and I started to drift off, finally giving in to my exhaustion. But even as I fell asleep, one question nagged at me.

*How long do I have?*

# Episode 3090

**Xavier**

I woke to find the sun shining in through Cali’s window. I was on my side, my body curled protectively around her. She was on her back still, tucked between us. My hand rested on Cali’s stomach.

Greyson was also lying on his side, on the other side of the bed. His hand rested on Cali’s arm. Between the two of us, we’d formed a protective cocoon around her.

Even though this situation was weird as shit, I didn’t want to get up. Partly because I didn’t want to leave Cali, but also because I didn’t want to leave Cali *with* Greyson. At this point, I wasn’t sure which was the worse option.

And then I remembered the conversation Greyson and I had had last night while Cali was washing up. We’d agreed to present a united front for Cali’s sake, to sideline our bickering for now so it wouldn’t put added pressure on her.

That agreement was the only thing that had made sharing a bed with my brother last night even remotely tolerable—but in the end, it seemed like Cali had slept well, which she desperately needed to do.

It would be spectacularly shitty of me to toss that agreement aside so quickly. Especially since today was Christmas.

*I can do this for one day. Anyone can do anything for one day.*

And then, tomorrow, I’d try to do it all over again. And I’d keep it up every day until Seluna’s ashes were sent to the demon world where they belonged, and Cali was finally free.

So, rather than linger here, watching Cali sleep, savoring the warm weight of her body against mine and trying like hell to ignore Greyson’s body on Cali’s other side, I got out of bed slowly and carefully. The mattress lifted as I shifted my weight, but Cali didn’t wake up, thank god. She needed all the sleep she could get.

As I stood up and stretched, I noticed my brother’s eyes cracking open. He lifted his head blearily, seeming to take in the situation. I half-expected him to gather Cali into his arms and take advantage of me being out of the picture—and the bed—but instead he rubbed his face and carefully eased himself off the mattress as well.

We shuffled out of the room, and Greyson gently closed the door behind us. It was still early enough that nobody was wandering around upstairs.

*Thank god—the last thing I need is for someone to see Greyson and me coming out of Cali’s room together.* I glanced at his bed head and self-consciously ran a hand through my hair.

“We need to make a plan, ASAP,” Greyson said, his voice rough from sleeping.

I nodded. “Meet me in the study in ten minutes.”

I headed to my bedroom without waiting for a response and quickly washed up and pulled on some fresh clothes before heading back downstairs. The scent of coffee beckoned from the kitchen, which meant someone was up, but I continued into the study. Coffee could wait, at least for a little while.

Greyson was already there, pacing up and down the length of the room.

“We need to lay out everything we know,” he said in lieu of greeting. “Every tiny detail, no matter how small it seems.”

“Agreed. Maybe we’ve overlooked something. Doesn’t hurt to be thorough.”

He nodded. “And we need to keep our heads on straight, especially around Cali.”

I frowned at that. “What are you implying?”

“You can’t let her see how frustrated you are. She’s on the edge with her nerves right now. And you know how she gets. I don’t want her feeling responsible for this situation, or for how we feel about it.”

“It’s not like I intended to upset her last night.”

He held up his hands. “Believe me, I get it. I feel it too. This whole thing is fucking maddening, and it kills me to see Cali like this. I’m just saying, we need to be hyperaware of how we’re affecting her.”

At that, my anger dried up. I couldn’t deny the truth of my brother’s words, though I wished I could. And I hated that he was the one who’d brought it up. He wasn’t the only one who loved Cali. He wasn’t the only one who was torn up inside, watching her suffer through this.

*Hell, she was my mate first. If anyone has the right to be worried sick about her, it’s me.*

That thought brought me up short. Fuck.

*You need to knock this shit off*, I told myself. *Stop having these jerk reactions to Greyson. Obviously he cares about her too. He wants what’s best for her too. And I can’t worry about this bullshit when I’m supposed to be focusing on finding Seluna’s ashes.*

I swallowed and nodded. “I understand. I’ll be more careful with her.”

“I will too,” Greyson said easily.

An instinctive dickish remark was on the tip of my tongue, but I held it back. I pulled in a breath. “Okay, here’s what we know…”

I rehashed everything I’d found out about the Duquettes, Slugger—the mercenary who’d been killed—the witch and vampire scent Greyson tracked across the Redwood lands, the car crash and the voice, the medals—all of it. Greyson wrote everything down as I spoke.

We paused for a moment at the realization that no matter how hard we tried to find this magical asshole, he always stayed hidden. That was the wall we kept running into. No matter what clues we strung together, we still had no clue who this fucker was.

“It must be the witch he’s working with,” I said.

“What we need is a surefire way to find someone that can’t be blocked.”

I frowned. “But if Big Mac doesn’t know a way, then is there one?”

“Maybe we can ask Vander?” He shrugged. “Plus, Vander seems to be invested in us getting those ashes back.”

“But I thought they already told you they can’t find the ashes.”

He scowled. “Yeah, you’re right. They did. Dammit.”

“Maybe there’s a non-magical way to do it,” I suggested. “Maybe we should focus on Slugger. He has to be connected to the Duquettes.”

“And you’re sure they’re somehow connected to whoever took the ashes?”

“Trust me, I wish they weren’t. I’ve tried to twist my brain around any possible way that this could be a coincidence. But I think they are. It’s just a matter of how.”

Greyson nodded. “If you’re convinced, that’s good enough for me.”

My brows rose. *Huh. It’s just that easy?*

Having my brother’s trust made me feel all warm inside, but I shoved that thought down. There would be time to unpack that complicated box of feelings later. Or never.

I cleared my throat. “I’ll ask for more information on how Slugger was killed, then.”

“And do what you can to not get killed in the process, okay?”

I smirked. “I’m pretty good at avoiding death.”

“Can’t argue with that.”

“WHERE IS EVERYONE?” Torin’s voice boomed through the house. “IT’S CHRISTMAS!”

Wide-eyed, Greyson and I both followed the loud voice from the study to the kitchen, where Torin was already cooking up a storm. He was decked out in a new apron with a giant Christmas tree on it with blinking LED lights. It was the most “Torin” item of clothing I’d seen in my life.

Tom was in the kitchen with him, helping out, and the whole room smelled of cinnamon rolls and bacon and coffee.

My stomach clenched. I was pretty hungry. I hadn’t been in the mood to eat much last night, and I’d totally missed dessert after everything that had gone down with Cali.

*Speaking of…*

I picked up Cali’s scent a split second before she appeared at the top landing. I didn’t hesitate, and we met each other halfway up the stairs.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

She gave me a small, weak smile. “Merry Christmas.”

There was a sea of omission in that response, but I followed her lead and smiled back. “Merry Christmas.”

I kissed her cheek and pulled away to see more pack members shuffling out of their rooms, pulled downstairs by either Torin’s bellow or the scent of delicious breakfast permeating the house.

Maren stepped out of one of the guest rooms, and as soon as she opened the door, Fenrir zoomed into the hallway and down the stairs. Instead of heading to the kitchen, he veered off to the living room and let out a delighted cry.

“Look at all the presents! And they’re for me!”

Sharing an amused glance with Cali, we headed to the living room to check it out. Sure enough, there were a bunch of new gifts with Fenrir’s name on them. I looked down the hallway at Greyson and gave him a nod. It was a kind thing to do, giving Fenrir the Christmas he deserved.

I headed over to him. “How did you get so many presents at the last minute?”

He shrugged. “You’d be surprised what Torin can do when you give him no budget and a credit card.”

I snorted. Torin really had created a true Christmas spirit for the pack. Without him, our holiday would have been all doom and gloom.

I watched Cali greet her parents in the kitchen. She seemed a little sluggish.

Lola brushed past me, following a very sleepy Artemis and a bright-eyed Rishika into the kitchen.

“Merry Christmas, Artemis!” Lola called out.

Artemis grumbled something in return.

I looked over at Cali again. I wished I could do something to brighten her mood. She had so much weighing on her, and I didn’t want her to be sad on her favorite holiday.

I sidled up to her and leaned in. “Hey, do you want to take your new car for a spin?”

# Episode 3091

Xavier’s question gave me pause. If I was being honest with myself, I wasn’t hungry *at all*, but I felt bad skipping out on the breakfast that Torin and my dad had worked so hard on. But then again, as soon as Xavier mentioned the drive, I found it hard to focus on anything else. I had to admit, my excitement absolutely was getting the best of me.

*Maybe I should go. Maybe it’d be good for me. I’ve been in such a funk lately. I think that some fresh air and some space away from the pack house is just what I need.*

And even if it wasn’t what I needed, at least I wouldn’t be a buzzkill for everyone else trying to celebrate Christmas.

I looked over at Greyson and realized he’d heard Xavier’s question. “Do you want to come too?” I asked.

He frowned, and I immediately second-guessed myself. *Was that the wrong thing to say?*

Last night, a truce of sorts had seemed to settle between the brothers. They’d been willing to share a bed last night, but it didn’t seem that understanding had extended into this morning. Maybe now, they wanted to be further away from each other than ever.

Or maybe this whole thing was more awkward for them than I’d realized. Had I asked too much of them? Were they embarrassed to be around each other now? That was the very last thing I wanted. Not only did I need their support now more than ever, I also didn’t want to be the source of conflict between them—even in a strange new way.

Greyson smiled and shook his head. “No, I’m good. You two have fun.” Then his gaze shifted to meet Xavier’s. “Be careful.”

Xavier gave a small but surprisingly cordial nod. *Looks like we’re going for that drive!*

I hurried to grab my coat from the closet and ducked into the kitchen to let my parents know I was stepping out to go for a drive. We had a whole Christmas tradition, and even though we were all living in the pack house together this year, we still planned to keep it going. Artemis was even joining us this time. I still planned to make it back in time for our tradition, even though I was going for a drive with Xavier.

“Are you okay?” Mom asked, cupping my face.

I forced a smile. “I’m fine. I just want to clear my head, and Xavier offered to take me out for a drive.”

“And you’ll be back in time for presents?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“All right then.” My mom smiled. “Have fun. I think it’ll be good for you to get out of the house.”

“I think so too.” I hugged her. “I’ll see you soon.”

I met Xavier outside. He was sitting in the passenger seat, though he’d already started the car. The heat was running, and as I slipped into the driver’s seat, I breathed in that new car smell. A wave of comfort and relief washed over me.

*Yeah, this is the right decision.*

Xavier smiled. “Ready?”

I nodded.

“Great. I know a place we should go. It should be okay, since the snow has cleared a bit.”

“Lead the way.”

I put the car in drive, and we were on our way. I started off slow at first, trying to feel out the car and the traction of the wheels on the snowy road. But as I got my bearings and became more comfortable, I pressed down on the gas a bit more.

While this gift was still way too much, the car was such a smooth ride. Easily the best I’d ever been in. I loved the feeling of just driving without having somewhere to be. All I had to do was focus on the road and the feel of the car, and let all my worries fall away.

When I’d woken up this morning, a weight had been pressing down on my chest. I’d hoped to be feeling much better by the time I woke up, but that didn’t seem to be on the table. It was disappointing to see that both my mates had left me in bed alone. And waking up like that, with no idea where they’d gone or why they’d left, had immediately put me on edge.

At first, I’d worried that they’d left early because I’d forced them into an awkward situation. I’d worried that they’d run out at the first opportunity. So this morning, when I’d seen them talking together and neither one of them had seemed to be scarred for life, it had been such a relief.

That meant I’d been left with the disappointment of sleep *not* being the reset I’d been hoping for. I knew it was unrealistic, but somewhere in the back of my mind I’d been hoping that when I woke up, I’d suddenly know exactly what to do about my problems. That I wouldn’t feel this constant pressing anxiety.

But I was wrong, and I still couldn’t stop worrying about everything that might happen. Worrying that something bigger was on the horizon. But the thing that had been on my mind the most was that whatever was happening to me would somehow hurt my mates or the pack. That my life wouldn’t be the only one on the line anymore.

I couldn’t stand it.

How many times had Xavier or Greyson gotten hurt protecting me? I couldn’t let it happen again. I couldn’t keep doing that to them. They deserved a mate who wasn’t a liability—and the pack deserved better, too. Right now, I had a target painted on my back, and for all I knew, I’d painted one on theirs too just by living with them.

I flinched slightly when Xavier put his hand over mine. “I can see you’re still thinking about it all.”

I sighed. “I can’t help it. Maybe you should be the one to drive. After all, it’s not great to have this distracted a driver.”

The very last thing I needed was to get into a car accident because I was too focused on all of my problems to keep an eye on the road. I half-expected Xavier to argue with me, but to my surprise, he didn’t push it.

“If that’s what you want.”

I pulled over, and we switched seats. Xavier opened up the sunroof before we took off again. He steered the car with such control that I felt completely safe. And opening the sunroof was a great idea. The winter wind blew through my hair and cooled my face. I closed my eyes and savored the sensation.

*This is helping*,I realized. *This moment of just letting go and not having to feel like I’m in control. I can just feel the wind and let go.*

Finally, the car slowed to a stop, and I opened my eyes—and let out a gasp.

Beyond the windshield, an entire snowy forest sprawled out in front of us. Xavier had driven us to a mountain overlook, and I could see *everything.* Snow glittered on the trees and the mountainside, and the sky was so clear and so blue I could’ve lost myself in it.

Stunned speechless, I opened my door and walked toward the edge of the overlook to take in the view. It was the most gorgeous, breathtaking thing I’d ever seen.

Xavier’s feet crunched on the snow as he came up behind me and wrapped his arms around me. “I thought maybe this might help you relax.”

*He knows me so well.*

I smiled, a real one. For the first time in… I didn’t even know how long. “It’s so beautiful. This place… It’s amazing.”

He nodded. “I wanted to share it with you.”

“How did you even know it was here?” No offense to Xavier, but taking long drives through the woods and trying to find the most picturesque vistas wasn’t exactly Xavier’s style.

“This is how I’ve spent my last few Christmases. Colton and I would go for a run in whatever forest or mountain or desert we were in. We’d find a place like this and just sit and enjoy the world around us. It was a way to find peace for a moment, no matter where we were.”

I sank deeper into his arms. The sound of his voice as he described this calm, soothing experience was nothing short of relaxing. All my anxiety, all my raw edges—they just disappeared as he painted a picture that was all too easy to imagine.

I could see it now—that peace that came from being out in nature with one of the people you trusted more than anyone.

“It used to be just me and Colton against the world,” he continued. “But now, I want it to be you and me.”

I turned in his arms to face him, a smile tugging at my lips as I kissed him. I poured all my love for him into the kiss. All my affection. My gratitude. Xavier had done so much for me. He’d given me so much—a whole new world.

*How did I get so lucky?*

When Xavier broke away, we were breathless. His voice was low and husky as he asked, “Do you want to stay out here a little longer?”

# Episode 3092

**Lola**

I leaned back in my chair, totally stuffed. It was a good thing I was still in my pajamas, because I was pretty sure my overly full belly wouldn’t have been able to handle anything other than an elastic waistband.

I must have eaten three cinnamon rolls and half a pound of bacon, and I had exactly zero regrets about it. In fact, I’d have done it all over again if my stomach had allowed it.

Jay nudged my shoulder with a laugh. “Are you going into a food coma? At eight in the morning?”

I smacked his arm. “It’s Christmas! I can do anything I want.”

“What about presents, though?”

*That* got my attention. I straightened up, my overstuffed belly suddenly forgotten. “Presents? Gimme!”

He laughed again. “It’s under the tree. So are you done with breakfast, or—”

I was already racing into the living room, my empty plate forgotten on the table. Fenrir was in there with Maren and Greyson, ripping into his presents. Greyson sat on the couch and watched the little boy unwrap his gifts with a look I’d never seen before. If I hadn’t known any better, I’d have said that our burdened, troubled Alpha almost looked… content? At peace?

*Does Greyson have baby fever? Cali better watch out.*

I didn’t think Cali or her mates had ever talked about kids—and frankly that was not a subject I thought *any* of us were ready for. But there was no denying that Fenrir brought out something paternal in Greyson. I made a mental note to ask Cali about it later.

*But first, presents!*

I searched under the tree for my gift from Jay and, after some digging, finally found a box with my name on it. The box was small, so small it fit in the palm of my hand. The delicate silver wrapping paper glinted up at me.

I couldn’t help the thread of disappointment that tugged at me. *It’s too small to be what I asked for.*

“Asked for” meaning I’d sort of hinted to Jay about a purse I’d seen and loved at the mall. But even folded up a thousand times, that purse couldn’t have fit in this box.

*This is what I get for hinting instead of outright asking for what I want. Now I have to pretend to like this gift.*

I looked up at Jay, who was kneeling on the floor next to me. I searched his face for any kind of hint about what I was going to find when I opened this gift, but his expression was maddeningly neutral.

I forced a smile. “Oh, this looks great! What is it?”

He rolled his eyes. “You have to open it to find out, remember?”

*Oh. Right.*

I laughed, and a little tension eased its way out of my chest as I began to tear off the wrapping paper to reveal a small, white box. I still had no idea what my gift could be. I glanced over at Jay again, but he wasn’t giving anything away.

I tipped the lid off the box, and nestled inside was an even smaller velvet jewelry box. I gasped and almost dropped my gift.

*He got me jewelry? This might be even better than a purse!*

My heart pounded as I lifted the lid on the jewelry box. My jaw dropped, but this time my hands stayed securely around the box.

Inside the jewelry box sat a white gold band, lined with glittering sapphires.

“Oh my god,” I breathed.

*This is definitely better than a purse!*

Jay moved forward and gently plucked the ring out of the box, holding it between his thumb and forefinger. “Here, you can see the engraving on the inside of the band.”

*My mate, forever*

Tears blurred my eyes, and suddenly I couldn’t see the engraving or my mate. This was beyond anything I could have imagined for myself. How had I ever doubted him? I blinked the tears away, and they spilled over my lashes.

“It’s perfect,” I said.

He smiled gently. “This is a promise ring. Like I told your dads, I will always be here for you and always stand by your side. I swear. And now you have the ring to prove it.”

I held out my hand so he could slide the ring onto my finger. It was a perfect fit, and I couldn’t stop staring at the way the gems sparkled on my finger. “I can’t wait to show it to my dads tonight at Christmas dinner.”

“Does that mean you like it?”

There was a thread of anxiety in his voice, and it had me throwing my arms around him. “I do! I love it! And I love you!”

I caught his lips in a sweet kiss, then pulled away. “Okay! Now for my Christmas Day plan.”

His brows rose. “You have a Christmas Day plan? I’m still in my pajamas.”

“No, that’s fine. The plan includes those. You can keep wearing them.” I took his hand, my ring sparkling, and dragged him to the entryway between the foyer and the living room.

He laughed as I stopped and faced him, then tugged him an inch or so to the left. I had to get the placement just right.

“What kind of plan is this?” he asked.

“I’m going to take you on a tour of the house.”

“But I live here. I don’t need a tour.”

I rolled my eyes. “Obviously, this is a *special* tour.” I pointed above our heads, and he looked up at the mistletoe hanging above us. His mouth made an “O” shape as realization sank in.

“We’re doing a mistletoe tour of the house? Is it really hung in that many places?”

I snorted. “Torin was in charge of hanging it. Do you even know how many places he’s stuck it?”

He seemed to mull this over, then shook his head. “I stopped counting a while ago.”

“Exactly. Let’s see if we can find them all.” I leaned in and gave him a quick, playful kiss before darting into the study, where I knew another sprig of mistletoe was hanging. I’d actually asked Torin for the full map of all the mistletoe in the house, but even he didn’t remember every single place. I had a feeling we’d be finding the decorations tucked away in random places for a long while after the holidays were over.

Jay laughed as I dragged him into the study, and I pulled him into my arms and kissed him again, a little longer this time. From there, it was a wild dash from one place to another, punctuated by kisses and laughter. Once we were finished with the ground floor, we stumbled up the stairs, and Jay was laughing so hard he was doubled over.

We found the “last” sprig of mistletoe in the walk-in linen closet upstairs. This time, Jay lingered in the kiss, cupping my face in his hands.

“I love you,” he breathed against my lips.

I grinned. We’d come so far together. From my uncontrollable shifting to turning into a vampire to becoming a new type of hybrid. Life had been nothing short of a rollercoaster these past few months, and Jay had never failed to be by my side, loving and supporting me and helping me through whatever life threw my way.

I gently ran my fingers over his eyepatch, my new promise ring glinting. “I love you so much.”

He smiled and leaned in for another kiss, but I put a finger to his lips.

“There’s one more piece of mistletoe to find,” I said. “A special one.”

He looked intrigued. “Where is it?”

“I’ll give you a hint, but you’ve gotta find it on your own.” I took his hand and led him to our bedroom and opened the door. Right above the bed, a giant piece of mistletoe was strung from the ceiling.

Jay looked up at it with a grin. “I like the way you think.”

He pulled me into our room, closing the door behind us and tossing me onto our bed. I laughed as I bounced on the mattress, but Jay wasted no time. Immediately, he followed me up onto the mattress, his body covering mine.

His lips crashed into mine, and I lost myself in the taste of him. This was my mate, my perfect match who loved me so much. I couldn’t get enough of him.

My hands slipped beneath his pajama top, my palms skimming over his bare, heated skin before I tugged the shirt off. His pajama bottoms did nothing to hide the erection pressing into my hip.

I winked. “Is that another Christmas present, or are you just happy to see me?”

He rolled his eyes and kissed a hot line down my throat, nipping at the junction of my shoulder and neck before he tugged my pajama top off too. We were skin to skin, and that sensation alone was nearly enough to make my eyes roll back in my head.

But never let it be said that I wasn’t greedy, because I started tugging at the drawstring of Jay’s pajama pants. Where my mate was concerned, I’d never get enough.

Suddenly, a loud voice outside boomed, “Redwood pack, we know you’re in there! Come out and face us!”

# Episode 3093

**Greyson**

When I heard the voice shouting from outside, I raced out onto the porch, my heart pounding and my mind racing into overdrive. Were we under attack? If so, from whom? The voice sounded vaguely familiar, but I was fairly certain it didn’t belong to Knox or Lucian or anyone else who’d tangled with us in the past. Could this have something to do with the stolen ashes?

*Is it too much to ask that we have just* one *day where we don’t have to worry about facing one enemy or another?*

I stopped short when I saw Mace standing in the snow in front of the house, a snowball in his hands. Several Blue Blood pack members stood behind him.

“Mace?” I heaved out a breath, relief thrumming through me. “What are you doing here?”

Mace’s eyes twinkled. “We challenge your pack to a Christmas snowball fight.”

My brows rose, and my mouth curved up in a feral grin. This was more like it. “What kind of game are you challenging us to?”

“Let’s do dodgeball rules. If you get hit, you’re out. Last pack with a wolf standing wins!”

I turned around to see most of the Redwood pack clustered behind me. They’d clearly heard Mace’s invitation and had come out to investigate.

“Redwoods, are you ready?” I asked.

They all cheered and raced out into the snow, scooping it into their arms. It was hard not to think their enthusiasm wasn’t borne out of sheer relief this wasn’t a life-or-death challenge.

Each pack formed a line on opposite sides of the snowy yard.

“Ready?” Mace called from the center of the Blue Blood line.

“Set!” I called back.

And then, in unison, we both shouted, “Go!”

The air around me filled with snowballs. My reflexes were fast enough that I dodged the projectiles with ease. Torin, on the other hand, got a face full of snow almost as soon as the game began.

“You okay?” I called over to him. Fae were tough, but a werewolf throw would definitely pack a punch.

Torin wiped the snow away from his face. “Just fine! I’d rather watch, anyway.”

He crunched off to the porch and, without missing a beat, started cheering on the Redwoods.

I turned my attention back to the game. A snowball was heading straight for my mom, and I pulled her out of the way at the last minute. She let out a gleeful laugh and let loose a torrent of snowballs that took out four Blue Blood pack members.

In a strangely effective team-up, Elle raced around the yard, making armload after armload of snowballs and dumping them at Fenrir’s feet. The kid was small, but he had amazing aim, and the dynamic duo was making quick work of the Blue Bloods.

Pack members on both sides were diving into the trenches we’d made in preparation for the Samara fight, and the game took on a new, competitive edge, with some pack members acting as snipers and others running full force toward their opponents.

“Violet, no!” Charlie dramatically leapt out in front of Violet, taking a snowball that had been meant for her. It hit him in the stomach, and he slumped to the snowy ground.

“Charlie!” Violet dropped to her knees, playing along. “Speak to me! Stay with me!”

I couldn’t help it. I threw my head back and laughed. It was wonderful to see the pack having such a fun time together, and it seemed to put them at ease that I was having a good time too. Maybe being an Alpha wasn’t limited to focusing on battles and defenses. Maybe it was just as important to give my pack moments like this, where they could come together and remember what it was like to be a family.

And this was an excellent reminder. Thank god for Mace and the Blue Bloods.

A snowball whizzed past my head, missing me by inches, and I was yanked out of my reverie.

*Right. Snowball fight. Time to focus!*

I spun, scooping up snow and taking out the Blue Blood wolf who’d thrown it at me.

Soon, it was only Mace and me left in the game. Everyone else was covered in snow or had retreated to the porch to watch.

Silence fell as we stepped forward to face each other.

“Do you really think you can take me?” Mace drawled.

“You don’t even know what I’m capable of,” I promised.

He grinned and crooked his finger. “Come over here and show me.”

The packs formed semi-circles around each of their Alphas.

“Grey-son! Grey-son!” the Redwoods chanted.

The Blue Bloods followed suit. “Mace! Mace! Mace!”

Mace darted forward, reaching down to scoop up a handful of snow, and the final battle began. We put our Alpha speed and reflexes to the test, ducking and weaving and scooping snow and throwing with expert precision.

Mace threw a double whammy, and the second snowball nearly clipped me. I barely got out of the way in time, and a feminine cry echoed from behind me as I lobbed my last snowball.

I glanced back. Mace had hit Maren in the face.

I heard Mace curse and turned back to face him a split second before a snowball hit me in the shoulder. He’d taken advantage of my distraction, but, judging by the snow caking his shirt, I’d hit him too.

“It’s a tie!” Violet cried, and everyone groaned in disappointment.

Smiling, I closed the distance between us and held out my hand to Mace. “We’ll have to have a rematch next year.”

“Thanks for being a good sport.”

“Hey, it was a good call. Maybe we can make this an annual tradition.”

Now that the game was over, the packs began to mingle. Over on the other side of the yard, where the snow was mostly untouched, Ravi was showing Elle how to make snow angels, and she was clearly delighted by it. In almost no time, she filled the yard with one angel after another until it looked like an army of snow angels was guarding the house.

Then, before Ravi or anyone else could stop her, she shifted into a wolf and started making lopsided snow wolves. Fenrir, clearly thrilled with this concept, jumped in to make a little snow Fae next to Elle’s snow wolves.

I grinned, looking for Maren to see if she was seeing this too. She was locked in conversation with Mace, who was red-faced and rubbing his head.

“So sorry about that snowball,” I heard him say.

Maren’s arms were crossed over her chest. She didn’t look amused. She was definitely going to make him work for her forgiveness.

This was such a nice change of pace from our recent relations with other packs. The Redwoods and the Blue Bloods were truly friends. Hopefully, in time, we’d be able to find unity with some of the other packs.

I ducked back into the house to warm up with another cup of coffee and to grab my phone. I wanted to text Xavier and Cali and check in on things. I’d meant it when I’d said I thought they should go together. Cali clearly needed a break from the pack house for a little while. And I didn’t want to be overbearing, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t worrying about her.

Hopefully they were having a good, safe time together.

I shot off a text to both of them to ask for their ETA and set my phone back down on the counter.

When I looked up, Elle was standing right in front of me, naked. She’d tracked snow and mud into the house with her bare feet. I winced at the mess.

*I’d better get a mop and clean that up before it gets tracked all over.*

But before I could move, Elle held out her hands. Cupped inside them was a little bouquet of dried flowers, a cutting of holly, and pinecones. She’d even written a small card on the back of a piece of cardboard she’d probably fished out of the recycle bin.

*A bowkay for u.*

She’d written it herself. I couldn’t hide my smile at how far she’d already come, not just in writing and reading, but in learning our customs.

“Is this a Christmas gift?” I asked.

She nodded. “For the holiday. And for a thank you.”

“I’m glad you’re with us this Christmas, Elle. You’ve been a great addition to the pack.”

She smiled, obviously pleased. “I am happy to be here too.” She held out the bouquet again, and as I plucked the delicate gift from her hands, something like guilt nagged at my stomach.

Elle was supposed to be my responsibility. I was the one who’d turned her, and she was so new to the human world. Cali had taken the lion’s share of caring for and teaching Elle while I’d been busy running the pack. Sure, things had been crazy lately, but I shouldn’t have handed over that responsibility so completely.

“How are you adjusting?” I asked. “Are you enjoying the holiday?”

She frowned a bit. “Yes, I like the Redwoods. I like Greyson. I like Cali. But…”

“What is it? Is something wrong?”

Her shoulders slumped. “I miss my family.”

I nodded. “Well, that reminds me. I have a Christmas gift for you too.”

# Episode 3094

As Xavier pulled up into the driveway, I felt more relaxed than I’d thought was possible, considering what a hot mess I’d been when I’d woken up this morning. Our time away had been a much-needed reprieve. It had been nice to take my Christmas gift out for a test drive—as ridiculous and expensive as the gift was. But Xavier had offered, and I’d accepted. It had been the smallest, simplest thing in the world to sit in the car with him, holding his hand and looking out at the snowy forest passing us by, and yet it had brought me so much peace.

*Maybe this can be a new Christmas tradition.*

As I got out of the car, some of the Redwood pack members were building a snowman in the yard. I grinned when I saw Mace helping Maren to place the head on top as little Fenrir clapped and cheered.

“He’s a real man now!” Fenrir cried in joy.

All of my complicated feelings about Maren and her son aside, the kid was as cute as a button. It was refreshing, in a way, to be spending the holidays with a child in the house. I’d never thought much about it before, but kids brought a whole new layer to the celebrations. Everything—even a very lopsided snowman—was magical with a little kid around.

Xavier climbed out of the driver’s seat and nodded at Mace in greeting. “Merry Christmas.”

Mace returned the slightly stoic greeting, but then his face split into a grin again when Fenrir tugged his arm and demanded that they “make a face” on their snowman.

It was a relief to see everyone having such a good Christmas morning. Maybe it was overly sensitive, but I’d been worried that I might confuse or worry people by stepping out for a while. I’d really needed a break from the pack house to clear my mind, and it had worked. I felt better now than I’d felt in days.

I headed into the house, hung up my coat, and walked into the kitchen. I’d probably missed breakfast, but a cup of yogurt sounded fine for now.

“Oh, good!” Torin beamed when he saw me come in. “You’re back! I saved you a cinnamon roll.”

“Really?” This was amazing news. They’d looked so good when I’d seen them earlier, and even though I hadn’t been hungry, I’d thought about snagging one and saving it for later. Ultimately, I’d been okay with missing breakfast so I could go out in the car, but it felt a little bit like a Christmas miracle that I still got to eat one of the delicious-smelling cinnamon rolls.

I took the plate with the roll, sat down at the table, and devoured it in an embarrassingly short amount of time. *Guess my appetite’s finally come back.* Xavier and Greyson would be relieved.

While I ate, Torin started cleaning up after breakfast, and once I’d stuffed the last bit of roll into my mouth, I hurried over to him.

“No, Torin, you don’t have to do that. You cooked, and the rule is that if you cook, then you shouldn’t have to clean.” I reached for the pan he was scrubbing, but he laughed and shrugged.

“I don’t mind. I actually enjoy this domestic stuff. It’s soothing, in a way.”

“You can’t be serious.” I’d never imagined scrubbing bacon grease out of a frying pan to be soothing.

He nodded. “That’s why I’m so into this stuff—cooking, decorating, even cleaning up afterward. It’s so safe. Much better than in the Fae world, where every second you chill out and let your guard down is a second you can end up murdered.”

I thought back to my own brief time in the Fae world. He wasn’t underselling it at all—every time I’d turned around, it had felt like something was trying to eat, enchant, capture, or kill me.

“I get it.” I nodded. “Sometimes you need a steady routine, especially with everything that’s been going on lately.”

“Exactly.” His expression softened. “I’m sorry that you’ve personally had to deal with so much lately. You deserve only good things, Cali.”

I ducked my head, then shook it. “Nope, we’re not talking about anything sad today. Only happy Christmas things.”

He nodded. “In that case, I have great news.”

I poured myself a cup of tea from the still-warm kettle and took a sip. “What is it?”

“I heard from Kevin this morning. He called to wish me a Merry Christmas!” Torin was beaming, his smile so bright I could have flicked off the light and he would have lit up the room all on his own.

“I’m so happy for you. I told you him not being here wasn’t a huge deal.”

“And you were right! Kevin explained it all—that he wishes he could be with me for our big dinner, but he promised his parents he’d spend Christmas with his family since he’s been so busy with work this year. He felt he owed it to his family to be with them.”

I nodded. “I knew it. I knew that Kevin probably wanted to spend the day with you.”

He blushed. “Kevin even said that he hopes next year I can come with him and meet his family.”

“That’s great! And it means Kevin thinks you’ll still be together next year, which is even better news.”

A sly grin pulled at his lips. “I know.”

“There you are!”

I turned to see my mom and dad walking into the kitchen.

“How was your drive?” Mom asked.

Torin quickly dried the now-clean frying pan and put it away. “I’ll let you all have some family time, since I now realize just how important that is during the holiday.”

He hurried out of the room, and I turned to my parents with a smile.

“The drive was really good,” I said. “It helped me clear my head.”

“I’m so glad. Do you want to come into the living room for our family gift exchange?”

“I’ve only been waiting all day for this.”

Speaking of routines being comforting, a little reminder of the family tradition was going a long way to making me feel even more at ease.

Artemis was already sitting on the couch, waiting for us. I grinned, thrilled that she was joining us for the traditional gift opening. I took a seat next to her while my parents gathered up all of our gifts.

Artemis leaned in. “So, explain this tradition to me?”

I smiled. “Oh, we just have to guess what our presents are before opening them.”

“What do you get if you guess correctly?”

I laughed. “Nothing. It’s just a fun game.”

Mom came over with a stack of gifts in her arms. “It started because Cali always wanted to guess what she got and would ask a million questions to see if she could get it right. It just became a thing we all ended up doing every Christmas.”

Artemis nodded.

“I’ll go first,” Dad said. He picked up a box and read the gift tag. “This one’s from Cali.” He weighed the gift in his hands, and I watched, delighted, as he tried to shake the box, then smelled it, then pressed his hand against it.

“I think it’s a new briefcase,” he said.

My grin widened as he peeled back the wrapping to reveal a back massager. “Ha! Nice try, Dad.”

Mom went next, going through the same motions as Dad. She took even longer mulling it over and finally guessed that her gift was a scarf. Actually, it was slippers.

“This game doesn’t seem to have many winners,” Artemis observed.

I laughed. “That’s because I haven’t gone yet.” I grabbed my gift from my dad and studied the shape, the weight, the sound of it rustling inside the box, and the general feel of it. I closed my eyes and focused. “It’s a sweater.”

I glanced at Dad for confirmation, but his face gave away nothing.

When I ripped open the wrapping and opened the box, I found—dun, dun, dun—a sweater!

“I was right!” I crowed in triumph.

My dad shook his head. “How do you get it right so often?”

I shrugged. “I am the Christmas gift guessing queen.”

“Well, you’re only half right, because there’s more to the gift.” Dad held out a box to Artemis and another one to Mom. They were identical in shape, and I grinned when I realized what they were.

Artemis followed our lead, hefting the box and trying to guess the shape and weight of the item inside. “I think it’s either a set of throwing knives, a spell flask, or a fairy cloak.”

Dad laughed. “Where would you even buy those things?”

Artemis shrugged. “Those are the only things people ever get me.”

Dad smiled. “Just open it.”

She did, and it was another sweater. It matched mine. Artemis stared at it, her throat working while she blinked rapidly. My heart melted to see something like a sweater affecting my sister so strongly.

I leaned in and pulled her into a hug.

“Dad,” I said, “these are perfect.”

We looked at Mom, who hadn’t opened her gift yet. At first I thought she was merely focused on watching all of us tear at our own gifts, but that wasn’t true—she didn’t seem to be paying as close attention as I thought.

“Mom? Aren’t you going to open yours?” I asked.

She didn’t reply at first, and her gaze seemed far off. Then she suddenly stood. “Cali, we have to go outside. The trees are trying to tell me something.”

# Episode 3095

**Greyson**

I brought Elle into the study and grabbed the throw blanket off the back of the couch before passing it over to her.

“Here. You can wrap up in that. You must be cold,” I said.

*Translation: please stop being so aggressively naked.*

She must have gotten the unspoken message, because she rolled her eyes as she took the blanket and wrapped it around herself.

“Come over here. I’ve got something to show you.” I led her to my desk, turned on the laptop, and typed in a URL.

She stared down at the page, confusion creasing her expression. “You got me a web… site?”

I shook my head. “No, it’s better than that.”

I tilted the screen back and turned up the brightness so she could see what she was looking at a little bit better. She frowned at the map that appeared, and the little blinking lights clustered together on it.

“What is this?” she asked. “Dots?”

“Each of those dots represents a member of your wolf pack,” I explained. “They’re being monitored by LIPS.”

She gasped, her eyes widening, and lunged forward. She grabbed the screen and looked at it so closely her face was only a few inches away.

“Where are they? What does this mean?” She peeled her eyes away from the screen to look up at me.

“It just shows us where they are, and that they’re on the move, which means they’re probably safe.” I reached around her to point to the screen. “See? You can see them moving in real time.”

She swallowed. “How is this possible?”

“Do you remember when your wolf pack agreed to ‘migrate’ away from here so LIPS would follow them and stop tracking the Redwood pack?”

She nodded.

“Part of that deal is that they’re allowing LIPS to follow them and track them, but that also means that Lola can hack into the LIPS site and find them any time.” I smiled. “So, whenever you’re missing them, or worrying about them, we can look at this tracker and see where they are.”

She looked down at the map, her brow furrowing. “It says Eye-da-ho?”

I nodded. “That’s right. They’re on the move, but not too far away.”

She ran her hand lovingly over the edge of the screen. Her gaze softened as she stared at the little dots that represented her family. I assumed she was probably missing them, but it struck me anew just how much Elle had given up to join the Redwood pack, to help us escape LIPS’s scrutiny. She’d set her entire life aside, her whole family, to become a werewolf, to enter the human world.

“I can’t imagine how much you must miss them all, but I hope this helps,” I said softly.

She nodded, her eyes misty. “Thank you. This is a good gift.”

“Any time you want to check on them, just tell me and we can look up where they are. And with some preparation, I could also organize an opportunity for you to see them. A visit, every now and then. It’ll take some planning, but I can make it happen.”

Elle set down the laptop and lunged at me, her arms tight around my neck. A little too tight, actually.

“Elle, you’re choking me,” I gasped.

She released her grip. “Thank you, Alpha. This makes me happy.”

“Good.” I smiled. “I’m glad. Merry Christmas. Do you want to sit here for a while and watch the screen?”

She nodded and sank into the chair at the desk.

I left her alone with the computer and stepped into the hallway.

Through the foyer windows, I spotted Cali’s new car in the driveway. Oh good, they’d found their way back. I never had received a response to my texts. Which was fine, mostly. Except for the fact that, in the back of my mind, I’d never stopped worrying about her and now I was even more concerned about making sure she was okay, that she was having a good Christmas.

I was looking around, unsure of where to start looking for my mate, when Sabine spotted me in the hallway and came over. “Hey, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something.”

“Oh, sure. What’s up?”

She stared at me for a moment, wringing her hands. Alarms went off in my head. What was going on now? Had something happened since I’d stepped away to give Elle her Christmas gift?

“You can tell me,” I pressed. “Whatever it is, we’ll figure it out.”

She smiled, and it eased the tension in her face. “Oh, no. Nothing’s the matter. I was just wondering if you were still okay with doing the mother-son dance with me at my wedding.”

My brows raised. “Oh, yeah. Of course. I still want to do that.”

She nodded. “I know it might be a hassle—you’re so busy with being Alpha—but when you first agreed, I signed us up for dance lessons.”

“Oh, um… I’m not sure if I’m cut out for dance lessons.” The thought alone kind of made me want to run and hide.

“I can cancel them,” she offered, but the disappointment shining in her eyes cut me to the quick. I wanted to do this for her.

I shook my head. “No, that’s okay. Let’s do it.”

She smiled. “I’m so glad you feel that way. You don’t know how happy I’ve been to have you back in my life after all this time.”

All I could do was nod. It felt a little awkward still, being around Sabine. For so long, she’d been just a Redwood pack member, one of the few people in the world who had more reason to hate my father than I did. And then everything had changed when I’d found out she was actually my mother. I’d suddenly had both a name and a face to put to the huge void my anonymous mother had left in my life.

Everything had changed, and nothing had changed, but the whole thing still felt awkward. But we had gotten closer lately. I’d never thought I’d have this in my life, and most of the time I was still pretty sure I was fucking it up. I didn’t know *how* to have a mom. What to say or do. How to make her happy.

“I got you something for Christmas,” she said, breaking the silence that had settled between us.

“Oh.” I tensed. “I wasn’t sure if we were doing gifts now or later. I have a little something for you too.”

“It’s okay. You can give it to me later.” Her smile was so soft, so gentle and accepting. Sometimes I wondered how different my life would have been if I’d grown up with Sabine as my parent instead of Silas.

“I do have yours now, though,” she continued. She held out a little box. “It’s nothing big. Actually, it’s more symbolic?” She let out a nervous laugh.

What could she possibly have to be nervous about?

I took the box and removed the lid to reveal a small plastic band that had been cut open. It looked like a piece of garbage, but I knew that couldn’t be right. Sabine wouldn’t have been so nervous if it were garbage.

I picked it up and saw my own name written on it, along with my birthday. And there, at the very bottom was my mother’s name. *Sabine Smith*.

“It’s your hospital bracelet from when you were born,” she said, suddenly misty-eyed. “It’s so strange to think that you were ever that small.”

Suddenly, my throat felt tight. *She kept this all this time?*

I’d spent most of my life believing that the woman who’d given birth to me had never wanted me. That she’d abandoned me. But that wasn’t the truth at all. The truth was, I’d had a loving, beautiful, kind mother out there all along.

I didn’t know what to say, so I just leaned in and wrapped her in a tight hug. She patted my back, rubbing circles.

“I’m so glad we found each other again,” I managed, my voice rough.

She sniffled, and her shoulders shook. She was crying.

I pulled back with a watery smile. “Merry Christmas… Mom.”

She smiled. “Merry Christmas, Greyson.” She wiped her eyes. “I’m going to help Torin clean up after breakfast. He’s so bad at loading the dishwasher.”

I laughed. What was it about this holiday that made everything seem so loving and familial? It was such a gift.

Sabine walked away, and I noticed Maren in the bathroom just down the hall, forcing Fenrir to wash all of the dirt from playing outside from his hands and face.

The little boy was wiggling and resistant, and the second they were done, he took off like a shot, almost colliding with me.

I steadied him. “Wow, be careful.”

“Sorry!” He raced away again.

“Sorry he’s so wild today.” Maren laughed, coming out of the bathroom. “He’s never had a big Christmas with a giant family like this, and he’s just really excited.”

I smiled. “I’m glad. Fenrir deserves this, especially after the ordeal he went through.”

Her expression sobered. “I can’t even begin to thank you for that.”

“You don’t have to. I wanted to help. I care about you, and Fenrir too. You’re my friends.”

She nodded. “Well, as soon as these festivities are over, we’ll get out of your hair. You’ve done so much for us already.”

I frowned, looking over at Fenrir, who was playing with one of his new toys under the tree. “You know you can stay here as long as you want, right?”

# Episode 3096

I jumped up and hurried over to my mom.

*The trees called her back really quickly… I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or a bad thing.*

Artemis frowned, confused. “Sorry, why are we talking to the trees? Did we need something?”

I quickly told her about the fairy circle. “We think it’s a warning. The trees must know something.”

Mom was already halfway out the door, and I rushed to keep up with her. Artemis and Dad were hot on our heels. Mom headed straight for tree line, put her hand on a trunk, and closed her eyes to listen in.

Even though she hadn’t made a sound, I knew Mom was talking to the trees, and it felt like the longest few minutes of my life, waiting for her to finish her conversation.

When she was finished, she turned to face me, worry clear in her eyes.

*That can’t be good.*

I forced some brightness into my voice. “What did they say? Is something bigger going on here?”

Maybe it was nothing. Maybe this was just another scary, useless omen. Something to keep me up late at night without offering any actionable information.

At this point, I honestly didn’t know which was worse.

“The trees recommend that you shouldn’t travel between worlds right now,” my mom said, her expression grim. “The mark on your shoulder could affect your magic and your very being if you try to leave this realm.”

I grimaced. “Great.”

This wasn’t news, exactly. The trees were telling Mom what I already knew, including the whole aura being affected thing. It seemed like trees telling you something should be taken even more seriously. Since, like, they didn’t usually talk.

A thrill of fear ran down my spine at that thought. I already felt fundamentally changed by Seluna. She’d marked me before, she’d possessed me, and now it felt like she was trying to hollow me out. The idea that the changes could get any worse was truly horrifying.

I forced a laugh. “Well, I don’t have any inter-realm vacations planned, but I’ll definitely make sure to avoid falling into any random portals.”

The joke fell flat, and none of my family members laughed. They didn’t so much as smile.

“Are you okay?” Mom asked.

*Nope. Never been less okay in my life, actually.*

I nodded. “Let’s finish opening presents?”

It was hard to imagine being distracted from that sense of impending doom that had been looming over me ever since Lucian had gotten me mixed up with Seluna and her psychotic scheme for world domination, but I had to try. Spending time with Xavier this morning and opening presents with my family had made me feel normal for the first time in ages. I wanted to savor that feeling, linger in it for as long as I could. Because I knew this peace wouldn’t last. It never did.

My dad’s expression softened, like he had some idea of all the things I was hiding behind my laugh. My fake smile. “We don’t have to do that right now. If you want to talk, or—”

“No,” I said, a little more sharply than I’d intended. But I *didn’t* want to talk about it. I felt like all I had done was talk about it *ad nauseam*. And we were still no closer to finding the ashes and freeing me from this hell. So what use was talking? It wouldn’t change anything.

I pulled in a breath and reattached that smile to my lips. “I mean, it’s Christmas. We’re opening presents! It’s what we do.”

I knew I probably sounded the opposite of Christmassy as I said all this, maybe even borderline unhinged, but Seluna had already taken so much from me. Too much. I wasn’t going to let her take my family traditions too.

We headed back into the living room, and my mom opened her gift, a sweater that matched mine and Artemis’s. We all changed into our matching sweaters, and my dad smiled. “My girls look amazing.”

And we did. Like an amazing, whole family. Things might not have been perfect, and we might not have been perfect, but we loved each other. We supported each other. And today, we were all together.

And, for me, that was about as close to perfect as you could get.

Artemis’s smile wavered, and she rubbed her eyes. I could only imagine how big a deal something like this was to her, having people who loved her and being part of a family after spending most of her life alone.

I didn’t mention her tears, though. Artemis was probably self-conscious about showing so much emotion. She was a strong warrior, and she’d lived in survival mode for so long that she didn’t seem to know what to do with her emotions most of the time.

“Okay.” Artemis cleared her throat and smiled again. “I’ve got presents for you, too.”

She reached under the tree and started passing out badly-wrapped, misshapen blobs to each of us.

I stared at it and blew out a breath, hefting the object and feeling the edges of it through the wrapping paper. “Wow, Artemis. I… I can’t even begin to guess what this might be. You really have me stumped.” I shook my head. “Is it a neck pillow?”

She scowled. “What in the gods’ names is a neck pillow?”

“Okay, I give up. I’ll just open it.” I ripped away what seemed like a million layers of tape and wrapping paper to reveal a sleek, shiny dagger in a gorgeous leather holster. My parents opened their gifts too. Mom got throwing stars in a small, sleek case. Dad got a kitchen mallet.

Artemis beamed at us as we all held up our brand new… weapons?

“Rishika helped me get you each the perfect weapon to go with your personalities!”

“Aw!” I laughed. “This is so sweet.”

“This is very thoughtful, sweetie,” Mom said. “Thank you.”

Dad hefted his mallet and hummed in appreciation. “I don’t know if I’ll ever use this on a living victim, but we’ll definitely have really tender chicken from now on.”

Artemis seemed pleased with this use of the mallet, and I smiled as I watched my family. Despite the little hiccup with the trees, my family seemed to be having a great Christmas.

*Speaking of the trees, maybe I should update Xavier and Greyson on what they told Mom.*

I stayed put for a while longer. I didn’t want to leave this beautiful moment with my family, but I knew it would be foolish to not share this information with my mates. We didn’t want to get caught unprepared if something else happened.

And something else always happened.

So, as my family started to clean up the wrapping paper, I headed off to find my mates.

Xavier was in the kitchen with Jay, pouring himself a mug of coffee.

“Hey, have you seen Greyson?” I asked.

He nodded across the way to where Greyson was talking to Maren in the hallway.

I mind linked with him. *When you get a second, we need to talk.*

His gaze snapped over to mine, and he quickly excused himself and joined us in the kitchen.

“What’s up?” he asked.

I swallowed roughly and looked at both my mates. We’d talked about not lying to each other, hadn’t we? “I don’t think that we can take the full day off, even though it’s Christmas.”

Xavier scowled and took my hand. “Did something happen?”

I filled them in on the message from the trees and my growing sense of unease. “It’s hard not to think about it. I know I need to take action, I just don’t know what that action should be.”

Greyson’s face was grim. “Okay, let’s try to figure out a way to locate those ashes.”

I nodded. “I hate to do this, but I think we need to bring in the witches. This is more their domain than ours.”

“Fair enough,” Xavier said.

Greyson nodded. “Okay, let’s go find a witch.”

We left the kitchen in search of Big Mac or Kira. We didn’t have to search long—both witches were watching TV with Mrs. Smith, Torin, Charlie, Violet, Lilac, Marta, and Dani. It was some kind of holiday baking show. One of those really calming British ones.

My brows rose. *What is Big Mac doing watching this? This kind of show doesn’t seem her speed at all.*

Suddenly, Big Mac leaned forward. “Careful!” she shouted at the TV. “The soufflé is going to fall!”

Mrs. Smith smiled and took her fiancée’s hand, entwining their fingers. Now I felt even more guilty for pulling Big Mac away. Today was supposed to be our break from everything, and nobody deserved a rest more than Big Mac, but we didn’t have a choice. We couldn’t keep waiting to do something about this.

Greyson went up to Big Mac and his mother and leaned closed to whisper in her ear while Xavier motioned to Kira. Just like that, the witches extracted themselves from the overcrowded couch and followed Greyson, Xavier, and me into the hallway.

Big Mac crossed her arms over her chest. “Be quick. They’re going to do the taste test soon.”

I nodded. “I know this is a big ask, but is there anything we haven’t tried to find whoever stole the ashes?”

# Episode 3097

**Xavier**

Just like that, any and all levity left Big Mac’s face. She took her time considering Cali’s question, so I glanced at Kira, who also looked deep in thought.

“We’ve tried everything normal,” Big Mac said carefully, and there was something in her tone that made me think a “but” was coming up. “But magic has an almost infinite number of branches. Even I don’t know everything about everything.”

It was evidence of the severity of our situation that I didn’t take advantage of the low-hanging fruit in that remark.

“Fair enough.” I nodded and looked at Kira. “What do you think?”

“I’ve heard of strange powers from the Pacific Rim that might be worth looking into.”

I blinked. “Seriously?”

She nodded. “It might not be anything useful, but it might help put you on the right track.”

“Do you mind looking into it for us?”

She smiled. “Of course not.”

Cali released a breath. “Thank you so much. That would be amazing. At this point, we’ll take any new scrap of information we can get.”

“I’ll reach out to some of my underground contacts,” Big Mac offered. “But there’s no guarantee I’ll be able to make contact with any of them. There’s a reason I don’t often reach out to those parts of the magical world. They’re unreliable—flaky at best, negligent or malicious at worst.”

“Honestly, I’m okay with taking chances at this point,” I said. “At least it means we’re trying something.”

I was sick to death of twiddling my thumbs and waiting for new intel to land in my lap. Sure, we were hitting walls left and right, but it felt a hell of a lot better to be doing something.

Greyson nodded. “And we appreciate you for even trying. So, no pressure.”

“Okay, I’ll let you know if I find anything, but in the meantime…” Big Mac went silent, her head cocked toward the TV. “The taste test round is starting.”

She hurried back to join Mrs. Smith on the couch. It was nice, what the two of them had. That comfort and companionship. It was the exact kind of relationship I hoped to have with Cali when we were older.

“Just so you know, this might take a while.” Kira reached out and gave Cali’s arm a gentle squeeze. “Hang in there. You’re not facing this alone.”

She headed off to make her call, and I turned to Cali. “She’s right. We’ve got lots of people working on this. I’m sure somebody will find something. And that lead will bring us to another one, and eventually we’ll figure this out.”

She nodded. “I know. I trust the witches. They’re the best around. They’ve proven that time and time again.”

“Can’t argue with that,” I said. “I’m glad to have Big Mac and Kira as allies to the pack.”

“In the meantime,” Greyson said, “we should look into the death of that Slugger guy.”

“I sent out messages to all the contacts I could think of last night,” I said. “Half of them told me they know nothing, and the other half seem to be taking their damn time replying.” I blew out a breath. If the situation were reversed, I probably would’ve had the same reaction as my contacts, but still, it was so fucking frustrating to be forced to sit here and wait.

“Maybe they’re just busy because it’s Christmas?” Cali suggested. It was a gentle and generous assumption, and I could tell she was doing her best to hold herself together. To look on the bright side and give people the benefit of the doubt like she always did. She had to be just as impatient as the rest of us, if not more so.

I loved that she was trying to keep things light, but I hated seeing her so stressed out about all of this.

I chose my words carefully. “These people aren’t exactly into celebrating the holidays.”

Greyson shook his head. “There has to be something else we’re missing. A clue or something.”

“If there is, I don’t know how to find it.” It was so fucking maddening. Especially because now I was more convinced than ever that this had to do with me and my past. And the guilt was eating me alive.

I hated that my past actions were the reason why my mate was being tortured now, even if it was tangentially related. I hated looking into that beautiful face every day and knowing I was the reason why there was so much pain and misery and fear there.

I hadn’t made the best choices in my past, mainly because I hadn’t been able to imagine caring about anyone in the world other than Colton. Ava had been long dead at that point, along with my mother. Silas had been MIA, and I would have gladly killed him then if I’d had the chance. Greyson too, for that matter.

Back then, I’d thought I didn’t have anything to lose. I knew better now, and I wished like hell that there was a way for me to go back and undo some of those bad decisions. Choose something better. Leave a legacy that wouldn’t come back to bite me in the ass.

Because the bottom line was that if I’d known back then that those choices would come around to hurt someone I loved as much as Cali, I would have never done any of that shit. Hell, I would have lived as a monk for five years rather than cause Cali pain for even one day.

“What about the medals?” Cali asked, pulling me back to the present.

I frowned. “What about them?”

“You said you found a second one. Can I see them?”

Then I realized that I’d only told her about them. I hadn’t shown them to her last night because she’d been so overwhelmed.

Honestly, showing her the medals didn’t seem like a good idea. They felt like a bad omen. I didn’t want any part of that bad energy touching Cali.

Her brows rose expectantly. “Xavier?”

I nodded. “They’re in my closet.”

I led Cali and Greyson upstairs to my room and went into my closet. I grabbed the hidden box and pulled them out, handing the second one over to Cali.

She turned it over in her hands and read the message, then shrugged at the scratched words. “Let me see the first one.”

I frowned. “They’re the same, except for the scratched message on the second.”

“Sure, but if the second one has a message for you, then maybe the first one did too and we just missed it.”

*Oh. I probably should have thought of that.*

Cali held out her other hand for the first medal. Once it was in her palm, she turned it over, holding it up next to the second one. She frowned. “I don’t see anything.”

Greyson squinted and leaned in to take a closer look. “Does the nose on the saint look bigger in that one?”

Cali leaned in too, squinting along with him.

*What a pair they make.*

I sighed, waiting for what I had to assume was a fruitless inspection to be over.

*What could a difference in the nose of the bust on the medal mean?*

Cali shook her head. “No, I think it was just a trick of the light.”

She passed both medals back over to me, and I took one in each palm, closing my fingers around them so tightly that the coins dug into my skin. I wished I could just crush them, crush out whoever was threatening the woman I loved.

“Maybe we’re just supposed to wait for the next message?” Cali asked.

I didn’t love that idea. It gave too much control to whoever was doing this to us.

As if reading my mind, Greyson shook his head. “I don’t think we should let them control what we do next. We should make the next move.”

Cali bit her lip, and I transferred the coin in my right palm to my left hand, clutching both coins together so I could take Cali’s hand.

“Look at me,” I said gently.

She did.

“I swear that I will not rest until we find more clues about what is happening to you.” I squeezed my other fist tighter around the coins, and they started to burn in my palm. I hissed and uncurled my fingers. The coins were stacked in my palm and glowing.

“Xavier?” Cali’s voice sounded far away, and a shudder went through my body.

*Shit. My knees are gonna give out…*

Dimly, I heard Greyson let out a shout of alarm. I tried to speak, but I couldn’t form the words, couldn’t force them past my tongue. My head started to throb so painfully I could barely see straight.

And then a voice, the same voice that had whispered to me on the road, slipped into my mind.

*I’m going to take away your choice, Xavier Evers.*

# Episode 3098

**Greyson**

I watched with shock as Xavier clenched his eyes shut and wavered on his feet. I rushed to his side and grabbed hold of him just in time to keep him upright, since he looked like he could collapse at any second.

“Xavier!” I said, shaking him slightly. “Xavier, what’s happening?”

He didn’t say a word. He was in some sort of strange, trance-like state, and it didn’t even seem like he’d heard me. *This has to be because of the medals, but why? What are they doing to him?*

Cali was starting to panic. “Xavier? Xavier!” She turned to me. “Why won’t he answer? What’s going on? Is he okay?”

She stepped forward and reached a hand toward him, her fingers trembling.

Suddenly, Xavier jerked upright, his posture ramrod straight. He opened his eyes slowly and blinked a bunch of times as if to clear his vision, but he looked normal otherwise. He looked between me and Cali and shook his head slowly, his eyes on the floor. If I wasn’t mistaken, he looked a little shaken—though I knew he’d never admit it.

“Hey, man, you all right?” I asked him. “What the fuck just happened?”

Xavier shook his head. “I was just about to ask you two that.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a big breath.

“You went into some sort of weird state. Were you in pain or anything?” Cali asked as she placed a hand on Xavier’s arm and stroked it, her face twisted with concern.

“I’m fine,” Xavier said gruffly. Realizing that I was still supporting his weight, he roughly shrugged out of my hold. He slowly opened his hand, revealing the two medals, now fused together in his palm.

Cali gasped. “How did that happen?” She stared at the medals, obviously as shocked as we both were.

“Great question,” I said.

Xavier’s gaze was riveted to the medals. “Hell if I know. I just got this sudden headache and, I thought… I thought I heard something. Did either of you hear it?”

Cali shook her head. “We didn’t hear anything—and it all happened so fast. One minute you were talking to us and the next… It seemed like you were a million miles away.”

“What do you think you heard?” I eyed Xavier warily. I couldn’t be sure, but it seemed like he was holding something back.

Xavier’s gaze shifted to Cali, and I could just make out a crease of concern across his brow.

*You can be hard to read, brother, but it’s still not that easy for you to hide things from me.*

“Did whatever you heard have anything to do with Cali?” I hoped like hell that it had nothing to do with her, but with everything going on with the handprint and her nearly fainting and what happened in the fairy circle, I knew the idea wasn’t too far-fetched. The only thing I didn’t get was why Xavier would keep the truth from us.

Xavier shook his head. “It was mostly just the pain in my head, and I probably just heard some white noise along with the sound of you two freaking out—but it was nothing. I’m fine, but maybe we should get these medals to the witches or put them away for now.”

“That sounds like a good idea.” Cali reached for the medals, but Xavier closed his hand as I reached out and grabbed her arm to stop her.

“I’ll hold onto it for now,” Xavier said. “We still don’t know what’s going on with these medals, especially now that they’ve fused together. They’re the last things you should be touching, Cali.”

“Fine, just trying to help,” Cali said, before turning to leave Xavier’s room. “Let’s update the witches. The sooner we get to the bottom of all this, the better. It’s all starting to give me the creeps.”

Xavier and I followed her out.

“Hopefully now there’ll be something the witches can sense from the medals. Fusing together like that has to mean something,” Xavier said.

“Only one way to find out,” Cali called over her shoulder as she started downstairs.

I stopped Xavier before he could follow, and he arched an eyebrow at me. “What? We need to get this thing figured out, right? So what are we waiting for?” Xavier rolled his eyes. “And why are you looking at me like that?”

“I know you’re holding back, Xavier. What exactly did you hear back there?”

It was just a feeling I had. Maybe if Xavier hadn’t downplayed what had happened, I wouldn’t have thought he was hiding anything. But he was acting strangely, and I just knew that it was because more had happened than he’d let on. He was so hell-bent on protecting Cali that I knew he’d keep anything from her that might cause her stress—and I couldn’t say that I wouldn’t do the same thing if I were in his shoes.

Xavier glanced at Cali as she walked downstairs, calling out for Big Mac and Kira, then he looked back at me and sighed. “I’m not certain it’s anything.”

It was my turn to raise my eyebrows at him. “So you did hear something, then?”

Xavier sighed and looked away. “It was a voice I’ve heard before. The last time I heard it was when I crashed my car, not too long ago. This time, the voice said, ‘I’m going to take away your choice.’ It didn’t say any more than that, so that’s why I didn’t make a big deal about it.”

“Choice?” I was on edge now. “Do you think it has anything to do with the *due destini*?”

Xavier shook his head. “I have no idea. Choice could mean anything, right?”

We both turned to face the staircase again. “If whoever left the medals plans on hurting Cali—”

“Nothing is going to happen to her,” Xavier said, cutting me off. “It might not even have anything to do with her.”

“Please. Why wouldn’t it? The *due destini* is all about choice. Cali’s choice, our choices. What other choices are you making besides that?” I couldn’t understand why he wasn’t as concerned as I was that this whole medal thing had just become a lot more complicated.

Xavier glared at me. “Nothing that would hurt Cali. I thought you were smarter than that.”

Without another word, Xavier pushed past me and went downstairs.

I stared after him for a moment, shaking my head. *He’s not being objective about this. He’s so caught up in trying to protect Cali that he’s trying to keep me in the dark.*

What we knew so far about the medal situation was that it had something to do with our past—likely Xavier’s in particular, since all his former associates were turning up dead. The way I saw it, it was only a matter of time before the person leaving behind the cryptic medals came out of the shadows and revealed themselves. I only hoped that it wouldn’t be too late for us when they did.

I had a sinking feeling that even being around Xavier was dangerous for the entire pack, especially Cali. I had no idea how far this person intended to take things, but if they only wanted to go after Xavier, why would they have stolen the ashes? The only thing that made sense to me at that moment was that Cali had a target on her back that needed to be taken care of before something happened to her. I just needed Xavier to be upfront so that I could figure out exactly what my next move needed to be.

I sighed and started downstairs. My mood had taken a nosedive, and I was feeling pretty dark. *Some Christmas this is shaping up to be.* I joined Cali and Xavier just as they were entering the den together. The baking show was still on, but the two witches were deep in conversation and were no longer paying attention to it.

Big Mac looked up at us as we came in. “Speak of the devil. We were just discussing your little predicament.”

“Thank you both for doing that, but there’s been a bit of a… development,” I said, giving Xavier a pointed look.

The witches looked at each other, alarm written across their faces.

“A development?” Big Mac said. “You were here like ten minutes ago.”

I gestured to Xavier, and he opened his palm. “The medals—they’ve fused together.”

“And they did something weird to Xavier when it happened,” Cali added.

Xavier shook his head. “I’m fine, really. It was just some sort of magical headache. I’ve dealt with way worse, trust me.”

*Why does he keep downplaying it?* “Xavier, just tell them what happened—everything.”

Despite my urging, Xavier gave me a stony look and kept his mouth shut about the voice as he handed the witches the fused medals. Kira reached for them and gasped as soon as her fingers made contact.

“Kira, what is it?” I asked.

“Yeah—what just happened?” Cali asked.

Kira handed the medals over to Big Mac. “You feel that?”

Big Mac took the medals and her eyes widened. “This changes everything.”

# Episode 3099

A chill raced its way down my spine at Big Mac’s words. *This changes everything? Changes everything to what?* Change could be a very good thing or a very bad thing, but when it came to our pack, it always seemed to be the latter.

I looked at Xavier, suddenly feeling overwhelmed with worry for him. He was downplaying what had happened to him, but the way he’d acted in his room when the medals had fused was worrying. It was hard for me to stop replaying the image of him standing there in a daze, obviously in pain. I couldn’t remember ever having seen Xavier so affected by something in that way. He was usually on the offensive, but in this case, there hadn’t even been a defensive reaction. The medals had completely overtaken him for those few tense seconds, and I’d feared the worst. Magic was always so unpredictable, and in that moment, I’d known that anything could’ve happened, and that Greyson and I might not have been able to save him.

“Big Mac, you have to give a little more detail than that,” I said when the silence between the five of us stretched on for too long. “What will change now that the medals are fused together?”

“Kira and I were discussing ways to try to track the magic itself, rather than the person. Given what happened to my map—it burning up like it was doused in kerosene—whoever charmed these medals doesn’t want to be found.”

Kira nodded before picking up where Big Mac had left off. “The next thing we wanted to try was tracing the magic to see if there was some sort of back door we could use to track this person down. It’s my bet that whoever this is thought we’d give up when it proved too hard to track them, but there are other ways, and now that the medals have fused together like this, well…”

“They might have just given themselves away,” Big Mac finished. “And that’s how everything has changed—we have a magic signature of sorts to go by, now. The magic used to do something like this is relatively unique. Not one of a kind or anything, but a little out of the ordinary compared to what the average witch does every day.” Big Mac looked at Xavier. “How did you manage to do this?”

Xavier shrugged. “I don’t know. I just held both medals in the same hand, then boom, they ended up that way.”

Big Mac nodded. “Well then, your stupid luck might have just helped you out. Way to go.”

A wave of relief flooded through me at Big Mac’s words. *Finally, a smidgen of good news.* We needed it more than ever now that our fun, relaxing holiday had turned into a bit of a nightmare scenario.

“Do you think that now we’ll actually be able to figure out who’s doing this? Quickly?” I looked over at Xavier. “You two didn’t see how it affected him, and I don’t ever want to see that happen to him again. I’m just kind of worried that between you two working on reverse searching the magic and actually finding out who was responsible, something else might happen.” I shuddered at the thought. “If anything were to happen to Xavier, I’d be beside myself.”

Big Mac softened her voice a little when she finally replied. “Listen, Kira and I will try our best to do this quickly, but there are no guarantees with something like this. Doing this kind of thing is like searching for multiple needles in a haystack, but the haystack is made entirely of needles and we’re looking for the blue one.”

Big Mac’s analogy didn’t leave much room for positivity. I deflated, just as Xavier draped an arm around my shoulder.

“It’s going to be fine,” he said. “We have to let the witches do their thing. Don’t worry about me, Cali. I’m good, really. Once we figure out who took the ashes and who’s fucking around with these medals, we’ll take care of it once and for all.” Xavier gave my shoulder a squeeze, and I leaned into his touch, wanting to believe him.

Greyson nodded. “And once we do, the handprint will be gone, and it won’t affect you for a second longer than it has to. You have my word on that.”

Greyson’s word meant everything to me, but it wasn’t lost on me that we were once again going up against a force that we didn’t completely understand.

“Cali, all you need to know is that there’s no scenario where we’ll let anything stop this search,” Xavier added.

I was trying my best to stay cool, but I was starting to feel a little overwhelmed. I nodded quickly. “Thank you, Kira, Big Mac, for what you’re doing. We really appreciate it.”

Kira gave me a weak smile. “Of course. We’ll do everything we can to get to the bottom of this. Hang in there, Cali.” Kira shifted her gaze to my mates. “And you two, also. Take care of each other in the meantime.”

Taking a deep breath, I turned to go back upstairs. I knew we were doing everything we could and were taking steps forward—in a way—but it was all starting to feel even more hopeless than it had before.

*Why is this happening right now? Why can’t we ever just live a normal life? Even on Christmas, something is trying to get under our skin and mess with us. It’s exhausting.*

I walked into my room, wanting a moment alone to just breathe through everything that was happening. I’d barely cleared my threshold when Xavier and Greyson appeared in the doorway, their eyes on me and their expressions beyond concerned.

“You doing okay?” Greyson asked.

“Yeah, you looked a little worked up back there,” Xavier added. “We don’t want you to worry. We know things are a little up in the air right now, and we want a real solution just as much as you do, but it looks like we’ll have to be patient for a little longer. I just hope you’re holding it together okay.”

I nodded. “I’m fine. I just needed a second away from… all of *that*.” They both lingered in the doorway, clearly uncertain. I tried to laugh. “Really, I’m good. I just need a second by myself to collect my thoughts and process things, that’s all.”

The brothers looked at each other, then back at me.

“Are you sure, love?” Greyson asked.

I nodded again. “I’m sure. I’ll be back downstairs in a few minutes.”

“Okay, we’ll be waiting for you,” Xavier said.

Reluctantly, both men turned to go, Greyson shutting the door softly behind him.

Alone, I fell back onto my bed and let my emotions wash over me.

*Why did they take the ashes—whoever “they” are? Why are they messing around with my life? With my mates?*

I let myself wallow for a moment, wondering if this horrible situation was ever going to come to an end. It certainly didn’t feel like it. In fact, everything seemed to be getting way worse instead of better.

*How much time do I even have before Seluna’s mark eats away my entire aura?* Just the thought of that struck fear into my gut. It was almost like my entire being was a ticking time bomb, waiting to go off and hurt my mates. *What if I never get rid of the mark, and other people get hurt, too? This is kind of like a curse, right? Curses aren’t meant to make you feel better. They’re meant to break you down to nothing, to disrupt everything in your life.*

The fact that the handprint had come back made me feel like we would never be free of Seluna, and that she would have free reign over my body for the rest of my life.

I was starting to spiral a bit when there was a knock on my door. I sat up and wiped away the tears that had managed to escape my eyes. “Hello?”

The door opened. It was Greyson, alone.

“Hey, can I come in?” he asked softly.

“Sure,” I said, hoping that he wouldn’t notice that I’d been crying. I didn’t want him to worry any more than he already was.

He came in and sat on the bed beside me. I tried to smile at him, wanting to lighten the mood, even just a little bit. It was Christmas, after all. I was just about to tell him again that I was fine when he held out a box to me.

“I thought you might want to open your gift.”

He was trying to cheer me up, and I appreciated that more than I would ever be able to put into words. “Oh, Greyson, you didn’t have to get me anything.” I touched my necklace. “This is more than enough. I love it.”

Greyson cocked his head at me and gave me a look. “Now come on, you know I was always going to get you a Christmas present. Don’t be silly.” He held out the box and leaned forward to kiss me on the cheek. “Now go ahead. Open it.”

# Episode 3100

**Violet**

Charlie had his arm around me, and I snuggled against him as we watched the contestants present their holiday showstoppers to the baking show judges.

Charlie sucked in a breath. “Ooh, that one guy’s base doesn’t look too steady.”

No sooner had Charlie made his statement than we all all cried out as the showstopper toppled to the ground. A collective gasp could be heard from everyone on the show, and the judges shook their heads as they looked at the mess on the floor. The baker looked like he was about to cry—and die of embarrassment.

“I can’t believe that happened,” Dani said, shaking her head.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen that happen before,” Lilac said. “Not in the entire history of this show.”

“Me neither,” Marta said. “Granted, I’ve never watched this show before, but still…”

“What are they even going to judge now?” Charlie asked. “It’s just a pile of red and green sludge.”

“Ugh, who knows? Maybe someone took a picture of it?” I said. “That way, they could judge what it used to be.”

There were some titters of laughter as we watched everyone on the show stand frozen in place, simply staring at the ruined showstopper with forlorn looks on their faces. No one knew what to do, though I could imagine the other contestants were kind of happy.

“Can you imagine if Torin went on this show, did all that work, and then dropped his masterpiece on the ground?” I asked.

Charlie winced. “No, and I hope we never have to see that happen. I can only imagine the mood he’d be in after something like that.”

I sighed and leaned into Charlie as the show cut to a commercial break. I was having a really nice holiday so far, and I was secretly glad that I was spending it with the pack, and not with Iris. I couldn’t imagine Iris watching this kind of show.It seemed like something she wouldn’t have given the time of day, but I supposed that maybe I was being unfair. It was possible that Iris had a softer side that I just didn’t know about.

I glanced over at Charlie. *He’s so cute.* It was nice spending Christmas with him, and I was grateful that he hadn’t mentioned anything else about going to see his family in Minnesota. With everything going on with Lilac right now, I wasn’t sure that I could get away. I felt a bit guilty about Lilac’s situation, too, having played a bit of a role in putting his relationship on shaky ground. Right now, it felt important for me to be by his side.

I gave Charlie a quick kiss on the cheek and held up my empty mug. “I’m going to get a refill on my hot chocolate. Does anyone else want one?”

“Yes!” the entire room said in unison.

“You don’t have enough hands for the order, so I’ll come help,” Charlie said, getting up and following me out of the den.

We went to the kitchen and tried to figure out the milk frothing machine together. We’d finally gotten it going and had just high fived when Charlie said, “So, Minnesota.”

I blanched, hoping that he hadn’t noticed how I’d pretty much recoiled. “Yeah?”

“I found some tickets and a flight, believe it or not. The airports are clearing out all the snow, and things should be up and running by tomorrow evening. With the refund from the other tickets, I think it should be doable. We didn’t get to spend Christmas with my family, but maybe we could do New Year’s. What do you think?” Charlie was beaming at me.

I didn’t know how to answer, so I busied myself with preparing all the hot chocolates, concentrating a little too hard on pouring the steaming liquid into the cups. After a few too many seconds of silence, I finally answered. “You mean you want to leave tomorrow?”

*Nothing like asking a question you already know the answer to in order to buy yourself a little more time.* I wasn’t proud of stalling Charlie, but I really didn’t know how to navigate this conversation without having it blow up in my face.

Charlie stepped up next to me and dropped a couple of marshmallows into the mugs. “Yeah, why not? We still have a week until New Year’s, and there’s so much fun stuff we could do together in Minnesota. Alone.” His words held an unmistakable flirty vibe, and it gave me butterflies.

“That sounds like fun,” I said.

“Then it’s decided. We’ll leave tomorrow.”

Panicked, I reacted almost without thinking. “Wait, what? I didn’t actually agree to go.”

I regretted saying it the moment the words left my lips.

Charlie’s face twisted with confusion. He stepped back, forcing me to leave the distraction of the hot chocolate and look at him. “What do you mean? You just said it sounded like fun—and fun is a good thing, right? Am I missing something?”

“No, you’re not missing anything, Charlie. It all does sound like lots of fun,” I said quickly. “There’s nothing that I want more than to spend some alone time with you, but I realized today that it’s been so nice spending time with Lilac, now that he’s back from the spirit realm and not dead…”

Charlie was still confused. “Okay… What do you mean? How am I supposed to respond to that?” His confusion was quickly turning into annoyance.

*I’m not handling this very well.* I was trying my best to walk back from the mess I’d made, though it wasn’t going very well so far. I didn’t want Charlie to be hurt or angry with me, but I also couldn’t really explain to him why I needed to stay home right now—to help Lilac through his potential mate situation. Lilac didn’t want me to tell anyone about it, not at this stage. He was still figuring things out, and information like this tended to spread like wildfire if it got out in the pack house. It was inevitable that news of Lilac’s predicament would make it back to Marta, and that would be a disaster.

“All I mean is that being with Lilac has been so nice, hasn’t it? And spending all this good quality time with the pack?” I gave him a weak smile.

“Sure, yeah. It’s been great, but I’m confused. You’d already agreed to spend the holidays with my parents. I thought you were excited about it—at least you seemed that way.”

“I was! I am!” *The only thing I am right now is floundering.*

“Then why does it seem like you’re making excuses not to go? Did you even want to go in the first place?”

My heart was breaking, and I was pissed at myself for fumbling things so badly. I was trying to figure out the right thing to say when Lilac came walking into the kitchen.

“Hey, do you two need a hand with the hot chocolate?” Lilac asked brightly.

I turned back to Charlie. “Can you give us a minute?”

“Sure,” Charlie said. “These are already done, I’ll take them.”

He picked up three mugs and left.

I reached out to him via mind link. *Charlie, please don’t be mad, we’ll talk about it—I promise.*

*I just need a minute alone*, Charlie replied.

My heart dropped, and I just stood there, unable to move.

“Is everything okay?” Lilac asked.

I glared at him. “No, it’s not. Your problem with your maybe mate just got Charlie and me into a fight.”

Lilac’s eyes went wide. “Wait, you told him? I told you not to tell anybody, Violet! I get that he’s your mate and all, but—”

“No, I didn’t tell him. That’s the *problem*. Because of you and your little mess, I’m lying to him! He wants me to go to Minnesota for New Year’s since we missed Christmas, but I can’t tell him why I don’t want to go right now because you told me not to say anything!” I was so frustrated. “If I could just explain everything to Charlie, I know he would understand and wouldn’t be upset anymore. Hell, he’d probably even want to help. I get why you don’t want anyone other than me to know, but it’s putting me in a sticky situation, and I want out of it!”

“Okay, okay, okay, I know how we can fix this. Then you’ll be able to go and be happy with Charlie in Minnesota.”

I looked at my brother. “Yeah? You going to let me tell him?”

Lilac shook his head. “No. We’ve already waited long enough. You know that I want to see that girl again so I can make sure that what I felt was… what I felt. So I’m going to go tonight. It’s the only way I’ll be able to confirm that she’s not my mate. Once that’s all taken care of, you’ll be free to go with Charlie. So, are you going to come with me?”

# Episode 3101

I didn’t know what to say. I was so grateful that I had a mate like Greyson, who only ever wanted to cheer me up and make me happy. The box felt good in my hands. It wasn’t too heavy, or too light.

“What is it?” I asked.

Greyson laughed and pushed my hair behind my ear. “You have to open it to find out.” He gave me a playful nudge with his shoulder. “So get on with it.”

I didn’t want to use my gift guessing prowess on this. I wasn’t feeling up to it at the moment, anyway. This seemed too special, too intimate for games.

“Here goes,” I said under my breath. I started to unwrap the box, and I was surprised to see that it was a black velvet ring box. My cheeks went hot. *Is this a ring? Did he really get me a ring? What kind of ring?* My mind was racing. “Greyson, what did you—”

“Just open it, the suspense is killing me!” He laughed and trained his eyes on the box, as if he were nervous for me to open it.

My heart was hammering in my chest as I flipped the box open. *It* is *a ring!* It was gold, with a crest as the feature.

“Oh, Greyson, it’s so beautiful!” I stared down at the gleaming ring. I couldn’t believe my eyes—it was perfect.

Greyson removed the ring from the box and slid it onto my index finger. “A perfect fit for a perfect finger.” He let out a sigh of relief. “It looks so good on you, Cali.”

I held my hand out to admire it, then I gasped when I realized what I was looking at. “Wait, this is my Fae family crest!”

*How did I not recognize it right away?* I’d been so distracted by the fact that Greyson was giving me a ring that I hadn’t even stopped to notice the best part about it. *I would know that crest anywhere, now.* It was the Wrenthorn family crest, the crest that would appear on my shield when I used my magic if I ever got as good at wielding it as my grandfather Innes.

“Greyson, it’s so gorgeous.” I couldn’t take my eyes off it. Immediately, I felt connected and in tune with my family, and with the Fae part of me that had changed my life so much.

“So… You like it?” Greyson flashed me a crooked smile.

I swatted him on the arm. “Like it? Greyson, I love it! How did you do this? It’s absolutely perfect. I never expected this in a million years!” I looked at him. “How?”

Greyson smiled. “I had a little help from your mom. We used her tattoo as a basis.”

“Yeah, her tattoo’s kind of hard to miss,” I said, picturing the crest emblazoned on my mother’s delicate arm.

“It was easier than I thought it would be—the tattoo helped, but I think your mother has the crest totally memorized, which was a big help for the small touches.” Greyson leaned forward and looked at the ring closely. “It turned out even better than I imagined, and seeing it on your finger…” He let out a breathless sigh. “It’s like you’ve worn it all your life.”

I held my hand up to the light, turning it slowly back and forth so I could admire the ring from all angles. It was hands down the prettiest piece of jewelry I owned. “I just can’t stop looking at it—the fact that I have this for my family, for my magic? It’s amazing, Greyson.”

I wouldn’t have been able to guess that this was what was waiting for me in the box if I’d tried. It was funny how someone could get you a gift that you didn’t even know you wanted, and it ended up being so right.

“I just thought it might be a good idea to give you something that reminded you of a special part of yourself… But also the place where we first realized we loved each other.”

My heart melted. *I can’t believe my mate is so thoughtful, and so sweet.* “Greyson, that’s so beautiful.”

Greyson paused, like he was a little choked up, but he recovered quickly. “I’ll never, ever forget what happened in the Fae world with you, and that experience will connect us forever. I’m honored that I could help reconnect you with your grandmother, and with that part of your life.”

“And you helped save my mother’s life by taking me there. It was the most thoughtful thing, Greyson. Not to mention that I would’ve died quite a few times if I hadn’t had you there with me.” I shivered as I remembered the intensity of our time in the Fae world. It was a wonder that we could look back on it fondly at all, but Greyson was right. It had been such a meaningful time for us, despite how chaotic that trip had been. We’d experienced a lot of chaos and craziness since, but that time had been special and had brought us to where we were today.

Greyson chuckled. “Oh, I don’t know about that. You had Torin and Astrid with you. I’m sure they would’ve gotten you through it okay. They’re tough.”

“That’s true, but you really came through for me there, and I’ll never forget that for as long as I live.” I took Greyson’s hand, unable to ignore how brilliantly the ring shone on my finger as I did so. “Thank you, Greyson. This is such an incredible gift. I never want to take it off.”

He smiled at me. “Merry Christmas, love.”

He leaned forward and pressed his lips to mine, and I relaxed into him, my anxiety from before melting away. For the first time in a while, and despite everything that was going on in the background, I didn’t think of anything else but Greyson.

After a while, we broke apart, and I looked into his eyes.

“I love you, Greyson.” I caressed the side of his face and ran my thumb across his lips.

“I love you, too, Cali.” He caught my hand in his and pressed my palm to his lips. “I love you more and more each day. You’re everything to me, love.”

I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him, squeezing my eyes shut to stave off tears of joy.

“Oh, I almost forgot the best part!” Greyson said suddenly, gently pulling away.

*There’s more?* I was in a daze. “What? How could this gift get any better?”

I couldn’t even imagine what else he might have up his sleeve, and I didn’t even try. I looked at him, waiting.

“Take it off for a second.”

I pulled the ring off and dropped it into my palm.

“Now look inside the band.” Greyson draped his arm around my waist and pulled me close.

I leaned into him while squinting at the ring and turning it over in my hands. Then I finally saw it. It was an engraving that read: *For Love*. My eyes watered, blurring the beautiful words for a moment.

“Greyson… I…” I was truly at a loss for words. I couldn’t fully describe the warm feelings crashing through me at that moment. I felt like the luckiest girl in the world.

Greyson smiled and wiped away the single tear that had fallen from my eye. “Cali, you have such a big heart, and you do everything for love, and with love. That’s why you’re *my* love. I just wanted you to know how much you mean to me, and how clearly I see the person you are.”

His deep, rumbling voice washed over me, taking my breath away. I still didn’t quite know what to say as I stared up into his handsome face. He looked so vulnerable and open—and happy. There was always so much going on in our lives that we didn’t often get the chance to just sit and bask in our happiness and our love for each other. I never wanted this moment to end. I reached out and pulled him close, smashing my lips against his and leaning forward so that our bodies were pressed together. He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me close as the kiss intensified, the heat between us building higher and higher until it felt like my entire body was consumed with it.

“Cali,” he breathed against my mouth before plunging his tongue between my lips and tightening his grip on my waist.

He used one hand to cradle the back of my head, and I closed my eyes, lost in the sensation of his tongue and his lips and his scent and the hardness of his chest pressing against mine.

I definitely felt better than I had before. Only Greyson could turn my mood around like this. We fell back onto the bed together, and I spread my legs as Greyson climbed on top of me, the fire that burned between us nearing a fever pitch.

# Episode 3102

**Greyson**

There was nothing better than Cali’s lips warm against mine, her sweet breath coming in bursts against my skin, her soft body pressed beneath me… I deepened our kiss even more as I shifted to fit more comfortably between her legs.

I was thrilled that she loved the ring. I’d actually been pretty nervous about giving it to her—though nothing had made me more uneasy than going to Orla with my request. I hadn’t been sure that she would think it was a good idea, but she’d surprised me and jumped at the idea.

*Cali deserves the world, and after everything with the ashes and the medals, she should be able to just enjoy the holiday without worrying.*

We all deserved a break, but no one more than Cali. She’d been through so much, and she was still going through it. I would’ve done anything to give her a few moments of levity.I’d learned long ago that there was no way I could completely stop Cali’s worrying—she would probably always worry. But if I could give her moments like this, doing something special for her to make her feel appreciated, seen, and loved, then it was all worth it.

I wove my hands through her soft, silky hair as we continued to kiss. My entire body was taut with desire for Cali, and there was nothing I would’ve loved more than to be with her in that moment, but I didn’t want her to miss out on the rest of the holiday. Her mood had lifted so much, and I wanted her to be able to share that happiness with her family and the rest of the pack, too.

We kissed for a while longer before a natural stopping point arose and we drifted apart. I moved a tendril of hair out of her face and smiled at her, then, unable to help myself, I leaned in and gave her one more slow, tender kiss.

*Maybe we can spend a few more moments here alone before returning to the festive chaos of the house…*

I could just picture Torin running around downstairs, doling out Christmas snacks and turning the music up to the max.

Cali surprised me by suddenly hopping up off the bed, adjusting her hair a bit.

“Hey, I worked hard on getting your hair like that!” I joked, lying back on the bed and admiring her. My eyes caught the ring on her finger as she ran her hands through her hair, and a feeling of pride welled up inside me.

Cali stuck her tongue out at me and gave me a wink. “Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

Before I could ask her where she was going, she rushed out of the room, leaving me curious. She came back moments later with a gift in her hands. It had a huge bow on top—almost bigger than the box itself—and my name was written on it in a loopy script. She was blushing as she sat down beside me on the bed. I thought she was going to hand it to me right away, but she held onto it.

I laughed. “What’s wrong?”

“What do you mean, what’s wrong?” She held up her index finger and looked at the ring, then back at me. “This thing is so perfect and thoughtful that now I’m scared my gift won’t be able to match up—and that you won’t like it.”

This made me laugh. “What? How could you ever think that? Just like you told me before—you didn’t even need to get me anything.”

Cali gave me a look. “And like you said before, you knew that I was going to. How could I not?”

She took a deep breath and finally handed me the box. It was wrapped so beautifully, and I hesitated for a moment before I ripped into the paper, causing Cali to flinch.

I stopped and looked up at her. “Don’t worry, okay? You could get me boxers with Santa’s face on them, and I’d still love them. You don’t have to be worried about anything. Anything from you is special, no matter what it is.” Cali’s blush deepened. “It isn’t Santa boxers, though, is it?”

Cali laughed and swatted me on the arm. “Greyson, stop it!”

“Just checking.” I smiled as I ripped off the last bit of paper and opened the box. Inside was a mug with white dots all over it. It was just the right size and pretty fancy, and right next to it in the box was a little bag of tea. I’d smelled it the moment I’d opened the box. I pulled the tea out of the box, pleased. “What’s this? You got me tea?”

Cali nodded. “I know you like Earl Grey, but I found a site where you can make your own tea blend, so I did a play off it. It has lavender and vanilla in it, too.” She hesitated. “But maybe it’s a little too floral?”

I shook my head and held the tea up to my nose. “It smells divine, just like you.” I gave her a peck on the lips. “Thank you, love. This is perfect.”

“Check out the mug, too,” she said.

I lifted it out of the box and realized that it had my name on it. I barked out a laugh. “I really, really love it, Cali. It’s perfect.”

I turned the mug over, checking out every angle. It was sturdy and fit nicely in my hand.

She ducked her head and smiled. “I’m glad you like it. I noticed that the mug you like is always getting used by other people in the pack house, so this way, no one will take your mug ever again because it has your name on it.”

“Thank you, love.”

We shared another kiss, and then I picked up the tea again.

“I want to go try this right now,” I said.

Cali’s face brightened. “Seriously?”

“I’m always serious about tea.”

Together, we headed downstairs to the kitchen, and I put on the kettle. I got Cali a mug from the cabinet while she went to work washing my new one. I opened the bag of tea, and the scent of it hit me even stronger.

“I really love this,” I said after taking a long whiff of it. *Cali is so funny. She knows me so well—even down to the tea I like.* I remembered her bringing me tea the first night I’d stayed outside the house. She was always so thoughtful. I loved that her gift reminded me of something special that we shared, just the two of us.

Cali handed me my clean mug just as a few people came in from outside. They were all wet and nearly covered in snow, like they’d been making snowmen. An icy draft rushed in through the open door, and Cali shivered. “I’m going to run and get my slippers,” she said.

“Okay, I’ll get our tea ready,” I said as she hurried off.

The kettle whistled, and I poured the water into our mugs, then concentrated on steeping our tea, following the directions on the bag. I looked up just as Maren came in with Fenrir. The kid looked like he was having a blast, and my heart warmed to see him so happy after his ordeal with his father.

“Fenrir, go to the bathroom and get a towel so you can dry off!” Maren said, giving Fenrir a loving look as he dashed off to do as he was told.

“He had fun out there, huh?” I asked.

Maren laughed. “He’s never seen so much snow; he loves it. Come to think of it, I don’t think I have, either. What a day. Everyone here has been so great to us, made us feel so welcome. I think we created an entire army of snowmen out there.”

I laughed, too. “Good. Now I won’t need to work so hard to defend the house all by myself anymore.”

“Guess not,” Maren said with a giggle.

“So, have you considered my offer? We’d love to have you here—and Fenrir is fitting right in.”

Maren cocked her head to the side and bit her lip. “I’ve been thinking about it, yeah.”

“I meant it. I know the way we left things before was… shaky, at best.”

Maren nodded. “I played a part in that as well,” she admitted. “I should’ve understood that you needed answers for yourself—finding out whether or not you have a child is a big thing, and I should have been more understanding.” She gave a wistful smile. “Thank you for being so welcoming and so kind to Fenrir, even though he’s not your son. You really came through for us in a big way—you and Mace—and I can’t begin to tell you how much I appreciate it. Fenrir, too.”

“Ah, it’s nothing. That’s what a pack is—caring for everyone and looking out for them. We’re all family, no matter what.”

“That sounds really nice, Greyson.”

“Then you should do it. Stay with us. Consider this an official invitation to join the Redwood pack.”

# Episode 3103

**Xavier**

Torin was preparing a glass of spiked eggnog for me, and he was concentrating on carefully pouring brandy into the glass. His hands shook, and he ended up pouring in a bit too much.

“Rats!” he said, slamming the bottle back down onto the table. “I’m sorry, my hand is anything but steady right now. I think I’m a little spent after all the Christmas celebration.”

“Did you just say ‘rats’? I think you’re the first person to say that in this century,” I said with a laugh. “Don’t worry about it.” I brought the glass of eggnog up to my lips and took a long sip. It was strong, but it still hit the spot. “This is good. Hope you don’t mind if I ask you for another one, later. I could use a stiff drink right about now, anyway.”

I had a lot on my mind—way more than overly spiked eggnog was going to be able to fix, but at this point I was willing to take what I could get.

“Oh, good! I’m glad you like it. I made the eggnog myself—it’s much better than the store-bought stuff we had before.” Torin gave me a proud smile. “Just don’t ask me to have a precise hand when pouring in the booze. At least not tonight,” he said. He flashed me a warm smile before hurrying off with his pitcher of chilled eggnog and the bottle of brandy. “Spiked eggnog!” I heard him calling out as he went.

I took another sip. Whoa. It *was* pretty strong. I winced just a bit as it burned its way down my throat. I’d been pretty broody since Cali had told Greyson and me that she needed some time alone. I’d only wanted to be by her side and comfort her, but I completely understood if she needed a few moments alone to process things. And then, of course, Greyson had gone back to her room, anyway. I’d initially thought that his little play at persistence would go poorly, but Cali had come out of the room a short time later, all smiles.

*Leave it to Greyson to save the day. As always.* I couldn’t help the bitterness that rose up inside me at the thought.

I threw back a swallow of the eggnog and headed into the den, where people were still watching the baking competition. One of the contestants had apparently set their oven on fire, and I could relate to them on a pretty deep level at the moment. Everyone on set was racing around in a panic, smoke was billowing everywhere, and a couple of firemen had just come running in. *This is probably ratings gold.* I was about to sit down and lose myself in some mindless TV when Big Mac grabbed me, nearly making me spill my drink on Jay and Lola, who were cuddled up on the couch.

“What gives?” I said, righting my drink. “You need something?”

I licked up the eggnog that had splashed onto my hand. I was starting to feel Torin’s heavy pour of brandy, and not a moment too soon. Everything and everyone seemed to be getting under my skin right now.

“Obviously. Just come with me,” the witch grumbled.

I followed Big Mac into one of the studies, and she closed the door behind us.

I put my drink down on the desk and leaned against it. “So, what’s going on? Something new and horrible and life-threatening, no doubt? Or are you going to give me some good news for the first time since I’ve known you?”

*Fat chance.* I was starting to think that good news was allergic to me or something.

Big Mac glared at me. “Are you going to keep moping? If so, I’ll just come back later. Self-pity of this magnitude makes my skin crawl.” She turned and headed for the door.

“Wait!” I called out. “What’s going on?”

I knew that Big Mac wouldn’t have pulled me to the side if it wasn’t important—in fact, she usually tried her best to avoid everyone but Mrs. Smith altogether—so I knew that she likely had something important to say. I just wasn’t sure I wanted to hear it, given everything else that had happened so far today. Between the fusing medals and the missing ashes, I didn’t have much more energy for any additional issues, and I could tell by the look on her face that she was about to hit me with something big.

“I wanted to talk to you about the medals,” Big Mac began. “You’re the one who found both of them, right?” She arched an eyebrow at me and considered me closely, waiting for my answer.

I nodded. “Unfortunately.”

“And you’re the one who recognized it, yes?”

I nodded again. “And? You already know all this.”

Big Mac nodded but didn’t say anything right away. Then she looked me right in the eye. “You’re not safe.”

“Uh… Okay? I thought that was obvious too. I’m a werewolf, remember? My very existence is unsafe. I mean, as we speak, we’re fresh off a deadly battle. Tell me something I don’t know, why don’t you?” I knew I was pushing it with Big Mac, but I was in such a lousy mood that I couldn’t help myself.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “No, you idiot. *You*, Xavier Evers, are not safe. You’re being specifically targeted. It’s not Cali, it’s not Greyson, it’s not the Redwood pack—they’re going after *you.*”

I was a little shocked to hear that, even though I’d sort of been toying with that thought since the moment I’d found the first medal. Still, to hear Big Mac confirm it didn’t feel good.

I crossed my arms over my chest and let out a weary sigh. “So, did you find something specific that’s giving you that impression, or are you just trying to scare me? Whatever it is, I can handle it.”

By now, there wasn’t much that could really get to me. I’d faced off against things that would’ve sent lesser mortals running the other way, so even though I wasn’t looking forward to hearing it, I couldn’t imagine a scenario where I wouldn’t be able to handle whatever Big Mac was about to tell me.

Big Mac held the medals up in front of my face, and I couldn’t help but flinch ever so slightly. Big Mac raised an eyebrow. “Not scared, huh? How closely did you look at this before you gave it to me and Kira?”

“Not very closely, if I’m being honest. If you recall, it fucked me a up a bit. I just wanted to get it away from me and into your capable hands.” I sighed and took a sip of my eggnog.

“Well, look at it one more time.”

She held it up, and I squinted at it. I shrugged. “It just looks like two medals fused together.”

Big Mac pointed directly at the side of it where there were small ridges, almost like it was a coin. I’d actually thought it *was* a coin when I’d first found it. I leaned in even closer. *What the hell is that?* I finally saw what she was talking about. There was something written on the side of the coin—small enough to easily miss. I read it out loud.

“‘X.E. We’ll always have S.C.’”

My blood ran cold. *S.C. That’s definitely not for Santa Clause.* What was it for? South Carolina? Was it their initials? Then realization hit me. *Santa Cruz—that’s where I went to locate the Duquettes on that mission.* There was no mistaking that the message was for me. Who else had the initials X.E. *and* ties to Santa Cruz?

“Shit,” I muttered. This was worse than I’d thought. It was bad enough that someone was coming after me—I only hoped that whatever they planned to do to me wouldn’t spill over to Cali or anyone else in the pack house. I’d never forgive myself if it did.

“‘Shit’ is right. This is pretty serious, Xavier. The magic involved here is dark and dangerous. I don’t want to needlessly alarm you, but you need to know who or what you’re up against if there’s any chance of you resolving this. I don’t know what you’re involved in, or what happened, exactly, but this is revenge magic if ever I’ve seen it. I can feel it. Kira can feel it. The person who cast the spells on these medals has it out for you big time.”

She pinned me with a hard look.

“When magic is used for revenge, like it has been here, it’s even more unpredictable and dangerous than at any other time,” she said. “You need to seriously think about how you’re going to deal with this—and whatever method you choose has to eliminate the possibility of collateral damage, because when this person shows up at your door, it’s going to be trouble. Watch yourself, Xavier.”

With that, Big Mac took the medals and left.

*Fucking hell. This is the last thing I need right now.* My head was spinning, and I wasn’t sure what my next move should be. Big Mac hadn’t really given me any additional insight into where I might start to find whoever was responsible, but at the very least, she’d helped me discover one thing—that I was up against a witch. The question was, which witch had I crossed badly enough to turn them into an enemy?

# Episode 3104

Cozy and warm in my slippers, I returned to the kitchen and found Greyson talking with Maren. They looked deep in conversation, and I was happy to see that they were officially back on speaking terms in person, and not just on the phone. When Maren had left, it had hurt Greyson—and that paired with the news that Fenrir wasn’t his son had been a lot for him to deal with. They had a past, and it was nice to see that they were working to put it behind them.

“Hey,” I said slowly as I joined them. “How’s it going?”

Maren’s eyes flickered to mine, and she barely managed a smile. A moment later, Fenrir came bounding in with a towel wrapped around his head.

“Fenrir, what are you doing with that?” Maren asked. “And you’re still soaked!” She shot a look at Greyson and me. “Excuse me, duty calls.” She scooped Fenrir up and walked off with him. “No more sugar for you today, you’re bouncing off the walls,” I heard her say before her voice faded away.

I turned to Greyson. “Was it something I said?”

I was feeling a little bummed. I’d apparently interrupted a moment between them, and I hadn’t meant to. I didn’t want things to be awkward between us. It was clear that Maren and Greyson were going to maintain a relationship, and it would be easier for all involved if she and I could get along and find some common ground.

“Don’t worry about that, she has a lot going on,” Greyson said as he grabbed our tea. “But I do have something that I need to talk to you about. You should sit down.”

“Uh-oh,” I said, only half kidding. His tone was a little odd. It didn’t sound like anything dire was on his mind, so that was good… I didn’t think I’d be able to handle any more bad news today. I sat down first, and he sat down across from me, his new mug in hand. I liked the way he looked carrying it.

“Cheers,” he said with a wink. We clinked our mugs together and each took a sip of the tea. “Whoa, this is even better than I imagined.” He closed his eyes to savor the taste.

“I’m so glad you like it!” I was so proud of my little gift. There was nothing I loved more than making my mates happy.

“I love it. This is hands down some of the best tea I’ve ever had.” He took another sip and let it roll over his tongue, slurping a bit to savor the taste. “Heaven.”

I couldn’t help but blush. “You’re just saying that.”

“No, I’m not. I think it’s the perfect Cali blend for me. Plain old Earl Grey can eat its heart out.”

I smiled at him and looked away, feeling a little bashful all of a sudden. I’d been so nervous to follow up his amazing gift with mine, but he was making me feel like I’d given him something just as good as a beautiful, unique ring.

I took another sip of my tea. “So, what were you going to tell me?”

I wasn’t sure of the nature of what he was going to say, but I was getting more nervous about it the longer he waited.

Greyson shifted a bit in his seat, looking mildly uncomfortable. “I suppose I should just come out with it.”

My heart fell just a smidge, and I took a huge gulp of my tea, waiting for what was coming. My mind sifted through all sorts of scenarios, but I just couldn’t think of what he was about to say. Luckily, I didn’t have to guess for much longer.

“I asked Maren if she and Fenrir would like to stay with the Redwoods—officially. I asked her to join the pack.” Greyson gave me a small smile that barely hid his nerves. It looked like he was preparing for me to jump up from my chair and tell him all the reasons why this was a bad idea.

I was surprised, to say the least, and it didn’t help that I had a mouth full of tea. Of all the things I’d thought he was going to say, this wasn’t one of them. I worked to swallow the tea with a loud, uncomfortable gulp.

“So… what do you think?” he asked. “Are you upset that I asked her?”

I shook my head, still processing. “No, not at all,” I said. “I actually think it’s great.”

Greyson sighed, relief written all over his face. “I’m so glad you think so. I wasn’t really sure what you’d think.”

That was fair enough. There was definitely a time when I would’ve had a very negative reaction. But that had also been when Maren had seemed interested in Greyson again. Even so, I should’ve cooled it. Too late to change the past.

“I do think it’s a good idea. The two of them don’t really have a big support system in Portland, right? It’s just Maren and Fenrir?” I couldn’t imagine raising a child somewhere without any family I could trust to really help out. It had to be hard for Maren, essentially raising a child on her own.

“Yeah. I mean, she has a few friends there, but that’s it. And now that she’s separated from the Fae mafia, and with Aiden having to keep a wide berth after what he did, yeah, it’s really just them.”

I nodded. “That seems a bit lonely. What did she say when you asked? Did she agree to join?”

I hadn’t been able to really read Maren’s expression that well when I’d come back to the kitchen, but I was pretty sure that she hadn’t looked all that excited. *Maybe she just wanted to play it cool—which I understand completely.*

Greyson shook his head. “She was as surprised as you were, I think.” He chuckled. “She said she needed some time to think about it. I basically left the door open for them, whatever they decide. She might not want to be with the pack now, but she might feel differently in a week, six months, a year. You never know. Also, if she just wants to come around with the kid sometimes, that works, too.”

My heart warmed, and I reached out and took Greyson’s hand. “It’s great that you did that. It really is. I hope she accepts.” I meant it.

“I do, too.”

We finished our tea in comfortable silence, and then we started to clean up. There were dishes everywhere.

“I had no clue we had this many mugs. Some of them must be new,” I said.

We started loading the dishwasher, and I couldn’t help but think about Maren’s expression when I’d joined the conversation.

“Do you think it might be a good idea for me to talk to Maren about joining the pack?” I ventured.

“Nah, I don’t think that’s necessary. Maren will come to a conclusion on her own time. The door’s open, and she knows it. That’s good enough.”

I bit my lip, thinking. *Greyson’s probably right, but at the same time, what if Maren’s uncertain about joining the pack because of me?* We hadn’t always had the best relationship, and my jealousy had gotten the better of me a few times in the past. But I kept my thoughts to myself as we finished cleaning up.

“Greyson!” Lola yelled from the den. “There’s something wrong with the TV, we need you!”

“Hurry up!” Jay called out. “They’re just about to announce the winner!”

“An Alpha’s work is never done,” I said, following him part of the way.

“Yes, if only all of my tasks were this easy,” Greyson said before jogging off to tend to his official duties.

I turned to go back to the kitchen to finish up with the cleaning and spotted Maren with Fenrir, who was busy building a Lego fantasy forest in front of the Christmas tree.

“Hi,” I said.

Maren looked up at me, her expression unreadable. “Hey.”

I shifted uncomfortably, remembering what Greyson had said about not getting in the middle of things, but also feeling like I needed to clear the air. Maren and I were both Fae, after all. We had that much in common.

“Could we talk for a minute?” I asked.

“Um… I guess so. Sure.”

She stood up, and we both walked out of Fenrir’s earshot.

“He barely notices we’re gone,” I whispered to Maren.

“Not even barely—he doesn’t at all. He’s serious about his Legos.”

“I can see that.” There was an awkward silence, and I started fiddling with the ring that Greyson had given me, trying to figure out a way to say what I had on my mind. Now that I was standing in front of Maren, it was like all my conversation points had melted into nothing.

Maren’s gaze drifted down to my ring, and in a feeble attempt to break the awkwardness, I asked, “Do you like it? It was a gift from, uh…” Awkward pause. “From Greyson.”

Maren’s eyes flashed with something I couldn’t quite read. “You’re a Wrenthorn?”

# Episode 3105

**Marta**

Everyone was on edge and waiting with bated breath for Greyson to reconnect the cables on the TV. I wasn’t sure what had happened, but the TV had gone out just before the winner of the show was announced. It was the absolute worst timing, and I could tell that everyone in the room was agitated as Greyson hustled in and got to work.

Next to me, Lilac could barely sit still, he was so incensed about it all. “All I know is that Dwane had better win. If it’s that Cindy lady, I swear I’m going to lose it! Dwane has worked way too hard this season not to win! He even comforted the other guy when his hideous gingerbread house hit the floor. If that’s not the kind of good sportsmanship that wins a competition, I don’t know what is!”

“I agree!” I said. “Dwane fought hard to get here, and Cindy’s a drag, anyway.”

“That’s what I’m saying!” Lilac said. “Those judges had better do the right thing, or they’ll be hearing from me.”

There was a loud cheer as Greyson finally got the TV back on. Charlie quickly hit the rewind button on the remote, and within seconds we were back at the big moment.

Instead of watching the show, though, I watched Lilac. He was absolutely engrossed in the show, and I wondered if he was throwing himself into this sugary competition to keep his mind off other things. I couldn’t help but feel like he’d been acting weird all day, and it was starting to get to me. Even though I was wearing the lovely charm bracelet he’d gotten me for Christmas (right alongside my witch council bracelets), I didn’t feel all that close to him. It seemed wrong that we were acting so distant on a day that was about spending quality time with the people you cared about.

*Things have felt distant and off between us all day today and yesterday, if I’m being honest. There’s a disconnect between us, and I hate it.*

I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was going on with him, but he wasn’t telling me what it was. *Maybe it’s just a twin thing, or a family thing that I wouldn’t understand.* I knew that he and Violet had lost their parents, and so maybe it was a difficult time of year for him.

In my case, being at the pack house was a good thing. There’d been so much going on, and there were so many people to talk to and spend time with that I hadn’t really had time to dwell on how this was the first Christmas in years that I’d spent *not* trapped in Bert’s house. It felt good to be out in the real world with people who cared about me. Just the thought of all those years I’d spent cooped up under Bert’s thumb gave me an empty ache right in the pit of my stomach.

I’d never had a family, really, but I’d still had a few special people in my life, like my friend Sylvia. I wished that she could be with me right now, but that wasn’t in the cards. I was starting to feel even sadder. I looked at Lilac, but he didn’t even glance my way. He was too involved in the show to even realize I was alive. I sighed and sat back on the couch, watching but not watching the show.

*The holidays sure have a way of being magical and difficult all at the same time.*

I took a breath and turned back to the TV, just in time to see Dwane win.

“Yeah!” Lilac jumped up and pumped his fist in the air before he and Charlie chest bumped. They exchanged a lively handshake and then quieted down and turned back to the television so that they could hear Dwane’s tearful acceptance speech. Lilac was all but sobbing along with Dwane.

I shook my head, unable to hold back my laughter. *I’ve never seen him this excited about anything… Not even me, lately.*

Dani leaned over to me. “I never thought a baking show would get this kind of response out of people.” She shook her head, a confused look on her face.

I laughed. “I didn’t think so, either. You’d think they knew these people personally, right?”

Sage came walking in. “Marta, Dani—Okorie is here. He’s waiting for you in the foyer.”

Dani and I exchanged a look.

“He is?” I asked Sage.

I hadn’t thought we’d see Okorie today, as the holidays had been deemed days off from mentoring. Honestly, I was more than happy to get a breather. We’d been training really hard lately, pushing ourselves more than ever before. My magic felt like it was finally getting to a good place—thanks to all the work Okorie was making us do—but I’d still been happy to get a break.

Dani and I got up and went to find Okorie. He was standing in the foyer dressed in a classy, warm-looking trench coat and holding two very fancy bags.

“Hey, there!” he said, giving us both a hug. “Merry Christmas.”

With a flourish, he handed a bag to each of us.

I took mine and hefted it in my hand, trying to get over the shock of Okorie being thoughtful enough to bring us gifts. “What is it?”

Dani was holding the bag up and rotating it so that she could admire it. “It’s so pretty.”

Okorie grinned. “Well, I had to get my two favorite mentees a little something for the holidays, didn’t I?”

“I definitely didn’t think you would.” I snorted. “Not that you even had to—but thank you.”

“Yeah, thanks, this is really sweet of you,” Dani said, her eyes shining.

“Well, what are you waiting for? Open them!” Okorie said.

I hesitated for just a second before pulling the tissue paper out of the bag to reveal a small glass jar filled with what looked like herbs. It looked pretty, and it smelled even better. He’d gotten Dani the same thing.

“What is this?” Dani asked.

“They’re good luck charms,” Okorie said. “My mother would always give me one around this time, before the new year. As magic folk, it’s important to go into the new year with good energy. These good luck jars will ward off any negative energy for you and get you off to a good start.”

“Wow, Okorie, thank you.” Now I was not only surprised that he’d gotten us gifts in the first place, but they were pretty amazing gifts at that. I held the jar in the palm of my hand and examined it closely. “You made this yourself?”

Okorie nodded. “Only the best for my mentees.”

We both thanked him again as we started to walk him to the front door. He stepped over the threshold and out onto the porch, still smiling.

“Good seeing you, Dani,” he said cheerily.

“You too! I can’t wait to show this to Kira!” Dani said, beaming.

“See you, Okorie. Happy holidays,” I said, casting him a smile as I started to close the door. I watched Dani hurry off, then I turned back just in time to see Okorie reach out to stop the door from closing.

It was then that I realized how close we were, barely a breath apart.

“Actually, there was something else I wanted to give you, Marta,” Okorie said.

I swallowed roughly, unable to ignore the little flip in my stomach.

“Come outside?”

“Sure,” I said. I glanced over my shoulder for a reason I wasn’t sure of—almost as if I wanted to make sure that Lilac didn’t see me—and then stepped out onto the porch. I shut the door behind me and turned to face Okorie head-on. “What’s going on?”

“I didn’t want to do this in front of Dani because I don’t have another gift for her…”

I was surprised, and my stomach did yet another flip. “Oh?”

“Let me see your bracelets.”

I lifted my hands, and his gaze immediately went to the charm bracelet Lilac had given me.

“It was a gift from Lilac,” I blurted out.

“Hmm, very nice,” he said. “He has good taste.” Then he seemed to shift gears, and his voice sounded even and official when he spoke again. “I have a gift from the council—you’ve been cleared to have your bracelets removed.”

I was shocked. “What? Really?” I couldn’t stop myself from jumping up and down. “This is the best news ever! Are you really, really serious?”

“Serious as can be,” Okorie said around a laugh. “You’ve been working really hard, and the council sees it, so I was given the okay to do it.” He reached out, his hands brushing mine as he used his magic to remove the first bracelet.

My breath caught in my throat as he removed the second one, his hand lingering for a moment as he said, “I guess I’m not going to be your mentor for too much longer, huh?”

I was hit by a sudden and surprising wave of sadness. *Okorie won’t be mentoring me anymore?* There’d been a time when I would’ve been relieved to hear that, but we’d become friends since then, and I would miss him. I made sure to focus on the *friends* part, and not on the way he was making my limbs feel all noodle-like.

I cleared my throat as the second bracelet disappeared. “So what happens after that? After my training’s done? Will we ever see each other again?”

# Episode 3106

I wasn’t exactly sure about how to respond to Maren’s comment. Or was it an accusation?It had kind of sounded like one, but I wasn’t sure why it would be. Thrown off and wanting to salvage our interaction, I began to fumble out an answer.

“Uh, I am? I mean, I actually didn’t know that I was a Wrenthorn up until a little while ago. My mom ran away from the Fae world a long time ago, and our family kind of lost touch. I didn’t even know who the Fae side of my family was…” I cut my rambling short when I realized that Maren didn’t really seem to be listening. In fact, the expression on her face was concerning, to say the least. “Um… Is everything okay?”

Maren looked like she was a million miles away, but at my question, she seemed to snap back to attention. “Oh yeah, everything’s fine.”

*You definitely don’t look like everything’s fine. In fact, you look like I just hit you with a ton of bricks.* I cleared my throat nervously, wondering if I should push the subject.Our conversation wasn’t going very well at all, and I was starting to wish that I’d taken Greyson’s advice and stayed out of it.

“So… You’ve heard of the Wrenthorns, I take it?” I winced as soon as I asked the question. Of course she had.

Maren nodded. “Mhm, and I don’t have a good history with them, I’m sorry to say. I guess it stings a bit, since you and I don’t have the best history, either.”

Well, I guess she wasn’t beating around the bush, was she?

“About that… I did want to at least talk a little bit about our relationship, and the relationship that you have with the Redwoods. I know Greyson asked you to join us, and I just want you to know that I fully support the idea—if you want to join, that is. There’s literally no pressure.”

Maren just looked at me.

“And I guess I wanted to say that to you directly, because I didn’t want you to be turned off on joining the pack just because of me. Not that you needed to be—or were.” *Not my most eloquent moment, by far, but she isn’t making this any easier on me. Blank stares are my kryptonite, after all.* “What I’m saying is that IF you want to join the Redwood pack with Fenrir, I’d be really happy about it.”

I managed a weak smile that felt like it was cracking my face in two. I hadn’t expected our conversation to go perfectly, but this was way worse than I ever could have imagined.

Maren nodded slowly, seeming to take it all in. “I already told Greyson that I needed to think about it, but thanks.”

Then, without saying anything else, Maren turned her back on me and returned to Fenrir’s side. Fenrir smiled up at his mother as she approached, none the wiser to the fail of a conversation I’d just had with her, thank god.

I just stood there feeling dazed and confused. I knew I’d done a bit of my classic rambling, but I’d also been able to feel Maren slipping out of the conversation from the very beginning. It was half of why I’d started talking so much—and so quickly—in the first place. It was almost as if Maren hadn’t been mentally there at all, but I wasn’t sure why.

*Is it because of Greyson’s question? Or maybe the Wrenthorn thing?*

I wondered what Maren meant, saying that she didn’t have a good history with the Wrenthorns… Or had she only been referring to me? I couldn’t imagine that our rough times in the past could have made her react so strangely, but there was no question that Maren had wanted out of our conversation as soon as possible.

“See you later,” I said, realizing that I was practically looming over Maren and Fenrir.

Maren didn’t even look up as I hurried back to the kitchen, where my mom and dad were opening up a tin of cookies.

“Cali! You’re just in time. We’re getting a little cookie sampling to put out for everyone. Now you can get first dibs,” my dad said as he handed me a cookie. “Have a taste. It’s my secret recipe. Torin has been after me all evening asking about what I put in them, and I’m having a lot of fun keeping it from him.”

“Good luck with that, honey,” my mom said. “Torin’s pretty crafty.”

I took a distracted bite of the cookie. “Thanks, Dad. I’ve always loved your sugar cookies.” I chewed it slowly, my mind replaying the conversation I’d had with Maren over and over again. “Hey, Mom, you think we could talk about something?” I lowered my voice. “Something Fae related?”

“Welp, that’s my cue,” my dad said, scurrying out of the kitchen with a giant plate of cookies to take to the others.

“What’s going on? Did something else happen because of the fairy circle?” My mom asked, concerned.

I shook my head. “No, nothing like that, luckily. I was just talking with Maren.”

“Oh, the young woman who’s Dark Fae?”

I realized then that I’d never formally introduced my mother and Maren. I wondered if her being Dark Fae had caused my mother to develop impressions of her own about Maren.

“Yeah, her,” I said. “She’s lived her in the human world for a long time, though. She and Greyson go way back… But anyway, she just saw my ring.” I held it up to the light, and my mother gasped.

“Oh, Cali, he gave it to you! It’s so beautiful! Let me see it.” She took my hand and looked at the ring up close, turning it from side to side. “They got the detail on the crest just right.” She stretched out her arm and compared the crest with her tattoo. “They couldn’t have done a better job in the Fae world itself,” she said with a wide grin.

My cheeks warmed. “I really love it. It’s beautiful. Thanks for helping Greyson with it.”

“It was my pleasure, sweetheart. It turned out beautifully. And what a thoughtful gift, right?”

“Yes, I’m still kind of in shock about it. But Maren—she saw it and immediately recognized it as the Wrenthorn crest… Then she made some comment about not having a good history with the family. Do you know what she might have meant by that?”

My mother sighed. “Unfortunately, our family is more than a little controversial in the Fae world.” She looked out of the window, a faraway look in her eyes.

“Because you married Kadmos?”

She nodded. “Yes, but it was more than that. You know that your grandfather, Innes, was a general. The Fae were in the middle of a war—they still are. The Wrenthorns are still a very well-known Light Fae family, and our involvement in the war was always very direct. Our family has done things that I’m not proud of. Some of our family’s actions—and even my own—have affected the very makeup of the Fae world. It’s war. People do what they have to do or what they’re ordered to do, and the Fae are no different than humans in that regard. Bad things happen.”

I took all of that in. “Do you think that any of those bad things happened to Maren’s family because of something our family did?”

Mom creased her forehead in thought. “What I think is that you should just give Maren some space. If she doesn’t want to talk to you or be your friend, then you have to respect that. The Fae world is a complicated place, and a lot of those complications have followed many of us into this world, unfortunately.”

I nodded. “Okay. Thanks, Mom.”

I was grateful for my mother’s advice, as always, but I couldn’t shake my curiosity about what could have happened to make Maren react the way she had.

Just then, Xavier walked into the kitchen with an urgent look on his face.

“See you later, Mom,” I said. “And thanks again.”

“I’m going to go help your father hand out the cookies. Come find me if you need me.” She gave my arm a squeeze and hurried out of the kitchen.

“What’s going on? Is everything okay?” I asked Xavier once my mother had left. There was something off about the look on his face—almost like he’d just fought a wild animal.

“Where’s Greyson? Have you seen him?” he asked.

“I think he’s in the den watching TV with the others.”

Without another word, Xavier headed that way. I followed close behind, wondering what the hell had gotten into him. I wasn’t sure if I’d ever seen him so shaken up. The last thing I wanted—or needed—was something else to go horribly wrong today.

“Hey, Greyson, can I talk to you?” Xavier said as soon as we entered the den. The others were still so locked into the baking show that they barely looked up at us when we came in, which was just as well.

The three of us filtered out into the hallway, and Xavier wasted no time telling us what was on his mind. “I have to leave. Tonight.”

# Episode 3107

**Greyson**

“Where the hell is this coming from, Xavier?” I demanded.

I was shocked not only by what Xavier had said, but also by the look on his face. He didn’t look like himself. Not only was it clear that he could use some rest, but he had a wild, haunted look in his eyes, and he was acting cagey, like he was running from something. Cali looked as thrown as I was. *Why the hell would Xavier say something like this today, after everything we’ve already been through?*

“Xavier, answer me,” I said. “What the hell are you talking about?”

My brother’s gaze flicked back to me. “I have to leave. What part of that was unclear? It’s not safe for the pack or anyone else for me to stay here.” He lowered his voice. “Big Mac found a secret message on the fused medals, and it’s about me. Everything that’s happening here is about me: the ashes being stolen, the medals showing up, all of it. Whatever comes next will be because of me, too. Someone wants revenge, and they’re going to great lengths to get it.”

“Revenge?” Cali asked. “For what? For Knox?”

Xavier shook his head. “No, it’s for something that happened a long time ago, and I’m not even sure what exactly happened. But someone—I don’t know who—has it out for me. After what happened to me today, and everything else that’s going on, it’s clear that they’re dangerous. So I have to get out of here. Now.”

I took that in. Xavier wasn’t scared, that was for sure, but he was desperate to protect us, and I respected that. But that didn’t mean I was going to let him make such a rash decision. “And by leaving you think you’re going to what, somehow save us from this revenge?”

Xavier shrugged. “It beats the alternative.”

“The alternative being that if you stay, you’d have the entire pack behind you to help kill this person for what they’re doing?” I pressed. “I don’t get your logic, brother. I know you want to protect Cali, but it’s too late for that. It’s already affecting her.”

Xavier knew Cali well enough to realize that not only would she never let him leave the house, she would insist on going with him if he did. There were a million reasons why I didn’t want that to happen.

“But if I leave—”

I shook my head, stopping him. “If you leave, they could still retaliate. If they’re after you, they’re going to hit you where it hurts.” The unsaid part of my sentence hung between us: Cali. If Xavier left, Cali might still get hurt, and then where would we be? Down a fighter and separated. Weaker. Not to mention that if anything *did* happen to Cali, we’d both be unable to function, and in a worse spot than we ever could have imagined.

“I just don’t know what’s the right thing to do,” Xavier said. “I’m just trying to keep everyone safe. If I’m the target, the best thing I can do is make sure that no one’s in the crosshairs with me, right?”

“Wrong. We should stay together. We’re stronger that way,” Cali replied.

“She’s right, Xavier. Someone might be after you, but think about it—they haven’t gotten to you yet, and they’re causing us trouble, but no one’s been seriously hurt. Now that doesn’t mean that we don’t need to find out who’s behind this and take them out, but it does mean that safety in numbers seems to be working at the moment.”

“Yes, we’ve been fine up to this point, but how long is that going to last?” Xavier demanded. “A witch is behind all of this, and they’re using some special revenge magic that does I don’t know what, but Big Mac says it’s bad. Really bad. How are we supposed to get rid of this person?”

“Like we always do. Together,” I said.

I understood why Xavier was so on edge, but it was almost like he’d forgotten the gravity and strength of the threats we’d gone up against in the past. If we could deal with them, we could certainly deal with some witch with a vendetta and a chip on their shoulder.

“He’s right,” Cali said. “The last thing I want is for you to be out there on your own where we have no way of helping you. I know you think leaving is for my benefit because this person has the ashes, but I know that however worried I am, I’m going to feel a hell of a lot worse if you get hurt out there because I’m not by your side to help you,” Cali said.

“If you really think about it, Xavier, us separating might be exactly what this asshole wants. We’re stronger together, so we should stay together. It’s not like this witch is working alone, remember? We caught the scent of a vampire, after all,” I said. “We have to be smart about this. I get why you want to leave, and I appreciate it, but that’s not the move right now.”

Cali took Xavier’s hand. “Please don’t do this. Don’t leave. Not right now.”

I could tell that my brother was struggling, and I felt for him. I knew exactly why he thought leaving was right thing, but that would be the worst move he could make, and it looked like he was finally starting to realize why.

Finally, he looked down at Cali and sighed, and I did the same. I could tell that he was finally starting to relax a bit, and that allowed me to relax, too. I would never admit it to Xavier, but his energy definitely had an effect on me, especially when he was as agitated as he’d been only a few moments ago.

“Okay, I won’t leave.”

I looked into my brother’s eyes, wondering if I could trust that he was telling the truth.

Xavier gave me a knowing look. “I’ll stay put. I promise.”

I nodded. “Good. I hope this is all settled for the time being, and I’m glad that you came to me.”

Xavier and I still weren’t the best of friends, but we’d come a long way. Not too long ago, Xavier never even would have spoken to me about something like this, let alone let me in on his fears or his plans.

Cali pulled Xavier into a hug. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if I’d woken up and you weren’t there.”

*I don’t know what I would have done, either.* It was strange to admit to myself that I worried about my little brother—*brothers*, really. No matter how much ire there was between us, I always worried about Xavier and Colton, no matter what. As long as Xavier stuck around, I would be able to maintain some semblance of control, should a situation that I needed to step into arose. *And there’s no question that a situation just like that will rear its ugly head, sooner or later.*

Xavier let out a loud sigh and rubbed the back of his neck. He suddenly looked very tired. “I’m sorry about the false alarm.”

“No, don’t apologize,” Cali said. “I’m just happy that you came to us so we could stop you.”

She was looking at Xavier with a degree of adoration that would’ve turned my stomach, once upon a time.

*Well, I guess it still kind of does. Baby steps.*

“So… They’re starting a Christmas movie in the den. Maybe we should go check it out?” Xavier asked, obviously trying to break the tension.

Cali grabbed Xavier’s hand. “That sounds like just the thing to lighten this day up a little.”

Just before she and Xavier stepped away, Xavier leaned in close to me. “A ring? Really?”

I snorted. Xavier definitely wasn’t thinking about leaving anymore if he was starting bullshit with me. I grinned at him. “You could’ve done the same, but you decided to go another route.”

Xavier looked like he was about to throw a barb my way before Cali interrupted.

“Greyson, you should come watch the movie, too. Take a load off, relax, enjoy the holiday cheer and all that.”

“Yeah, tell the Alpha to get his ass in here and crush some Christmas cinematic gold with us!” Ravi called out from the other room.

“Come commune with your pack, Alpha!” Jay added.

Just then, my phone vibrated in my pocket. I was just about to hit the ignore button and join the others for the movie, but then I caught sight of the name on the caller ID.

“I’ve got to take this,” I said to Cali and Xavier before stepping away for a little privacy. I answered the phone and prepared myself for what was coming. “Rhonda?”

“Hey, Greyson,” said the LIPS scientist. “Hope you’re enjoying your holiday.”

*I actually haven’t enjoyed it all that much, and this call isn’t doing me any favors, either.* I thought about Cali’s ring. *But I guess it hasn’t been all bad.*

“I am,” I said. “Same to you. To what do I owe this call? It can’t just be to wish me happy holidays.”

“You’re right. It’s not,” Rhonda replied. “I have some bad news about Dick.”

# Episode 3108

**Marta**

The idea of never seeing Okorie again had unlocked an odd feeling inside me. I didn’t know how to categorize it, but I wasn’t about to overanalyze the emotion with him just standing there, staring at me.

My heart was racing.

Where the heck had *that* come from?

“Why would this have to be goodbye?” Okorie asked thoughtfully.

He hadn’t offered me a sarcastic, dismissive reply. For some reason that made my pulse pound even harder. I ignored it and played it cool.

“Because with the mentoring over,” I said, “what reason would there be for us to hang out?”

He raised his eyebrows, smiling a little. “Who says we can’t be friends?”

“Friends, huh?” I heard myself chuckle. Awkwardly. “Is that really what we are?”

He shrugged. “I’ve always thought of us as friends, yeah.”

My heart kept racing at his answer, as if in disappointment. But why would I be disappointed? No, that was wrong. This was fine. This was as cool as I was, actually.

I forced myself to keep a straight face as I told him, “Your definition of friendship includes way too many unnecessarily judgmental comments, Okorie.”

“It’s not my fault I’m a certified genius who’s always right,” he replied.

I scoffed. “You wish.”

“Was that an unnecessarily judgmental comment?” He smirked. “I’ve taught you so well.”

I shook my head but couldn’t help but smile.

“Tell you what,” he said with a grin, holding his hand out. “Let’s make a promise: even after the mentoring is over, we’ll still see each other.”

My stomach twisted as I looked at his hand. Why did this feel like prolonging a goodbye? I had to get a grip.

I was about to agree when Okorie added, “I know I’ve been tough on you and Dani, but the truth is I feel proud of the work you’ve done. I consider myself lucky to be your mentor, and I know you’re good people. That’s why I’d like to be your friend as well, if you agree. Deal?”

I nodded, taking his hand. The moment our skin made contact, I held my breath. I wondered if my magic would affect him now that the bracelets were gone.

It didn’t. I felt much more in control now.

“Look at you, not killing things.” Okorie squeezed my hand and winked.

I realized that Okorie’s tone held pride. He was proud of my progress, and that made me grin. His gaze flickered to my mouth, then down to our joined hands.

After a small beat, he let go and cleared his throat.

“Merry Christmas, Marta.”

I didn’t have the time to say it back. In the blink of an eye, Okorie blipped away. I was left in the cold, all alone, but the quiet felt good. Peaceful. I took a moment to look at my bare wrists. The only thing decorating them was the bracelet I’d gotten from Lilac. It was a strange sensation to be free of the witch council’s literal shackles, but I felt much lighter now.

I felt free.

I’d come such a long way.

Smiling to myself, I picked up my gift from Okorie and headed back inside to the group. I joined Lilac as he poured himself another cup of hot chocolate.

His gaze dropped to my hands. “That’s a fancy little bag. Where did you get it?”

“It’s a gift from Okorie,” I said, then explained what it was and how he’d made it.

Lilac’s expression was unreadable. He just said, “Oh. That’s cool.”

I picked up a clean mug and poured myself some hot chocolate as well. “Did you notice anything else about me?” I made a little show out of pouring marshmallows into my mug, hoping he’d notice my—mostly—bare wrists.

But Lilac just squinted at me. “Did you change your hair or something?”

*How* could he not notice? Also, why would he think that my hair had changed?

“Lilac, my hair is the same as ever,” I told him. “Something else?”

He squinted at me some more. “I don’t know. Nice hair, though.”

“Oh my god, Lilac,” I said, raising my wrists right in front of his face. “The bracelets are off!”

His eyes widened, a huge smile spreading across his face. “Wow!” He picked up my hands and squeezed. “That’s so great!”

This was the reaction I’d been looking for.

“I know,” I said, beaming. “It was Okorie’s other gift to me, from the witch council. I guess they think I’m not a walking death liability anymore.”

“Right,” Lilac said. Did his smile just slightly dim? “Okorie did that?”

I nodded vividly. “Yes! Best present ever, right?”

Lilac nodded, mumbling, “Sure,” as he averted his gaze.

How *weird*. Lilac had been acting so hot and cold tonight that I had no idea what to make of it. I missed how charming he could be, how much attention he usually gave me.

Could he be jealous? I didn’t want to believe that he had an issue with Okorie. He’d been acting distant for hours now, actually, and this was just the cherry on top.

Trying to bring him back to me, I took his hand again. “I’m glad the only bracelet I have now is yours.”

Lilac paused at that. His gaze trailed from my wrists to my face, and then he gave me one of those gorgeous smiles of his that made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

“Me too,” he whispered, leaning down to kiss me. The contact felt as good, as sweet as ever. I told myself that I’d imagined his earlier weirdness.

Lilac and I settled down with the others to watch the movie. I was having a hard time concentrating, though. I linked my hand with Lilac’s as he stared at the screen, and even though his touch felt familiar and soothing, my mind wandered off.

All I could see right now was my hands in Okorie’s, and my bare wrists.

He’d snapped the bracelets off just like that, offering me my freedom. Was that why our conversation had felt so intimate? More intimate than any talk I’d had with Lilac for a while now?

I shook my head at the thought—of course I felt close to Okorie. He’d helped me control my magic. He was part of the reason I was free now. Though he was also infuriating. Not like Lilac, who was annoying in a cute funny way, but *infuriating*. Okorie could be a total jerk, and he had a mean, manipulative streak.

Why had he been so cheerful earlier, though? He’d winked at me too. Why would he wink? I’d never, *ever* seen him wink before. Why had he been in such high spirits?

The answer was suddenly obvious.

He was probably relieved to get rid of me. All that friendship talk had probably been some sort of trap or mind game that he’d laugh about later. Because he was, indeed, an evil genius. Occasionally kind, but still feral.

There.

That made more sense.

Satisfied with that explanation, I settled back and tried to relax. Lilac put his arm around me and brushed his lips over my temple. I melted into his arms, feeling like everything was falling into place.

“Marta?” Big Mac’s low voice startled me. I felt her hand on my shoulder from behind as she whispered, “Can you come with me for a moment?”

I nodded and whispered to Lilac, “Be right back.”

Lilac blew me a kiss as I walked away. I covered my mouth to hide a grin. *This* was the boyfriend I knew, and he was adorable.

“What’s going on?” Dani asked after joining Big Mac, Kira, and me in the study. Before answering Dani’s question, though, Big Mac looked down at my hands.

“Congratulations, Marta,” she said. The other two noticed as well and said the same thing, only with much more excitement.

“How did—” Kira started, but Big Mac waved her off.

“You can ask Marta your questions in a moment—right now we have this to worry about,” she said, and showed us a piece of metal that looked like it had been fused together. It almost looked like a coin?

“What’s that?” I asked.

“It’s something that was given to—or left for—Xavier,” Big Mac said.

“Not good,” Kira said, looking between Dani and me seriously. Dani swallowed audibly, staring at the coin. I made a move to reach for it…

“Careful!” Big Mac snapped.

I flinched.

“Careful,” she repeated, softer.

Taking a deep breath, I picked up the coin. For a second, I felt a faint vibration. Nothing I could identify, though. Maybe I was just imagining it.

“Are we sure this thing is magic?” Dani asked quietly.

Big Mac nodded as Kira explained. “We’re trying to find out who owned this and who put a spell on it. We want to track the magic on it.”

“I didn’t know that was possible,” I said, feeling a little awed.

“Me neither,” Dani agreed.

“In the same way we all have fingerprints,” Big Mac said, “magic has a fingerprint as well. But some people are good at concealing it. That’s what we have to pinpoint here, and then narrow down the person’s identity.” She looked between Dani and me. “Are you two willing to help with a spell to find out?”

# Episode 3109

**Greyson**

I let out a long-suffering huff. Of course this was bad. Could there ever be any good news about Dick? No way.

“As you know, LIPS has been tracking the wolf pack…” Rhonda trailed off.

“I’m aware,” I said. I was trying not to sound snappy or impatient, but it was pretty hard. “What does this have to do with Wigbert?”

“Dick and I had a falling out,” Rhonda said. “My idea of saving wolves is very different from his.”

Right. Rhonda wanted to pet the wolves and be BFFs while the *Beauty and the Beast* soundtrack played in the background. Dick, on the other hand, would very easily choose the murder route if things didn’t go his way. That was what he’d done when it came to my mother—just fucking casually shooting at her, as if she were nothing but an obstacle to whatever the fuck megalomaniac capitalist dream he had going.

My jaw clenched at the thought.

“After Dick’s and my little, uh, talk—”

*Talk* sounded suspiciously like *screaming match*, under these circumstances.

“—Dick is no longer actively working with LIPS,” Rhoda continued. “He’s essentially gone independent.”

The realization hit me. “Which means you won’t be able to keep close tabs on him.”

“Exactly,” Rhonda said. “I agreed to help you, but I can only do so much now.”

“Do you two still share personnel?” I asked.

“Not really, so we can’t pinpoint any of his moves for certain. I thought I should give you a heads-up. There’s a good chance Dick might return to your territory.”

*Let him*, I thought. In fact, I actually hoped he would return. I had some unfinished business with him. Of the bloody variety.

“Thank you for the tip,” I told Rhonda. At least she meant well. “How are you going to be able to keep LIPS running without Dick’s financial support?”

Rhonda sighed. “At the moment, Dick is still funding us, but who knows for how much longer? It’s only a matter of time before he cites our disagreement as the reason why he’s withdrawing his funds. He can’t do it suddenly or without an explanation—it would give him a bad rep. But he *is* going to do it.”

I shook my head. That motherfucker needed to be dealt with in a permanent way.

“Either way,” Rhonda continued, “I just wish we could get support from someone else. But this is how the system operates.”

“You took Dick’s money and made a deal with the devil to work on a positive cause,” I said.

She agreed. I didn’t tell her that the way to hell was paved with good intentions. The phone call had already been heavy enough for me.

“Keep me updated if you hear anything else,” I told Rhonda. “I’ll do the same.”

We wished each other happy holidays before ending the call. I stared at my phone’s screen, then glanced outside. My feet led me to the front porch. I looked out at the dark woods. Would Dick dare come around during the holidays? I wouldn’t put it past him.

I took a moment to stare at the dark tree line and imagine the son of a bitch approaching with a shotgun, looking for my mother. It would be so easy for my wolf to charge straight at him and bite his head off, spit it on the ground and stomp on it. His audacity had my blood boiling.

I reminded myself to calm down and think logically.

Until I could confirm Dick’s location, I was going to have to talk to Rishika about patrols. And keep my mother close. I didn’t know if Dick had just shot at her because he’d seen her first, or if there was something even more sinister at play. Either way, I would make sure it never happened again. And if Dick lost his head in the process… Whoops?

Entering the den, I immediately made eye contact with Rishika. I jerked my head toward the door, and her eyebrows shot up. I needed to talk to her.

Her gaze moved from the TV screen, where the movie was still playing, to my direction. She offered a curt nod and stood up, Artemis instantly following her. A moment later, we were alone in the hallway.

“Sorry to ruin the holiday spirit, but this couldn’t wait,” I said.

“What’s going on?” Rishika asked.

“Dick might be returning,” I said, cutting straight to the chase.

Artemis’s eyes narrowed. “You know, I can always track him down and gut him like a fish.”

“Artemis—”

“It’s honestly not that hard to break into a rich person’s home,” Artemis interrupted. “And if you don’t want me to gut him, I could just suffocate him—that would serve him right.”

In the past, Artemis had rambled to me about how painful suffocation could be. She reminded me a little of a *Star Wars* fanboy. Only her favorite thing wasn’t *Star Wars*—it was murdering people who had wronged her.

Anyway…

“I appreciate your enthusiasm,” I told the Fae, which was admittedly true, “but for now, I just want Rishika and the rest of the guards to be extremely vigilant.” I turned to Rishika. “Increase patrols until we can confirm Dick’s whereabouts. It’s possible he won’t approach anytime soon, but better safe than sorry.”

Rishika nodded. “Agreed. What do you want us to do if we do find him trespassing?”

“Murder,” Artemis replied.

I ignored Artemis and eyed Rishika. “If you find Dick, just let me know.”

And then *I* would take care of him. I didn’t need Artemis giving me any ideas—this had already gotten personal when the bastard had tried to kill my mother.

“Artemis, how long does it take for your magic to wear off?” I asked, changing the subject.

“What are you two talking about?” Rishika asked, looking confused.

“I told you—I accidentally wiped your memory while trying to wipe Dick’s memory,” Artemis told Rishika seriously. “Remember?”

Rishika nodded. “There are still some holes in the events of that night, but I’m slowly starting to piece things together. Though that’s only because I know something is amiss. The incident itself is still a blackout for me.”

“Must be the same for Dick,” I said, turning to Artemis. “Do you know how long the memory loss will last?”

Artemis pressed her lips together, shaking her head. Whether this thing would last in the long term was the biggest question of all. But I knew we could only wait and see.

“Thank you for your help,” I told the two women.

The next thing on my list was to check in with my brother. I had to make sure that he was being completely honest about staying and wouldn’t run off trying to be a hero. Or a moron. He was with everybody else in the den, watching the movie, with Cali in his arms.

Annoying, but expected.

“Xavier,” I whispered, poking his shoulder.

Cali was instantly on alert. “What’s up? Everything okay?”

“Just need to talk to Xavier. It’s about patrols,” I said. I wasn’t lying, exactly. I’d explain everything to her later. For good measure, I added, “Even though it’s Christmas, we can’t let our guard down.”

Cali frowned and nodded, reaching out to squeeze my hand. She was so serious, so sweet and cute that my heart clenched at the sight of her. It felt horrible knowing that, even today, she couldn’t just relax. The holiday spirit wasn’t giving us any breaks.

“What is this *really* about?” Xavier asked me, once we were out in the hallway.

I bypassed the bullshit, because Xavier employed enough of it for both of us. I told him about Dick, about talking with Rishika, and then I finished with, “I need to know that you’ll be here if Dick trespasses and asks for trouble. I don’t want you roaming around out there in wolf form while that asshole is out with a shotgun. It would also be better for pack morale if you were here.”

Xavier raised an eyebrow. “The way you’re always asking me to stick around makes me feel like the Redwoods can’t function without me.”

“Or that I know Cali would freak out about your whereabouts, and I’m trying to spare her,” I said.

Xavier scoffed. “I already said I’m not going to leave. Unless the situation with Cali escalates, and I have to take action to assure her safety.”

I huffed. “I get it. But in that case, let me know before running off. I don’t want to have to wonder where the fuck you are, or stay back with Cali while she’s sobbing over you putting yourself in danger for her well-being or something.”

Xavier frowned. “That sounds like Cali.”

“Obviously. Now, will you agree to tell me if you plan on leaving?”

Xavier sighed, nodding. “If there’s nothing else…”

He made a move to leave, but I shook my head. “As a matter of fact—”

Before I could continue, Xavier’s phone vibrated. Xavier checked it out, then he grinned. “Colton’s calling me.”

# Episode 3110

**Xavier**

I was grateful for the interruption—I’d had enough of these one-on-ones with Greyson to last me a lifetime. They were starting to put a damper on my Christmas cheer. Good thing I was a very cheerful dude in general. Sometimes. Mostly when Cali was naked.

That was about it.

For real, though, between me and my twin, Colton was definitely the happy one. To the point of being too much, but I’d forgive him considering what day it was.

“Merry Christmas, bro!” Colton said the second I answered the video call, his smile wide.

“Merry Christmas, back ‘atcha,” I replied, grinning.

Colton looked behind me, at Greyson, and waved wildly. “Look who it is! You two still haven’t killed each other?”

“I’m working on it, don’t worry,” Greyson replied with a chuckle.

I scoffed. “Not if I kill you first.”

Colton cackled in delight. “Damn, I’ve missed you two bickering dickheads. This should’ve been an Evers brothers Christmas—I wish I was there in person!”

“We’d love to have you here, Colton,” Greyson said. This time, there was no hint of sarcasm in his tone. At least we agreed on something.

“Hey, how’s Maya doing?” I asked my brother.

Colton snorted. “Same old Maya, you know how she is.”

Colton didn’t offer any details—was that because Greyson was around? I squinted at him. “The last time I saw you and Maya together, you were at each other’s throats. But you’re still together?”

“She’s obsessed with me, dude,” Colton said with a shrug. “What can I say? I’m amazing.”

Greyson laughed, because how the fuck else could anyone respond to Colton’s words? I did the same.

“And how does it feel to be a baby daddy?” I asked.

Colton’s eyes widened. “No shit—I’ve been doing extra workouts to keep the dad bod in check.” He lifted his shirt and slapped his abs. “Hear that? Hard as steel!”

Some things about my twin would *never* change.

“Hey, how’s Cali?” Colton asked.

“How about you ask her?” I said.

The movie watch party had moved to the living room as more pack members wanted to join in, so I walked toward the living room and yelled, “Cali! Colton’s asking for you.”

Cali instantly jumped up and met me in the hallway, grinning wide. “Colton! Merry Christmas—how are you and Maya?” she asked, taking the phone from my hands to face him.

I watched the easy, fun way that Cali talked with my brother, and for a moment I had this little fantasy of all of us being back together. Especially for the holidays. Colton and I had always been so close.

I glanced at Greyson, knowing that I could never have that kind of connection with my older brother. Even without Cali coming between us, there were too many things that we would never see eye to eye on. Competition was innate between us, and Greyson was just… annoying.

“Jay!” Colton shouted through the phone at the top of his lungs. “Jay, it’s Christmas—pay attention to me, dude!”

Right. If I was being honest, Colton was also annoying.

But I’d grown up with him, so I was used to it.

Cali swept the phone around the room so Colton could greet everybody. The small ruckus he created made me grin. This was totally my brother’s energy.

“Here you go,” Cali said as she returned the phone—and Colton—to me.

“Don’t wait for a holiday to call next time,” I said. “You know we have working phones; you can always text or something.”

“Aw, you must really miss me!” Colton grinned. “Who can blame you? I’m awesome.”

“And super humble,” Greyson said in the background, and Colton burst out laughing.

That was part of what made being around Colton feel so good. He didn’t take anything too seriously—not even when the sky was falling.

Colton and I said our goodbyes, Greyson too, but then Colton spoke up again. “Hey, Cali?”

I lowered my phone so my mate could look at my brother. “Yes?” she said.

He pointed at her. “Make sure you take good care of Xavier. He needs all the help he can get.”

I rolled my eyes while Cali chuckled, looking up at me warmly. I moved the phone around the room one last time for the entire pack to say goodbye, and then I ended the call.

“That must’ve been a nice surprise,” Cali said, wrapping her arm around mine.

I nodded. “For sure.”

Right on cue, my phone buzzed again.

*Try not to die without me!* *XOXOXOXOXOXOXOXOOOOO*

He followed the message up with an absurd amount of kissing emojis. I snorted, shaking my head as I typed my reply.

*Love you, bro. Seriously. But you’re still a dick.*

*I’m a bigger dick than you! HAH!* Followed by (of course) three eggplant emojis.

“Oh, Colton. Never change,” Cali said, snickering as she checked out the texts.

My mate looked so uncharacteristically carefree right then that I felt something inside my chest ease. Colton had always been good to Cali, and he’d always been good to me. I missed the sorry asshole, and I wished he were here. This was the first Christmas I’d spent without him, and even though our celebrations were never like one of those corny movies, we’d always had a lot of fun.

“What are you thinking?” Cali asked, resting her hand on my arm.

“Just—I wish I could see Colton in person.”

Cali nodded. “Maybe we can visit him sometime?”

“Thank you—that sounds great,” I said with a smile.

I realized that Cali hadn’t mentioned Greyson anywhere in that equation, which made me even happier. I could just picture it—Colton and me, Cali and Maya. Though Maya had always given Cali shit, I knew that deep down, they were friends. It would’ve been so nice for the four of us to celebrate together while Greyson was off wherever, doing his Rogue thing again. While I was Alpha, of course.

Now *that* would’ve been a perfect Christmas.

“Come on now, you two,” Cali said, looking between Greyson and me. Walking toward the living room, she called over her shoulder, “Let’s go watch the rest of the movie—it was getting to the good part.”

I didn’t care about that, but I did love watching movies with Cali. It wasn’t often I could just sit with her and hold her. I was about to follow when I recalled something and turned to Greyson.

“Just before Colton called, you were about to say something?” I asked.

I truly did not give a damn here, but I also didn’t want to get interrupted again once I’d settled down to cuddle Cali. *I* would be the one to cuddle her—I’d called dibs earlier.

“Wait here for one sec,” Greyson said, then headed off to one of the studies.

I scowled, looking over at Cali, who gestured for me to join her. What the fuck did Greyson want this time? Didn’t he see I was busy? Why would he—

My thoughts were interrupted when Greyson returned with a small wrapped box.

“What’s this for?” I asked, confused.

“Merry Christmas,” he replied, holding out the thing toward me.

I scoffed, picking up the box. “A gift? For real?”

“For real,” Greyson said, eyebrows arched.

“Hope you don’t expect one in return,” I said.

He rolled his eyes. “I’m not—and it’s not much.”

Why the hell would Greyson get me a present? We’d never exchanged gifts. Though that was maybe because… because we’d never had a chance. That last thought made something weird twitch inside my stomach. Truthfully, I hadn’t thought Greyson was going to get me anything at all. Like I hadn’t gotten anything for him. Because we just—weren’t like that.

Were we?

Shaking my head, I opened up the box. It was a pair of AirPods.

“I know you like to go running to blow off steam,” Greyson said. “I thought you could use them. I have no idea if they’ll stay in when you’re shifted or not, but if they don’t, you can always return them.”

Greyson’s voice was even, thoughtful. He’d thought about this gift, about me, and wanted to do something nice. So now I felt like a guilty dickhead for not having something, anything, to give to my brother in return. Maybe next year.

“Thanks,” I mumbled, and Greyson held out his hand.

“Merry Christmas, Xavier.”

I stared at my brother and shook his hand. It felt strange. Not too long ago, I’d been constantly ready to kill Greyson—how had we ended up celebrating Christmas together? How had it ended up feeling almost… *nice* to be around him? A weird kind of feeling overcame me—a mix of guilt, gratitude, and bewilderment.

Clearing the lump in my throat, I said, “Thanks again. I, uh—I’m gonna try them out. I’m going to go for a run. I’ll do a perimeter sweep in case Dick comes around.”

“Sounds good,” Greyson said with a smile. “Let me know if you find anything.”

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*Out for a run, will be back soon*, I mind linked to Cali from the front porch.

*Wait, why?* she replied.

*It’s just my turn for patrol*, I explained. No need to get into details.

*Hurry back! You need to see the end of the movie*, she said.

I assured her that I would. Then I stripped my clothes off, played some music on my phone, threw it all into a backpack, and popped in the AirPods. And then I shifted. To my amazement, the pods remained in my ears. Greyson’s idea had been very practical, actually. I was impressed.

I leapt off the porch, loving the feel of the snow beneath me and the music in my ears as I raced toward the woods. I was having a good time, a great time, running along the perimeter of the property.

Then, suddenly, I picked up the faint smell of death.

I went rigid.

I slowed down. The smell grew stronger.

*Vampire*.

My breathing spiked. I looked around, moving slowly. I wished I could stop the music so I could hear—

But I didn’t need the music to be silenced to sense that someone was moving toward me.

# Episode 3111

I was trying to focus on the movie, but that was hard when I kept thinking about the box that Greyson had given to Xavier. It was clearly a gift—I could hardly believe it. Greyson had given Xavier an actual gift for Christmas, and I was trying not to smile like a dork.

*They are brothers, after all. Who give gifts to each other! Or at least Greyson did… Anyway, I’ll take what I can get.*

Greyson swaggered over right then—a lot of swagger, by the way—and met my gaze with a smile.

*Are you enjoying the movie, love?* he mind linked.

I nodded. *It’s one of my favorites.*

Greyson sat down next to me, slinging an arm around me. *Then I’ll probably enjoy it too.*

I stared at Greyson as he looked at the screen, smiling wide. He noticed and raised an eyebrow.

*You want to ask me something?* he said.

“What was that with you and Xavier?” I whispered, poking his ribs.

Greyson shrugged. “Hey, it was just a gift exchange. Well, less exchange and more I had a present for that dumbass.”

I kept grinning, gripping the hem of Greyson’s shirt. “And?”

Greyson shrugged again. “And maybe having Torin around, with all his efforts to make Christmas special, got to me.”

I bounced a little in place. “*And?*”

Greyson scoffed, his voice low. “And nothing. Don’t make a big deal out of this. *Please*.”

His words didn’t stop my smile. I wrapped my arms around his torso with a tiny squeal, and he chuckled.

Xavier and Greyson thought they were so different, yet neither of them would acknowledge that somewhere deep down in their hearts, they loved each other. Or at least they really liked each other. Greyson’s gift and Xavier’s acceptance of it was a testament to their growing relationship.

But then, another notion entered my mind.

*If it weren’t for the* due destini*—if Xavier and Greyson weren’t held together by the mate bonds—would they become true friends? Am I the one who will always keep them apart?*

My thoughts made my smile vanish.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Greyson whispered in my ear. “I thought you liked this movie.”

I forced myself to snap out of it. “Oh, it’s nothing,” I said. “I was just thinking how nice it was that you got Xavier a gift.”

He raised an eyebrow. “And that got you frowning?”

I wasn’t about to tell him about my mini spiral. Better to bury it and examine it later on, when I could find the time and place to have some sort of secret breakdown. Very on brand for me.

“I think it’s obvious that I’m very happy you did this, Greyson,” I said, caressing his jawline.

“It’s really not a big deal,” he insisted.

I kissed him on the cheek. “It *is* a big deal. I practically have to keep pinching myself in order to accept that this is real—that I’m having Christmas with my two mates and there have been only a few issues. Not too long ago, you two would have tried to kill each other.”

“That’s not true,” Greyson muttered. “I may joke about killing Xavier, but I’ve never wanted to hurt my family. Ever.”

His eyes were bright with sincerity, and I knew he was telling me the truth.

“You’re right,” I whispered, swallowing. “You’ve done everything you can to keep everyone safe.”

“And I always will,” he said.

I recalled the way that Greyson had also tried to protect both Maren and Fenrir. Should I tell him about my talk with Maren earlier? I cringed a little at the thought, but I figured it would be better for him to hear this from me instead of Maren.

“Do you know anything about Maren’s family?” I asked. I’d kept my tone hushed this entire time, and nobody had told us to shut up yet as they watched the movie, so I gathered it was working.

Greyson cocked an eyebrow. “Why are you asking?”

“Answer my question first,” I whispered.

“We never talked much about our pasts,” he said. “I never told her anything, because I didn’t want to drag Silas into our relationship. We both seemed to avoid talking about our families.” He leaned closer. “Will you tell me now why you’re asking?”

Greyson’s warm breath was very, very distracting. I looked up at him and forced myself not to look at his mouth, because that would lead my thoughts astray. This was a serious conversation, and I had to focus.

“I talked to Maren…” I trailed off.

Greyson didn’t seem surprised, so I continued.

“Turns out she knows about my Fae family, the Wrenthorns,” I said. “She’s not a big fan.”

Greyson frowned. “Oh?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I mean, she’s allowed to feel however she wants to feel.”

“How did Maren realize who your family is, exactly?” Greyson asked.

I held up the ring he’d given me. “She saw this. And now, I guess…” I took a deep breath and looked around. Everybody seemed engrossed in the movie, and my mom was sitting at the front. I didn’t want her to overhear by accident.

*What if Maren doesn’t join the pack because of me and the Wrenthorns?* I mind linked to Greyson.

Greyson paused, his expression thoughtful for a moment. *Whether or not Maren joins the pack*, he replied, *I doubt your families’ histories will be the final deciding factor.*

*What do you mean?*

*Maren has a lot to consider—she’s a Fae, not a werewolf*, Greyson replied. *Her son is both, and that brings in a whole other layer of potential mishaps when it comes to his instincts. Besides, she’s got to figure out Aiden’s role in Fenrir’s life. I bet she’s considering never allowing him to see Fenrir again, but what if the kid asks for him? You see? There’s a lot more going on here than old Fae family rivalries.*

I nodded, feeling relieved but also concerned for Maren. This was a lot for one personto deal with.

“I guess I wanted Maren to know that I’m cool with all this,” I whispered. “Like, she doesn’t have to worry about me being weird in any way. I mean, I *am* weird in general, just not about her.”

Greyson gave me a soft smile. “I love your weirdness. It’s cute.” He pulled me closer, kissing the side of my head. “Thank you for talking to Maren.”

I snuggled closer, wrapping my arms around Greyson’s torso. He smelled so good that I felt this sudden urge to rub my face against his chest. Just as I was wondering how I could do that without looking like a creepy cat, Torin jumped up from his position on the floor.

“Time for a break!”

Everybody groaned when he paused the movie.

“But we’re almost at the end!” Sage yelled.

“Yeah, I wanna see what happens,” Ravi agreed.

Everyone else said similar things, and Torin moved his hands in a soothing gesture. “Now, now, stop yelling. I have a special treat for everyone.” He turned to Jay. “Jay, could you please help me?”

As the two of them headed out, my mom asked, “What could this be?”

“Why does Torin seem so serious?” my dad wondered.

“What do you think it is?” I muttered to Greyson.

He smiled. “Knowing Torin, something extravagant.”

I grinned, resting my cheek against Greyson’s chest as he hugged me even closer. His steady heartbeat, his scent and warmth and engulfed me, and I felt so safe and relaxed for the first time in what felt like forever. Someone added wood to the fireplace, and staring at the dancing flames soothed me. All the worry I’d been feeling was now overshadowed by the holiday spirit, the warm fire, the feeling of all of us being together.

*The only thing missing is Xavier. He’d better be back soon.*

“Oh my god! Cali, look!” Lola screeched, grabbing my calf and pointing at Torin and Jay as they re-entered the living room. They were holding a giant platter with the biggest Yuletide dessert I’d ever seen.

“It’s the size of a log—no wonder Torin needed someone to help him carry it!” Sage said, absolutely losing her mind as she bounced up and down.

“How did you bake this, Torin?” my dad asked, his eyes wide with awe. “How did nobody know about this?”

Torin grinned. “I had some witchy help. Shout-out to Kira for her kitchen magic assistance.”

The witch bowed as everybody clapped and whooped for her.

“This should be fun to eat,” Greyson said with a grin. He stood up from his seat and pulled me up as well. I paused as we walked by the fire, the flames catching my attention again. I found myself drawn to their red and golden light.

*Wait*, I thought. *Look how beautiful it is…*

I paused in front of the fireplace, unable to help myself. The sight was suddenly unbearably inviting, mesmerizing. The flames danced and flickered, and I watched them for a moment. My vision tunneled until nothing but the flames remained in my sight.

“Cali?” Greyson said from a couple of feet ahead of me. “As big as that dessert is, it would be pretty easy for a hungry wolf pack to devour it in seconds—we’d better get a move on if we want to try it.”

I snapped back into focus.

*How come I got so distracted by the fire?* I wondered, shaking my head to clear it. I was about to follow Greyson, when suddenly…

*CRACK!*

The Christmas tree burst into flames.

# Episode 3112

*The tree is burning…*

*The tree is burning…*

*The tree is burning and NOBODY SEEMS TO BE NOTICING?*

“Watch out!” I screamed. My voice had a ripple effect through the pack, Greyson jumping toward me as he looked around, ready to protect and attack.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, his posture rigid.

“The tree!” I shouted, pointing at the corner. “It’s on fire, oh my god!” I looked up at him. “Greyson, it’ll burn down the house, we have to get a fire extinguisher. Or a tarp to smother the flames. Something!”

I started pushing him toward the door with all the force I could muster. My head, my ears, my heart were all pounding, trying to break through my skin.

But Greyson wasn’t moving.

“Cali, stop,” he said, grabbing me by the shoulders. His voice was even but firm as he stared into my eyes and said, “The tree’s not burning, love—I need you to take a deep breath and—”

“But I can’t—I can’t breathe!” I sobbed, dark spots seeping through my vision. I coughed, grabbing my throat as I choked. “The smoke is—it hurts, it’s—”

*CALI!*

Greyson’s voice echoed through my head—over the frantic sound of my heartbeat, over the panic screaming through every inch of my body. His mind link was like a drum that vibrated through me, bringing me back to reality.

*Greyson…*

*He’s here…*

*He’ll fix this...*

“Cali, sweetheart, look—” Greyson’s tone was gentle, just like his touch when he turned my face to look at the tree. “It’s okay. Nothing is on fire.”

I was still panting, stunned. The tree was twinkling with Christmas lights. Nothing was burning except the logs in the fireplace.

“There’s nothing wrong with the tree, Cali,” Lola whispered. She seemed so worried.

“It’s the same as always,” Torin said, his expression similarly guarded.

“It could use a little less tinsel,” Jacs quipped, “but it’s definitely not on fire.”

I gazed around—everybody seemed so very concerned, and I hated that I’d slipped up and had another hallucination in front of the entire pack. I felt completely humiliated even thought I knew it wasn’t entirely my fault.

“Sorry,” I whispered, swallowing down tears as I hurried out of the room. Had I just ruined Christmas? Because it felt like I’d ruined Christmas. And now I had no fucking idea where to go or what to do. My throat felt so dry, as if I’d swallowed smoke. I ran toward the kitchen and grabbed a glass of water.

My heart was still racing.

*It’s fine, Cali*, I told myself. *Breathe in, breathe out, you’re fine…*

I wasn’t fine. *This* wasn’t fine—it wasn’t a random freak-out.

It had Seluna written all over it.

“My sweetheart…” My mother’s voice brought me back to reality. I turned to see Mom, Dad, Artemis, and Greyson rush in. All of them looked worried sick.

“Are you okay?” Dad asked as Mom poured more water for me.

*I don’t know if I’ll ever feel okay again*, I answered in my head. But on the outside, I could only say, “The tree wasn’t on fire…”

Greyson hugged me tightly. Dad’s expression was full of apprehension. He reached out, holding my hand as I trembled against Greyson.

“Shh, I got you, I’m right here,” Greyson muttered against my forehead, embracing me tightly. The feel of his body, his power, the way he held me so tightly as if he could protect me from anything and everything… It all made my breathing calm down.

“I’m sorry for freaking out. I feel terrible for how I worried you all.” I looked up at Greyson, sniffling.

“Please don’t apologize,” he said in a low, soothing voice. “Everyone here just wants to make sure you’re better.”

I turned to look at my mom, standing there, her hand covering her mouth, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. I looked at my sister, the deep lines of her frown, her widened eyes. Then at my dad, who held my hand in both of his.

They were all here for me, and I was a complete mess.

“I wish I hadn’t ruined your Christmas by making you worry about me,” I said in a shaky voice.

“Parents will always worry about their children, regardless of how young or old they are. Or what holiday it is,” Dad said seriously, offering me a tissue to wipe my eyes.

Mom stepped forward, reaching for me, hugging me next. The scent of her perfume brought its own kind of comfort. “It’s so terrible to see you go through this, honey. I’m so sorry.”

I wondered if this had anything to do with the fairy circle. Could it have somehow increased the severity of my Seluna visions while draining my aura? I should have listened to Elle and stayed away from it.

*I’m such a fool…*

“It’s Seluna,” Artemis said. It was the first time she’d spoken since she’d entered the room. Her voice was low, shaky. Full of anger. “Those ashes—I’m going to track them down. I wasn’t a bounty hunter for nothing, Cali—I can find them.” She stared into my eyes. “Please let me do this for you.”

“Thank you for—for wanting to help me,” I whispered.

I looked around, and having my family here, having Greyson here, reminded me that I wasn’t alone in this. I’d had terrible visions and nightmares before. I could get through this.

*Right?*

“I’m feeling better,” I said, ignoring the lump in my throat. “Please go back to the amazing dessert Torin made.”

My parents frowned—Artemis too—and I could tell no one was going to be budging anytime soon. Not without a significant push from me.

“I insist. Let’s at least try to be normal.” I looked at them all. “I’ll be right out, okay?”

My mom exchanged a look with Greyson, and then she, my dad, and Artemis were gone. I looked away from Greyson, swallowing roughly. “I’m okay. You should—”

“Cali,” Greyson said, resting his palms on my shoulders. “Look at me.”

His voice was tender. When I met his soft gaze, it took everything I had not to burst into tears. He stroked my cheek with the back of his hand. “Sometimes, because we don’t want the people we love to worry, we say that we’re okay, even when we’re not. I know that. *You* know that, Cali. So please be honest with me.” He squeezed my shoulder, his touch grounding. “I can handle the truth. I love you more than anything.”

I was a goner every time Greyson looked at me like this—like he was cracked open before me, raw. Like he would always be there to fight the world for me, even if it meant his own destruction. I moved closer to him, and he opened his arms wide, engulfing me with his warmth. I shivered with how good it felt.

How safe.

“I meant what I said—I *am* feeling better,” I said. And that wasn’t a lie. I met his eyes again. “Especially when you hold me like this, it seems like everything’s going to be okay.”

Greyson smiled a little. The gesture was tainted with sadness, but it was still breathtaking. “Then I’ll hold you until New Year’s and beyond if you want.”

Greyson had a way of making everything feel *better*. I no longer felt so guilty about screaming at everyone while they were trying to eat Torin’s dessert.

“I might take you up on that,” I said. “Forever hugs.”

Greyson smiled once more. He leaned down, kissing my nose, my cheek, my jawline. Every soft, tender kiss made me breathe steadier until he brushed his lips over mine. “Maybe next year we’ll get a smaller tree, just in case…”

I chuckled a little, shaking my head. My heart pounded at his words as fear, sharp and bitter, crept up in the back of my mind.

*What if we haven’t found Seluna’s ashes before then? What if I don’t last that long? What if my aura is sucked out of me? What if, in the end, there’s nothing left of me?*

I shuddered at the thought. Greyson frowned, stroking my back. “You cold?”

“Do you really think this is because of the ashes?” I blurted.

He stared at me. “I can’t imagine any other reason. And whatever you just went through involved fire—that *is* Seluna’s favorite thing.”

My stomach clenched with nausea.

“Please don’t give up, though,” Greyson said. His tone had a plea in it. His gaze was heavy with something familiar. *Guilt*. “We will recover the ashes, love. I’m so sorry we’ve failed you so far. It’s not—”

“You and Xavier can’t control everything, Greyson,” I said shakily. “I know you mean well, but this can’t be just your responsibility. It’s mine as well. It is what it is.”

Greyson shook his head, his gaze fixed on mine. “No. We’ll fix this. We have to. I promise.”

The one truth here was that if we didn’t find Seluna’s ashes, things would get worse. Also, despite what everyone had said, I couldn’t help but feel everybody from the pack would remember this Christmas as the day I’d imagined the tree had been set on fire.

Greyson had said that he would hold me forever if I wanted to, but I knew that he couldn’t do that. I couldn’t let him carry my burden. I couldn’t let him feel like he was failing me when this entire situation was out of his control.

“Thank you for everything, Greyson,” I said, caressing his cheek. “I am feeling better.”

It wasn’t a lie. Not fully. I doubted I’d feel better until the ashes were destroyed once and for all, but I couldn’t worry my mate for that long. Sometimes that meant putting on a brave face. I had to keep it together until we got those ashes back.

Still, the anxiety was lurking in the back of my mind. When were the visions going to strike next? I had no idea. I only knew that the effects of Seluna’s ashes were going to keep getting worse. And when they did…

Could all this affect the rest of the pack too?

# Episode 3113

**Xavier**

I braced myself.

The figure ahead of me suddenly stopped, as if they’d just become aware of my presence. It looked like a woman, but I couldn’t see her face. She smelled like death, the stench strong enough to overwhelm everything around her. I wasn’t about to sit here and wait for her to attack.

I did it first.

She was fast, though—faster than I’d expected. I should’ve known better than to think that this would be easy. Vampires were notoriously quick, but I wasn’t exactly a fucking sloth.

I broke into a sprint behind her, not giving up. My growl was low and menacing, just in case she had any doubts about my intentions. The chase through the snowy woods was fast, with every scent other than the monster’s muted. The snow offered a glow to the dark scenery, making visibility better for me. Good enough that I was making progress, closing the distance between me and the vampire—

She suddenly shifted direction.

I’d never met a vampire who was so good at not getting caught. If she was the monster who was out to get us—and I was pretty fucking sure she was, because why the hell would she be in our territory in the middle of the night otherwise?—a witch had to be helping her. She was moving so fast, dodged me so quickly, that she was practically a blur.

I pushed myself forward, though. I told myself that this was my battle, for Cali, for the pack, for all the times I’d failed my mate. Sheer spite was the only reason why I finally managed to catch up to the vampire. I snarled, snapping my teeth right behind her. Just a few inches closer, and I’d get her leg. Just this tiny bit…

*Fuck fuck fuck!*

I missed.

I crashed to the ground, my head pounding with adrenaline and fury. The woman got even faster somehow, putting more distance between us before she stopped several yards away. Despite the moonlight, despite the snow, despite my werewolf vision, I still couldn’t see her face clearly, which was unsettling.

I wasn’t going to be able to outrun her. That was a fact at this point.

But maybe there was another way to get to her.

I knew it was risky, but the idea that this bloodsucker was hurting Cali was too much to ignore. And if I played my cards right, I might still be able to kill her. I wanted to kill her so badly I could almost taste it.

This ended right the hell now.

The woman didn’t move, but I did. Not to run toward her, but to shift back to human. I finally ripped the AirPods from my ears and opened my arms.

“You want me?” I taunted. “Here I am!”

The woman stayed put. She was wearing a jacket—I could tell by the pointed shoulders. The moonlight reflected on the sternum area, and there was a sudden shining glint of gold. What was that?

I fought to force my brain to cooperate, to figure out if I could recognize her.

*Nothing*.

The woman was quiet, as unmoving as the forest, but then the wind shifted.

And I picked up the faint scent of a witch.

Had this been a trick all along? Just to get me alone, to attack me? Two against one was not what I’d signed up for, but still, I wasn’t afraid. I was more furious than ever, rage seeping through every inch of me.

“Who are you?” I growled. “Stop playing games!”

The vampire was shrouded in shadows now. I couldn’t see her smile, but I could *feel* it. It was razor sharp. Mocking. And then, stepping closer, she spoke.

“The games have just begun, Xavier.” That voice. I knew that voice. It was the same one I heard when the medals spoke to me. “Didn’t you get my message?”

With a howl, I made my move. Lunging forward, I shifted, ready to tear this vampire apart for all she’d done to Cali, to me, to my pack.

But I bit into nothing but cold air.

The vampire had disappeared in a blur.

I was panting, shaking as I looked around, frantically searching for my target. But there was nothing to find. The lingering scent of death began to fade. There was no point in trying to track it—I knew it was gone.

I was left behind, just about ready to claw my fucking skin off.

I took a second to calm myself down—Cali didn’t need to see me like this. I might have felt like shit for not capturing the vampire, but that didn’t mean I was allowed to push that burden onto her. She was dealing with enough already.

After I was sure that I wouldn’t go into a rampage if I so much as spotted a squirrel, I decided to return to the pack house. I spotted the AirPods in the snow where I’d dropped them. I shifted back, scooped them up, popped them in my ears, and shifted back into my wolf.

I needed to talk to Greyson about this.

A few minutes later, I was back at the house. I stopped at the porch, shifted, and got dressed. The entire time, the AirPods stayed in place. Not that I was impressed. Or that I cared. But they were good.

Moving along…

I passed by the living room—everybody was eating something that looked chocolatey, sniffling as the movie ended. Cali wasn’t there. I frowned, looking in the kitchen. I found Greyson instead, sitting alone, making tea. My brother had a serious tea addiction. In the past, I used to hide his Earl Grey just to piss him off.

I didn’t do that anymore.

“What happened?” Greyson asked. No hello necessary—I gathered my expression was already saying enough.

“Where’s Cali?” I asked gruffly. “Is she okay?”

“She’s upstairs,” he said. “She had another Seluna-inspired vision.”

I shook my head. “Shit.”

“What’s up with you?” Greyson scowled. “Did you run into Dick?”

“Much worse,” I said sharply. “I ran into the vampire. I know it’s the same one we spotted before, at the car accident site. But it got away. I also smelled a witch.”

Greyson had gone rigid. Through clenched teeth, he asked, “Did you see the vampire’s face?”

“No. But I think it’s a woman. Something to go on at least.”

“I’ve smelled vampire and witch on our territory before, but this is the first time we’ve actually come into contact with it…” Greyson trailed off.

We didn’t speak for a moment. Then I said, “She’s taunting me.”

Greyson stared at me.

“The vampire is taunting me, I know that for sure,” I said gruffly.

“Would it do any good to try to track her down?” he asked.

“No. The witch who’s helping the vampire has enhanced her powers,” I said. “If I couldn’t catch her, I doubt anyone else in the pack would. And who knows how far she’s gone by now?”

Greyson didn’t disagree. His grip on the cup of tea was so tight that his knuckles were white.

“Do you think there’s any connection between Cali’s vision today and the vampire and witch appearing right now?” I asked.

“The timing suggests it,” Greyson said. “Though it’s hard to say.”

“I have to go check on her,” I said.

“She was pretty rattled,” Greyson said. He pointed at the mug. “That’s why I made her tea.”

“I’ll take it to her,” I said, and grabbed the cup from his hands. I must’ve looked like hell, because Greyson didn’t protest. He let me do it, because he could tell that keeping my shit together depended on it.

Greyson was many annoying things, but, like he’d proven with the AirPods, he did know me.

I headed upstairs, shaking my head to clear out the thoughts of my brother. I took a moment outside Cali’s door to calm myself. Again. I didn’t want her to pick up on how angry I was at the vampire.

Taking one final deep breath, I knocked.

Her voice was quiet. “Come in.”

I entered the room to find her sitting near the window. She looked so pale and sad that it broke my heart. She sat up slightly, her surprise evident. “Xavier, hi! Thought you were Greyson.”

I placed the tea on her desk, staring at her. “I heard what happened. I just wanted to make sure you were feeling better.”

She pressed her lips together, staring at the floor. “It’s okay.”

It wasn’t. None of this was fucking okay, and Cali seemed so dejected it hurt. My voice was low when I said, “Come closer, Cali.”

She instantly walked up to me, into my embrace. I squeezed her tight. She sniffled as I whispered, “There’s my little tiger.”

I took a long moment to breathe in her scent, fighting to purge the vampire’s stench. If that creature smelled of death, Cali was life. She was my life.

“You had the right idea,” she murmured against my chest.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She looked up at me. “We should get out of here, Xavier.”

# Episode 3114

**Violet**

Lilac and I were sneaking downstairs. As ever, my brother was overdoing things, peeking around corners and tiptoeing, clearly fancying himself some sort of spy. I tried to mind link with Charlie one more time, repeating the things I’d said earlier.

I wanted to let him know that I would be back, that I did want to go to Minnesota if that would make him happy. He wasn’t responding, though. The way he was acting hurt my heart—I knew my mate was mad at me, knew I’d handled things poorly, but if he’d only listen to me, he might understand.

*Charlie, please*, I mind linked. *I never meant to upset you…*

Again, no response. I shook my head and tried to focus on the task at hand. Lilac and I had reached the ground floor, and most of the pack seemed to be in the living room, arguing about which movie to watch next.

Lola was, of course, the loudest of them all. “*Home Alone*, people! THAT’S the best Christmas movie!”

I wondered if I could ask for her opinion on what had happened with Charlie. *Should I?* I had to.

“Hold on a minute,” I whispered to Lilac. “I need to talk to Lola.”

He huffed. “Seriously? We’re supposed to be in stealth mode! Plus, we have to go!”

I ignored him and walked into the living room.

“Those thieves had it coming!” Lola was saying. “They’re lucky the kid didn’t straight up murder them for—oh, hi, Violet! What’s up?”

I grabbed Lola by the arm and dragged her from the living room. Thankfully, as I’d predicted, her curiosity about what I wanted had surpassed her *Home Alone* obsession.

“Seriously, what’s going on?” Lola asked, her eyes wide with intrigue.

“If you see Charlie,” I said, “please let him know I’ll be back in a little bit.”

Lola frowned. “Why don’t you tell him yourself?”

I cringed. “He’s kind of upset and won’t talk to me.”

Lola squinted. “Why’s he mad at you? Is it because you’re sneaking out on freaking Christmas Day? Where are you even going?”

Lola fired out one question after the other, and I sighed deeply. I didn’t want to lie to her, but the truth was so complicated. And I’d told Lilac that I wouldn’t tell anyone about his potential mate, whose name we didn’t even know!

Lola letting me go without giving her a solid explanation was probably a no-go, though. Like, what should I tell her? *Oh, I’m going for a run*? She’d flip.

Thankfully, by some miracle, Lola said, “You know what?” She held up her hands. “Don’t tell me. But whatever it is, you should tell Charlie—that’s what mates do.”

I nodded. “I *will* tell Charlie, just not right now. If he asks, just let him know I had to do something with Lilac—he’ll understand.”

Lola’s eyes narrowed. “You’re becoming quite the mystery, Violet. Who would’ve thought?”

I was feeling terribly guilty when I returned to Lilac. He was pacing up and down in the hallway, waiting for me. When our eyes met, he hissed, “Oh my god, there you are! We should hurry up!”

“Stop rushing me!” I hissed back.

“I wouldn’t have to if you stopped stalling!” he snapped. Then he cleared his throat and said, “Thanks for coming with me, by the way. I really appreciate it.”

Sighing at my brother’s mood swings, I followed Lilac outside. Within minutes, we were both shifted and running through the woods toward the Samara pack. I wished Charlie were here with us.

He loved to run in the woods, and maybe he would’ve been able to help Lilac deal with this mate stuff. Charlie was a guy, and Lilac was also a guy. They were different, but still.

*Will you explain to me why you insist on being so secretive about this?* I mind linked to Lilac. *You should talk to some of the other guys. They might have a different perspective on what it’s like when you meet your mate.*

Lilac huffed. *I can’t be going around talking about my business, Violet! Men are huge gossips!*

I frowned. *They are?*

*What if someone lets it slip and Marta finds out?* Lilac asked*. She would be devastated, and then I would be devastated too, because I love her. I hate being devastated!*

I hated to say it, but my brother made sense. Sometimes.

*Besides*, Lilac continued*, I’m not even interested in that girl, whoever she is. I just want to know if we’re mates. I’m not going to do anything about it.*

I wondered if that was true, though. I knew Lilac and Marta had strong feelings for each other, but the pull of a mate could push all other things aside. It was more… animalistic, in a sense. *Visceral*. Lilac and Marta’s connection was more of a choice, whereas the mate bond was fate. And who could go against fate?

The thought of that was a little scary, actually. The lack of free will. What if your mate turned out to be a monster or something? Look at what had happened with Ava and Xavier! And with Cali, who had *two* mates!

Oh god.

*Are you sure you want to do this?* I asked Lilac. *If Marta did somehow find out, it would make for a horrible holiday.*

*That’s literally why I’ve only told you what’s going on*, Lilac replied. *And you won’t tell a soul, right?*

I sighed, nodding. I hoped that my brother was wrong, and that Samara girl wasn’t his mate. That would just complicate everything, and I didn’t like complications.

When we finally we approached the Samara camp, we saw and smelled the remains of a funeral pyre. I shuddered at the sight. The Redwoods were lucky not to have suffered any casualties.

*This is so sad*, I mind linked.

*Look at the campsite, though*, Lilac replied.

As we got closer, I realized what he meant. The location wasn’t in shambles—it had a Christmas feel to it. There was a big fire, and a few pack members were singing Christmas carols. Maybe they needed some holiday spirit to cheer them up, and that was great, actually. Who could blame these people for wanting to cling to hope after Knox and his allies had nearly destroyed them?

Lilac’s wolf stopped suddenly. He nodded toward the circle of people*. There she is.*

The girl seemed familiar. We were far away, so I couldn’t see her clearly, but I felt I’d seen her with Ava before at some point. Her outfit had a bohemian vibe to it. She was holding a camera, circling everybody else as they sang the Christmas songs.

*Do you see that?* Lilac asked. *She’s not recording them with her phone—she has a real camera. Do you think she likes to make videos or something?*

I shot Lilac a sideways look. His intrigue was obvious, even though he was trying to act casual. He’d said he had no interest in this girl, but I could detect a hint of enthusiasm there, which worried me. I was trying to keep an open mind, but I couldn’t help but feel like I was somehow betraying Marta.

Like both of us were betraying Marta.

She had brought my brother back from the dead, and now here we were, being shitheads together.

*Let’s just hide*, I told Lilac.

The idea of the camera girl catching us right now was just too much.

When we were fully concealed, I asked him, *Do you even feel anything when you look at her?*

*No*, Lilac said, but his wolf huffed*. I’ll go talk to her.*

Lilac was legit about to strut over when I nipped at his shoulder.

*You absolute lunatic!* I mind linked. *You can’t just walk up to those people! We were just at* war*, remember?*

*But I have to talk to her*, Lilac insisted. *I have to find out if she’s my mate! This whole “staring from afar” thing isn’t getting me anywhere!*

*If she really* is *your mate*, I replied, *you’ll be able to mind link with her from here. She’s in her human form right now, and you’re wolf, but you should still be able to mind link with her if you’re mates.*

Lilac blinked at me. *That’s genius! Why didn’t I think of that?*

*We all know I’m the smart twin*, I said.

*Right, and I’m the hot twin*, Lila replied with a straight face.

I rolled my eyes.

*What should I even say to her, though?* Lilac asked.

*I have no idea*, I said impatiently. *This whole thing is taking too long, Lilac. We have to get back to Marta and Charlie.*

If I was lucky, maybe he wouldn’t even realize I’d left.

*No, we’re too close now!* Lilac begged. *Should I just ask her if she’s my mate?*

My brother was far less savvy than he’d ever let on. I realized that now.

*That’s a very bad way to start a conversation with someone you’ve never spoken to*, I told Lilac wryly. *How about hello?*

*Right!* Lilac nodded. *Like, “Hey, I’m Lilac. Yes, that’s really my name—I know, it’s cute. I see you’re holding a camera—what’s up with that? Actually, we can never, ever get together, because I have a girlfriend, and she’s the light of my life. I bet you’re nice, though. Okay, bye now!”* Lilac paused, staring at me expectedly. *Should I tell her that?*

*No, Lilac!* I huffed. *Keep it simple.*

Lilac tried out like ten more lines similar to that one, and I was just about to lose my mind.

*Oh my god, just do it!* I hissed internally.

*Okay, I’ve got it*, my brother said. *I’ll just say, “Um. Hey.”*

I stared at Lilac blankly. He really was lucky he was pretty.

*Just mind link with her, and let’s move along*, I said.

He took a deep breath, turned to the girl, and stared at her. Hard.

But before he could do anything, I heard Ava’s voice behind me.

“Are you two spying on us?”

# Episode 3115

Xavier frowned. “I didn’t say *you* should leave. Just me.”

“I know,” I said, “but I’m worried that if the effects of the ashes worsen, I could bring trouble to the pack.”

He sighed. “Cali, that’s not—”

I placed my fingers over his mouth. “Let me finish. You’re convinced that someone—someone who could very well have stolen the ashes as payback—is after you for something you did long ago. Right?”

He nodded.

“So wouldn’t it be better for everyone if you and I, the two people most involved in this situation, get as far away from the pack house as possible? Just to protect the others?”

“Can I talk now?” Xavier said against my fingertips, and I lowered my hand, nodding.

“I get where you’re going with this,” he said. “And as much as I would love nothing more than to get you as far away from Greyson as possible and keep you all to myself—”

“This is really not about you versus Greyson, Xavier,” I said wryly.

“—I also agree with my brother,” Xavier continued. I was willing to bet that he hadn’t even heard the last thing I’d told him, and him versus Greyson was the only mode he could exist in. He continued, “There’s safety in numbers. At the Redwood house, we’ve got Greyson here to help us. We’ve got the pack. Did you see how we managed to stop Knox? We did that as a group, not individuals. Same thing happened with Lucian, Seluna, Letifer, and Silas.”

I took a deep breath. “You’re right about that. And it would be best for you to stay here, just plan with the others. But what about me? What if I become too much of a liability with the Seluna visions? Perhaps I should hide somewhere and ride it out, or—”

“What are you talking about?” Xavier looked at me like I was nuts, his hands coming to rest on my arms. “Hide where? Away from me? I’d fucking die without you.”

I blinked. “Well, that was dramatic.”

“And going somewhere all by yourself and feeling horrible the entire time isn’t dramatic?” he asked. “Where would you even go?”

I shrugged. I felt like an idiot, but also not, because what the fuck was I supposed to do?

“I haven’t actually planned that far,” I said. “I just want to make sure the pack is safe.”

“And you think the Redwoods don’t feel the same way about you?” Xavier asked, his voice getting louder. “You worry about everybody all the time, but they’re always there for you as well. How many times has the pack stood beside you?”

He had me there. The pack had never given up on me. Even when I acted recklessly and ran straight into danger.

“That’s true,” I admitted, sniffling.

Xavier’s hands moved from my arms to my shoulders, then he ran them up the sides of my neck. “When I was ready to leave before, you were the one who told me that it was better to stay with the pack. It’s the same for you. It’s better for everyone if you stay. You’re not just my mate. You’re a Fae with powerful magic.”

I took a moment to process Xavier’s words. This was what I’d already known deep down, but hearing him say the words made everything better. The pack needed me as much as I needed them, and sticking together was always for the best.

“You’re right,” I whispered, hugging him tight. The feel of his arms around me settled me down. “When did you get so good at being comforting?” I joked, trying to lighten the mood.

“I guess I’ve watched you do it enough times that I’ve figured it out for myself.” He stared at me imploringly. “Who comforts you better?”

I huffed before it turned into laughter. “You’re *impossible*.”

Xavier chuckled as well, kissing my forehead. We stayed silent for a moment, just embracing.

“I’m glad I talked to you,” I murmured.

“Me too,” he said. “The last thing I need right now is for you to run away. I don’t want to go searching for you in the snow.”

I raised an eyebrow, shaking my head. “Poor Greyson actually *had* to look for me in a snowstorm after I ran off.”

Xavier pretend-frowned. “Stop trying to make me jealous.”

I laughed again. It was louder now, and it came deep from within me, spreading like warmth.

“But seriously,” Xavier added, sobering up, “don’t do that. It would be a bad way to end Christmas.”

I gasped at his words. “Wait, I forgot! Christmas is almost over, and I haven’t given you your present!”

“But you were my Secret Santa,” Xavier said.

I waved him off. “That doesn’t count. You literally bought me a *car* for Christmas—this is the least I can do.” I raised an eyebrow. “Though I’m sorry to say that it’s nothing as big as a car.”

Xavier grinned, leaning down to trail his mouth gently over mine. “This is the only thing I want.”

He kissed me again, the tip of his tongue brushing against the seam of my lips. I opened up to him, melting into the feeling as he held me. His warmth, his palms on my waist, the way he teased a moan out of me—

“Okay, don’t distract me,” I said, breaking off the kiss. He smirked. “I really do have a gift to give you, hang on a second.”

I felt his eyes on me as I reached for my dresser drawer. Picking up the medium-sized gift bag, I turned back around and handed it over. “Here. I hope you like it.”

“Do you *really* think I would tell you if I didn’t like it?”

I crossed my arms. “Well, that’s not reassuring.”

He grinned. “Just saying—even if I didn’t like it, I’d say it was the best thing in the world just to make you happy.”

“This is taking a turn I did not anticipate,” I told him, waving at the gift. “Just open it up and see.”

Still grinning, Xavier released the bow around the bag and looked inside.

*Will he really truly like it, though?* I wondered. *What if I got the wrong size? I don’t want him to lie just to spare my feelings! We can be honest with each other! Though I* will *be devastated if he hates it…*

“It’s okay if you don’t like it,” I blurted out as he opened the bag. “You can exchange it if you—”

Xavier held up the sweatpants I’d bought for him, his gaze instantly falling on the small design by the hip. His eyes went wide. “Is that an embroidered tiger?”

I was blushing. Why was I blushing so much? “Yes.”

He looked so happy, it warmed my heart. “I’m gonna try them on.”

Before I could even speak, Xavier dropped his pants. He was casually half-naked, and I turned away, feeling flustered. And also feeling ridiculous for feeling flustered.

*This is your BOYFRIEND, Cali! My god, can you at least try to be less of a dork?*

“Did you seriously just avert your eyes?” Xavier teased. “How many times have you seen me naked, now?”

“Not enough, apparently,” I mumbled. “I just wasn’t prepared for all… *that*.”

Xavier let out a low laugh. In my peripheral vision, I saw him putting on the sweatpants. “I like that I can still make you blush.” Tying up the strings, he said, “Okay, turn around.”

I faced him fully, and he started strutting around, pausing in front of me like he was on a catwalk. His abs were rippling with every move, the sweatpants hanging low around his hips.

“Well? What’s the verdict?” he asked cheekily.

Still flustered, I chuckled. “You’re prowling around all right. Could definitely be a tiger.”

Xavier walked up to me, his dark blue eyes fixed on mine as he grabbed me by the waist. “I’m no tiger, baby. I’m your wolf.”

He pulled me upward to him, then—one hand at the back of my neck, the other at the small of my back, his mouth sliding over mine. The kiss went from one to a hundred in a second, and I clung to him, taking it all in. His taste, his scent, the heat of his body, the way he made me feel, as if I were floating and on fire all at once…

For the first time since the tree burning incident, I felt like myself. I felt normal, like this was right, and I was allowed to have a carefree moment with my mate. Like no matter what was thrown at us, we’d always make it through. Xavier had been right, earlier—we were stronger with the pack, and the pack was stronger with us.

But above all, we were at our strongest when we were together.

Xavier had always been certain of that—I was the one who needed a reminder, and Xavier had delivered. The way he kissed me had my knees buckling, my fingertips digging into his bare skin, the muscles of his arms trembling under my touch.

When he broke the kiss, I was panting. My body vibrated against his, seeking more friction.

“I want one more gift…” He trailed off in a husky voice that sent chills down my spine, guiding me backward. The back of my thighs hit the bed, and he flipped me onto it with one swift motion. I choked out a laugh. He smirked, reaching for my gift bag again.

He picked up the red ribbon and twirled it.

I squeaked. “What kind of gift did you have in mind?”

He tilted his head to the side and gave me a grin that could only have been called wolfish.

And then he tied up my wrists with the ribbon.

# Episode 3116

**Xavier**

Up until seeing her, I hadn’t realized how much I needed Cali right now. I craved just a few minutes of normalcy with her to calm all the bad feelings that were roaming around inside me. Shit could hit the fan at any minute, but I couldn’t let that stop me from living in the present.

“Xavier,” Cali whispered. “What did you have in mind?”

Cali’s gaze was fucking scorching. She looked at me and didn’t see failure or pain or anger. She just saw *me*. She loved me, and that was the only thing I needed to think about right now.

“Lie back, and I’ll show you,” I said.

With a coy smile, she obeyed. A moment later, I pulled her tied wrists upward, over her pillow.

“Here’s how it’s gonna go,” I murmured. “You’re going to hold on tight here…” I guided her hands to grab the bed frame. “And you won’t try to touch me until I say so.”

“But—”

I kissed her hard, cutting her off. She was panting when we broke apart. Her pupils were dilated, her mouth bitten pink, and she’d forgotten what she’d wanted to say. She only watched as I grabbed her pants and dragged them off, right along with her underwear.

“You’re gonna lie there…” I slid the bottom of her sweater up, painstakingly slow. “And I’ll do whatever I feel like… Sound good?”

“Y-Yes,” she breathed.

“Good girl.” I gripped the front of her bra and dragged it upward to bare her breasts, only to cover them with my mouth. I kissed and bit at the hot skin there, just to see her eyes squeeze shut, her mouth drop open so a moan could escape. Her whole body jolted upward, always so responsive that it drove me fucking nuts.

“That’s it,” I whispered, one hand on her throat, the other trailing down between her legs where she was already so wet I could see it. “That’s the kind of present I have in mind.”

“Not sure if this is for you or me, but I’ll take it,” she rasped, shaking, and I grinned against her lips. I kissed her there, then moved down to her breasts, to her stomach and her hips and her waist. And then I rested my mouth even lower, at the apex of her thighs.

She was so pretty like this, and I fucking loved it. I sucked and licked and teased her clit, used my fingers too, until she was trembling under my tongue. I made her come twice like that, broke my own rule easily when I let her still tied-together hands clumsily slip into my hair as she arched her hips up to my lips.

“Xavier, *please*.”

She said my name and begged again and again. By the time I came up for air, I was wound up tight, and I knew I wasn’t going to last. I pushed her hands back to the bed frame, still tied with that ribbon. When I told her to hang on this time, I meant it.

I moved one of her legs over my shoulder and bent the other at the knee, and when I pushed inside for the first time, she convulsed under me. My whole body was on fire, shudders rippling through me at our contact. Her bound wrists moved over my head, then, her arms around my neck locking me down.

“This is my gift too,” she said in a shaky voice, her eyes dark and gleaming.

I kissed her hard, fucked her the same way—not stopping until I made her come again just to feel it around my cock. It sent me over the edge. And then, as I looked at her—at her flushed skin and her shining eyes and her warm embrace—I knew that I would never feel this way about anyone else.

I would die without Cali by my side.

“That was…” She was breathless, still shaking. “An *amazing* gift.”

We both burst out laughing.

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After we took a quick shower, we returned to bed, and she rested her head against my chest.

“How did patrol go?” she asked.

I was confused for a moment. “What?”

“You told me it was your turn to go on patrol. That’s why you left during the movie earlier. Right?”

“About that…” I trailed off. I’d been hoping that I could put off telling Cali since today was Christmas, especially after she was already upset after her Seluna vision. But at this point, I couldn’t tiptoe around it. She needed to know.

“Xavier,” Cali said, eyeing me carefully. “Did something happen?”

“Yeah,” I admitted. I told her about the vampire that looked like a woman, how fast she’d been, and the witch scent. Cali grew more and more aghast with every passing second.

“*Xavier!*” she exclaimed. “You should’ve told me right away!”

I shook my head. “If I had, would you have enjoyed the end of Christmas?”

She pressed her lips together, looking away.

Stroking her hair, I added, “I meant to tell you from the beginning. This was never supposed to be a secret, because it’s one more reason why you shouldn’t be thinking about sneaking away. It’s not safe out there.”

Cali breathed deeply, nodding in agreement. When she spoke again, her voice was quiet.

“Why do you think the vampire was here?” she asked. “Is she planning to do something?”

“That’s possible. Maybe she wanted to leave another medal.” My anger from earlier nagged at me, begging to be known. “I was so close to catching her, you know.”

“Really?” Cali asked, her eyes wide.

“Yeah. Almost bit her leg,” I said.

Cali looked spooked. “You’d better take your own advice on this, Xavier. Let the pack help out.”

“If I’d gotten that vampire between my teeth, we wouldn’t have to worry about her anymore,” I grumbled. “And then I’d be able to torture the location of the ashes out of her.”

Cali blinked at me in alarm. “You and Artemis would choose violence every second of the day if left to your own devices.”

“As we should.”

“Do we really know if she’s the vampire we’re looking for, though?” Cali asked. “Would you recognize them if you saw them again?”

“I never got a good look their face, but I think I’d recognize the figure,” I said. “Why?”

Cali’s concerned expression turned into one of triumph. “We should check the footage from Aysel!”

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Cali’s excitement was short-lived. She and I played the footage back a few times, but there was nothing. It was so frustrating I wanted to bang my head against the wall.

“It’s too blurry,” I said, fighting not to drop my voice into a growl. “It’s just as useless as it was before.”

“Goddamn it, Aysel,” Cali said under her breath, huffing. “Why can’t she be more helpful, huh? Would it kill her?”

“I don’t think this particular incident is Aysel’s fault, but I still hate her on principle,” I told Cali.

She sighed, looking up at the ceiling. Then, as if extra determined, she grabbed the phone and played the thing again. “Just one more time…” She stared at the screen, scowling as she said, “I wish Aysel had noticed something that was helpful besides those stupid buttons. How does that get us anywhere?”

I froze. “What? Show me what you’re talking about.”

She gave me a questioning look but rewound the video and showed me the screen. “It was all Aysel told us she remembered distinctly. The vampire’s wearing some sort of jacket—look at those shoulder pads. And then, the buttons are pretty obvious…”

My pulse racing, I stared at the screen.

The buttons.

A memory popped into my head.

I was running through the woods, chasing the vampire. It escaped me at the last second, then stopped several yards away to turn and look at me. To taunt me. The snowy scenery was dark, but then—the moonlight reflected on something gold.

Buttons.

Motherfucking buttons. I’d already thought there was something familiar about them, about the gold. I turned to Cali.

“You’re a goddamn genius!” I pulled her in for a kiss.

She stared up at me, her eyes wide. “What? Why?”

I told her about the buttons, and realization dawned on her face. “Well, then. I *am* a genius. Not sure how this helps, since we don’t have an actual face, but—”

“No, no,” I said, shaking my head. “Now we know for certain that this is the same vampire who stole the ashes. It’s no longer speculation—it’s fact.”

Cali exhaled sharply. “That’s true. We don’t know the vampire by name, but we’re closing in, connecting dots.”

I took in Cali’s beautiful face. My jaw clenched, my teeth gritting together as I promised myself that next time, I wouldn’t let the vampire slip away.

Cali’s safety depended on it.

“What should we do next?” she asked me.

“Not sure,” I said. “The vampire had all those fast moves… It reminded me of Knox and the other Samaras with their magic steroids.”

Cali swallowed nervously. “You think that’s connected, too?”

“I’m not saying that. Just that this vampire was the fastest I’ve ever seen,” I commented.

Then I thought that, perhaps, if I could get hold of some of Knox’s magic juice, the vampire would *definitely* be surprised. I wanted to disarm the monster, make it kneel for what it’d done to my mate.

“But what do we do now?” Cali asked. “Should we talk to Greyson?”

I suppressed the urge to huff. Talking to Greyson was the only reasonable thing to do, as much as I hated to admit it. This wasn’t just a Xavier-Cali problem—it involved the pack, and Greyson was the Alpha. He was also a good strategist. Not that I’d ever say that to his face, but still.

“I guess we’ll have to let him know,” I told Cali.

“Don’t sound so enthusiastic about it,” Cali replied.

Rolling my eyes, I was about to get out of bed when there was a knock on the door.

I opened it to reveal Big Mac.

“Xavier.” Her face was serious as ever. She glanced behind me, at Cali in bed, then gave me a sharp look. “The other witches and I are going to try one last thing with the medals,” she said. “Come with me.”

# Episode 3117

“Wait, what are you planning to do?” I asked Big Mac.

“The first thing would be to put on some pants,” Big Mac said in a dry tone. I blushed profusely as she turned to Xavier again. “Then, I want you to join me downstairs.”

Thrusting her chin upward, she turned around and walked away.

“Merry Christmas to you too!” Xavier called after her. Then he grumbled, “What a pain in the ass…”

Shaking his head, he closed the door and picked up the sweatpants I’d given him. I got up as well and looked around for my clothes.

“Where are *you* going?” Xavier asked, eyebrows arched.

I scoffed. “You should know the answer by now—I’m coming with you. Always.”

I braced myself for a second there, wondering if he’d argue. But he just smiled, reaching for my hand. “You’re right. We’re in this together.”

I smiled back, then I took a step closer to kiss him…

“Wait, no!” I pushed him back. “We can’t get distracted!”

He smirked, looking very pleased, the greedy little monster. At least he kept his hands to himself, and we got dressed as quickly as possible. I went straight for the door, but Xavier blocked my way.

“I know this isn’t the Christmas you’d hoped for.”

I shook my head, offering a small smile. “Maybe not.” I glanced at his mouth.

*Okay, one more tiny peck!*

I got up on my tiptoes and kissed him. Against his lips, I said, “But at least I got to spend it with my mate.”

Xavier tucked my hair behind my ear. “Any Christmas with you is a good one.”

As Xavier opened the door for me and led me out, I told myself at least we’d spent these few moments together, having a lovely time before… whatever would happen next. Which sounded pretty ominous, if you asked me.

“What’s Big Mac up to, do you think?” I asked Xavier.

He shrugged. “No idea.”

That didn’t soothe me in the slightest. I’d learned that witch magic was sometimes a mixed bag. Usually it worked out, but every so often, things didn’t go as planned.

“This is Big Mac, though. She’s obnoxious, but we know she’s going to do her best,” Xavier was saying as we arrived at the living room.

Greyson was talking with Rishika, Artemis, Ravi, and Jay. He looked so serious that it made my stomach drop.

“What’s going on?” Greyson asked, glancing between us.

“The vampire I chased today is the same one who stole the ashes,” Xavier said, before explaining the bit about Aysel’s video.

“Big Mac is going to try something to help,” I told Greyson.

Greyson nodded. “Let me know how it goes.”

“Aren’t you coming with us?” I asked before I could think about it.

Greyson’s lips twitched, like he was about to smile. “I’m having a conversation here.” He gestured at the others. “But I’m sure Xavier can handle this.”

“Obviously.” Xavier rolled his eyes, then grabbed my hand and led me to the study. The fact that this interaction hadn’t upset me was testament to how far all three of us had come. I’d actually seen Xavier reverently place the AirPods that Greyson had given him right next to his cellphone.

*They’re getting along now!*

Perhaps an exaggeration, but still.

“About time,” Big Mac huffed once we entered the study.

Kira, Marta, and Dani were gathered around her. The room smelled strange—herbs and scented oils. As I took it all in, I started feeling anxious.

*Time for some good old-fashioned second thoughts, folks!*

“Is it really a good idea to try a spell right now?” I asked Big Mac. “Didn’t you have some issues earlier?”

Big Mac waved me off. “That was because of the magical storm, and it wasn’t focused on me alone. If you recall, all the magic users in this house had problems. But that’s over now.”

“But what if—”

Big Mac cut me off. “For the magic to be tracked successfully, we need to do the spell now, when the fingerprint is still fresh.” She turned to Xavier. “Greyson told me about your encounter with the vampire, which means that things are escalating. We have to go on the offensive, and since you may have some previous connection with this vampire, we need you to be present. The medals have also been given to you, nobody else.” She pointed at my mate. “This is about *you*, Xavier.”

My heart was now full-on pounding. So that was pleasant. Not.

“Let’s do it,” Xavier replied seriously.

Big Mac nodded, gesturing to Dani. “Since the magic that’s been used on the medals is powerful, we’ll need your amplification powers. Okay?”

“Okay,” Dani said, her eyes wide.

*Oh, god. Is Dani ready for this?*

That was a great question, because the last time I’d used my magic near Dani, she’d amplified it and we’d toasted Xavier’s car. One of them. But at least I knew that Dani had been training with Okorie. And even though Okorie could be the worst, he’d also proven to be quite helpful lately, with Seluna and all. Plus, Dani hadn’t complained about him at all, so that had to mean he’d stopped being a dick and managed to help her master her power.

*At least, that’s what I hope…*

“Stand in a circle,” Big Mac told the witches. She turned to my mate. “Xavier, stand in the middle.”

*It’s gonna be okay*, Xavier told me before stepping forward.

Swallowing roughly, I watched as they all took position, and Big Mac placed the medal at Xavier’s feet.

“Picture the vampire you saw in the forest, Xavier,” Big Mac instructed.

Xavier closed his eyes, concentrating.

The moment he did, Kira began to chant.

Only seconds later, the medal began to vibrate.

I watched on, holding my breath.

*Okay, then… Time for some catastrophic thinking!*

But seriously—hadn’t we had a lot of bad luck with magic lately? What about the map burning up? The chili blowing up in Big Mac’s face? What if something happened to Xavier right now? What if he got hurt—physically, emotionally, or mentally? What then, huh?

*At what point should I intervene if things go wrong?*

My question went unanswered as Big Mac started waving her hands in the air, chanting something along with Kira, repeating some of it. The otherworldly quality of the scene was heightened by the scents and flickering lights, and my head throbbed from the tension. I kept my eyes fixed on Xavier, looking for any sign of discomfort.

*He seems okay… Is he okay? Is he—ouch!*

I jumped in place, looking behind me when I felt a hand on my shoulder. There was nobody there. It was just… Seluna’s presence. I was reminded that everything was connected—the vampire, the ashes, the witch. The pressure against my shoulder blade remained, and I told myself that I could handle some pain.

*What if it starts hurting as badly as before, though? How do I keep myself from crying out? Should I tell Big Mac?*

I pressed my lips together, feeling sweat gather at my forehead. I gritted my teeth against the pain, smothered it, told myself that I could deal. I didn’t want to alarm anyone, but I hoped that it wouldn’t get worse. The last time things had escalated, it had felt like I was being burned.

*You can do this, Cali*, I told myself. *Breathe in through your nose, try to ignore the pain, try to stay strong…*

Xavier’s eyes were still closed. They didn’t even open when the air lit up with a hazy glow that encompassed him. The light was too bright, and I shielded my eyes, swallowing a moan of pain as the smoldering pressure on my shoulder got more and more intense. I could hear whispers coming from every direction, a sea of low rumbly slithering noises roaming all around him, but I couldn’t make out what they were saying.

And then, just as the pain on my shoulder felt ready to push too hard and burst—

*BANG!*

There was a flash of light, and everything went back to normal.

*That’s it?*

Xavier opened his eyes, panting. I was panting as well, staring at him—he was okay, thank god. Everybody seemed okay, or at least in one piece.

I turned to Big Mac. “Did the spell work?”

Big Mac shot me a look, cursing under her breath before she said, “Not exactly.”

My heart sank. I’d been hoping for a last-minute Christmas miracle, and what I’d received instead was a mini witch concert and some shoulder pain. I looked around—all the witches were frowning. Kira was staring at the ground, her lips pursed.

“At least we tried,” Xavier mumbled, picking up the coin.

He flipped it in the air. As it landed in his palm, Kira blurted out, “It’s not a vampire.”

Xavier stared at her. “You’re wrong. I saw her. I smelled her. She’s a vampire.”

“But she’s not *just* a vampire,” Kira said. “She’s also a witch.”

# Episode 3118

I stared at Kira in disbelief, then down at the medals. I’d thought the spell hadn’t even worked—just like the rest of our magic hadn’t worked the way we’d wanted it to during the magical snowstorm. So, if the spell *had* worked, did that mean everyone’s magic really was back to normal now that the storm was over?

But, if that was the case, then what Kira had said was truly terrifying.

Xavier seemed to think so, too. “What do you mean, a vampire *and* a witch? What the hell are you even talking about?”

“Yeah, is that even a thing that can exist?” Dani asked, looking confused. “I’ve never heard of that.”

I was *this close* to saying I’d never heard of it either, but then my thoughts went to Hypatia, from the Obaltarion. I was fairly certain she was a vampire and a witch, and I swallowed roughly as a sudden pang of anxiety pulsed through me.

“It’s very, very rare,” Big Mac was saying, “but it can happen. And it can be a very dangerous combination.”

My heart caught in my throat. “Are you sure that spell even truly worked? Our magic’s been so unpredictable lately. It hasn’t been doing what we want it to—maybe this was just a mistake?”

But Big Mac leveled a look at me. “The storm is gone, girl, like I said before, so whatever was affecting our magic is gone, too.”

“But—” I started, but Big Mac shook her head.

“I’m certain that Kira is right about what she saw,” Big Mac said firmly.

“Exactly how certain?” Xavier asked.

The older witch nodded. “Completely positive. I sensed the same thing, if that bolsters your confidence.”

“Dani was able to amplify our magic this time,” Kira explained. “That’s what made it possible to find the signature of this person’s magic, even though it was very faint.”

“Faint?” Xavier asked. “It was hard to detect?”

Kira nodded. “Whoever this is, they’re an expert at cloaking their magic. It was barely discernable, even with Dani’s help.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It means that if we want to know about whoever this is—and find their location—we’re going to have to find an expert to help. Someone who works with a much stronger kind of magical tracking.”

“Do you know someone like that?” I asked.

“I did, once,” Big Mac said thoughtfully, “but they’ve gone underground. I’m trying to find them again, but when you’re an expert at locating people, that means you can be an expert at hiding from them, too.”

I took that in. “So, if this *is* a vampire-witch—who doesn’t want to be found—how exactly are we supposed to stop them?”

Big Mac looked over at me. “You don’t.”

“So what do we do, then?” I asked.

“You run.”

“What?” I asked.

She nodded, looking grim and even a little shaken. “Running is the only way to survive one of these creatures.”

Everything about this was freaking me out. Big Mac never seemed scared, but she seemed scared now, and if this vampire-witch was bad enough news to scare Big Mac, then I actually thought my mild anxiety was beginning to feel like the biggest under-reaction in the world. Even thinking so made my heart begin to pound.

“I don’t understand why this is such a problem,” Xavier said impatiently. “You can stake a vampire. You can kill a witch. How is it any different just because someone is both?”

“Because they can use their magic to protect themselves in a way normal vampires can’t. And add to that their vampire speed, strength, and imperviousness, and you get a pretty perfect predator. We’re talking even more perfect than the Alpha werewolf,” Big Mac said, giving Xavier a pointed look.

A muscle in Xavier’s jaw flexed, and he nodded, finally accepting her explanation.

I didn’t like the idea of anyone out there who was stronger than an Alpha werewolf. I didn’t want to even think about either of my mates going up against someone like the being Big Mac had just described—not even to retrieve Seluna’s ashes.

Big Mac rubbed her forehead. “We’re going to have to take our time on this one. We can’t just go charging in trying to use force against someone like this.”

Xavier looked at me, his expression alarmed. “But we don’t have time to take the slow and careful approach.”

I swallowed hard. I could practically feel the handprint on my back starting to burn again, and fear rose in my chest. Xavier was right—the mark on my back was a ticking time bomb.

“Whatever it takes,” Xavier said, his voice determined, “we have to find this person and get those ashes back. As soon as we can.”

Big Mac gave Xavier a searching gaze, and—probably reading the desperation in his eyes—nodded curtly.

She turned to Dani and Kira. “I have another spell I want to try. Can you two come with me?”

Without even a moment’s hesitation, Kira and Dani nodded.

“Thank you for doing all this,” I said. “I know…” I trailed off, my throat tight with emotion. I took a deep breath and cleared my throat. “I know that you don’t have to help me, but you always do, and I appreciate you trying.”

Big Mac cleared her throat with a bark of a cough. “Now don’t go getting all soft on me, girl. You have to stay strong if you’re going to beat this.”

I nodded, trying to force my expression into one of firmness. I wanted to show Big Mac that I was holding strong.

“Let’s go,” Big Mac said to the younger witches, and I watched as the three of them marched out of the study.

I turned to Xavier. “We should tell Greyson what we found out.”

Xavier frowned at the mention of his brother, but he nodded and headed out of the study, moving toward where we’d last seen Greyson.

He was still there, only this time, he was speaking to only Jay.

Xavier waved Greyson over, and he excused himself from Jay.

“What’s up?” he asked, striding over to us. “What did you find out?”

“It’s a vampire-witch,” Xavier said without preamble. “And that’s pretty bad news.”

Greyson looked a little startled, so I filled in a few more details.

“Okay,” Greyson said slowly. “And how is this vampire-witch connected to that family? The Duquettes?”

Xavier shook his head. “That part’s still unclear. It seemed to me like they were just a human family, but it’s not like I stuck around to get to know them. I just located them.”

Greyson thought this over. “Maybe while the witches work on the magic end of this, we should start working on figuring out the connection.”

Xavier nodded. “Yeah, that’s something I can do.”

Greyson pushed a hand through his hair. “And in the meantime, we have to figure out exactly what a vampire-witch is capable of.”

“What about Hypatia?” I asked.

“Who?” Xavier looked over at me.

“The head librarian from the Obaltarion. She’s a vampire-witch. She’s bound to know about others, right?”

“Is she a good person to ask?” Greyson wondered.

I considered the question for a moment. “She’s never exactly been friendly, but she’s always been polite. I think we could ask her.”

“What if it *is* her?” Greyson asked. “What reason would she have for coming after Xavier and you?”  
 “None,” I admitted. “I can’t see Hypatia lurking in our bushes. The only thing she seemed remotely interested in was her library. I didn’t get the vibe that revenge was her particular cup of tea—unless you were burning books or something.”

“What if,” Xavier said slowly, thinking it through as he spoke, “she *is* responsible, but she’s being forced to do this?”

“Didn’t Big Mac just tell us that vampire-witches are super strong?” I asked. “Who could be forcing her to do this to us against her will?”

“I get what you’re saying, Cali, and I think you’re probably right, but we do have to make sure it’s not her. Just in case,” Xavier explained.

I nodded. “I could probably do that. I just need to get in touch with Steinar.”

“Can you do that?” Greyson asked.

“Yeah, sure. I have his phone number.”

Xavier and Greyson shared a knowing look, then they both gave me a determined nod.

“Do it,” Xavier said. “Contact him.”

I pulled out my phone and scrolled through my contacts for Steinar’s number. My anxiety grew as I listened to the phone ring, waiting for him to answer. Finally, someone picked up. I could hear muffled breathing on the other end, and then after a moment there was a whispered, “Hello?”

But before I had a chance to say anything in response, there was a high-pitched scream so loud it made my ears ring, and the call was dropped.

# Episode 3119

**Greyson**

Cali looked down at her phone, then up at me. Her gaze was baffled and scared. Not what I was expecting. At least, not *before* she had her conversation with Steinar.

“What happened?” I asked.

“The call was dropped. There was a scream, and then—nothing.”

“Call him back,” I said urgently.

Cali nodded and dialed again. She waited for a moment, then ended the call with a worried look. “It went straight to voicemail. It didn’t even ring.”

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Should we just go to the Obaltarion ourselves to talk to him? I mean, this is an important lead. We have to figure out if they might know something, anything, and we don’t have time to waste on faulty signals and dropped calls.”

All that was true, though I wasn’t sure I was totally comfortable leaving the pack alone just after finding out that there was a vampire-witch out on the hunt for us. Especially if Xavier and I both went. But what choice did I have? We couldn’t just sit around and let this vampire-witch close in on us.

I opened my mouth to say that I thought we should go to the library, but Cali’s phone rang before I could say anything.

She gasped and fumbled with it for a moment.

“*Answer it!*” Xavier urged.

“*I am!*” Cali hissed, getting control of the phone again. “Steinar?” Cali asked, turning on the speakerphone. “What happened?”

Steinar’s deep bass voice sounded a little warbled. “Hey! Sorry about that!”

“What happened?” Cali asked again. “Are you okay? We heard a scream!”

“What? Oh, yeah, I mean, I dropped my phone. My screen is cracked now, which is great. Brand-new phone and everything. Should’ve gotten the extended warranty,” he muttered. “Now I have to go to the damn Apple store, and those jerks at the Genius Bar are just so damn smug.”

I lifted a brow in surprise. “Do gargoyles go to the Apple store?”

Cali shushed me.

“So, what’s going on?” Steinar asked. “How’s the pack doing?”

“Fine, we’re fine,” Cali said vaguely. “How are you?”

“I’m okay. Just staying quiet these days, you know.”

“Sure, sure,” Cali said.

I gritted my teeth, trying to keep myself from rolling my eyes. I was trying to keep it together, but I was getting anxious, and I wanted her to hurry up and ask him the question already.

“So, anyway, Steinar, I was actually calling for a reason,” Cali finally said.

“You usually are. How can I help?”

“I wanted to ask you about Hypatia.”

“Hypatia?” Steinar asked, sounding surprised. “What about her?”

“I was wondering if she was around. We really need to talk to her,” Cali explained.

“She’s sleeping right now,” Steinar said, “but I’ll let her know you called.”

“Listen, man,” I said, breaking into the conversation, “we actually need to speak to her directly. And can you tell us where she’s been in the last twenty-four hours?”

Cali shot me a glare. She clearly hadn’t intended to ask Steinar that question so directly, but I ignored her. I wanted to talk to Hypatia, but I also knew that she had good reason to lie to us about her whereabouts if she *was* in fact responsible. Steinar, on the other hand—I didn’t know him that well, but he didn’t strike me as the kind of guy who would lie.

“Oh, she’s been here!” Steinar said. “We all have!”

Cali frowned in confusion. “Who’s ‘we all’? Isn’t it just the two of you?”

“Well, we’ve had some other magical librarians here at the library for the holidays, and they all got marooned after that snowstorm. Something was going on with that weather system, because none of them could even blip out.”

That tracked—none of our witches had been able to blip during that snowstorm, either.

“Why are you asking me all this?” Steinar asked warily.

“Well, there’s a vampire-witch who’s been kind of stalking us here. We don’t really know of anyone who’s both a vampire and a witch—”

“Hypatia wouldn’t do anything like that,” Steinar said, cutting Cali off. He sounded defensive, and I immediately realized that he was fiercely protective of the librarian.

Which made sense, as Hypatia and Steinar lived alone in that supernatural library, and she was both his maker and probably his only friend.

“Hypatia can’t even leave the library for long amounts of time,” Steinar went on. “She never does now, not after the library was almost completely destroyed. She’s not going anywhere,” he finished firmly.

I stared at the phone. “What do you mean by that?”

“I would think that was perfectly understandable,” Steinar said.

“No, I mean, is she magically tied to the place or something?”

Steinar took a deep breath, and through the phone it sounded like a small windstorm. “Hypatia really loves this place. I don’t know if anyone realizes how much. It’s the only place she would ever want to be. I wouldn’t think she’d leave it for anything. She made a vow to this place.”

Xavier looked confused. “A *vow*? What, like a nun?”

Cali nudged him hard in the ribs.

“*What?*” Xavier hissed.

“Yeah, kind of like the vows a nun takes,” Steinar said thoughtfully. “But her vows were to protect this place, and to keep the information on the supernatural realm safe from outsiders. She’s very serious about her obligation, and that involves never leaving when she can help it—she feels she has to be physically here to protect it.”

“Well that’s good, I guess,” Cali said quietly, looking up at Xavier and me. “I guess that somewhat rules her out.”

I thought about Steinar’s claim that Hypatia was too noble for anything like what I’d described. I believed that *he* believed that, but I still wanted more information.

“Could the vow be broken?” I asked.

“What?” Steinar asked, sounding baffled. “I don’t even know what that would mean.”

Xavier stepped forward, closer to the phone. “Does Hypatia have any enemies who might force her to do something like threaten our pack?” he asked, spelling things out more clearly. “Someone who could force her to act outside of how she might want to act?”  
 “No,” Steinar said slowly. “Not that I know of. And like I said before, she’s been at the library for the past few days. I know, because I’ve been with her practically the whole time.”

“What were you doing?” Cali asked.

“Well, we were preparing for the party,” Steinar said, “and then the storm hit, and no one could go anywhere. And these out-of-town librarians are very demanding, so there was a lot to do. Whatever’s happening to your pack, I can guarantee that whoever is doing it is *not* Hypatia.”

I opened my mouth to ask another question, but I stopped when I saw the sharp look in Cali’s eyes.

“Thanks, Steinar. I know that was a lot of intense questions, and I’m sorry for grilling you like that, but we really appreciate you answering,” Cali said in her brightest, most diplomatic voice. “We don’t mean to accuse of Hypatia of anything. But I hope you understand that we’re in a tough spot right now. We badly need information, and we don’t exactly know where to start.”

There was a pause and then the sound of grinding rocks—which was the sound of Steinar clearing his throat. “I understand, Caliana. I want to help—I really do—but I don’t know what information I could give you that would be of use.”

Cali seemed to sag. “Nothing? That’s not like you, Steinar.”

“All I can tell you is what I suspect you already know. Vampire-witches are quite strong and very powerful. I’m so sorry that one of them is stalking you. That means that you and your pack are in great danger.”

“Thanks, Steinar,” Cali said quietly. “Take care.”

“You, too, Cali,” Steinar said gravely. “Please watch out for yourself. Goodbye.”

I turned and paced away as Cali slipped her phone back into her pocket. I was pissed—we were in the exact same place we’d been before we’d spoken to Steinar. He was supposed to be this great librarian, but we’d learned *nothing* talking to him.

Cali looked at me closely. “Hey, at least we eliminated a suspect, right?”

“Maybe,” Xavier snapped, clearly as annoyed as I was. “But now we’ve got a whole host of other people who could be after us.”

Cali looked upset, so I stepped in, trying to quell the anger I was feeling. “I guess we are sort of narrowing it down—in a way.”

The three of us were silent for a long moment, the only sound the ticking of the clock on the wall.

Cali tapped her fingertips against the desk as she thought. “So,” she said slowly, looking up, “Big Mac says we can’t kill a vampire-witch, but…” She trailed off.

Xavier shot a quizzical look at me. “But what?” he asked, looking at Cali.

Her eyes had taken on a strange gleam. “But maybe we could *trap* one.”

# Episode 3120

**Violet**

I stood stock-still, frozen with surprise as Ava stared down at us.

“I said, are you spying on us?” Ava asked sharply.

“Why would we be doing that?” Lilac said. “We’re allies now, remember? We don’t need to spy.”

I was grateful he’d spoken—because I’d had *no* idea what to say—but Ava looked less impressed.

“Exactly—you don’t *need* to spy, which is why I’m wondering why you’re sneaking around my pack doing just that.”

“*What?*” Lilac said, trying to look outraged.

She narrowed her eyes. “You two are acting very suspiciously, and—for the record—you’re not as stealthy as you think you are. What’s going on?”

I wracked my brain, trying to come up with an excuse, but it was hard to think when Ava was glaring at me. I had to admit it—she was kind of scary, with those dark eyes and dark hair and the way the snow reflected off her pale white skin. Oh, and also the fact that she had recently *come back from the dead*. Okay, maybe I couldn’t judge her for that *entirely*… considering Lilac had pulled that same trick.

“Well, actually,” I spluttered, “we were… kind of… looking for someone.”

Lilac was standing just behind Ava, and he slashed his hand across his neck as his white cheeks turned pink, signaling for me to cut it out.

Ava frowned at me. “You’re looking for someone *here*? Someone in my pack? Who?”

Lilac was still signaling for me to shut up, but I knew I couldn’t leave the question unanswered, especially considering we were well and truly caught.

“Yes?” I said uncertainly.

Ava glared for a moment more, then something in her eyes changed. She looked over her shoulder at Lilac and smiled a strangely knowing smile. “*Oh*. You must be the wolf Perrie was talking about.”

Lilac shot a shocked look at me, then turned to Ava. “Perrie’s… looking for me? I mean, we didn’t know her name. But she’s been looking for me?”

“Well,” Ava said, “not looking exactly, but she probably wants to talk to you.”

“Why?” Lilac asked, his voice an octave higher than normal.

Ava shrugged. “She said she saw a Redwood wolf and thinks he might be her mate.” She looked carefully at Lilac. “Am I right? Is that you?”  
 Shit. This wasn’t good. It was one thing if Lilac had some crazy idea that this random wolf might be his mate—he was wrong all the time—but if Perrie *also* thought she and Lilac were mates, then that was a bad sign. How the hell were we going to tell Marta about this? She was going to be crushed.

Ava’s eyes had lost their wary flash, and when she spoke, her voice sounded gentler. “Come on, Redwood, I’ll take you to her. You two should talk.”

But when I started forward, too, Ava raised her eyebrows questioningly.

“My sister is coming with me,” Lilac said, answering her unspoken question.

“Fine,” Ava said with a shrug. She turned and led us both toward the Samara camp.

There was a large campfire in the middle of the clearing, and a couple dozen wolves were sitting around it. Despite it being outdoors, there was something cozy about it. Someone had a guitar, and they were singing “Silent Night,” though I thought I heard a couple of slurred voices in the mix as pack members drank something out of mugs.

Ava stepped over to the girl we’d seen—Perrie—who was looking down, fiddling with her camera.

“Hey, Perrie,” Ava called.

The girl looked up, and—closer now—I could see how pretty she was. She couldn’t have been much older than us. She was on the shorter side, but she was willowy with warm brown skin and black-brown braids that swung halfway down her back. I had to admit that she was beautiful.

*Dammit.*

“Hey, Ava,” the girl said with a smile that lit up her face. Then her gaze moved past Ava, and when she saw Lilac, her big brown eyes widened in recognition.

Seeing this, Ava smirked. “This guy wants to talk to you. Maybe you should use your tent for some privacy. You know how everyone around here likes to gossip.”

Perrie nodded, but she didn’t seem to be truly listening. Her eyes were on us, and she looked back and forth between Lilac and me.

“Yeah, this way,” she murmured, and waved us toward a small tent beneath a pine tree.

Lilac followed right away, but—not sure what to do—I stayed rooted to the spot alongside Ava.

Ava glanced over at me. “So,” she started, clearing her throat, “how’s Xavier?”

“Oh, he’s good,” I said awkwardly. “Christmas was fun.”

Ava nodded. “That’s good. You all deserve it after all the effort you went to for the Samara pack.”

I nodded, still feeling awkward. “Sure,” I said vaguely.

Ava lingered for a moment longer. “Well,” she said, gesturing toward the group around the fire. “I’m going to…”

“Sure,” I said quickly, and watched her walk away across the clearing. *Not awkward at all, Violet, good job.*

I still wasn’t sure what to do, but my curiosity was burning, so I stepped closer to the tent to try to catch a bit of the conversation between Lilac and Perrie. But between the group singing around the fire and the closed tent flap, I wasn’t getting much. I could hear voices but couldn’t make out any words until I heard Lilac say, “—I guess. We’ll stay in touch.”

Perrie murmured something, then I heard her say, “—sure, here’s my number.”

I’d leaned closer to hear more when the zipper started to open, and I realized that they were about to come back out. I scurried away from the entrance and tried to look deeply interested in the rendition of “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree” being sung around the fire as Lilac and Perrie stepped out of the tent.

Lilac looked around, and when he caught sight of me, he gave me a strange look, like he knew what I’d been up to. But he didn’t say anything as he turned to Perrie.

“I guess we’ll talk later? Maybe?”

Perrie nodded. “Sounds good.”

Lilac turned to me. “Okay, let’s go.”

Confused, I looked over at Perrie, who looked a little uncomfortable standing there, watching us.

But Lilac strode toward me and tugged on my arm. “We’re going, Violet.”

We were quiet on the walk back to the pack house. I was waiting for Lilac to speak first, but when he didn’t, I broke the silence.

“So, what happened?”

Lilac just shrugged.

“Well? Is she your mate?” I asked. “Or isn’t she?”

Lilac shrugged again. “I still don’t know,” he said testily.

I felt a strong sense of relief at that. If Lilac wasn’t sure, then that was the answer. Perrie wasn’t Lilac’s mate. The mate bond was so strong, if it was her, he definitely would’ve known it.

Lilac looked at me with a scowl. “Why are you looking so happy?”  
 “What are you talking about? You should be happy, too.”

“Why in the world would I be happy about any of this?” Lilac asked.

“You’re obviously not mated to Perrie, otherwise you’d know it without a doubt right now.”

“It’s not that easy,” Lilac said, an edge to his voice.

I laughed at this. “What are you talking about? I knew within a second of first seeing Charlie—”

“Don’t project your own experience onto me. Your feelings are not *the* feelings. Your mate bond experience was yours. It’s not all the same.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that I need more time to figure out if she’s really my mate,” he said.

Before I could answer, there was a rustle in the trees off the path, and Charlie stepped out of the forest. He’d clearly come looking for me and had been expecting some kind of confrontation—his expression was melting from “ready to fight” to “what the hell is going on?” I would have found it adorable if I wasn’t so distracted with Lilac’s own emotions.

“Wait,” he said, looking between Lilac and me. “Lilac has a mate now?”

I stopped and stared at him, frozen. How long had he been eavesdropping on us? Then, collecting myself, I shot a look at Lilac. “Well, the thing is—” I started, taking a step toward him.

“Is this the secret?” Charlie asked. “What you were keeping from me?”

I shifted awkwardly on my feet. I did *not* want to have this conversation right now.

“Yeah,” Lilac said, stepping toward Charlie. “I asked her to keep it a secret. I’m sorry she didn’t tell you, but she was doing it for me.”

“Okay,” Charlie said. He looked like he was trying to take it all in. He turned to Lilac, his expression grave. “This is a big deal. Are you okay?”

Lilac frowned, clearly thinking about the question. “I’m not sure. I’m still trying to figure it all out.”

I rolled my eyes. “Can you tell this guy that he’s totally overreacting?”

Charlie looked confused. “What do you mean?” he asked. “Overreacting about what?”

“This girl,” I said. “I mean, if he’s not sure she’s his mate, then she’s definitely not, right? I mean, come on. We knew immediately.”

“Actually…” Charlie began to scuffle his feet in the snow, kicking up flakes of white dust as his eyes looked away from mine awkwardly. “That’s not… a hundred percent true…”

# Episode 3121

Greyson and Xavier turned to look at me, wearing twin masks of confusion.

“What did you say?” Xavier asked. “Did you just suggest we *trap* a vampire-witch?” He shot an incredulous glance at his brother. “And how exactly would we do that?”  
 “I’m not sure about that part,” I admitted, “but Big Mac says she doesn’t think we should try to kill one, so why not try to trap her? That’s a better option anyway, because if we get her alive, we can force her to tell us where the ashes are. And that’s what we need to know. She’s not a lot of use to us dead.”

“Having her not stalking me either sounds damn useful too,” Xavier muttered.

“Okay,” Greyson said warily, “but where would we trap her? And how?”

“I’m not sure,” I said, feeling less certain about the idea by the moment.

Greyson thought for a moment. “Is Hypatia trapped in the Obaltarion?”

“I don’t think so,” I said uncertainly. “I think she just really loves the Obaltarion and doesn’t want to leave… I don’t think she’s bound or anything.”

“But you’re not sure?”

I bit my lip then shook my head. “No.”

Greyson ran a hand through his hair as he took this in. “Well, if the creature out there is a vampire *and* a witch, we should find out whether the same methods used to kill either of those would work on her. I respect Big Mac, but *shouldn’t* kill and *can’t* kill are two different things.”

“I agree,” Xavier said, nodding. “I mean, it’s not easy to do, but a wooden stake has always done the trick for me. Just watch out for splinters. Those wounds are little bastards if they get infected—”

“Maybe we could figure out a way to temporarily trap her,” I cut in. “You know, to get information out of her first?”

“Cali,” Xavier started, an edge to his voice.

“Look, all I’m saying is that Big Mac said what she did for a reason,” I reminded him. “She’s never heard of a way to kill a vampire-witch, so the methods you’re thinking of might not work.”

Xavier gave an unbothered shrug. “Everything and anyone can be killed. We literally killed a demon recently, remember? Trust me on this: there’s always a way.”

“Yeah, I remember, but do *you* remember that killing that demon is exactly why we’re in this mess to begin with?” I pointed out.

Xavier heaved a sigh. “And if we don’t kill this vampire-witch down the line, then we’re going to be in an even bigger mess. This woman has the ashes, and we have to do something about that. You’re bearing the brunt of the consequences, Cali, and we can see it’s wearing on you. I told you, I’m going to do whatever it takes to get them back.” He gave me a long look. “Don’t you want that, too?”

“Of course I do,” I said, an ache in my heart at the look of confusion in Xavier’s eyes. “But I don’t love the idea of jumping right back into battle with another powerful being again. Not after Seluna.” I chewed my lip nervously. “Can we just try trapping her first?”

Xavier shook his head. “*We* don’t have to do anything. I’ll kill her myself.”

I opened my mouth to protest this, but Greyson spoke before I could.

“You’re both right.”

I looked at him in surprise. “What? How can we *both* be right?”

He nodded. “Your point about having to be smart about our plan is right. We need to be strategic, and if we’re going up against something as dangerous as a vampire-witch, then we’re going to need to think things through.”

A warm feeling spread through my chest. I felt bolstered by Greyson’s trust in me.

“But Xavier is right, too,” Greyson went on. “Sometimes the best solution is the most obvious, and we have to get rid of the threat completely. And a vampire-witch isn’t a demon. We’ve killed vampires before, and we’ve killed witches before. Once we find the ashes—or better yet, get them back—we can kill her if we work together.”

I sighed, but I had to admit—even if only to myself—that Greyson had a point. “I guess I’m still just in shock about everything that went down with Seluna. Or I have some PTSD or something. I just keep thinking of it, and it’s hard to forget, because we’re still actively dealing with the ramifications of the demon’s death. It’s just freaks me out to think of getting involved in all that stuff again.”

But maybe that worry was a problem. I didn’t want this vampire-witch to get any more power, or to be able to manipulate us any further. I needed to be bold. I needed to act. Because, at the end of the day, it was Xavier who was the most affected. He was the one being targeted now. I was almost like collateral damage. And there was no way I was going to sit back and let anyone do anything to Xavier.

Now was the time to buck up.

“Fine,” I said with a nod, “we’ll trap her and get the ashes back, then find a way to kill her.”

“That sounds good to me,” Xavier said. His expression was tight, but he seemed pleased to have a concrete plan in place.

“We’ll work with the witches to do more research about how to trap this vampire-witch,” Greyson said, also looking relieved.

“Let’s do it,” Xavier said, and he and Greyson headed out.

I watched them go, then sighed. I was exhausted. Physically, yes, but mostly emotionally. I just felt drained and empty. I needed to recharge, and I realized I also needed some time alone to collect my thoughts.

So I headed upstairs.

In my bathroom, I splashed some cool water on my face, hoping it might rinse away some of the stress and aching anxiety I’d been feeling. But as I looked up at my dripping face in the mirror, I knew it hadn’t done any good. I was worried, and no amount of cold water was going to change that.

I toweled off and headed into my room. Standing in front of my dresser, I pulled down the collar of my shirt and took a good look at the handprint on the back of my shoulder. I squinted at it. Did it look redder than before? It was hard to tell, but maybe the spell Big Mac had just done had made it worse.

What if I was going about this all wrong?

I let go of my collar and rubbed my eyes. Even though the idea of killing anything or anyone made me deeply uncomfortable, I also realized that this vampire-witch seemed unrepentantly intense about hurting us. And it was indiscriminate. She didn’t seem to care who got in the way. With beings like that, we needed to be equally as strong in our reactions.

Xavier and Greyson were right—we were going to have to kill this person. I didn’t love the idea, but deep down—where I was ready to be honest with myself—I knew I wanted her dead too.

God, was this who I was now? Someone who was okay with death? Someone who didn’t care about it?

I sighed and looked into my own dark eyes in the mirror. I had changed. I knew that. But did I regret those changes? I felt I was stronger now than I used to be—stronger than I’d ever been. And I didn’t want to change that. I never wanted to forget the moments in the recent past where I’d found strength and determination I’d never realized I possessed.

Good or not, I was forever changed. I wasn’t the same girl who’d shown up at Xavier’s house all that time ago. I wasn’t naïve anymore. I was a fighter, I knew that now, and I would protect myself, my family, and my mates—no matter what.

My whole life, I’d thought I was so ordinary. Just a normal girl, living a normal life. But that wasn’t true. I wasn’t even human. I was Fae, and not just any Fae. I was part of a powerful and infamous Fae family.

I thought of what Maren had said about my family—how we didn’t have a proud history. And that might have been true, but it was a history that involved fighting when necessary, holding on to family, and being strong as hell. It was in my blood to fight and to be the best, and maybe that was what I needed to tap into now. It felt strange, but I knew I could do it if I remembered that fighting meant protecting the people I loved.

My face was pale and thin, but my eyes shone bright as I stared at my reflection in the mirror. I looked exhausted, but I also looked determined.

I knew what I had to do.

# Episode 3122

**Xavier**

Big Mac hadn’t been as interested in our thoughts about the vampire-witch as I’d hoped. When we’d told her the outline of our plan, she’d only said she’d add “research” to her to-do list. And she’d been pretty snippy about it.

I knew we’d been asking a lot of her lately, but I hoped she got that when we came to her, it was because we had no other options. The image of the handprint on Cali’s back haunted me. Time was running out for her, and I refused to sit by while she suffered at the hands of someone who was after me.

Greyson and I were sitting silently in the study. I held up my glass, looking through it at the fire, letting the amber whiskey distort the flames.

Neither of us had said anything since we’d spoken to Big Mac, but when we came into the study, Greyson had poured the drinks without a word—as though we’d already agreed on it. We were both tense and needed to take the edge off. There had just been so much shit going on.

Greyson dropped onto the couch next to me with a sigh. He clinked his glass against mine—the sound loud in the quiet room—and gave a mirthless chuckle.

“Merry fucking Christmas to us, huh?” he said darkly.

Something about this amused me, and I laughed. “For sure.”

Greyson took a deep pull of liquor. “Is there anything we’re missing here?”

“What do you mean?”  
 “Is there anything else we can piece together from our end? We’ve got the witches doing everything they can, but that doesn’t mean we just have to sit on our asses waiting for them to figure it all out.”

“That’s true,” I muttered. I turned my glass thoughtfully in my hand. “I’m doing everything I can to remember that damn Duquette job.”

“Anything?” Greyson asked.

I shook my head. “Not much. It just doesn’t stand out to me. It was just so standard.”

“Is there *anything*, though?” Greyson asked. “Even something small, something that struck you as a little odd?”

I frowned. “I guess I thought it was strange that someone would hire a mercenary with my reputation to find such a normal-looking family.”

“What do you mean? Normal how?”

I shrugged. “They were just a regular family, living outside Santa Cruz. There wasn’t anything unique or strange about them—which I guess is kind of strange. Just a mom, dad, a kid.” I shook my head. “Honestly, I thought it was an easy job. Except…”

Greyson looked at me quickly. “Except what?”

I frowned deeper, trying to remember. “It did take me longer to find them than it should have. I remember thinking that when I was on the job. For such a normal family and the population of the city, it should have taken me a couple of days to find them, tops. But it ended up taking more than a week.”  
 Greyson took this in. “Do you think that whoever is using those cloaking spells now might have used one on the Duquettes way back when you were working on that job?”

I stared at him, shocked. I hadn’t ever considered the possibility, but now that I thought about it, it kind of made sense. “The cloaking—if that’s what it was—wasn’t as intense as what we’re experiencing now. But… maybe. It would make sense, I guess. I worked on the job a few years ago—maybe back then, this witch wasn’t as skilled. Maybe her cloaking wasn’t as strong. But it might explain why it took me so long to find the Duquettes. Even though it didn’t even register at the time as having anything to do with magic.”

“That must be it,” Greyson said, clearly warming to the idea. “They must have known this witch, even way back then. It might even be why you were hired to find them in the first place. Because of their connection to magic.”

“Maybe,” I admitted.

Greyson took another sip of his whiskey. “I think we should find out what happened to this family after you found them. That might be the biggest clue.”

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking the same thing. I even put out a couple of discreet feelers. But it’s been tough,” I said.

“Why?” Greyson asked.

“It’s just this case. Since people have started dying, no one wants to touch it.”

“Is there anything else you can do to get information?” Greyson asked.

I nodded. “Yeah, I have a couple of contacts that are pretty deep underground. They know how to protect themselves and have never been known to say no to the right price. Money talks with these guys.”

This stopped me, and I thought of Marvin, who hadn’t even wanted money. He’d been too scared.

But I couldn’t think of that now, and I forced myself to push the thought out of my mind. I couldn’t hold back—not now. I had to use all the resources at my disposal to get to the truth here. I had no choice; it was for Cali

Greyson tossed back the last of his drink and set his glass down on the table next to the couch. “I’m going to turn in. There’s not much more we can do tonight.”

He got to his feet and slapped my back in a brotherly way.

I nodded up at him. “Yeah. We’ll figure this out.”

“Night,” Greyson said, heading out.

I knew I should go up to bed too, but I just felt too wired. I wasn’t sure how I was ever going to close my eyes.

Maybe I needed to go for a run or something. I’d already gotten to my feet before I remembered the run-in I’d had last time I’d gone out.

Staying in was the smart choice, but I had to admit that deep down, I was spoiling for another confrontation with that asshole. I just really wanted to take care of her—now.

But I had to think. I remembered what Greyson and Cali had said about being strategic about this, and I tried to take a deep breath. This was about more than just eliminating a target—it was about finding out where those ashes were. *That* was what was going to help Cali, and though I might’ve been a hothead a lot of the time, I knew I could be smart when it came to protecting Cali.

And that was what I was going to have to do this time.

But I was still restless. I got to my feet and tossed back my whiskey. I set my glass down next to Greyson’s and started to pace the first floor of the house. It was dim and silent. Everyone seemed to be in bed now, and the quiet reminded me of the old days when it had been just Colton and me in this house.

The house had seemed too big at times, but I’d liked the solitude. I’d never had to account for myself then, or tell anyone where I was going or when I’d be back. I hadn’t had my name on the chore wheel that Torin had taped to the fridge.

I missed that life a little. It wasn’t that I wanted to go back to it—not now that I had Cali in my life—but I had to admit that I was a little nostalgic for those simpler times. Sometimes everything seemed so complicated these days.

I strode into the living room and over to the Christmas tree, whose lights were reflected softly in the windows. I walked behind the tree to turn the lights off, but I stopped when I saw the gift that Ava had handed me.

It felt like that had happened days ago, but it had only been that morning.

I picked up the box and gave it another shake. But—again—it didn’t sound like anything was inside. I hesitated, wondering if I should open it. Ava had asked me to wait until Christmas, but now it was nearly over, so I ripped off the paper and pulled the box open.

Inside, I found a single strip of photos, the kind you got at a photobooth. It was Ava and me, years ago. Clearly she had kept these somewhere safe somehow—a relic of a more innocent time.

I stared down at the photos. In one we were staring straight ahead, like we were taking photos at the DMV, and in another we were smiling like loons. The third photo was of Ava surprising me with a kiss, and the fourth photo was me surprising her back, tackling her to make out.

If I remembered correctly, it had taken us a while to exit that photobooth after those photos had been taken.

What did this mean? Was she reaching out? Was this an olive branch?

Then I saw the card.

*No matter what, thank you for the good memories. I’ll always treasure them.*

I looked at the card, then at the photos, and was hit with an unexpectedly sharp feeling of loss.

The way she had written the card… It felt like she was saying goodbye.

Was she? Was Ava admitting that we were finally done?

And if she was, why the hell did that make me feel so bad?

# Episode 3123

When I opened my eyes the next morning, it was with a plan. Today, I was going to be more proactive. I was going to enact my plan with all the Fae in the house.

Throwing back my covers, I got to my feet. The air in my room was freezing, and the floor felt like ice, but that didn’t bother me. It just made me feel more awake. I took a quick shower and pulled out a clean pair of jeans and a sweater.

As I got dressed, I tried to think of what I was going to say. I knew I couldn’t do what I wanted to do alone, but I wasn’t completely sure how I was going to convince the others.

I slipped on a pair of warm woolen socks and slid into my shoes, then hurried down the stairs. In the living room, I found Torin standing in the middle of the room, bossily directing Jay, Lola, Ravi, Sage, Zainab, and a handful of other pack members.

“I need those lights down sometime today, Jay!” Torin boomed, making Jay roll his eye.

“What do you want me to do with all the ornaments?” Sage asked.

“Put them away!” Torin said, pointing toward a red- and green-colored bin. “There are protective sleeves for each of them!”

I stared at the scene in shock. I had never in my life seen Christmas decorations taken down so soon after Christmas. Growing up, we’d always enjoyed them for at least a week or so, but Torin seemed to be on a mission.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Cleaning up,” he said briskly.

“But Christmas was, like, five minutes ago,” I said, still stunned.

Torin shook his head. “It’s over, Cali! It’s time to clear the palate for the next holiday! We only have a week to prepare for New Year’s Eve! Sage! When you’re done with the ornaments, I want you on holly and wreaths!”

“What about these, Torin?” Zainab asked, walking over with her arms full of bunches of mistletoe. There had to have been a hundred in her arms.

“Did you get them all?” Torin asked.

“I think so,” Zainab said wearily. “God, Torin, there were so many.”

Sage laughed and walked over to Zainab. “You know what I have to do, right?” she asked, peppering Zainab with kisses.

Zainab grabbed for her mistletoe as it stared to slip from her arms. “What are you doing?” she demanded.

“I have to get this in while the mistletoe is still around,” Sage explained.

“Enough with the hijinks!” Torin barked over his shoulder as he strode out of the living room.

I followed him into the kitchen, where he pulled open the fridge. He started pulling out the leftover roast, ham, and turkey. Next came the containers of mashed potatoes, gravy, and stuffing. Then the pies.

“We have to get rid of all this so we can prepare for the next big feast!” he said. “We need this food gone as soon as possible.”

Jay had followed us into the kitchen, and he perked up as Torin said this. “I’m on it!” he said, pulling the mashed potatoes toward him.

Lola rolled her eyes at him as she joined us in the kitchen. “If you get sick from eating Christmas dinner for breakfast, I’m not taking care of you.”

Jay scoffed through a mouthful of cold mashed potatoes. “Are you doubting my iron stomach?”

Lola laughed. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

I grabbed a roll from the bag Torin tossed onto the counter. “Can I help with anything?”

“Sure,” Torin said, his head half in the fridge. “I heard there are old New Year’s Eve decorations in the basement. I sent Maren down to look for them, but she’s taking a while. Can you go see if you can help her?”  
 “Sure,” I said, swallowing my bite of roll. I’d been meaning to talk to Maren, but I’d been putting it off, so this push helped.

I headed down to the basement and looked around. I didn’t see anyone at first, but then from the far end of the basement I heard a muffled bang.

“*Shit!*” someone hissed.

I headed in that direction and found the door to a storage room open. Light shone from a dim bulb overhead, and Maren was standing on one foot, holding the other foot in her hand.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Stubbed my toe on a box,” Maren muttered. Then she looked up, and when she saw it was me, her expression closed up. “I’m fine,” she said coldly.

The tension meter shot up immediately. If I was going to ask Maren for a favor, this wasn’t a good start. I was going to have to ease into it.

“Where are those decorations supposed to be?” I asked, looking around.

“I have no idea,” Maren said stiffly. “I’ve been looking, and all I’ve found is a wine cellar and a trunk I couldn’t get open.”

“Yeah, that kind of tracks. I didn’t really believe Xavier had a big trove of holiday decorations stored away down here.” I thought for a moment. “But Colton might have.”

That also seemed unlikely. It seemed more likely that Colton would have some holiday-themed unmentionables down here. I shuddered. Those I would NOT want to see. Anything but that.

Maren turned her back on me and started to look around the storage room. Torin had sent me down here to help, so I started looking too.

On the bottom rack of a large shelving unit, I found a stack of papers that looked like they might have been old records from the pack. In another box I found a dusty photo album, and when I opened it, I found a large black and white photograph of a group of people standing together in front of a house. It looked like it could have been taken years and years ago. I had questions about both of those finds, but now wasn’t the time, so I put them away to look at later. It would be cool to learn more about the history of the Redwoods.

But there were *no* decorations.

I walked over to Maren, who was bent over digging through a large box.

I cleared my throat. “So, I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

Maren gave a small hum, indicating she had heard me, but she didn’t look up from her box.

I pressed on. “You know the Fae world better than I do, and I was hoping to get your thoughts on something.”

This made Maren look up, and her expression was surprised. “You really want to talk to me about the Fae world? Not your mom or your sister or whoever? Wouldn’t they be better for this?”

“Maybe, but it’s just that there’s a thing happening with this vampire-witch, and it’s a threat to some of us. We think she’s targeting us.”

I didn’t know how much I wanted to tell Maren, so I kept it short and to the point.

Maren’s eyes opened wide. “Shit. That’s not good. What did you do to piss off someone as powerful as that?”

“So you’ve heard of those kinds of beings?”

Maren nodded. “Yeah, I’ve heard of them, but I’ve avoided them for as long as I’ve been in this realm. They’re not something you want to mess with.”

“Yeah, that’s the impression I’ve gotten, too,” I said dryly. “And we didn’t cross her on purpose. I don’t even really know why she’s targeting us, but I was hoping…”

Maren looked at me, confused. “What? Do you want my advice about what to do? If so, my advice is to run away as fast as you can.”

“That’s not an option,” I said. “Others are in danger, too. People I love.”

Maren sighed and looked back into her box. “I guess I can understand that. If they came after Fenrir, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do.”

I nodded. I knew Maren loved her son, and I could relate to that kind of all-consuming love. That was one thing we had in common—we would both do anything for our family.

But the thought of family reminded me that my family had done something awful to Maren’s family, sometime in the past.

“I’m hoping there’s a way to fight back using Fae magic,” I said, trying to refocus.

Maren shrugged. “If there is, then I haven’t heard of it.”

That was discouraging. Maren probably knew more about Fae magic than most, since she’d grown up in the Fae world, and I’d intended to ask her to work with my mom and Artemis. Like when we’d all worked together to save the Obaltarion.

I just needed to ask, so I took a deep breath. “What if we all worked together?” I said in a rush. “We’ve done it before.”

Maren looked up at me, shocked, and for a long moment she didn’t say anything. I stood watching her, waiting anxiously for her answer.

Finally, she spoke. “You’re really asking me to help you? After your family killed mine?”

# Episode 3124

Shocked, I stared at Maren. What the hell? My family had *killed* her family? *That* was what my family had done to hers?

“I—I’m sorry, Maren. I didn’t know. I really didn’t,” I stuttered out in a shaking voice.

Maren closed her eyes with a sigh. “Fine, you didn’t know. But now you do.” She looked up at me. “So you can imagine why I’d be reluctant to knowingly help a Wrenthorn with my magic. I have a lot of big feelings about that.”

I nodded. I did understand, but I had no idea what to say. I felt awful that my family had been the cause of any hurt, but—at the same time—I had *no idea* what happened.

Some of my confusion must have shown on my face, because Maren’s expression softened slightly.

“I know you weren’t part of that past,” she said a little reluctantly. “You did only just find out about your Fae heritage. And probably even more recently found out you were a Wrenthorn by birth. I get that, but it’s still really hard for me.”

“I totally understand,” I said, nodding gravely. “And knowing this now, I wish I didn’t have to ask you—I know you don’t owe me anything. And I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t a pretty desperate situation. But it is, so I have to ask. I hope you understand that. Lives are at stake here, Maren.”

She rubbed her forehead. “I just don’t know. I don’t know if I even can.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Magic is tied to emotion, Cali,” Maren explained wearily. “I don’t want to say yes, and then hurt someone by accident because I can’t control how I feel. And from what you’re describing, this sounds like it’s going to take some big magic.”

I nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense. I remember times when my emotions were running high, and my magic seemed more powerful…”

“And less under your control, right?” Maren asked.

“Yeah. I just didn’t know that happened to everyone,” I said.

“That’s how it works.”

“Right, I get that. Well, thanks for telling me, Maren, and I understand if you don’t want to help,” I said. I was trying to keep my voice neutral, but it was hard. I was really disappointed with the outcome of our conversation, and shaken by what I’d just learned.

When I got back upstairs, Torin was waiting for me.

“Where are the decorations, Cali?” he asked.

“Oh, we didn’t find any,” I answered. “Sorry.”

Torin looked like he was going to keep after me, but I turned my back and walked outside, onto the porch.

“Hi, honey. Why don’t you come sit with us?”

I turned to see my parents sitting on the porch bench, blankets across their laps. They both held mugs of coffee, which billowed steam into the cold morning air, and they looked pleased to see me.

My mom scooched over, offering me a space to sit between them. But her smile turned to a look of concern as I sat down.

“Cali?” she asked. “Are you okay?”

I nodded absently. “Everything just seems so complicated, Mom.”

She frowned. “It can be. What do you mean, sweetheart?”

I sighed. “Every time I start to think I’m getting a handle on things—like my Fae powers—suddenly something happens, and all this new information comes to light.”

My mom glanced at my dad, and I could feel them exchanging a look full of meaning. They used to do this all the time when I was a kid. They were so connected it seemed like they could communicate even without speaking, and now if felt like she was giving him a silent message.

And then, as if on cue, my dad got to his feet. “Well, I think I’ll go inside and see if I can help Torin with anything.”

He walked into the house, leaving me alone with my mother, who turned to me, her expression serious.

“Okay, what’s going on, Caliana? Is this about your Fae powers? Are they on the fritz because of the Seluna mark?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “No, not yet anyway. I just thought I’d had a good idea, but it’s not going to work.”

“What was your idea?” Mom asked.

“I wanted to use our group Fae powers against the person who’s trying to hurt Xavier and me.”

“That *is* a good idea,” Mom said. “Why won’t it work?”

“Because when I went to ask Maren if she’d help, she told me that our family killed hers.” I looked up at Mom, curious about what her reaction would be. I wasn’t even sure if she knew this information.

My mom didn’t look surprised, but she did look quite upset, and I suddenly felt bad for bringing it up.

“I’m sorry, Mom—”

“Don’t apologize,” she said quickly. “You have a right to know about this. This is your history.” She sighed. “Maren’s right—our family, the Wrenthorns, caused a lot of deaths in the Fae world during their bid for power. I wasn’t a part of that aspect of our family life, and part of the reason why I wanted to marry Kadmos so badly was because I hoped our marriage would stop the worst of it, but the truth is that while I didn’t hurt anyone, I also didn’t do very much to help those being hurt.”

“Oh, Mom…”

“Our family is complicated,” Mom said. “All families are, but no family with a great deal of power acquires that power by keeping their hands clean.”

I nodded. “I wouldn’t normally press this kind of thing with Maren, not when it makes her so upset, but we really need all the Fae magic we can muster if we want this plan to work.”

My mom frowned. “What exactly is the plan?”

“I was thinking about how the Fae worked together to save the library, and we also once trapped a poltergeist with a Fae triangle. We’ve done stuff like this before, and I was hoping we could do something like that with the vampire-witch—”

“A *vampire-witch*?” my mom repeated, looking shocked. “Those exist?”

That was the moment I remembered I hadn’t told her about this development. “Yeah, we sensed a vampire-witch last night with those medals Xavier got.”

“Oh, Cali,” my mom murmured. She looked so worried it made my own heart beat fast.

“We’re hoping we can trap this being, but we aren’t sure exactly how to do it. I thought we could use the triangle thing again, but the last time we used it, Astrid was here, too. So I wasn’t sure if we’d need another Fae to help.”

My mom nodded. “That’s true. We probably would need another Fae to take Astrid’s place, but—I don’t know.” She was quiet for a moment, thinking. “I’m not sure a triangle could hold something as powerful as a vampire-witch, Cali.”

“But could we try?” I asked.

“With Artemis, Torin, you, and me, we could try a circle,” she conceded. “Though having a fifth Fae would be better. It would make the magic stronger.”

“Well, we can’t depend on Maren, but we’re still going to have to try. We really don’t have that much time,” I admitted.

This seemed to worry my mom, and her expression turned alarmed. “Has something new happened, Cali?” she asked. “Something else?”  
 I hesitated, but I hated to lie to my mom. “The handprint on my shoulder hurt last night when we did the spell on the medals—”

“Oh, Cali!” she cried. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’m okay now,” I told her quickly. “I’m okay for now.”

My mom’s face was pale, but the cold December day made her cheeks look rosy. “So we do have to do this now.”

“I think so,” I said.

She nodded. “I’ll go and get Artemis and Torin,” she said, pushing back the blanket and getting to her feet.

“Good,” I said, feeling nervous. I trusted my mom, of course, but I was nervous. It was my plan, but I just hadn’t expected it to happen so soon. I watched as my mom disappeared inside, then snuggled into the blankets as a bitterly cold wind whipped up.

I pulled the blankets tighter around me as I started to shiver. It was cold—it *was* winter, after all—but I suspected I might’ve been shivering because of more than just the cold. I was scared, too. I didn’t know what this plan was going to bring about, or whether it was a good idea. But right now, it was all we had to try to stop this vampire-witch woman and maybe, just maybe, have a chance at getting the ashes back.

And protect Xavier.

When the door opened again, I turned to ask my mom if she was ready, but it wasn’t my mom standing in the doorway. It was Maren, and she had a blazing, determined look in her eyes.

“Maren?” I asked.

“I’ll do it,” she said.

“What?” I asked, baffled.

She nodded. “I’ll do what you asked. I’ll help you.”

# Episode 3125

Heading inside, I looked around for my mates. Greyson was nowhere to be found, but I came across Xavier in the kitchen, making himself a cup of coffee.

“Hey, what’s up?” he asked, seeing the tense look on my face.

“We’re going to try to use a Fae circle to find the vampire-witch,” I told him quickly. “And if that works, we’ll try to trap her.”

This was clearly *not* the answer Xavier had expected, and he stared at me for a moment. Then he glanced toward the door, looking a little nervous. “Maybe you should wait for a bit,” he said.

“For what?” I asked.

“For Greyson to come back, just to have a little backup before you try to trap a vampire-witch.”

“Where is he?”

Xavier nodded toward the door. “He’s out on patrol, running the perimeter. He won’t be gone much longer.”

But I didn’t want to wait. Not even a moment longer. “We’ll just go try the Fae circle first to see if we can even locate the vampire-witch.”

“Cali—”

“I want to know if it’s possible,” I said.

He frowned. “Wait, are you talking about that mushroom circle thing you were telling me about?”

“No, that’s not a *fairy circle*, that’s a *fairy ring*.” I laughed at the dumbfounded expression on his face. “I know it’s confusing, but just go with me on this, okay? The fairy circle is the one we can use to locate someone.”

“What makes you think this will work?” he asked. “Big Mac’s magic can’t even find this person.”

“I know, but we’re using Fae magic. That’s different. Maybe it can work in a way that Big Mac’s can’t,” I explained.

“Maybe,” Xavier muttered, holding his coffee cup. He took a sip and put the cup down on the counter. “But I’m going with you. I want to be there in case something goes wrong.”

“Fine,” I said with a nod.

Xavier followed me out of the house and down the porch steps. In the front yard, Maren had gathered the rest of the Fae in the house, and they were setting up the circle.

With a bone-cracking sound, Xavier shifted into his wolf form in preparation for whatever was about to happen. I walked over to where Artemis and my mom stood. Torin and Maren stood across from me, and—as one—we all joined hands.

“Okay,” my mom said. “We’re meant to all think about the person we’re trying to find, and—in theory—a wisp will appear and lead the way to her.”

“And this is just a test run,” I explained. “If a wisp appears, it means this method might work in the future, and we can try it again with more backup present. We will not engage with a wisp if it appears.”

I glanced at Xavier—he was right. We couldn’t do this without Greyson.

Everyone nodded silently and bowed their heads, concentrating.

I could feel my magic starting to tingle. It was working—I was almost sure it was working. Something was happening—the air seemed to be almost whispering to me.

I closed my eyes and tried to picture the dark figure I’d seen in the footage from the Vanguard security cameras. I tried to picture the coat with the gold buttons, but then, without warning, the handprint on my back began to heat, and I dropped my mom’s and my sister’s hands with a hiss of pain.

Struggling to take a breath as the waves of pain crashed over me, I dropped to the ground.

“Cali?”

“Sweetheart!”

Artemis and my mom dropped down next to me, their faces tense with fear, but as they spoke to me, I could feel the magic start to dissipate.

*Dammit*. It was gone.

Artemis slipped her hands under my arms and helped me to my feet.

“Are you okay?” my mom asked anxiously.

I nodded. “Yeah, I think so,” I said. I was still dizzy, and I swayed on my feet as I stood, but I looked around the circle. “Did anyone sense anything? Did a wisp appear? Did they say anything?”

No one responded.

“I don’t think there was time for anything to happen, Cali,” Artemis said gently.

“It might not have just been that,” Maren put in.

“What do you mean?” my mom asked.

“It might not have worked because we don’t know anything about this person except that they have a coat with gold buttons. That’s not a lot to go on.”

My mom nodded. “That might be true. When we used this kind of magic to find Artemis, we knew her name. We could all picture her face.” She thought for a moment. “This kind of magic might not be strong enough to find this vampire-witch without more information.”

“Shit,” I murmured to myself.

I turned and looked at Xavier, who was standing behind me, watching me steadily with his wide, blue wolf eyes.

*I really thought it would work.*

*Don’t beat yourself up about this, Cali*, he said gently. *It’s not like this was our only shot. We have the witches working on another way. Maybe they’ll find this being’s name and you all can try it again.*

*Yeah, maybe*, I said doubtfully.

Xavier shifted back to human and came to my side, taking over the effort of helping me stand straight.

“Let’s get you inside,” he said quietly.

I nodded dejectedly, but before I could take a step toward the house, I heard Torin gasp.

“Look!”

I looked up and saw a wisp zip over my head.

“Wait! It did work!” I cried, pointing. The wisp zoomed back and forth two feet over my head.

I knew this was meant to be an experiment to find out if our magic would work… I knew that, but seeing the wisp right in front of us… Did it mean the vampire-witch was nearby? Could Xavier be in danger? Could it mean the ashes were close too? Could we finally see the person who was taunting us?

Filled with a sudden burst of energy, I took off before anyone could stop me.

The wisp led me into the forest, and I followed it.

“Stop, Cali!” Xavier called after me. “We can’t just run to wherever this vampire-witch is without a plan!”

I hesitated on the edge of the trees. Xavier was right about that, but… I couldn’t lose this chance with the wisp. What if I could spot the vampire-witch and see her face?

Behind me, I heard four feet racing after me. Xavier had transformed back into his wolf form, and when he caught up with me, he lowered himself so I could climb onto his back.

“Let’s follow the wisp and just see where it leads,” I said.

Xavier made a low growling sound. *No. You explicitly said you weren’t going to do this.*

*But what if we see her?* I asked him. *What if she’s nearby? This is killing me, Xavier.*

He growled, but then said, *As soon as I sense a threat, I’m turning around and getting you the hell out of there. I don’t care what you want, I’m not carrying you into danger.*

*Okay*, I said, though I wasn’t sure if I really meant it. It just suddenly felt so close, and I hated the idea of not being able to actually find this person when it seemed like we were on the right track.

When he was certain I was secure on his back, Xavier raced off into the trees. After a little while, I saw a shadow appear and looked over my shoulder to see that Artemis had joined us. She was running behind Xavier, working hard to keep up.

I kept my eyes on the wisp, directing Xavier when we needed to turn or cross streams. My heart was beating hard as we moved, and I wondered if this was it. Was this the moment I was finally going to face the tormenter who wanted to hurt me and my mate?

I didn’t know what lay ahead, so I tried to gather all the magic I could within me. Whatever was about to happen, I wanted to be ready. I thought back to the conversation I’d had with myself the night before. I’d promised myself that I would embrace my warrior nature, that I would fight back. I knew I could do it—I’d already proven to myself that I could do it—and I was ready to do it again.

My eyes were trained on the wisp, so when it slowed down, I tightened my grip on Xavier. It slowed, and then stopped, hovering over something about fifteen feet ahead of us.

Xavier got the message and slowed down, too. He walked slowly toward where the wisp hung in the air, approaching it with caution.

Artemis, Torin, Mom, and Maren were next to us now. Artemis looked over. She indicated that she was going to go around the side, and an instant later she disappeared into the shadowy forest.

I ducked low on Xavier’s back and took a deep breath, holding on as tightly as I could to my gathered magic. I strained to see into the distance, and suddenly something moved. Or… I *thought* something moved. It was like a dark blur—almost exactly like the dark blur in the Vanguard surveillance video.

My heart thundered in my ears. Holy shit! We’d done it! The wisp had led us right to it. We’d found the vampire-witch.

I could feel Xavier’s pulse racing as I gripped onto him, and I held my breath as he walked slowly toward the blur.

*Xavier, wait*, I mind linked. *Let us use the Fae trap!*

Then, without warning, and before any of us could do anything, the blur became a mass of dark shadows and shot directly toward us.

# Episode 3126

**Greyson**

I’d checked the entire perimeter of our land and confirmed what I had hoped to find: there had been no breaches of our borders. I didn’t even smell any strangers nearby—no wolves, no vampires, no witches. All I picked up was the scent of my own pack, and a few wandering Samara wolves who were no longer a threat.

I wasn’t exactly resting easy now, but I was glad I hadn’t found anything on our land. There was still the overwhelming pressure to keep everyone in the pack safe right now, and I couldn’t sit still without doing at least one patrol myself.

I’d just started back toward the pack house when I picked up another scent—and this one was fresh. It was my brother’s. What the hell was he doing out here?

Turning slightly, I started to follow the path of the scent. What had brought him out here? He’d known I was out on patrol—had he come out to help me? Or had he gone out for a run to clear his head? I knew he did that sometimes, but that didn’t mean now was the best time. Xavier was supposed be at the house keeping an eye on Cali while I was gone. We had agreed that one of us would always be with her until this vampire-witch situation was taken care of.

But then I picked up on Cali’s scent, too, and my heart rate kicked up. She was out here too?

Artemis’s own distinctive Fae scent rounded out the trail, and my instincts told me that whatever this meant, it wasn’t good. I didn’t know why exactly, but I had a bad feeling about the three of them being out in the forest.

I picked up my pace and started to race down the path, following the scents. They had all been traveling together, so that was something.

Then I heard a shout, and I dropped my head, sprinting even harder. Whatever was happening, I *had* to get to them. I reached a copse of trees, but I didn’t have time to go around, so I rammed into them, breaking through.

I came out on the other side just in time to see Xavier—with Cali on his back—dodge an attack from a blurry, shadowy shape.

Confused, I stopped and blinked, wondering if my eyes were playing tricks on me. I could see Xavier and Cali clearly enough, but the thing coming after them looked like some kind of shadow monster.

What the hell was this thing doing out here in the middle of the forest?

Without another instant of hesitation, I raced forward.

*What the hell is going on here?* I demanded.

*No time to explain*, Xavier said, his voice flint-hard. *Just help me fight this thing.*

*Don’t you remember?* I told him. *We can’t fight this thing head-on.*

*Terrific*, Xavier growled.

*We need to do a Fae circle*, Cali panted. *To trap it.*

*Are there enough of you?* I asked her.

*There’s me and Artemis and…* *My mom, Torin, and Maren should be close*, Cali said, looking around through the trees.

Before anyone could make a move, the shadow monster suddenly charged toward us, and we all scattered to avoid it. Artemis shot a burst of magic over her shoulder at the thing, but it didn’t seem to do anything.

“We need to do the Fae circle!” Cali screamed, sliding off Xavier’s back.

The shadow monster was now charging toward her, so I galloped to her side and scooped her onto my back, getting her out of the monster’s path just in time.

“*Shit!*” she cried in surprise, hanging onto me for dear life.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something else rushing at us from the forest. I wheeled around to see the new threat, but it wasn’t a threat: it was just Maren.

Maren paused at the edge of the small clearing and held up a bow. It looked like one of Artemis’s, but Maren clearly knew what she was doing and shot an arrow straight at the monster. The monster dodged the shot, and the arrow missed its mark.

“*Maren!*” Cali screamed.

“We’re coming, Cali!” It was Torin, emerging from behind Maren with Orla.

They ran to join Cali and Artemis, and the five of them joined hands. I watched as they all dropped their heads and began to chant. The sound was low, haunting, and it made my head spin.

I turned to look at the shadow monster, which had stopped moving. It was as though the thing had become trapped in place, and the shadowy blur was becoming slightly more resolved. It was coalescing into a figure, almost humanoid. The longer it stayed still, the more solid it became, though the edges were still blurry.

*Are you thinking what I’m thinking?* Xavier asked me.

I looked over at my brother, whose eyes were trained on the figure. *Yep.*

And without another word we both leapt forward, each grabbing hold of half of the figure. I somehow expected my teeth to go through it, like grabbing smoke, but they didn’t. I was able to latch onto something solid, though it filled my mouth with a bitter taste so vile I nearly gagged. But I pulled with all my might, and—next to me—I felt Xavier doing the same.

As it ripped in half, the thing let out an ear-piercing screech, then dissolved, dissipating into vapors.

I sat back for a moment, panting and watching the smoke melt into the morning air. It was only when I determined we were in no further danger that I shifted back to human.

My gaze shot to Cali, giving her a quick once-over to make sure she wasn’t injured. Then I looked between Cali and Xavier and spoke just one word. “Explain.”

Cali took a deep breath. “We used our magic and were able to call a wisp. The wisp led us out here, and that’s how”—she gestured vaguely to where the shadow monster had disappeared—“we found this.”

I stared at her, then at Xavier. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. Are you *serious*? Why would you do that without at least warning me? Why would you do any of this without me?”

“I’m sorry,” Cali said quickly. “I thought we’d just locate the vampire-witch. We didn’t realize that the wisp would lead us to anything, like, right away. I didn’t expect it to backfire.”

“And why did the wisp lead you to this shadow monster instead of the vampire-witch?” I demanded.

“Probably because we based the location magic on that blurry surveillance footage. That was what we all had in our heads, so the wisp did what we asked and found us a nice, dark blur.”

I scowled at her, then at everyone else, frustrated as hell. “I could have helped predict this outcome if anyone had asked me,” I snapped.

“I’m sorry, Greyson,” Cali said again. “I’m so sorry.”

“I know, love. It’s done now, okay?” I said. “I’m just glad you’re all safe. Let’s just get home.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Orla said.

Torin nodded. “Let’s go. I can make everyone some hot chocolates to warm up.”

I smiled. “Thanks, Torin. Good idea.”

Everyone nodded, and we turned and walked silently back to the pack house. Inside, I was about to head upstairs to shower and put on some clothes when Maren stopped me.

“We need to talk.”

I wanted a shower and a pair of pants, but she sounded pretty serious, so I followed her into the small study next to the front door.

As soon as the door shut, she rounded on me. “What the *hell* were you thinking, Greyson?”

I was caught completely off-guard. “What?”

“How could you have invited my son and me to join a pack that is literally the target of a vampire-witch?” she demanded.

I stared at her, shocked. Was this really what she was mad about? “Maren, I don’t know if I get what you’re saying—”

“You know that I would never do anything to put my son in danger, and you almost made me do that by inviting me to join a pack that is in *active danger*,” she said, her cheeks flushed with anger.

I shook my head. “After what happened to Fenrir, I figured the kid needed a pack.”

Maren’s scowl deepened. “He’s half-Fae, too, and he can learn to take care of himself without a pack.”

“He’s half-werewolf, too, in case you forgot,” I said, my voice rising. “You can teach him all about his Fae side, Maren, but he needs a pack to understand that side of his heritage. It’s who he is, too.”

Maren’s eyes narrowed. “That is not for you to decide, Greyson.”

“I know what it’s like to be a werewolf!”

“You might be a werewolf, but you are *not* his father!” Maren snapped. She looked at me, her eyes blazing. “Tell me the truth, Greyson. Do you still think you are?”

# Episode 3127

**Xavier**

As I pulled on jeans and a T-shirt, I thought back to the events of the morning. I was disappointed that the Fae circle thing hadn’t worked—it would have been nice to get this vampire-witch thing taken care of—but I was also kind of relieved. Greyson had been pissed when he’d found out what had happened, and that was probably justified. We had jumped the gun. We’d gone out unprepared, and it had almost gotten us hurt.

I didn’t like being reprimanded by my brother, but I knew I needed to be a lot more careful about that kind of stuff. But it could be hard to balance it all—I was pretty sure I’d dived into the Fae magic ideas so quickly because I felt a lot of responsibility for what was happening to the pack, and especially to Cali. I knew this vampire-witch had something to do with my past, and I was going to need to push harder to get information on exactly what that connection was if I ever wanted to break from it.

Grabbing my phone from my dresser, I dialed Marvin’s number again. It rang so long I was certain the guy wasn’t going to answer, but he finally picked up—after about the tenth ring.

“I told you I can’t help you,” he said abruptly.

“Don’t hang up!” I commanded.

Marvin didn’t answer, but he didn’t hang up either, which was good.  
 “I’m not asking for much, man, I just need some information—”

“Xavier—”

“It’s harmless,” I assured him.

Marvin heaved a sigh. “You don’t get it, man. Whoever this is, they know when someone talks.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“I don’t know how, but they know. And I’m not going to die for your drama, Evers.”

“You already told me something, though, so if you’re already on this person’s radar, then it’s too late anyway, right?” I pointed out.

“Fuck,” he muttered. “I regret ever having met you, you know that, don’t you?”

I gave a bark of a laugh. “Trust me when I tell you that you’re not the first person to say that to me, Marv. But if you want to survive, your only chance is helping me find this person. Now. Before they can do anything to you.”

Marvin sighed again. “Fine. There’s one thing.”

“What?” I demanded.

“I took over Victor’s unfinished jobs after he was killed—”

“Wait, really?” I asked, incredulous. “Isn’t that kind of… tacky, don’t you think? To steal a guy’s business after he’s dead?”

Marvin snorted. “What’s he going to do about it? He’s dead, man.”

I supposed he had a point, and now wasn’t really the time to offer my opinion on Marvin’s sharky behavior. I needed a favor from the guy.

“I was curious after your visit,” Marvin continued, “so I looked up the Duquette file.”

I gripped my phone tighter. “And?” I asked urgently.

“And the whole thing was in Victor’s chicken scratch code writing. You know that shit—only person who could decipher most of it was Victor himself—but I figured out how the job ended.”

“My job?” I asked.

“No, the whole damn thing,” Marvin said.

“Well?”

“It was a bloodbath, man.”

My heart pounded so hard I could feel it at the base of my throat. “What are you talking about?”

“They killed them. The whole family, and it wasn’t pretty. Probably meant it as a message to whoever hired you not to do whatever the Duquettes did to cross this person.”

My thoughts went back to the little kid—the Duquette kid—laughing as he ran through the sprinkler in the front yard. I felt sick to my stomach. They’d killed a kid.

A job *I* had worked on had ended with that kid dying. Did that mean I’d contributed to his death?

That had always been my number one rule when I’d worked as a mercenary: I never killed or hurt kids. And whoever had hired me had forced me to break that rule. I’d been party to the death of a kid.

Whoever had done this, I was going to make them pay. But in the meantime, I needed to figure out how everything that was happening now connected to the Duquette job.

“So, this person—whoever they are—they want revenge. I mean, they’re using a fuck ton of magic that relies on vengeance, so that checks out. It’s probably a family member or a close friend, then. It’s definitely personal. Was there anything on the record about other family?”

“Sorry, that’s all I got, man. That’s all I found in the file,” Marvin said.

“Yeah, okay. Thanks, Marv, really,” I said. “I’m going to do everything I can to find this person and make sure they don’t come after you.”

“You’d better,” Marvin warned. “Or I’m going to come back as a ghost and haunt the hell out of you, man.”

He hung up without another word, and I scowled down at the phone. I wouldn’t have put it past Marvin to spend his afterlife haunting me. He was that petty.

But the call *had* been useful. I’d been able to confirm that what was happening with the vampire-witch was definitely connected to the deaths of the Duquette family.

God, I was going to have to tell Cali about this, and admit to her that a kid had died. It was the last thing I wanted to do, but I couldn’t keep this from her. Not something as important as this. Not now.

I headed out of my room to look for Cali—hell, at this point, I would’ve talked to Greyson if I’d found him.

Luckily, I found Cali first. She was in her room, and she called for me to come in when I knocked.

When I pushed the door open, I found her pulling on her clothes, her hair still wet from the shower. She smiled when I stepped in, and I hesitated. I really didn’t want to tell her this, but I knew I had to.

*Just do it.*

“Hi,” she said, emerging from the neck of her sweater. But her smile faded when she saw the expression on my face. “What is it, Xavier? Did something else happen?”

“Kinda,” I said, running a hand through my hair.

“What?”

“I just got off the phone with Marvin, and he was able to give me some more information about the Duquette job…”

Cali’s eyes searched my face. “Are you okay? Was it bad news?”

“Maybe you should sit down,” I suggested.

The blood drained from Cali’s face. “You’re scaring me, Xavier. You know whatever it is, you can just tell me. Was it bad?”

I nodded. “Well, it’s not good. They were killed. The whole family.”

Cali’s eyes went wide. “Killed? But… Wait, didn’t you say they had a child?”

“Yeah,” I said flatly. I should have known she would pick up on that right away.

It didn’t take long for Cali’s dark eyes to mist over with tears as I knew they would. “How could someone do that?” she asked quietly. “To a whole family? What could they have possibly done to deserve that?”

“I don’t know,” I said wretchedly. “But they obviously crossed someone dangerous.”

Cali nodded, tears falling from her eyes. “And you don’t know who it was who wanted to find the family?”

I shook my head. “It was a long time ago. I wasn’t really great at screening my clientele back then. I should have been more careful, but I didn’t even check who I was doing work for at the time, just took whatever came across my desk that paid well.”

Anger rose in my chest as I spoke. I was angry at myself for being so careless.

“If I had just given a shit, none of this would be happening,” I said furiously.

Cali looked up quickly. “You can’t think that way, Xavier. You did what you had to do to survive. You had no way of knowing that finding a family would put them in danger.”

Ever since the call with Marvin, I’d been tasting the bitter tang of guilt on the back of my tongue, and hearing Cali say those words nearly brought me to tears. I stepped toward her and took her hands, unspeakably grateful for her understanding and comfort.

“What we have to do now is figure out who cared enough about the Duquettes to have nursed this personal vendetta against me. It’s been years, and I wasn’t even directly involved in killing them.”

“That sounds right.” Cali nodded. “I wish we knew more about this person. Anything more would be nice, but knowing why they’re doing this would answer a lot of questions.”

Big Mac stepped into the open doorway. “Well, I think I can help you out with that.”

“Really?” Cali asked, surprised.

Big Mac nodded, looking satisfied. “I finally got in contact with one of my underground connections—”

“Who?” Cali wondered.

Big Mac narrowed her eyes. “Never you mind, who. The important thing is, they think they know someone who can help you find your vampire-witch.”

# Episode 3128

**Charlie**

I was trying to work my way through the laundry list of chores Torin had assigned to me for the post-Christmas cleanup, but it was slow going. I was too exhausted and preoccupied to focus on the many tasks at hand—and the only reason I hadn’t bailed on the whole thing was because I was afraid of incurring Torin’s wrath. It was hard to concentrate on sweeping up fallen pine needles from the Christmas tree when I was so distracted by how bad things were with Violet right now. We’d had such a weird fight the evening before, and I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I’d spent most of my night tossing and turning and replaying the fight over and over again in my head, which meant I hadn’t gotten much sleep, either.

*I don’t think she’s ever been that mad at me before.* She’d stormed off after our fight, and we hadn’t spoken to each other since. It was torture, especially since I could hear her in the kitchen helping to put away last night’s dinner dishes. She was avoiding me like the plague—wouldn’t even look at me. *The longer I let this drag on, the worse it’s going to get.*

Violet left the kitchen, and I quickly followed her.

*Even if she doesn’t agree with my opinion on the whole Lilac situation, we still need to talk this thing out. We can’t leave things so bad between us.*

I followed her into the pantry and saw her standing on her tiptoes, reaching for a roll of paper towels perched on one of the high shelves.

“Allow me,” I said, trying to lighten the mood. I reached up and easily plucked the roll of paper towels from the shelf. Violet spun around to face me and scowled. She tried to snatch the paper towels from me, but I held them up over my head so that she couldn’t reach them. “Come on, Violet. We should talk.”

“I don’t want to talk to you. Apparently, you aren’t even *sure* if we’re mate bonded, so why would I need to talk to someone who isn’t even sure if he’s my mate?”

“Violet, you know that’s not what I meant.” *Note to self: choose my words a little more carefully with Violet when it comes to our relationship.*

“I don’t care what you meant! I heard what you said, and that was enough for me. Now give me those! I need to get back before Torin wonders where I am. He’s giving people time penalties for taking too long on their tasks, and I’m not getting an additional ten minutes of kitchen cleanup duty because of you.”

“I’ll take your penalty if you get one, okay? Can you just listen?”

Violet sighed and stopped trying to snatch away the paper towels. She crossed her arms and sighed. “Fine.”

I paused, trying to think of the right way to word things. It was all so complicated, and I hated that I’d hurt Violet’s feelings. *I love her, but I know that Lilac is going through something really hard, and I just wanted to give her a little insight into that.*

“What I meant was that I think I get what Lilac is going through right now. He feels a bond to someone he just met, but he’s in love with someone else. That has to feel like such a betrayal. When that sort of thing happens, it’s not easy, even if your body knows that you’re bonded to someone. It just takes a while for your brain to catch up and get used to the idea.”

Violet frowned up at me, but she didn’t interrupt or leave, so I figured that was a good sign.

“I know that all of this is hard to hear, and I know that it would be so much easier if we could say that our beginning was all happiness and love, but even you have to admit that it was kind of confusing because of Sandi.”

Violet sighed and slid down the wall to sit on the floor. She looked miserable now, and I felt so bad that I was the reason for that, but I also hoped that she was starting to see my point. Maybe it would help her understand her brother’s situation a little more.

“I think that I feel so guilty about what happened with Sandi that I push it out of my memory, sometimes,” she said. “I don’t really know how to feel about her, still. In some ways, I’m jealous of her—that you loved her—and then that makes me feel even guiltier.”

I sat down beside her on the floor. “I mean, it was hard on her, no question about that, but I’m sure she’s okay by now. People move on. Life goes on. At the time, though, it wasn’t easy for me to do what I did and just up and break her heart. Even though I was starting to truly fall in love with you, I didn’t want to hurt her. Maybe that’s how Lilac is feeling now. He loves Marta, and he doesn’t want her to get hurt.”

“What?”

Violet and I looked up in shock at Marta, who was standing in the pantry doorway.

*Oh my god. How much did she hear?*

I jumped to my feet. “Marta—what did you—are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’m just trying to understand what you were talking about just now—who doesn’t want me to get hurt?”

*Phew. She didn’t hear much—just the end.*

I took a quick look at Violet, who had also gotten to her feet in panic.

“Torin! He’s being such a tyrant about cleaning up, right? But he still wouldn’t want me, or Charlie, or you, to rush things and hurt ourselves,” Violet said.

Marta frowned at that.

“Yeah, I was saying that Torin loves Dani and Violet and Lola and you—all of us, really. He’s becoming a true part of the pack. That’s probably why he would be devastated if any of us got hurt—while cleaning.” I didn’t sound convincing, even to my own ears.

Marta nodded slowly, looking more confused than ever.

“Anyway, we’ll get out of your way.” I held up the paper towels. “We need to get these to the troops.”

I edged past Marta, pulling Violet after me. We scurried away and hid in one of the guest bedrooms, closing the door firmly behind us.

Violet let out a breath. “Holy crap! That was close. I don’t know what I would’ve done if Marta had heard that from us and not Lilac.”

“We have to be more careful about where we talk about that kind of stuff.” My heart rate was only just starting to slow down.

“That was my fault. I was deliberately ignoring you and giving you the silent treatment, and you were doing whatever you could to break through to me, and I appreciate that. It’s just that… The idea that you might not be sure about our mate bond was eating away at me.”

I wrapped an arm around Violet. “I’m so sorry I gave you that impression. That wasn’t what I meant at all. Of course we’re mates! I’m sure of it. And I’m sure that I love you.” I gave her a peck on the cheek.

“I’m grateful that you explained it, though. I think I get it now. I was just hoping that things could work out between Lilac and Marta in an easier way,” Violet said.

“You know, I think it might be best if we both butt out and let them handle it.”

Violet nodded slowly, though I could tell by the look in her eyes that she might not really be into that idea. On the one hand, I didn’t understand why Violet couldn’t just let Lilac handle his own relationship, but then I thought about how I was an only child. I hadn’t the slightest idea what it was like to have a sibling and care about them as much as Violet did Lilac—and he was her twin, at that.

Violet and I were on the mend, but because I still felt so bad about not supporting her last night, I said, “Whatever you want to do, I’m here for you. Always.”

Violet smiled. “Thanks. I’m so lucky to have you as a mate, and I’m sorry for keeping all this from you.”

I nodded somberly, thinking about what I would’ve done in Violet’s position. “I don’t mind that you had to keep your brother’s secret. It wasn’t yours to tell. I get that. But know that you can just tell me that next time. You don’t have to sneak around and tell me half-truths.”

Violet looked surprised. “You mean you really won’t be upset if I tell you that I have a secret that I can’t tell you?”

I nodded. “Of course! As long as it’s not dangerous, and as long as you truly have to keep it a secret, then I trust you one hundred percent.”

Violet smiled and planted a kiss on my lips. Wanting to keep it going, I linked my arms around her waist and walked her back against the wall. Violet relaxed against me and slid her tongue into my mouth, achingly slow. I tunneled my hands under her shirt and pressed them flat against her back, pulling her even tighter against me.

Without a word, we began to walk toward the bed, never breaking apart. The kiss was getting hotter by the second, and all I could think about was what might come next.

Suddenly, the door slammed open, and Lilac came storming in. “What the hell did you two say to Marta?”

# Episode 3129

**Greyson**

“Are you being serious right now?” I was staring hard at Maren, completely blown away by her question. It was such a weird thing to say, especially when she and I both knew that I didn’t believe for a second I was Fenrir’s father.

“Yes, I’m being serious. You’re certainly acting like you’re Fenrir’s father, but we both know that you’re not, since you went behind my back and got the paternity test. There’s no mystery here—you’re not his dad.”

“No, I’m not, but that doesn’t mean I don’t care about the kid. I can want what’s best for him even if he isn’t mine. It’s why I wanted to help with the Aiden situation. And by the way, aren’t you the one who called *me* for help with that little problem?” I was trying my hardest not to hold her comments against her—especially since she hadn’t seemed too worried about me overstepping my bounds when she’d needed me to go up against Aiden.

Maren faltered a bit. “You’re right, I did.” She pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed before looking up at me. “I’m sorry for overreacting. I do truly appreciate your help, but since you’re not a parent, you might not get that I need to have all the information possible before I make any semi-permanent choices that could affect my son’s safety. You know I appreciate your concern for Fenrir, there’s no question about that. I just don’t think this pack is safe right now, and to be honest, I don’t know if it ever was. I left last time because of the revenant thing, and now there’s some rogue vampire-witch out there stalking all of you?” Maren shook her head. “You understand that’s alarming to hear, right?”

I nodded and took her by the shoulders. “I get that. If you don’t want to accept my invitation, that’s fine. It’s always going to be on the table. I’m just worried about you being out in the world alone without any support while trying to raise a kid—a kid who’s half werewolf. I know he’s half Fae, too, but still. Our pack isn’t perfect, and trouble seems to court us, that’s true, but more and more I’m realizing that trouble is always going to follow us—and you—no matter where we go. It seems like it’s some unspoken supernatural code. We can’t get away from it.”

Maren laughed a little and nodded. “You can say that again. I’m resilient; I can figure it all out if I have to. I don’t have much of a choice, anyway.”

“No. And neither do we. So will you at least stay another couple days? I mean, I know the whole vampire-witch thing is bad, but it seems like they only have it out for my brother, not the entire pack. You’ll be safe, I’ll make sure of it. You can stay for a few more days, just in case Aiden goes back to Portland. Let him cool off a bit before you go back and let your guard down.”

Maren nodded. “That sounds like a plan. Thanks, Greyson. I’m going to go check in on Fenrir and make sure Torin hasn’t put him in another sugar coma.” She rolled her eyes good-naturedly.

“Sounds like a good idea,” I said before moving off to find Cali.

I passed Violet on my way. She looked quite upset as she and Charlie walked behind Lilac. *What’s going on there? Maybe I should check in with the younger pack members to make sure everything’s okay with them.* There’d been so much going on lately that I hadn’t had a chance to make sure that they were coping. I made a mental note to touch base with them later. First, though, I wanted to make sure that Cali was okay after the fight in the forest.

Before I could head upstairs, Rishika stopped me so that she could give me an update on how the patrols were going. “Hey, Greyson. I sent Sage and Ravi out for patrols—which they were happy about, since it got them out of cleaning duties. Funny that the threat of danger was preferable to dealing with Torin’s rigid cleaning schedule.”

I chuckled. “Torin’s nothing if not thorough. Thanks, Rishika.”

I turned to go upstairs, but Rishika stopped me again.

“The whole Dick Wigbert thing—you think he’s going to be an issue again? I can’t stop thinking about it.” Rishika cast an uneasy look over her shoulder, almost like she was concerned that Dick was going to show up at any moment. “That whole thing with Artemis and me confronting him, and then him injuring your mom… The guy is really bad news.”

I sighed, hating that she had to worry about that asshole again, but I had to tell her the truth. “Yes, he could be trouble, for sure. He has money and resources on his side, so if he shows up again, we need to learn what exactly he wants and cut it off at the beginning before he can do any damage.”

I was teetering between considering Dick a real threat and just thinking of him as an annoyance that could be taken care of easily enough—but in the back of my mind, all I could think about was how little problems often became bigger ones. That was the last thing I wanted to happen with Dick.

Rishika nodded her agreement. “Do you think you’ll bring Mace or Lucian in on this?”

“I already messaged Mace, but Lucian… I don’t know.” I frowned to myself as I considered what it would mean to work with Lucian on this threat. It was still difficult to wrap my mind around being allied with him after everything that had happened. Especially since if I stopped and thought about it, he was the reason why Cali was in this whole Seluna ashes mess to begin with. I quickly pushed that thought away, not wanting to go too far down that rabbit hole—I’d end up hating Lucian all over again. “I know we have an alliance with the Vanguards, technically, but I’m still not sure how much I can trust him—it’s a little hard not to think of him as the Alpha of the disgraced Vanguard pack. But Dick *did* try to use LIPS to purchase Lucian’s land, so there’s definitely a chance something could go down with the Vanguards.”

I paused, my mind going a million miles a minute as I considered the implications of working with Lucian.

Rishika nodded slowly. She was waiting for an answer. “I get it. It’s definitely a hard call to make. Allies can make or break a pack. That much is for sure.”

“Very true. I’ll talk with Lucian and Zeke as interim Samara Alpha, see what they think. If nothing else, they need to be made aware of this threat.”

“Sounds good. Let me know if you need anything from me,” Rishika said before bending down to pick up a mound of fallen mistletoe. “I’d better get back to it before Torin does his rounds to check our progress. He’s intense.”

I stood back and watched the hustle and bustle of the pack clearing out all the Christmas holiday decor, amused by how thoroughly Torin had whipped everyone into shape. *Torin definitely knows how to light a fire under people’s asses.*

Inevitably, my thoughts drifted back to the matter at hand. I knew that the smart thing to do as Alpha was leverage alliances to our advantage. Reaching out to Lucian at a time like this, despite my misgivings, was a good way to show goodwill—and it would ensure that Lucian would return the favor when the time came. It was just so hard for me to believe that Lucian wouldn’t eventually stab me in the back—he was so damn unpredictable. Hot and cold. Moody. Selfish. He was exhausting.

*Cali might say that Lucian is repentant and lonely, but I know better.* Anyone capable of doing what Lucian had done, allowing people to get hurt and sacrificed just for what he wanted, wasn’t a person to let your guard down around. People like that didn’t just up and change overnight. Sure, Lucian felt bad about everything now, but that was because he’d gotten caught, because things had gone wrong, and because he’d been ruined in the process. If Seluna hadn’t turned into a murderous demon bent on destroying everything and everyone in her path—including Lucian—I doubted that Lucian would’ve cared how his little love affair affected us.

Besides all of that, Lucian still thought of himself as a prince, which begged the question—when would he try to become a king?

I pushed all those thoughts aside and finally headed upstairs to find Cali. As I approached her room, I could hear her talking to someone, followed by Xavier’s reply. I almost rolled my eyes. *Of course Xavier found his way to Cali’s room to clean. Anything to get more time with her.* But then I heard Big Mac’s voice, too. *What the hell are they up to?*

I walked into Cali’s room. “What’s going on?”

Xavier looked up at me. “Pack your bags. We’re going to New Orleans.”

# Episode 3130

**Xavier**

Greyson just stood there in the doorway with a confused look on his face. “New Orleans? What are you talking about?”

“What it sounds like. We have to leave as soon as possible,” I answered, trying to keep the impatience out of my voice. I didn’t think I’d ever get used to having to explain every decision I made to my brother. In the back of my mind, I couldn’t help but think that if he weren’t around, I wouldn’t even have been asking him to go on this trip to New Orleans. I was perfectly capable of dealing with all of this without him, but for Cali’s sake, I knew I had to include him. Not to mention that if we’d just tried to leave without him, he probably would’ve tried to flex his Alpha muscles and put a stop to it.

Greyson held up a hand. “Wait, you’re going with Artemis and Cali? Since when?”

“More like Xavier’s decided to come with us since we have a new development. Big Mac might have a lead on someone who can find this vampire-witch. She knows a person whose magical specialty is finding people, but they’re in New Orleans,” Cali explained.

“Yes, it’s the only real lead we’ve got,” Big Mac added. “It’s a long shot, but it’s worth trying.”

Greyson looked surprised. “Really?”

“Really. My contact is skittish, to be sure. She said she’d wait for you for a couple of days, but after that she’s going back underground,” Big Mac said. “So you need to think fast about whether you’re coming or not. We don’t have much time.”

“See?” I said to Greyson. “No time to waste. So, are you coming, or not?”

*And if you don’t come, we’ll be more than fine*, I thought to myself. I wouldn’t exactly mind if Greyson tagged along, but I didn’t need him to, either. I couldn’t help but think about how far we’d come. It wasn’t so long ago that I would have actively worked against Greyson at a time like this, deliberately keeping him in the dark.

Greyson frowned. “And what about the rest of the pack?”

“There’s no more heat from the Samaras, so what else is there to worry about?” I asked. This was one of the rare times where we didn’t have some big threat looming over the pack house. The vamp-witch was only after me, after all.

Greyson’s eyes went to Cali and then Big Mac. “Dick Wigbert, for one. He’s broken away from Rhonda and the rest of LIPS and could be headed our way.”

“What? He’s back?” Cali gasped. “I can’t believe this. Why can’t that guy just buzz off and mind his own business?”

“Well, he’s not back yet, as far as we know, but he could be. He’s MIA, which is way worse. He could pop up at any minute, and when we least expect it.”

I scowled. “He’s just one guy, and a human at that. How much of a threat could he be?”

Big Mac snorted and shook her head, giving me a look that I couldn’t quite read, but I knew her well enough to guess that it probably wasn’t anything good.

“Don’t underestimate him,” Greyson warned. “That’s gotten us in trouble before.”

*Fuck, I hate when he’s right.* “So, Dick’s on our radar again. Great.” I sighed. “So what’s the plan? I’m not going to delay this trip. We need to find this person and talk to them if we have any hope of locating the ashes. We haven’t had many leads with this whole thing, so we need to jump on this one before we lose it.”

“I agree completely. I’m going to come along. I don’t think I have much of a choice if we really want to get this thing figured out,” Greyson said.

“Now that that’s decided, I’ll let my friend know you’re on your way,” Big Mac said before turning and leaving the room.

“Thanks, Greyson, for agreeing to come,” Cali said.

“Of course, anything to get you back to normal and get this vamp-witch off our asses.”

Cali took a deep breath. “Should we start packing?”

“On it,” I said.

I went to my room, eager to get started. It felt good to actually be doing something about the ashes problem, finally. For a while there, it had felt like we would never get on the right track.

I’d just pulled my duffel out of the closet when Greyson appeared in my doorway.

“What are you doing? Go get ready,” I said.

“We need to talk first.” Greyson came in and closed the door behind him.

I raised an eyebrow at my brother, wondering where this was going. “So talk.”

“I’ve decided to tell Lucian about Dick and get his help,” Greyson said with a heavy sigh.

I scowled. “I hate the idea of working with that asshole. I still don’t trust him even a little.”

“Me neither, but with this Dick thing—even if he’s not an immediate threat, all the packs need to be on the same page. If we’re going to do this whole alliance thing—even as a trial—we need to do it properly.”

I shrugged and threw my duffel on the bed, then began to throw clothes in. “It seems like you’ve already decided, so why are you telling me?”

Greyson hesitated before he finally answered. “In case you thought it was a horrible idea.”

*What? Is he serious? Did my brother really just ask me for my opinion on something?* “You’re bouncing the idea off me? Who are you and what have you done with my brother?”

He rolled his eyes. “Stop it, Xavier. I’m being serious. You don’t trust him, and neither do I, so I just wanted to run it by you.”

“Right.” I sighed. “If you think it’s the right move, I trust your judgment.” That wasn’t the easiest thing I’d ever said to my brother, but it was true—at least in this instance.

Greyson nodded. “Good. One more thing—I want you to contact the Samaras and get them in the loop. I’ve already touched base with Mace.”

*Ah, so there it is. He wants me to do something for him. Should’ve known.* I was a little surprised by the task, but it made sense. I’d been the Samaras’ main contact, and Greyson was clearly depending on me to keep that role. I nodded. “Sure, I’ll get in touch with them now.”

“Thanks—now I’ll go get packed.”

Greyson left, and I concentrated on packing for a few minutes until I realized that I didn’t have Zeke’s number. *I have Ava’s, though. Should I call her? Would that be weird after the way we left things? No, it should be fine. This isn’t about our personal relationship, anyway. This is pack business—it’s about everyone’s safety.*

It still felt awkward to be reaching out to her after I’d insisted on us keeping our distance from each other—and after her Christmas gift. *Suck it up. Just call her.*

I dialed her number, and she picked up on the first ring. For a second, I wondered if she’d been waiting for my call, but I dashed that thought away. It wasn’t right for me to make any assumptions like that. It would do nothing but lead me down a confusing mental road, and I didn’t have time for that right now.

“Hey, X. How are you?” I could tell that she was trying to sound light, but there was something unusual about her voice. I could only imagine that this whole thing felt just as awkward for her as it did for me.

I cleared my throat. “Hey. Um, how was your holiday?”

“Oh,” Ava said, sounding surprised. “Um, it was fine. How about yours?”

“Good.”

A heavy silence stretched between us for a beat.

“So, did you call for a reason?” Ava finally asked.

“Yeah. You remember Dick, the LIPS guy? We got word that he’s gone rogue from the rest of LIPS, which means that he might be headed back in our direction. There’s a chance that he could come back onto Samara land, so everyone should be on alert just in case, since we have no idea what his plans might be.”

“Shit. Thanks for letting us know. I’ll fill Zeke in.”

I hesitated, contemplating the best way to end the conversation.

“I’m going away for a few days,” I blurted out.

“Really? Where?”

“New Orleans,” I said quickly. “Just wanted to let you know in case you needed to get in contact with the other Redwoods—I won’t be here.”

Ava cleared her throat. “Have a good trip.”

“Thanks.” I hung up before the awkwardness could get any worse—if that was even possible. “That was painful,” I said to no one in particular, blowing out a breath.

I finished off my packing and then decided to go in and check to see how Cali was getting on. I couldn’t wait to see her after that awkward exchange. I heard the shower running in Cali’s bathroom as I walked into her room. *Why is she showering right now? She’s supposed to be packing.* I considered joining her for a moment, but when I pushed the door open, I found her standing stock-still in front of the shower just staring at the running water, her eyes as wide as saucers.

“Cali? Are you okay?”

Cali let out a loud wail and clutched at her throat as if she were choking. I ran to her and gripped her shoulders, just as her knees gave out and she collapsed into my arms.

# Episode 3131

I was drowning.

The entire room had filled up with water, and no matter how much I struggled and kicked, I couldn’t break through to the surface. I tried to open my mouth to scream, but no sound came out, my voice swallowed up by the water. My lungs burned as they filled with water, too, and the more I screamed, the more water flowed down my throat, suffocating me.

I flailed and kicked, using every bit of strength I had to swim to the surface of the water and take a breath, but something kept pulling me back down. I looked down and saw a dark, demon-like shadow hovering just beneath me. Its long, pointy fingers were wrapped around my ankles, and it yanked me down into the depths. I fought against it, flailing my legs and trying to kick it off, but its grip was too strong.

*I’m going to die.*

I’d been deprived of oxygen for so long now that I was starting to feel weak. The handprint on my shoulder began to burn like crazy, despite the cool press of the water around me. It felt like it was going to burn right through me. I writhed in pain and gave one solid kick against the demon’s hold as I jerked upward, my arms swinging out and clawing at the water. I let out another silent scream as I made one final attempt to swim to the surface and get my head above water.

“Cali!” Xavier grabbed my hands to stop me, and I blinked at him, confused. He had a series of angry red scratches on his cheek.

*Oh my god, I scratched him!*

“Cali, are you okay?” Xavier wrapped his arms tightly around me, and I sagged against him before pulling away to look at him, needing to convince myself that he was real.

I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t. I watched the scratch heal on his cheek right before my eyes. *He’s real. He’s really here.*

“Cali, answer me! Are you okay? Can you hear me?”

I nodded as a sob escaped my chest. I leaned into him, hot tears streaming down my cheeks. All of the stress and fear from the dream—or whatever it had been—had taken over my body. Xavier lifted me up in his arms and carried me back into my bedroom where he sat down on my bed, cradling me in his lap.

“What happened, Cali?” He rubbed my back briskly, and I leaned into his touch. “Did you have another nightmare? It’s okay, you’re back now. With me.”

I was trying to calm my breathing, which was still coming in short, hard bursts.

“I thought I was drowning,” I choked out. “It was so real. I saw a demon, and it was pulling me deeper and deeper down into the water. I tried to fight it off, but I couldn’t.”

I choked out another sob and laid my head against Xavier’s chest. I was afraid to even close my eyes for fear of seeing the demon again.

“None of that was real, Cali. It was just a hallucination. I’m here now, and you’re safe.”

I nodded. I knew that what Xavier was saying was true, but I was still shaken. “It felt so real. When those hallucinations, or visions, or nightmares—whatever—take over, I can’t really tell them apart from reality.” I lifted a hand to Xavier’s cheek, caressing the place where I’d scratched him. It was all healed now, but I could still picture the wound I’d caused. “I’m so sorry for hurting you.”

Xavier grabbed my hand and brought it to his lips, kissing it softly. “Don’t worry about me. I’m just glad you’re okay.”

I nodded. I wasn’t actually sure I *was* okay, but I didn’t want to admit that to Xavier. I didn’t want him to worry any more than he already was.

“Cali… Are you sure that you’re up for a trip all the way across the country? I know that you want to find the vampire-witch and help Artemis look for her uncle, but maybe it’s safer for you to stay here?”

I stiffened and sat up straight. “What? No. I’m coming on this trip. I have to.”

“I know you want to help with all this, but I just want to make sure that you’re in a place where people can help you or heal you if you need it—like here in the pack house. Here, you have Big Mac, Torin, Kira—in New Orleans, you won’t have that. It might be safer for you to stay behind.”

I shook my head. “No. I’m coming with you. I have to see this through. I have to do something about what’s happening to me.”

Xavier shook his head and sighed. “I want you to be with me wherever I am, you know that, but I can’t be selfish, Cali. I have to do what’s best for you. Your safety, you being protected—that’s all that matters to me.”

“But *I* know what’s best for me. Trust me on this.”

Xavier nodded, his mouth pressed into a tight line. “Fine. But just in case, maybe you should try to do that meditation thing with Kira again before we go. Maybe it’ll help get you in the right headspace for the trip.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” I said. I was already feeling hopeful that it might help, at least long enough for us to get to New Orleans and back. The hallucinations were all in my head, so maybe realigning my mind would help keep them at bay.

“Do you need anything? Are you sure you’re good?” Xavier asked. He gently lifted me from his lap and sat me down on the bed.

I shook my head. “No, I’m fine. I just want to get ready to go on this trip. Maybe being busy will keep me distracted so my mind doesn’t have time to create more visions.”

“Let’s hope so. I can stay here with you if you need me.”

“No, Xavier. I have to do this on my own. I love that you want to protect me, but I have to be able to take care of myself, too. Besides, I need to go talk to Artemis, anyway. I can’t remember when Artemis said she bought the plane tickets for, but we probably need to change them.”

“All right. I’ve got just a little more to do before I’m ready to go, so I’ll get to it. Just make sure you come get me if anything happens—promise me that.”

“I promise,” I said. I gave him a peck on the lips before he left. I took a deep breath and plopped down onto my bed, trying to get my bearings. I was still a little shaky from the hallucination, but I hadn’t wanted to show that to Xavier. He was already unsure about me coming along to New Orleans, and if he thought for a second that I wasn’t fully recovered from what had happened, there was no doubt in my mind that he’d do everything in his power to stop me from coming along.

I understood where he was coming from, but I had to be able to do what I felt was best for me. I just needed a bit more time to gather my strength, and I’d be good as new. No one wanted to find this vamp-witch more than me. *Except maybe Dani.* I grimaced as I realized that I was going to have to tell Greyson about what had just happened.

*I’ll tell him—after I talk to Artemis.*

I went to Artemis’s room, but she wasn’t there. I checked the rest of the second floor, then went downstairs, but she was nowhere to be found.

*Shoot. We need to get going as soon as possible. Where could she be?*

I knew I might’ve been rushing things a bit, but Artemis had been eager to go to New Orleans for a while now, so I was sure that she’d be okay with moving the trip up. We’d all been so preoccupied with the Samara situation and then the whole Seluna thing before then, and Artemis had waited patiently throughout all of that. I was actually kind of excited to tell her that it was finally time for us to get to New Orleans and get more information about her father and the Fae side of her family.

I was relieved when I finally spotted her outside. She had her bow and was using a tree for target practice. I grabbed a coat and rushed out to her.

“Hey, Artemis! Good news!” I said as I jogged out to join her.

Artemis turned to face me, her cheeks red from the cold and her breath clouding the air in front of her. “Hey. What are you talking about?”

“We’re going to New Orleans. We have a lead on the ashes, so let’s change your ticket so you can come now.” I stood there waiting for Artemis’s excitement—or for her to say something, at the very least—but she didn’t.

Artemis frowned and nocked another arrow before taking aim at the tree. “I don’t think I want to go anymore.”

# Episode 3132

“Wait, what? You don’t want to go anymore?” Of all the reactions I’d thought I might get from my sister, this wasn’t one of them. She’d been so excited about going to New Orleans before so she could try to find some answers about her father Kadmos’s family, so what had changed?

Artemis just shrugged and let her arrow fly. “It’s probably a bad idea, so I’m not going to go.” Her voice was level and almost stony, almost like she was trying to keep it neutral so that she didn’t give anything away.

I shook my head. “But, Artemis, that doesn’t make any sense. You were so excited about it before! You were really looking forward to getting answers.”

Artemis wasn’t one to go back on something once she’d made her mind up about it. I was surprised she’d had a change of heart about something this important. I wondered why she hadn’t come to talk to me if she was having second thoughts about going.

“Yeah, I changed my mind,” Artemis said, tight-lipped. “No big deal.”

She’d nocked another arrow and was slowly drawing her arm back, preparing to shoot it. It was obvious that she was distracted, but that didn’t seem to be affecting her aim.

“Can you look at me, please?”

With a sigh, Artemis lowered her bow and turned to face me, finally revealing the turmoil written all over her face. It looked like this was the last thing she wanted to talk about.

“Are you really saying that you aren’t interested in going anymore?” I said. “Or is there something else going on here?”

We stared at each other for a long beat, then Artemis sighed. “I was looking at places in New Orleans online with Rishika, and I don’t know, I just got a bad feeling about the whole thing. Maybe this isn’t something I need to pursue. Also, it’s all moving just a little too fast.”

“But is it, though?” I asked. “You’ve been waiting a hell of a long time for answers. I don’t think it’s moved that fast at all.”

Artemis had spent most of her life in the Fae world without knowing the truth about who her parents were—who *she* was. I couldn’t imagine why she’d want to wait a single moment more to find out her history.

Artemis shook her head. “It could all just be a bad idea, and we all have enough on our plates with everything going on in this place without adding crazy family drama to the mix.”

My heart went out to my sister. I had a feeling that what Artemis was dealing with was nerves, and I couldn’t blame her. Finding out more information about her dad’s side of the family was a big thing, and she didn’t quite know what to expect.

“Learning more about my father’s side of the family might open up more secrets and questions than actual answers,” she said. “I’m just trying to figure out if I really think it’s worth it.”

*Just as I thought. She doesn’t know if she even wants to know much more about her family.*

“That could be true. I mean, I just learned some crappy information about our Wrenthorn side of the family from Maren and how our family got some of hers killed.”

Artemis’s eyes widened. “Shit.”

“Yeah,” I said. “And even though it really sucked to hear what she said, and learn about some of the shady shit the Wrenthorns did, I realize that there’s no way to break that cycle and move on if I’m not even aware of it.”

Artemis shook her head slowly, looking thoughtful. “When you put it that way…”

“Look, why don’t you drop the weapon and come take a walk with me? We can clear our heads.”

Artemis looked down at her bow and slowly set it down, though she still didn’t look convinced about everything just yet.

“Come on.” I linked my arm through hers and urged her along with me. She was tense at first, but as we walked, she relaxed. We didn’t talk for a while, but the silence between us wasn’t awkward. It was really nice spending time with her like this.

“Do you really think I’m capable of even finding my family” Artemis asked suddenly. She was tense again.

I nodded without hesitation. “I know you are. You’re one of the strongest, bravest people I know.”

I truly didn’t think that there was anything Artemis couldn’t handle. Hell, she’d had Letifer in her head and survived that. That had to count for something. Not to mention that she’d gone through so much working for the Kollector in the Fae world that I doubted anything could surprise her. Still, I couldn’t imagine she’d ever faced anything quite like this before.

Artemis shot me a skeptical look. “What if I find Adair and he doesn’t want anything to do with me? What then? What if he rejects me?”

I squeezed Artemis’s arm. “Then he’s a complete idiot and we’ll move on from that together. I’ll always be here for you, no matter what. You’re my sister, and I love you. You have me, no matter what happens in New Orleans.”

Artemis nodded and stopped walking. If I wasn’t mistaken, it looked like she was choking up just a little, the big ole softy. I pulled her into a hug, and after a moment’s hesitation, Artemis hugged me back.

“I think you’re ready,” I said. “If you don’t get these answers now, when will you have another opportunity?”

“That’s fair, I guess,” Artemis said.

“And I hate to rush you, but we just found out that there might be someone in New Orleans who can help me find whoever stole Seluna’s ashes. We can’t wait too long to go.”

Artemis looked serious now. “Why didn’t you say so?”

“I did,” I said. “But you were understandably brooding and—”

“Let’s go as soon as possible!”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I am, Cali,” she said. “You’re my sister.”

My eyes started getting a bit misty. “Thanks. Xavier and Greyson are in the middle of packing now. I’ve still got quite a bit to do—you know me, it’s hard for me to decide what to take and what to leave.” I didn’t even mention that I probably would’ve been further along with packing if I hadn’t had that vision of drowning in the bathroom. I didn’t even want to think about that. I’d been so terrified that even now, my heart was beating faster than it should’ve been.

I turned back to her, pushing away the panic from before. I was happy for my sister’s support, especially knowing how much she was struggling with the idea of taking the trip at all. *I’ll just have to do everything in my power to help Artemis while we’re there, no matter what’s going on with the other stuff.*

We made our way back to the house, still arm in arm. Mom was just coming out onto the porch, mug in hand. She smiled when she spotted us together. “My two girls,” she said.

I smiled back at her, but inside I was worried about how she was going to react to us going on the trip, and so soon, at that.

“I talked to Big Mac,” Mom said.

“Oh?” I looked closely at her, trying to read her expression but coming up short. “She told you about New Orleans, then?”

She nodded and sighed as she looked down into her cup. “I can’t say that I won’t be worried about you two. You’re going to an unfamiliar city to find answers that might hurt more than you expect. I wish that I could have protected you both better.”

I shook my head. “No, you always did whatever you could for me. I know it must have been hard for you.”

Artemis stood silently at my side, her head slightly bowed.

“Artemis,” Mom began, her eyes on her older child. “I know this might be hard, learning about your father’s family. I hope you know that you can always come to me for anything, no matter what.”

Artemis nodded stiffly, obviously uncomfortable with all the familial affection being aimed her way.

“Promise me that you’ll both take good care of each other?”

“Of course,” Artemis and I answered in unison.

Mom put her mug down and gathered us both in a hug. I hugged her back, trying my best to push every bit of the love I felt in that moment into the gesture.

There was something about this goodbye that seemed bigger than any we’d had before. Maybe it was because when I got back from the trip, my parents would be heading back home. I’d grown used to having them around at the pack house, and for a bit, I’d almost convinced myself that this was our new normal. It seemed like the perfect arrangement, to have them living in the pack house forever as part of one big, mixed, happy family. I felt a tinge of sadness that things weren’t going to turn out that way, though I fully understood why they were leaving.

The three of us had just started back inside when we heard shouts from the living room.

*What’s happening now?* I thought as I raced into the living room. I stopped short and stared in complete shock at Lola and Torin literally tug-of-war fighting over the Christmas tree.

# Episode 3133

I raced into the living room to grab Lola’s arm as Mom and Artemis yanked Torin back. The tree shuddered but stayed upright. Most of the beautiful decorations that had sparkled so brilliantly on the tree had been destroyed in the struggle. Broken ornaments littered the floor around the tree, and lights were hanging haphazardly from the branches, most of them shattered. There were even more pine needles on the floor than before, and I felt a pang of pity for Charlie, who’d been tasked with pine needle cleanup duty.

“What’s going on in here?” I asked as I held Lola back. She was breathing hard and looked like she still wanted to leap across the room and take Torin out.

“Look, I was onboard with cleaning up some stuff around the house initially, but he’s gone too far this time, Cali. TOO FAR!” Lola wailed. “He’s ruining Christmas!”

“I am not ruining anything! It’s not Christmas anymore! It’s New Year’s!” Torin screamed. “If you need confirmation of that, I can show you my calendar! Christmas is in the past! New Year’s is our future!”

“NOT IN MY FAMILY!” Lola shot back. “Besides, this is the first Christmas you’ve ever even celebrated! What makes you the authority on how the holidays should go? You’re drunk on your own power, and I’m sick of it!”

They were both practically shouting at the top of their lungs now, and my mother stepped between them, holding out both of her hands. Zainab, Charlie, Violet, and few others were peeking into the room, completely confused.

Jay came rushing in. “Lola, are you okay?”

Lola, with tears of anger in her eyes, turned to face her mate. “He wants to take down the tree before the new year!”

“And I don’t understand why that’s a problem!” Torin said. “The stores have already gotten rid of all their Christmas stuff! If Christmas were meant to drag on for days and days afterward, don’t you think the stores would keep all their Christmas stuff in stock?”

“In my family, we leave the tree up until a few days after the new year. It’s still the damn holidays, okay? They’re not over just because you or some stupid store inventory pattern says so!”

I remembered the tradition that Lola and her dads had. Lola had always joked that she got to have a longer Christmas than everyone else because of it. She always said that it kept her in holiday vacation mode before going back to school.

“Okay, do we HAVE to take down the tree?” I asked.

Torin stubbornly crossed his arms. “We have a set schedule that I made for the holiday season, and unfortunately, the tree doesn’t fit into my aesthetic for New Year’s Eve decorations! The tree needs to go, and that’s that.”

I sighed and looked back and forth between Lola and Torin. Neither of them looked like they were going to back down.

“What if we redecorate the tree in a way that fits Torin’s decoration scheme for New Year’s?” I finally said. “That way, we can keep it up for Lola’s family tradition, and it can be a cute centerpiece for Torin’s New Year’s festivities. Best of both worlds.”

Torin cocked his head to the side, thinking that over. After a bit, he finally nodded slowly. “We’ll have to buy all new ornaments. Gold and black and silver only! And we’ll probably have to go online because like I said, the stores aren’t stocking ornaments anymore.”

Lola nodded. “Fine. I’ll get them.”

“Good,” I said with a sigh. “All resolved, then?”

Lola and Torin nodded, still not making eye contact with each other.

“Well if it’s all good, then you two need to hug it out,” I said. I didn’t like seeing two of my friends fighting, and it hurt even worse to see my best friend so torn up over this. It wasn’t like Lola to be so sentimental, but when something got to her, it couldn’t be ignored.

Lola looked at me, surprised. “Hug it out?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I said what I said. You guys need to get over your pride and just hug it out. You have to put all this behind you. It’s not that big a deal in the greater scheme of things. You’re friends—don’t let a *tree* come between you.”

Lola sighed and took a reluctant step forward. “Cali’s right.”

“She is,” Torin said.

They each gave each other the quickest, most awkward hug I might have ever seen, but I was satisfied. It would have to be okay for now. At least they weren’t trying to break the tree in half anymore.

When they broke apart, I went to Lola’s side. “Everything’s okay, see? Crisis averted.”

“Thanks, yeah,” Lola said, wiping her eyes. “That was intense, right?”

“Yeah, you have an iron grip,” I said.

“I overreacted, didn’t I? I made a big deal out of nothing and got the entire pack house involved in our drama.”

Jay and I exchanged a glance.

“Yeah, maybe you overreacted just a little bit,” I said.

“I know. I guess I just miss my dads already. They left this morning to go back home, and it got me thinking about our family traditions and how the holidays were when I was little. So when I saw Torin taking the tree down, I kind of freaked.”

I nodded. “I’ve been thinking about family a lot this morning, too. You know, maybe we can start creating our own family traditions now, as a pack. That way, we’ll all get to celebrate the way we want and make new memories together.”

Lola nodded. “That might be nice.”

“So, did your dads have a good holiday?”

“They did. We had a fun late-night hangout last night and exchanged gifts. They even got Jay something!”

Jay smiled. “Tell Cali what you got your dads.”

Lola sighed. “I gave them the promise that I’d start up college again. Semester to be determined, but I’m going to do it.”

I pulled Lola into a hug. “Oh, that’s so great!”

I never would have thought that Lola would even entertain the idea of going back to school, but I was happy that she was going to do it. It would make her dads proud, and more than that, she wouldn’t have to lie to them anymore.

Elle appeared, smiling wide. “Me too! I want to go to school.”

I was shocked for a minute, but then I remembered that I’d promised to help Elle learn how to read. It was clear that Elle was hungry to learn everything there was about being human, and I understood that completely. It had to be hard for her to feel so far behind everyone else.

“I’m not sure you can go to a regular school, Elle—there’s a lot of official stuff and paperwork that needs to be submitted for that to work—but as soon as I come back from our trip, I’ll teach you how to read,” I said.

There was no way for Elle to go to a traditional school—what with the need for records and proof of identity and all that—but that didn’t mean we couldn’t get her up to speed here in the pack house.

Elle gave me a confused look. “No, I want to start now.”

“Elle, I’m sorry. I have to do this thing first. It was sort of unexpected, but as soon as it’s over—”

“I do not care about paperwork. I will go to school with Lola,” she said.

“Some of my classes might be in person, and I don’t think they’ll let you on campus with me if you’re not a student,” Lola said.

I heard the white lie in my friend’s response, but I thanked Lola silently. *Maybe now Elle will drop it.*

She sighed. “But I want to learn more human things.”

I could practically feel Elle’s frustration, and I felt really bad about it, but I didn’t have time to deal with this, not when we needed to be getting our things together so we could get to New Orleans.

I made my voice firm. “No, Elle, it’s a bad idea. You just have to trust us.”

Elle gave me an angry look and stormed off.

Lola and I exchanged a look.

“Do you think I was too harsh with her?” I asked.

Lola shook her head, still looking after Elle, who’d stormed off in the direction of the kitchen. “No, you were just telling the truth. There’s no way she can go to a college campus. She’s still not used to human behavior. She’d stick out like a sore thumb.”

I nodded. *Lola’s right, and I’m just trying to look out for Elle. Still, I feel bad. She’s a new werewolf, and there’s still so much for her to learn.* It was starting to feel like my own problems were getting in the way of me being there for my friends, both old and new. It almost felt like I was making them feel abandoned and upset. *Maybe I should go find Elle and explain all of this a little better.* At that same moment, I saw Elle slipping out of the back door, shifting as she went.

“Elle!” I called after her. *Shit. Great job, Cali.* “Come back!”

I raced out onto the porch and was about to run after her when I spotted a shadowy figure darting through the trees.

# Episode 3134

**Greyson**

“The patrol schedule looks good the way you have it,” I said to Jay. I was finally done packing and could now concentrate on making sure that the pack house would be well protected during my absence. I was a little uneasy about leaving the pack, but I also knew that this was the most opportune time I was likely to find. “I really feel confident that I don’t have anything to worry about here while you’re running things.”

Even though Jay was Xavier’s good friend, he hadn’t ever let me down, so if I had to leave, it made me feel a hell of a lot better to know that I was leaving things with him.

Jay nodded. “Happy to do it, man,” he said just as Cali came running into the house, her eyes wide with fear.

“Greyson! Greyson, oh thank goodness.” She fell into my arms, shivering. She was breathing hard, and she latched onto me as if she thought she might collapse otherwise.

“Cali, what’s the matter? What the hell happened?” She wasn’t wearing a coat, and she was freezing. I hadn’t even realized that she’d gone outside. *How did I miss that?* I wrapped my arms tightly around her. “Why were you outside without a coat on?”

“I didn’t have time to grab one. I was chasing after Elle,” Cali said through chattering teeth. “She got angry and took off into the woods.”

Fuck. Just what I needed. “She’s supposed to go out with an escort when she goes on her runs,” I said. This was exactly the kind of thing that made me uneasy about leaving. Our newer and younger pack members—Elle specifically—really needed the support and guidance that only their Alpha could provide.

“But that’s not the main problem,” Cali panted. “I think I saw something in the woods. Do you think it could be the vampire-witch?”

I was immediately on high alert. “*What?* Are you sure?”

Cali nodded. “I definitely saw something.”

I turned to Jay and the other pack members who’d been helping to figure out the plans for when I was gone. “Jay, Rishika, you go after the vampire-witch.” I turned to Zainab. “Go find my brother, tell him what happened and that he needs to get down here ASAP.”

“On it,” all three said in unison as they rushed off.

“Cali, where did you see it?” I asked her, already stripping off my clothes as I headed toward the back door.

“Right outside, just at the tree line,” Cali said, still shaking—probably as much from the cold as from fear.

I nodded and took off not far behind Jay and Rishika, shifting mid-run as I leapt off the porch and into the snowy yard. I lifted my nose to the air, trying to see if I could pick up the familiar yet strange scent that the vampire-witch gave off, but I couldn’t smell anything.

*Is it because of the snow again? I was able to smell it before. Hopefully she’s not getting better at hiding herself.*

Jay and Rishika were only a few paces ahead of me, and I reached out via mind link as we neared the tree line. *We should spread out and see if we can pick up a trail.*

*Got it*, Jay replied.

*Good idea*, Rishika said.

*Rishika, you go down the center, Jay, you take east, and I’ll head west.*

I moved off from the others quickly as we all fanned out. I was still trying my best to sense where the vamp-witch might be, or at the very least pick up her scent. I trusted that Cali had seen something—it was just a matter of where it was right now.

Suddenly, Xavier fell into step beside me.

*Took you long enough*, I mind linked.

*Nice to see you, too*, Xavier replied. *Have you found anything yet?*

*No. The trail seems a bit cold, but I believe that Cali saw what she thought she saw.*

*I agree.* We ran in silence for a bit before Xavier mind linked again. *There could be a correlation here.*

*What do you mean?*

*Did Cali tell you about the hallucination she had earlier?*

I was completely thrown off that she’d had another vision and hadn’t told me about it. I definitely felt some type of way about her keeping it from me, so I didn’t feel comfortable admitting to Xavier that she hadn’t thought to tell me about it.

*So, what’s the correlation?* I mind linked.

*Either she really saw something, or this might just be another hallucination. I don’t know. You should have seen her, brother, she was pretty shaken up.*

*I’ll bet, but we can’t think like that right now. If we give up because we think Cali imagined it all and the vampire-witch is really out here somewhere, that would be a big mistake. It could put the entire pack in danger. For now, we need to act like there’s actually something out here because there still could be.*

*I agree*, Xavier replied. *I do hope that we find something, otherwise it might mean that her hallucinations are getting even worse, and that would be bad.*

I didn’t even want to consider that. It was clear that Cali was only going to get worse the longer it took for us to find the ashes, but I was really hoping that we’d end up having more time before the situation became any more dire.

*What will even happen to Cali if things get worse for her?* I thought to myself. I wondered if we’d even be able to bring her back from what was ailing her if her condition passed a certain point.

I pushed those thoughts aside as I noticed a trail of what appeared to be footprints. I zeroed in on them, only to realize that they were only animal prints. *Shit. Are we really not going to find whatever Cali saw out here?* I was getting more and more frustrated as time passed. For Cali’s sake, I didn’t want Xavier to be right about the possibility that she’d imagined whatever she’d seen in the woods. I didn’t even want to think about what that could mean for her mental state if the ashes stayed in the wind for much longer.

*Greyson!* Rishika’s mind link came through to me. *I found something.*

Relieved, I motioned to Xavier to follow me, and we took off in the direction I’d seen Rishika go. We came to a stop where the others were already gathered, staring at something lying in the snow. I edged closer and saw that it was a drone that Rishika had brought down.

*Well, that’s not a vampire-witch*, I mind linked to the group.

*Is this from LIPS?* Jay asked.

*It has to be Dick Wigbert*, I said, already feeling the creep of dread edging up my spine. I’d been hoping we’d have a bit more time before Wigbert decided to rear his ugly head, but I supposed we weren’t going to be that lucky.

*If that thing has been out here this whole time, do you think it picked up on any of us shifting?* Rishika mind linked.

*Could have*, I admitted. *But for now, at least you brought it down. We should take it back to the house and see if it transmitted anything. Maybe Lola can hack into it like she did the other one.*

I picked up the drone in my mouth, and we made our way back to the pack house. I was starting to wonder if it would be selfish for me to leave and jet off to New Orleans at a time like this. This problem with Dick could only get worse. I wanted to go with Cali so that I could protect her and help her get to the bottom of the ashes problem, but I couldn’t shake the thought that leaving the pack right now with Dick Wigbert out there somewhere was the wrong choice.

*If he has this sort of technology up and running just to spy on us, then there’s more where this came from.* I hated to think that we might be back to square one: unable to shift freely in our own woods. I didn’t like the idea of leaving my pack with an issue like this festering.

I reached out to mind link with Rishika. *Rishika, you know I really trust your advice, so I have a question for you. Do you really think the pack will be okay if I leave right now? If we both do?*

Rishika paused to think on it for a bit before she finally replied. *The pack can handle it. It’s not like we haven’t dealt with Dick Wigbert before. We’re prepared for his tricks. If everyone has to be more cautious in the meantime, so be it, but the pack will find him and figure out what he wants.*

Time wasn’t on our side for that right now, though. We had to leave for New Orleans immediately, and I didn’t feel right about leaving with this unresolved. This was the last thing I needed.

I thought about it a moment before I finally responded. *We have to get out of here as soon as possible—which is why I have to find Dick tonight.*

# Episode 3135

**Violet**

I was safe in the quiet of my room, having escaped here during the confusion-slash-Christmas tree fight. I’d always known that the holidays could bring out the best—and the worst—in people, but I wasn’t in any mood to get swept into any additional drama when I had enough of my own going on.

There was nothing I wanted more than to be alone with my thoughts—especially after my fight with Lilac. He’d just started in on me, accusing me of implying things to Marta and spilling his secrets. Even when I’d tried to explain that it was all an honest mistake and that we hadn’t known that Marta was there and had tried to cover for it, he’d still told me that he couldn’t trust me anymore. Hearing him say that had hit me like a kick in the gut.

*How dare he say that to me? Me! I’ve had his back and kept his secrets since we were kids! And now one little slipup and just like that, all of his trust is out the window!*

I was seething. After everything we’d been through, the only thing we’d ever known for sure was that we had each other. After our parents had died, we’d stuck to each other like glue. Then I’d had to mourn him when he’d died. And now, after all of that, for him to call me *untrustworthy* because of one almost-accidental-slip that hadn’t even revealed anything? It was complete bull. It was like all the good things I’d done and all the times I’d bent over backward to protect him meant nothing at all.

There was a soft knock on my door, and Charlie poked his head in. “Can I come in?”

“Of course,” I said, even though I really felt like being alone.

“You okay?”

I huffed and dropped down onto the bed. “Of course I’m not okay. My brother is insisting on being a total ass to me and blaming me for everything, and I might be a part of destroying his and Marta’s relationship, even though that’s *exactly* what I don’t want.”

I couldn’t believe how messed up everything was at the moment.

Charlie winced and nodded. “Yeah, but I can’t help but think he’s lashing out because he’s upset about the mate thing.”

I shot him an angry glare, and Charlie held up his hands in mock surrender.

“Sorry. I’m just trying to help.”

I stood up and started pacing, unable to ignore the angry energy surging around inside me. “Well you’re not helping by trying to fix the situation. Besides, it doesn’t really matter *why* he’s lashing out, only that I’m the one he’s lashing out at, even though I’ve done everything I can to help him! Ugh, I think I just need to be alone with my feelings. Sorry.”

Charlie nodded. “Should I go?”

“No, I will. I need to get some fresh air, anyway.”

Charlie hesitated, as if there was something lingering on the tip of his tongue.

“What?” I asked.

“I overheard Cali shouting about something a bit ago. It seemed like a big deal, and then Greyson and a few others took off. Maybe it’s not safe to go outside right now.”

I sighed. *What else is new? All these woods and all these acres, and we can barely ever use them because there’s always something brewing out there.* “Fine, I’ll stay in the yard and won’t go into the woods. I just really feel like I’m suffocating in this house right now.”

Charlie nodded. “Okay, sunshine, but just stay in view of the house, and mind link with me if you need anything.”

I nodded and took off before he could give me any more warnings or rules. I just wanted to do my own thing and clear my head without him—or anyone else—trying to make excuses for Lilac being completely unreasonable.

I raced downstairs and out of the house, rejuvenated by the blast of fresh air that hit me. I started walking the perimeter of the yard, wondering if I should shift and run a few laps.

*No, I’d better not. The moment I’m in wolf form I’m going to want to run farther and faster, and the only way I can do that is if I go into the woods.* I decided to stay in human form for now, just to be safe.

I heard a twig snap, and I turned around, ready to defend against whoever might be sneaking up on me. I was shocked to see Perrie step out of the forest. I looked back toward the house, unsure of what I should do. I wondered, for a moment, if Perrie was what Cali had seen in the woods earlier. *But that doesn’t make sense. Why would they be all up in a tizzy about Perrie? We’re all good with the Samaras now.*

Perrie came toward me. “Can we talk?”

“My brother’s inside,” I said. “You want me to go get him for you?”

Perrie shook her head. “No. I actually came here to talk to you.”

I frowned. Talking with Perrie seemed like the worst idea in the world. Lilac was already accusing me of butting into his business as it was. *If I talk to Perrie right now, will he get even madder at me?* I was about to tell Perrie that I had no interest in getting between her and Lilac, but then I noticed that she looked kind of upset, and it tugged at my heart strings.

Against my better judgement, I nodded. I would just hear what Perrie had to say and decide what to do from there. “Okay, sure. What’s up?”

Perrie hesitated a bit and started pacing back and forth in the snow. “I don’t think your brother wants to be my mate,” she blurted out.

I stood there looking at her, unsure of what I should say. Technically, it was true. *But it would be* so *mean of me to admit that, right?* I couldn’t imagine how I would’ve felt if someone close to Charlie had told me that he didn’t want to be my mate after we’d first met, so I just kept my mouth shut. It was obvious that she was already pretty torn up about the whole thing, and I didn’t need to add to that.

“This isn’t really how I imagined finding my mate would play out—I definitely didn’t think I’d end up talking to his sister about it.”

“Touché,” I said.

Undeterred, Perrie went on. “Did you ever dream about finding your mate? You know, like when you were little?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I had dreams about it, the same way other little girls probably dreamed about their weddings or first boyfriends.”

Perrie nodded slowly. “It just feels so complicated. Back at the Samara camp, your brother told me about his girlfriend, and I can tell that he really loves her. What the hell am I supposed to do with that?”

I realized then that this was exactly how and why Charlie had related so much to Lilac, and how I could, weirdly, relate to Perrie. It was almost the exact same situation, and Perrie was right—it was complicated, to say the least.

“I actually went through something really similar with my mate,” I said. “He had a girlfriend when we met, and he really loved her. On top of all that, he was a brand-new werewolf, still learning what it was to be what he is. He didn’t even understand what a mate bond was, let alone all the complicated feelings it would stir up in him. I had to explain it all to him.”

Perrie’s eyes widened. “What did you do? How did you two resolve the situation? I feel like no matter what I do or say, it’ll be the wrong thing. I’m not a monster. I obviously don’t want anyone to get hurt over this, but I can’t deny that I feel this intense connection to your brother. That’s obviously why I’m talking to *you* about it.”

I took a moment to think about what Perrie had said. It was strange to be in my situation. As much as I loved Marta and was rooting for her and Lilac, I could see Perrie’s side, too. All I knew was that I was going to be loyal to my brother. I wanted what he wanted, simple as that.

*But he’s so damn mad at me right now that he won’t even tell me what he wants anymore. Is it still Marta? Or is he being swayed by his connection to Perrie?* I was getting more frustrated by the minute, mad that I was in the middle of it all and even madder that I had no idea what to do about it.

I turned at the sound of footsteps approaching in the snow, suddenly thinking that I needed to hide Perrie for some reason—it felt like I was doing something wrong or violating some code by even talking to her. That feeling only grew when I realized that it was Marta walking over to join us.

“Hey, Violet, can I talk to you for a second?” Marta asked. “I’m really confused about what’s going on with your brother lately… He’s acting so weird—” Marta stopped herself as soon as she spotted Perrie. “Oh, hi, sorry. Who’s this?”

# Episode 3136

I was pacing back and forth in the foyer and staring out the window, wondering what they were dealing with out there. I was so nervous, and I wished I were out there with them. *Did I really see the vampire-witch? Or was it something else?* It had happened so fast that I couldn’t be sure. All I knew was that it hadn’t looked right.

I let out a sigh of relief when I saw them all emerging from the forest. I noticed that Greyson was carrying something in his mouth, and I was even more surprised when they all crowded into the house in wolf form before shifting back. *Why are they doing this again? Did something happen out there?*

I looked at what Greyson had brought in. It was a drone. *Shit.*

I cornered Greyson and Xavier as they started getting dressed. “What happened out there?”

“We found that drone out there,” Xavier said. “We think it must be one of Dick Wigbert’s.”

I scowled. “So what I saw out there, the shadowy figure, it wasn’t the vampire-witch? You think it was this?”

Greyson shook his head. “We can’t be sure. We checked out the entire area, but all we found was the drone. There was no scent or sign of the vampire-witch, but it’s a good thing that you saw whatever you did, because otherwise we wouldn’t have found this.” Greyson gave me a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “I don’t know if I’m relieved or even more worried that it was this drone and not the vampire-witch.”

“A little of both, for me,” Xavier said.

“Where’s Lola?” Xavier asked. “We need her to hack into this drone like she did last time to see what kind of footage it might have picked up.”

“I think she’s in the kitchen,” I said.

“I’ll go get her.” Jay rushed off to find her.

I pulled my mates aside. “I’m sorry I was so intense earlier. I really was just scared that vampire-witch was back to hurt one of us.”

“Cali, stop, you never have to apologize for that kind of thing. You were on alert, and what you did helped the pack,” Greyson said. “At least now we know to be vigilant.”

I nodded, but I still felt so unbalanced. It didn’t feel good to doubt myself this way. How was I going to be able to trust anything I saw until this whole Seluna thing was resolved? *Maybe I need to hurry up and ask Kira about that meditation session.*

Xavier went off to look for Lola with the drone in hand, and I was about to go looking for Kira when Greyson pulled me aside.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the hallucination you had?” he asked.

I blanched. *Shoot. I totally meant to do that before he found out from Xavier…* “I meant to, Greyson, I really did. Then everything went all crazy and I didn’t get a chance.”

Greyson gave my hand a squeeze. “I’m just glad that you’re all right.”

He kissed me on the lips before Lola came in with Xavier and Jay. Everyone gathered around her as she got to work on the drone.

I edged away from them, feeling like I’d only be in the way. I turned and saw Artemis standing off to the side. I went over to join her.

“Hey, do you maybe want to do some magic practice? We might need to use it on this trip.” I pictured the shadowy figure that I’d seen weaving through the trees. I was still convinced that it could have been the vampire-witch, and I wanted to be as prepared as possible, just in case the creature decided to catch us by surprise again.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to be flashing our magic around with all the drones that might be circling us out there,” Artemis said. “But maybe we could practice with my bow and I’ll show you some basics. At least that way I’ll feel like I’m doing something productive rather than just sitting around waiting to leave for New Orleans.”

“That sounds good. I need a bit of a distraction myself.” Not only was I constantly thinking about the vampire-witch and where she may or may not be lurking, but I still was having a hard time shaking the image of the demon from my hallucination pulling me deeper and deeper down into the water. I could all but feel its tight grip around my ankle even now.

“Good,” Artemis said with a smile. “I can give you a few pointers.”

I followed Artemis out into the yard. We went to the same place where we’d done magic practice many times before. “I wonder if our magic might still be a little wonky because of the storm… Though the witches’ magic seems to be back to normal, for the most part.”

Artemis looked up at the sky and then back at me. “No, I think that’s all over now. At least for the time being.” Artemis handed me her bow. “Now, don’t poke your eye out.”

I laughed. “Good advice, I’ll try not to.”

The sky was so clear and beautiful and bright that the snow shone like a sea of sparkling diamonds beneath it. It was rare for me to stop and take in my surroundings. I definitely hadn’t made a point of stopping to enjoy the snow—especially since the only reason there was so much of it was because the world was unbalanced by Seluna’s missing ashes. *I guess it’s still pretty, regardless.*

I tried to nock an arrow while Artemis helped to guide me through it. I’d seen her do this so many times, but it still felt like such an alien skill to me.

“Now keep your eye on your target, one eye closed,” Artemis said.

“Okay, I’m looking at it.”

“Now pull your arm back slowly…”

I followed Artemis’s directions, surprised by how much I liked the feel of my muscles straining as I pulled my arm back. I shot the arrow at the same tree that Artemis had been using for target practice earlier… and it flopped down into the snow a few feet from where we were standing.

“That’s not bad for your first try,” Artemis said. “Try again, you got this.”

I took a deep breath and nocked the same arrow, then lifted the bow again. I did exactly what Artemis told me, closing one eye and squinting the other as I considered my target. I pulled my arm back once again, feeling warm and lively as I focused on the tree. I took in a deep breath, held it, and then released the arrow.

“Yay! I hit it!” I was thrilled. I hadn’t hit the target—nowhere near—but at least I’d hit the tree this time.

“Good job!” Artemis said, her eyes shining proudly. “Do it again. You need to get a feel for it. It’s good to practice with this. There might be times when you won’t be able to depend on your magic alone.”

I nocked another arrow, this time feeling hyperaware of the handprint burning on my skin as I shot another arrow off. *Could the handprint affect my magic? I might need to use it on our trip, and it would be a shame if it was all out of whack, still.* I needed to be able to handle myself while we were in NOLA. The last thing I wanted was to be a burden on everyone.

My mates and Artemis were already dealing with so much, and there was so much we would need to accomplish while we were there. They weren’t going to have time to babysit me. It also didn’t help my case that I’d been so insistent with Xavier earlier about being able to take care of myself. I didn’t want to prove him right.

*Maybe I need to see if I can use my magic before we leave, just to be sure.* I needed to know if I was even capable of using it before we got into any kind of situation where I might really need it. As I nocked another arrow and pulled it back on the bowstring, I felt my magic simmering. *Why is it doing that? I didn’t even call for it yet.* I tried to push it down, but I could feel the handprint heating up on my skin. I tried once again to shove my magic back down where it had come from. *I can’t use it right now. It’s too risky with the drone they found… What if there are more?*

Despite every effort to suppress it, my magic seemed to have a mind of its own. I could feel it filling me up. It was so intense, like a bright light burning inside me. It felt wild and out of control, and I wasn’t sure how much longer I was going to be able to keep it contained. “Artemis, you need to get away from me.”

“What? Are you okay? What’s happening?” Artemis looked confused and shocked, but she moved away like I’d asked.

I was just about to answer her when it happened. Without meaning to, I shot the arrow just as a wave of magic burst out of my body. I watched in horror as both the arrow and a beam of magic energy exploded into the tree, setting it ablaze.

# Episode 3137

**Xavier**

We’d moved Lola to the study so she could concentrate while she worked on the drone, and it hadn’t taken her long to hack into it.

“Looks like we’re in luck,” she said, beaming up at us. “There’s a video, but it didn’t have time to transmit. I’ll download the video so you guys can watch it, and I’ll delete it from the drone’s hard drive so that it can never transmit. Piece of cake.”

“Sounds good,” I said, impressed. One thing about having a pack full of all different types of people was that there was always someone with a skillset that could come in handy at any given time.

“Thanks, Lola, this is exactly what we were hoping for,” Greyson said. “We deserve some good news,” he said with an exasperated sigh.

“Maybe we should destroy the drone altogether,” Jay suggested. “Just to make sure.”

Lola shook her head. “I think I can actually use the transmitter to find out where it’s sending its data. Then we’ll know who it belongs to. If it’s Dick, then we might be able to pinpoint where he’s hiding himself.”

“Do that,” Greyson said. “And give me the location as soon as you find it.”

Greyson looked, and sounded, intense—well, more intense than usual.

I frowned at my brother, wondering what the hell he was planning. I knew the look he had on his face, and whatever had him riled up went beyond us being followed by yet another drone.

Before I could question him, there was a huge explosion outside.

I raced out of the house to see Cali crouched in the snow with Artemis standing over her. Panicking, I ran to Cali’s side. “Cali, are you hurt?” I ran my hands all over her body, checking for any sign of injury.

“No, I’m—f-fine. I’m not hurt. I did that,” she said, pointing to a smoldering tree. “But I didn’t mean to. I tried, but I couldn’t stop it!”

I took in the sight of what was left of the tree that Artemis always used for target practice. It was nothing more than a charred husk of a trunk, now. Artemis was just standing there, staring between it and Cali, her eyes wide with shock.

“What happened, Cali?” I asked. “What were you two doing out here?”

I helped Cali to her feet. She was still shuddering, and I pulled her close, trying to calm her down. It seemed like every time I took my eyes off Cali, something traumatic happened to her.

“I was practicing with Artemis’s bow, and something happened. My magic started churning around inside me—I couldn’t control it—and I summoned it without meaning to. I don’t know why it happened.”

“Come inside,” Greyson said.

Still holding her close, I led her back into the house and sat her down on the couch, just as Orla and Tom came racing in. Cali smiled at them weakly and put on a brave face before they could even speak.

“I’m fine, Mom, Dad,” she said. “Just a little unexpected magic discharge.”

“Oh my god, that explosion, it was you?” Orla asked, casting Tom a horrified look.

“Afraid so,” Cali said meekly. “No one was hurt, if you don’t count the tree I obliterated.” She looked at Artemis. “I know that was your favorite tree. Sorry about that.”

“No worries,” Artemis said quickly.

I turned to Rishika. “Go and get Big Mac and Kira. Now.”

“Got it,” Rishika said before rushing out of the room to round up the witches.

I sat down beside Cali on the couch, and Greyson sat on her other side. Artemis was still standing, holding her bow and looking completely shocked.

“What happened?” I asked her. She looked nearly as shaken as Cali, which was surprising, since not much seemed to shake Artemis.

“It’s like Cali said. We wanted to practice our fighting skills to prepare and blow off a little steam before our trip. Cali was about to shoot another arrow at the tree, but then…” Artemis shook her head. “I really don’t know. Something happened. It was like when I’d lost control of my magic too. Thank the gods Cali told me to step away. The force of the blast was unbelievable.”

“I felt the handprint heat up on my back, and then a little bit after that my magic started to feel all weird and out of whack.” Cali leaned forward and wrapped her arms tightly around herself. “Maybe I shouldn’t be around any of you right now. Who knows what else could happen, or when? It shouldn’t have been that strong, but it was. My magic’s never felt so strong before!” Cali still looked dazed, and I was starting to wonder if she might be in shock.

Big Mac and Kira came racing in. “Rishika filled us in,” Big Mac said solemnly, her eyes on Cali.

“Good. Do you think it might be residual effects from the snowstorm?” I asked.

Big Mac shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. My magic is back to normal.”

“So is mine,” Kira said. “So it’s definitely not the storm.”

Kira crouched down in front of Cali and took her hands.

Cali blinked a few times and looked up at Big Mac. “It was like a bomb went off inside me. I don’t know what happened. I couldn’t stop it—”

“Just let me take a look,” Big Mac said. She closed her eyes, and her lips started moving as she muttered something that none of us could hear. It was probably some sort of incantation, but I couldn’t tell for sure. After a few moments, Big Mac opened her eyes and then pulled down Cali’s collar. Cali let out a little yelp of distress at first, but Big Mac ignored her and kept pulling her collar down until she could see the handprint on Cali’s back.

I gasped when I realized that the handprint was glowing. *How long has it been like that?*

“What’s happening?” Cali whimpered.

I met Greyson’s eyes, wondering if it would be better to lie to her. She wasn’t in the best state as it was, and I could only imagine what it might do to her to learn that the mark was behaving strangely. Greyson seemed to sense what I was thinking, and he shook his head.

I sighed. “The handprint… It looks like it’s reacting to your magic somehow.”

Kira nodded. “Xavier’s right. I think it’s somehow feeding on your magic *and* feeding your magic at the same time. It’s like a symbiotic relationship.”

Cali’s eyes went even wider. “But how? Why? That didn’t happen last time, so why is it happening now?”

“I can’t be certain,” Big Mac said. “It could be tied to the fact that the handprint is coming from a demon that, for all intents and purposes, is dead. Maybe her magic works differently now that she’s reaching for you from beyond the grave. Who knows? This is bordering on uncharted territory, to be fair.”

“There’s so much that the spirit world leaves undefined,” Kira added. “You could study all this stuff for an eternity and never know everything about how this demon or that demon will assert its influence. The demon world has very different rules than we have here.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” I said. “It almost sounds like we have no power to fight back against Seluna. She can’t be that powerful, can she?”

“She’s more powerful than we first thought, that’s for sure. The fact that her ashes have this much sway over this world says a lot,” Big Mac said.

“And what about Dani?” Cali asked. “Could this happen to her, too?”

Kira and Big Mac exchanged a look, but Big Mac was the one to speak. “I don’t think so. Dani has never had the handprint—only you’ve had to deal with that.”

Cali nodded as she processed the witch’s words. She looked absolutely miserable, and it pained me to see her that way. There was nothing I wanted more than to keep Cali away from anything that could harm her, and it pissed me off that right at this moment, there was nothing I could do to take this pain away from her.

I gritted my teeth, feeling motivated despite everything. We had to get those ashes and put a stop to this. There was no other option.

“The plan is the same as it always was.” I looked around the room at all the concerned faces before returning my gaze to Cali. I wanted her to see that I was undeterred and that I knew we were going to put an end to this, no matter what curve balls the dead demon insisted on throwing our way. “We have to get those ashes, and we have to return them. Then all of this will go away.” I turned to Big Mac. “Right?”

Big Mac nodded. “There’s no reason why that won’t still work. You just have to hurry. The phrase ‘time is of the essence’ applies directly to situations like this one.”

I looked at Greyson, who nodded.

“Even more reason for us to get going as soon as we can,” he said, his expression grim.

Orla was still standing by wringing her hands while Tom rubbed her back, trying to calm her down. “Cali, is there anything you need right now?” she asked. “Can we do anything to help ease the stress of this?”

I fucking hated to see them all like this. On my watch.

“I don’t know, Mom,” Cali said slowly. “Maybe some tea?”

“On it,” Orla said as she and Tom hurried off to the kitchen.

After a span of heavy silence, Cali finally looked up at Big Mac. “Tell me the truth. Do you think this handprint could kill me?”

# Episode 3138

“Tell me the truth. Do you think that this handprint could kill me?” I asked Big Mac.

*Straddling too many words will break you—*that was what I’d heard while in the fairy ring. Encouraging? Not really. Scary? Very much. Was I fucked? Perhaps.

Meanwhile, the witch stared at me for a brief moment that felt like a lifetime. I valued her opinion immensely, which made this even worse. She finally said, “The handprint has no power over you—”

*Oh, yay!*

“—but the dark magic behind it is a different story,” Big Mac concluded.

*Great.*

“What happened with the tree,” Big Mac continued, “and how your magic overwhelmed you and caused the fire—that is what could prove lethal. Your inability to control your magic.”

I swallowed audibly at the witch’s words, shuddering. The feeling of having this thing brewing inside me that could erupt at any minute was terrifying. I had, probably naïvely, hoped for a different answer, something more positive, but also who the fuck was I kidding?

*I am cursed!* I thought. *AGAIN! Why would things go well for me?*

“We’re not going to let anything bad happen to you, Cali,” Xavier said gruffly.

“He’s right,” Greyson said in that same tone. “We’d protect you with our lives.”

I looked between them. “But this is something that’s out of your control. You know that, right?”

Xavier frowned. “That’s bullshit.”

Greyson frowned too. “I resent that, even if there’s an edge of truth to it.”

Xavier grunted as Big Mac rested her hand on my shoulder and said, “I wish I had a better answer, but it is what it is.”

“So until we recover those ashes…” I swallowed, glancing at the tree. “Things are only going to get worse?”

Big Mac nodded, her eyes flashing with something like sympathy, and I drew in a deep breath. It didn’t help—I could smell the smoke, feel my lungs protest. What if it hadn’t been the tree that I’d hit? What if next time I crisped my sister? Or one of my mates? I imagined half of Greyson’s face burned off, then the entirety of Xavier’s arm charred, and the shiver that ran through me had my stomach clenching with nausea.

*This is fucked*, I thought. *I’m fucked, and I’ll never forgive myself if that happens!*

It was all so unfair, actually. I was just coming into being able to wield my magic to defend myself and the pack—what with my shields and all—but now Seluna was using my magic against me? From the fucking GRAVE?

*Is this even Seluna at all?* I wondered.

There were so many unknown variables in this situation, and Big Mac’s opinion had only managed to make me more insecure and fearful about the future.

“… could be an idea.” My dad’s voice snapped me back into the present. I looked over Big Mac’s shoulder and saw my parents approaching. And now, I was actually panicked.

“Don’t tell them anything,” I hissed at Big Mac. “It’ll only upset them more!”

The witch scowled at me. “I’m not going to lie. What do you take me for?”

“Lie about what?” Mom said, standing at the doorway with a cup of tea in hand. Crap, she’d heard!

“Well, it’s—” I started spluttering before settling for, “Big Mac looked tired, so I suggested she should lie down.”

Big Mac shot me a glare while both Xavier and Greyson looked uncomfortable.

*Is that really the best lie you could cook up, Cali?* Xavier mind linked.

I wanted to elbow them both as my mom brought me the tea, with Dad right behind her.

“The only one who is lying right now is my very own daughter,” Mom said seriously. She looked up at Greyson and Xavier. “What is going on?”

“Many things at once,” Xavier answered.

At the same time, Greyson deadpanned, “Who can say.”

I felt like bursting into hysterical laughter, but that feeling vanished when I was hit by an immense feeling of guilt. Mom stared at me, and I hated the fact that I’d just lied to her.

“Cali?” she said. “Why are you all being so weird?”

I sniffled. “Because I’m bad at lying.”

“I suggest you be honest with your parents, Cali,” Big Mac told me wryly.

I shifted uncomfortably, trying to figure out a way to explain all this without making it sound as bad as it seemed. I glanced up at Greyson for help. He instantly spoke up.

“Well,” he said, resting his hand on my shoulder, “it’s just that Big Mac reminded us that we need to reclaim Seluna’s ashes, or Cali’s inability to control her magic will get worse.”

That… still sounded pretty bad. If Greyson couldn’t sugarcoat something, then you knew you were in trouble. My parents seemed to agree, because I noticed a wary little glance pass between them. I knew they were up to something now.

*Shit.*

“Cali, your father and I have actually been thinking…” Mom took my hand as she sat down next to me.

She glanced up at my Dad, who said, “We don’t want you to go to New Orleans, pumpkin.”

Everybody went dead silent.

“*What?*” I jumped up. “I can’t just not go!”

Mom rushed to soothe me. “I know that your heart is set on going to New Orleans, on helping Artemis and hunting down the ashes. But we think you should stay here where we can watch you until your magic is back under control.”

“But I *have* to go!” I said. “I can’t just let my mates and sister go on their own!” I looked up at Greyson and Xavier. Xavier opened his mouth to speak, but Greyson gave a slight shake of his head.

*This is a family matter*, Greyson mind linked*. We can’t get involved, love.*

Xavier didn’t say anything, just stared at me intensely.

I took a deep breath, realizing that I was on my own on this one. And I couldn’t even blame my mates. Turning to my parents, I said, “Outside of Dani, I am the only one who is connected to and affected by the ashes. I am also the one responsible for killing Seluna in the first place.”

“That is exactly why—”

“Please, I wasn’t finished,” I said, interrupting my mom, who sighed and nodded curtly. Glancing up at my mates, I added, “Greyson and Xavier have always gone out of their way to protect me and help me, and I love them both for it. But they can’t keep me safe from dark magic.” I gestured at Big Mac. “Not even the most powerful witch I know can do that.”

My parents turned to Big Mac. She nodded. “I really *am* very powerful.”

Xavier coughed to cover what had to have been an uncomfortable snort.

I continued. “If this is going to break me, I can’t just sit here and wait for it to happen. I can’t give up so easy, like a coward.” I sat up straighter, peering between my mom and dad. And then, I declared, “I am going to New Orleans, and you can’t stop me.”

My parents glanced at each other. Then, softly, my mom said, “You misunderstood, sweetheart. We’re not stopping you from going. We just don’t want you to go.”

“The choice is still up to you,” Dad added. “The choice is always yours.”

“So you’re not…” I swallowed roughly. “Like, forbidding me from going?”

Mom looked puzzled. “Cali, you’re a grown woman, we can’t forbid you from doing anything.”

“We will stand by you no matter what decision you make,” Dad continued. “We trust you and respect your judgement.”

I sniffled, standing up to hug them. “Dad, thank you. I—”

“—though that won’t stop us from worrying, or considering it a troublesome choice—”

“Let’s circle back to the part where you trust and respect me,” I said as we completed our group hug. It felt so good to be embraced by them both, like I had this protective little cocoon around me. A cocoon that, unfortunately, had to break.

“I promise I’ll be careful,” I said, looking between them.

“Cali won’t be alone, anyway.” Xavier spoke up. “Me and Greyson, along with Artemis and Rishika, are going to stand by her every step of the way.” He pointed between him and his brother. “Think of us as two very large guard dogs who would die for your daughter.”

“I’m the larger of the two,” Greyson said, which prompted Xavier to elbow him.

My mom smiled and said, “That’s always a relief, thank you.”

“We know our daughter is in the best hands,” Dad said. He looked like he meant it.

“Cali! Where is Cali, dammit?” Lola’s screaming voice startled everyone. Before I could even speak, she burst into the room.

“Cali!” she gasped out. “I tracked the computer that the drone sent the video to!”

“That’s great! Why are you—”

“I have to provide the right password in the next three minutes, or I’ll be locked out permanently!” She looked wildly around the room. “Does anybody know Dick Wigbert’s password?”

# Episode 3139

**Violet**

I would’ve preferred to battle a shark over dealing with both Marta and Perrie at the same time. On the left, we had the girl who’d saved my brother’s life. On the right, we had his probable mate.

And where was Lilac?

Vanished.

I’d been left here to fix his mess.

Being a twin was purgatory.

“Marta, uh,” I stammered out, gesturing at the other girl. “This is Perrie. A member of the Samara pack.”

Perrie stiffened. Oh god, did she know Marta by name? Did she know that she was Lilac’s girlfriend and the girl he’d repeatedly called the love of his life? Could this BE any more awkward? Well—the only thing that would’ve made it more awkward was Lilac dropping by. Peak drama right there.

“Perrie, hi,” Marta said. “Nice to meet you.”

“Hi,” Perrie replied curtly before turning to me. “I need to talk to Xavier. Ava has a message for him.”

This was a surprising turn of events. Well, not really, because Ava was Team Xavier all the way.

I gestured to the house. “Xavier’s inside; I think he’s in a meeting. You can wait, though, or leave the message with me.”

Perrie seemed to ponder that as Marta spoke up. “I can see that you’re busy right now, so I’ll be going inside.” She reached for my shoulder, squeezing a little. Her voice dropping, she added, “When you’re free, though, I really want to talk to you about your brother. Is that okay?”

I nodded dumbly. “Of course. See you in a bit.”

Marta nodded as well before turning to Perrie. “Nice to meet you,” she said, then went inside. Perrie mumbled the same thing, but I doubted her heart was in it.

“What’s this message from Ava you’re talking about?” I asked Perrie after Marta was out of earshot.

Perrie scoffed. “As if I’d ever make the mistake of getting caught between those two tornadoes. Ava may be my friend, but I’m not her personal messenger.”

“What are you saying?” I asked, confused.

“There is no message,” Perrie said wryly. “I was lying.”

I blinked in shock. “Why would you—”

“I didn’t want to make this situation even more awkward,” Perrie said, “and it was the first thing that popped into my head.”

Perrie was… actually a very good liar. I was impressed, but also worried. Was my brother’s potential mate a devious mastermind? Of *course* he’d get one of those—he was such a problem child.

“That was her, right?” Perrie asked, shooting a look at the door. “Lilac’s girlfriend?”

I spluttered, “Uh, well, that’s—”

“I’m not stupid,” Perrie said sharply. “I can tell.”

I sighed. “Yeah. It was her.”

Perrie frowned, crossing her arms over her chest.

I started to panic. “Wait, you’re not going to say or do anything, right?”

Perrie’s eyebrows arched. “Since Lilac is my mate, I think I’m supposed to say something.”

I swallowed roughly. “I get that, but Lilac is trying to process this, and he was blindsided when he realized you might be mates, so—”

“Ha, no,” Perrie interrupted. “We *are* mates. There’s no doubt. But I never thought that when I met my mate, he’d have a girlfriend. What am I supposed to do now?”

This was just too much. I wasn’t socially savvy enough to navigate it.

“Do you…” I cleared my throat. “Do you have feelings for Lilac?”

Perrie paused. Then she said, “I told you I feel intensely connected to him. But *feelings*? That is beside the point—I barely *know* Lilac, and now there’s this other girl. And Lilac is…” Perrie trailed off, as if she’d changed her mind about saying something.

“What about Lilac?” I pressed.

Perrie rolled her eyes. “Lilac’s not exactly my type.”

“What is that even supposed to mean?” I asked. “What is your type?”

Perrie sighed dreamily. “Like a painter or musician who looks like a young Idris Elba or Oscar Isaac. An artistic spirit who loves to ponder and brood with style.” Her nose wrinkled. “Instead I got a slightly better dressed Jughead who, as Ava put it, never shuts up.”

Her words offended me in a second flat. I could be mean to my brother as much as I wanted, but nobody else was allowed to judge him.

“That’s actually not fair at all,” I blurted out. “Lilac might talk a lot, but he’s hilarious—everybody laughs at his jokes, even Xavier, who hates everything half the time! And he’s also very giving and kind and sweet and such a good fighter when—”

I cut myself off. What the hell was I doing? I did *not* want to get stuck in the middle of this. And if Perrie didn’t have feelings for Lilac, all the better!

“Anyway,” I said. “This isn’t my business.”

Perrie huffed. “So what am I supposed to do?”

I recalled Charlie’s advice and repeated it, because my mate was very smart. “Just let things work themselves out and stay out of it. You’re not in any rush, are you?”

Perrie’s eyes narrowed. “You want me to do nothing while my mate is with someone else?”

I knew exactly what Perrie meant. After all, I had pursued Charlie even while he’d been with Sandi, and I’d felt so jealous and possessive of him, as any wolf would. But this wasn’t Sandi—this was Marta. She’d brought Lilac back from the *dead*. That definitely needed a whole lot more consideration.

“Perrie, I understand you’re annoyed right now, and I would be too,” I told her honestly. “But Lilac’s my brother, and Marta is a very good friend of mine.”

“And?” Perrie tapped her foot impatiently.

“And this is putting me in a really tough spot,” I said, pointing out the obvious. “I don’t know what else to tell you.”

Perrie paused. Her expression softened. Then, taking a deep breath, she said, “If Lilac doesn’t sort this out, I’m going to. I’m willing to wait, but only for so long. This isn’t fair to me, but it’s not fair to your friend Marta either. Don’t forget that.”

And with that, Perrie thrust her chin up and headed off.

She had a point, so I cursed under my breath.

What was I supposed to do now?

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When I got back inside, I tried to find a place to hide to avoid seeing both Lilac and Marta. At least to buy myself some time to figure things out. But Marta was waiting for me right around the corner. Literally.

“Sorry if I scared you, but I really need to talk to you about Lilac,” she said apologetically after I squeaked in surprise. Some werewolf I was.

“Of course,” I said, fighting not to cringe as Marta herded me into one of the studies.

The second the door closed, I was filled with dread that got even worse as Marta started talking. “So Lilac’s been acting weird lately, and I’m worried that it’s because of something that I did, though I have no idea what that could be, you know?”

Oh my god. Poor Marta.

“But Lilac feels so distant, like he’s not present, or like he doesn’t even want to be around me. Does he even love me anymore?” Marta let out a sad little chuckle. “I don’t know.”

I felt like throwing up now. This was so terrible.

It got even worse when Marta stared into my eyes and asked, “Has Lilac said anything to you?”

I internally squirmed. I hated that I was being asked to lie to Marta, but I also didn’t want to hurt her by telling her that Lilac had found his mate. Marta had been worried about that, and if I were in Marta’s position, I would’ve been crushed if I’d found out that Charlie had a different mate.

In the end, I decided to skirt a direct answer.

“The truth is that the holidays have always been a stressful time for me and Lilac,” I said, “ever since our parents died in the pack war.”

Marta nodded sadly. “I get that. It’s not like my last fifty years are filled with joyous holiday memories.”

Poor, poor Marta. My heart was gonna break.

“You should—you should just talk to Lilac,” I said, clearing my throat.

“I’ve tried to, but I thought that since you’re so close to your brother, you could talk to him instead?”

“I could, but it would be better if you talked to him directly—less room for miscommunication,” I insisted. I wasn’t even lying—that was a good point.

Marta pondered that before finally saying, “Okay. I’ll talk to him again. Maybe later, though.”

“That’s great!” I forced a smile. “Anyway—I have to make a phone call that I forgot, so I’ll talk to you later. Good luck with Lilac!”

I left the room, trying not to hyperventilate with how guilty I felt. And then I made a beeline for my bonehead brother’s room upstairs, and I shoved the door open.

“You need to tell Marta what’s going on, Lilac,” I declared. “Or I will.”

# Episode 3140

**Greyson**

I followed a flailing Lola into one of the studies. The drone was lying on the desk in pieces, with cables going every which way like spilled guts.

“Look!” Lola pointed at her laptop screen as everybody else entered the room. “We need Wigbert’s password before the countdown ends. Any ideas?”

She stared up at me, buzzing like a live wire. I couldn’t fucking believe she’d actually managed to crack this. All I could think to say was, “I’ve never been so impressed by you, Lola—”

She blushed. “Thank you—”

“But I have no idea what Dick’s password could be.”

Lola groaned in frustration.

Jay spoke up. “You should go for the obvious—123456789.”

“I can’t use that!” Lola scoffed. “We only have three attempts or we’ll be locked out forever.”

Jay’s tone was wry. “I think it’s worth a try—I’ve known people to use that, or ABCDEFGHI.”

Lola looked up at me with huge eyes. Apparently complimenting her had made her care about what I had to say. “Greyson?”

I nodded. “We have to try it. Anything to prevent him from seeing the captured footage.”

Lola frowned, taking a seat behind her laptop. “Okay. But if this doesn’t turn out well, I won’t be held responsible.”

She typed in the numeric password. A second later, she huffed and groaned and slapped the desk. I gathered *that* hadn’t worked.

“This leaves us with another two options,” Lola said grimly. “Think, you guys!”

“Should she try the ABC one?” Cali asked me cautiously.

I exchanged a glance with Xavier. He shrugged. Shaking my head, I told Lola, “Do it.”

This time, Lola cursed out loud, ready to flip the table. “We have only one more try now!” She pointed at the screen. “AND time is running out!”

I stared at the screen, fighting not to show my frustration. As the Alpha, you were supposed to keep your shit in check at all times, even if everybody else was buzzing around you like honey-drunk bumblebees.

“Maybe it’s a date? Like his birthday.” Cali said.

“It’s not long enough. Maybe it’s his wife’s name—does he have a wife?” Xavier said.

“Or his pet?” Orla said. “Does someone like him even have a pet?”

“It can’t be any of those things!” Lola wailed, as if she were living her very own Greek tragedy. For once, I couldn’t blame her for the theatrics—this was urgent, and there had to be a way to crack it. We needed to get in and delete that footage. The last time something similar had happened, we’d had Rhonda’s help…

“Maybe it’s his favorite food,” Tom said helplessly in the background as I mulled over the current facts.

1) Rhonda had helped us last time.

2) Rhonda had had a falling out with Dick since then.

3) There was no fucking three here—calling Rhonda was worth a shot anyway.

As everybody else kept debating what to do, I grabbed my phone and called her. She picked up right away.

“Greyson Evers!” she said, sounding surprised. “Is everything okay?”

“I need the password to Dick’s computer—can you help?” I asked. No need to do any kind of lead up.

Everyone in the room had fallen silent, staring at me.

“What do you need his password for?” Rhonda’s voice was intrigued, but I didn’t have time to analyze this.

“That’s on a need-to-know basis—right now I really need that password because we’re dealing with a countdown,” I told her.

“One minute left!” Lola squealed.

“I’m sorry,” Rhonda said, sounding regretful. “I have no idea—”

I couldn’t waste any more time. “Okay, thanks for—”

“But actually, Kenneth might know!” she exclaimed like she’d just hit the jackpot.

I had no idea who Kenneth was, but I’d take it.

“See, Dick is clueless when it comes to technology, and Kenneth had to do everything for him. Let me ask!” Rhonda said, then yelled, “Hey, Ken!”

I could hear some muffled conversation, right along with Lola hissing, “*Thirty seconds, Greyson!*”

Cali shivered right next to me, just as Kenneth came onto the phone. “Okay, it could be one of two passwords.”

“We only have one chance—which one is the most likely?” I asked quickly.

Kenneth paused. I held my breath, and a beat later, Kenneth said, “It’s most likely ‘bigdickenergy69’.”

Right.

*Right.*

Fucking hell, how the fuck was this my life?

“Can you repeat it for me?” I asked my new buddy Ken, grasping at straws here.

I could just hear Kenneth cringe as he said again, “‘bigdickenergy69’. No caps.”

It had to be some sort of curse, really. First Lucian, then Knox, now Dick. At this time, all the people I wanted to murder were so fucking ridiculous, they deserved to die just for that alone.

“Greyson!” Lola shouted. “Fifteen seconds!”

Cali grasped my arm tight as I told Lola, “I got it.”

I told her the worst password that had ever existed, and Lola frantically typed it in as the countdown got to—

*3*

*2*

Lola tapped ENTER.

The countdown stopped at *1*.

And Lola shouted in delight. “It worked! We’re in!”

I exhaled sharply. Cali grabbed me tight, the relief on her face evident. I gave her a rueful smile as I told my new best friend, “Thank you, Kenneth. I owe you one.”

“No,” he blurted out. “Thank *you* for listening.”

I stared at the phone, a little confused by my pal Ken’s reaction until Rhonda returned.

“Sorry,” Rhonda said through the phone. “Ken has been working with Dick for so long that he’s forgotten how it is for someone to say thank you.”

Dick needed to be extinguished.

“Anyway, I’m glad we could help,” Rhonda continued, and I nodded.

“I’ll be in touch. Right now, we have something to take care of.”

“Be careful, though,” Rhonda cautioned. “Dick can go a little off the rails at times.”

I knew that for a fact, what with Dick shooting my mother and all.

Too bad for him, I could go off the rails as well.

Not to mention Big Mac also wanted to skin his ass alive.

This should be fun.

“Thanks again. Talk to you later,” I told Rhonda, hanging up. Everybody in the room cheered. I turned to Lola and said, “Find that footage and get rid of it.”

“Already on it,” Lola said, scrolling through the files.

Cali was still holding my arm tight, staring up at me. She mind linked, *What if she can’t find the footage?*

I shook my head. *She’ll find the footage.*

Cali swallowed roughly. *But what if—*

“Found it!” Lola exclaimed. Cali gasped and grabbed me, pulling me forward. Everybody watched over Lola’s shoulder as the woods appeared.

“Speed it up,” Jay said, his expression dark. I’d never seen him so serious, actually.

Lola did as she was told, going through everything, until finally, we came across a clear image of Rishika and Jay, in wolf form, coming upon the drone. I held my breath as Rishika leapt up, mouth wide as she grabbed the thing with her teeth.

And then the video went dark.

“Well, at least there isn’t any footage of us shifting—or of my ass,” Xavier commented.

“Why would Dick have footage of your derriere, Xavier?” Cali’s dad asked, his eyebrows knitted in confusion.

“He’s just joking!” Cali blurted, waving Xavier off. “Werewolves, nudity… The old song and dance…”

I could see that she was flustered, though. I internally huffed. How long had it been since the last time Cali and I had gotten naked alone? Too fucking long, if you asked me.

“Getting rid of this footage was extremely important,” I told Lola before my train of thought, and the conversation, got further derailed. “Clearly he thinks something is up if he’s using a drone out here again. Maybe he thinks he knows something or doesn’t trust something LIPS said. Either way, it’s not safe. We don’t know why he’s here, and if he sees anything on this, he’ll know that the ‘large’ wolves didn’t leave, and he’ll want to continue his asinine plan to pursue them for his zoo.”

“I’ll go through his files and look for other footage as well,” Lola said. “Just in case anything slipped.”

“Good idea,” I said. “Thank you. You’ve done well.”

“So well, babe,” Jay added, stroking Lola’s shoulder. Lola blushed again, and I felt like snorting. Was praise all that was needed to make Lola less insufferable? Who would’ve thought?

“Greyson,” Cali said, tugging on my arm to pull me to the side. “I’m so relieved right now—you have no idea.”

I did have an idea, actually. Cali had been so stressed out lately, dealing with one crisis after the other. Just minutes earlier, she’d set a fucking tree on fire. She’d needed the good news.

I took her hand and said, “I’m glad this makes you feel better.”

She looked up at me, smiling softly as she scrutinized my face. But then she suddenly frowned. “Oh, no.”

“What?”

She wagged her index finger at my face. “There’s a *but* coming! I can see it, Greyson—it’s at the tip of your tongue.”

“I didn’t say anything—”

She scoffed. “No more diplomacy, Greyson. What are you thinking?”

I just gave up. “I’m glad you’re feeling relieved, *but* I’m afraid that a guy like Dick isn’t going to stop sending drones. He has a lot of resources, and from what I’ve heard, he’s passionate about all this.”

Cali pressed her lips together, looking forlorn. “That makes a lot of sense. I hate it.”

“I know,” I said quietly.

In the background, Jay yelled, “Lola, why are you looking at his email?”

“Because I can,” Lola said haughtily. “He trespassed on our land, so I can trespass on his inbox.” She turned to me, pointing at the screen. “Greyson, look—Dick’s staying at the Grand Gardenia hotel.”

“Lola,” Jay said with a groan. “You can’t just click around his email—he might realize something is off.”

As the two kept arguing, Cali stared up at me, her grip on my hand getting tighter. Her vulnerable expression reminded me that I’d go to hell and back if it meant protecting my mate, my mother, my family.

“What are you going to do to stop this man?” Cali whispered.

My jaw clenched, but I still gave Cali a smile. “The only thing I can do. It’s time to pay Dick a little visit.”

# Episode 3141

**Xavier**

Greyson had just told Cali that he was going to pay Dick a visit.

“What are you gonna do with him?” she asked.

“Just talk. Maybe scare him a little, you know how it goes,” he said. Then he kept smiling at her, leaning down to kiss her cheek.

She got all flustered, and that was my cue to intervene. I grabbed Greyson by the arm and pulled him to the side, telling Cali, “Sorry, gotta talk with my brother.”

Greyson arched an eyebrow. “What’s up?”

I crossed my arms over my chest and forced myself to focus on the problem at hand. “How, exactly, do you plan to deal with Wigbert? Because I’m more than happy to join you.”

I wasn’t talking shit right now—I had it out for Dick myself.

Greyson shook his head. “I think I want to have a one-on-one chat with him. Should be fine.”

I scoffed at his use of the word “fine.”

Jacqueline walked by us and paused. “I was thinking about the Dick problem as well, actually.”

“You were eavesdropping, you mean,” Greyson said mildly.

“Of course,” she replied in that same casual tone. “Anyway, I want to help. Why not let Lola and me pay Dick a late-night visit? We could drain him before he has a chance to say *werewolf*.”

Greyson cleared his throat. “Thank you for the enthusiasm, but I’m trying to avoid killing anyone right now.”

That was some bullshit. I shot a look at Cali, who was talking with her parents—she was probably the reason why Greyson wasn’t openly talking about disemboweling the bastard. Dick had shot Greyson’s mom—there was no way my brother was going to simply forgive and forget.

“Okay,” Jacqueline conceded. “But if you change your mind…” She dropped her fangs and added, “You know where to find me.”

The second Jacqueline left the room, I stared at Greyson. “Okay, let’s be honest here. You want to tear Dick’s throat out, don’t you?”

Greyson smiled. “Let’s just say I wouldn’t be unhappy if Dick met a tragic end, sooner rather than later,” he said in a calm tone.

“And you sure you don’t want me to come along?” I asked. To be honest, I wanted to witness Greyson’s interaction with Dick. There was a fifty-fifty chance he would absolutely lose his shit and snap Dick’s neck like a toothpick. Greyson was all diplomacy and bullshit until he went on a rampage, and he’d have justification too. Dick had almost killed his mother—he could’ve hurt anyone in the pack. I was an Alpha that would enjoy witnessing that kind of display.

Perhaps offer to give him a hand, as well.

“I’d rather go knowing that you’re here with the pack—and Cali,” Greyson said. That put all my plans of witnessing Dick’s murder on the backburner. My brother had a point.

I hated it when he had a point.

“You can’t take too long. I’m worried we’re running out of time,” I told him. “We need to get those ashes.”

Greyson nodded. “I’m aware. I’m only planning to see Dick for a few minutes, and I’ll be back way before we have to leave for New Orleans.”

I just nodded at his words, and our conversation was over. Greyson walked out of the study to go do god knew what, and I looked around the room. Jay and Lola were still arguing—apparently Lola wanted to release Dick’s pics—an unflattering dating profile set of selfies—out into the world, and Jay found that ethically appalling.

I spotted Cali walking out of the study, so I followed her out into the hallway. She was holding an empty tea mug—the one that Orla had brought her earlier after she’d burned down the tree.

“How you feeling?” I asked.

“Better,” she said. “You really don’t have to check on me all the time. I’m not that fragile.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to treat you like you’re breakable, Cali.” I paused, then admitted, “I’m here because I thought about what you told your parents earlier.”

She blinked slowly. “Oh?”

“Yeah,” I said. “About you taking care of yourself and making your own decisions. You’re right. I’ve been hovering over you.” I stopped myself from mentioning Greyson, and how she somehow didn’t seem to have an issue when *he* hovered. It was as if his hovering was different than mine, which it wasn’t. Probably. I didn’t fucking know.

Either way, I had to be honest with Cali right now.

“I want you to know that I’m not telling you what to do or whatever because I think that you can’t take care of yourself,” I said. “When you first found out that I was a werewolf, you tried to run—and you almost succeeded, so—”

“That was an interesting endeavor, yeah,” Cali said, sighing.

“The point is, you have survival instincts,” I continued. “You fought a werewolf with a spatula. You’re a powerful half-Fae who’s defeated vampires, revenants, and demons. I may not always tell you everything I feel, and I may fuck up when I try to express myself, but I do believe in you.”

Cali’s eyes were glistening now. Her voice cracked. “Xavier…”

I pulled her closer, swallowing thickly. “I love you more than anything in the world, Caliana Hart. I can’t imagine living without you. So I’m always doing everything I can to make sure you’re safe…” I reached out to caress her cheek, and my heart was pounding. My voice dropped to a whisper. “Not just because I want to protect you—but because I’m selfish, and I… I need you.”

I stared into her dark eyes before pulling her into a hug.

“I need you too, Xavier…” She said the words in the same hushed tone, as if we were sharing a secret. Then she faced me, looked up at me, and said, “Always.”

Every inch of me that touched her was on fire. She reached for my face, and the second her feather-soft fingertips came into contact with my skin, I was a goner. I kissed her, hard, not holding back, while the mate bond vibrated between us, feeling stronger than ever.

I’d told her I believed in her, but could I really ease up on wanting to keep her safe?

I only knew that I was going to have to try.

Cali had made that clear today.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Greyson said, a little too loudly. “But I have to talk to Xavier.”

His tone made it obvious that he wasn’t sorry at all, actually. Cali spluttered after we broke off the kiss, presenting her empty mug to him as if it were a trophy. “Clean up!” she blurted out. “I have to clean it up. The cup. My cup, that is.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Greyson told her gently.

She looked like she was about to burst out laughing and/or crying at his reaction. But then she just walked past him and squeezed his arm before vanishing down the hall.

I scowled at Greyson. How much of my talk with Cali had he actually heard? I wasn’t sure how I felt about the idea of him seeing me get so… emotional.

To his credit, though, he was all business. “Did you tell Zeke about Dick?” he asked.

“I talked to Ava about it,” I replied. “Don’t worry.”

Greyson frowned. “Ava’s not the Samara Alpha—Zeke is.”

I scoffed. “Zeke is a *temporary* Alpha. He’s like a substitute teacher.”

Greyson stared at me, clearly not appreciating my amazing joke. “Zeke needs to know, Xavier.”

“Ava has told Zeke, I’m pretty sure—don’t fucking worry about it.”

Greyson gave me that same murder smile I’d seen earlier. “You keep telling me not to worry, but that’s the thing—when you’re an Alpha, you have to worry. All the time. Until your hair turns grey and your dick falls off, you *worry*.”

“Fucking hell, *fine*.” Huffing, I grabbed my phone. “I’ll make sure Zeke knows.”

Greyson rested his hand on my shoulder. “Not good enough. Since you’re my unofficial Samara pack messenger due to your old kissy times with Ava, you have to go there. Make it clear that we’re allies on this.”

“Fine,” I snapped. “I’m just texting Ava a heads-up that I’m coming. Is that okay, *Dad*?”

Greyson took a deep breath, pinching his nose before he said, “Look, Xavier, I’m not looking for a fight. I’m just looking out for the pack.”

I kept my mouth stubbornly shut. Greyson shook his head, took another deep breath, and walked away. I stayed back, scowling. Nine times out of ten, conversations with Greyson made me feel worse afterward. Everything was always his fault, anyway.

Huffing, I texted Ava.

*I need to talk to Zeke. I’m coming by.*

I hesitated before sending it. What would her reaction be? Our last conversation had been high on the awkwardness scale. In the end, I just bit the bullet and pressed SEND.

Ava’s response came five seconds later.

*Bad idea. You shouldn’t come.*

# Episode 3142

I finished washing my mug, thinking about Greyson’s face when he’d caught me kissing Xavier in the hallway after that emotional moment between us. I wondered how much he’d heard—if he’d heard anything at all.

I should’ve been used to it by now, right? It happened all the time—one mate just casually dropping by when I was with the other. It was bound to happen with all three of us living under the same roof. And it probably didn’t help that Xavier and I had decided to have a heart-to-heart and tongue tango in the middle of the hallway.

*Did I just think the words TONGUE TANGO?*

Anyway, I hoped Greyson wasn’t too bothered by it. I would hate for him to go see that dick Dick Wigbert without making sure he was okay. I nodded to myself decidedly, and then I went upstairs to find Greyson. I took a deep breath and knocked on his door.

“Come in,” Greyson called.

I walked in only to see him in putting on a dress shirt that was an icy blue color that made his grey eyes pop. I noticed he’d already put on a pair of dark trousers that fit a little too nicely. I overall felt personally attacked by how handsome he looked.

“Why are you getting dressed up?” I asked. My throat grew dry as he buttoned up the shirt one button at a time, and then he started to roll the sleeves up his forearms.

*It is not fair that someone can be this hot.*

“Dick doesn’t stay in one-star motels,” he said. “He’s booked himself in at the best hotel around. I want to blend in—can’t go in looking like I just came from a bowling alley.”

“Hah,” I scoffed. “No matter how you dress, you’ll always stand out.”

He raised an eyebrow, picking out a belt to wear. A belt! My god, this was basically pornographic.

“Stand out in a good or a bad way?” he asked.

My face felt hot. “Stop fishing for compliments, you know you’re wildly aesthetically pleasing.”

He smirked. “Do I?”

“You’re a menace.”

He laughed, shaking his head as I approached.

“I’m going to hug you right now and look at you respectfully,” I announced, and he just laughed some more.

“You can look all you want, love.”

Once he was done with that, and I was done trying to convince myself to stop not looking at his ass in those pants, I looked up at him.

“What are you going to say to Dick?” I asked quietly.

This really was a crisis, and I needed to get a fucking grip. I wondered what Greyson was thinking right now, because all he did was smile down at me. That charming smile of his that was sometimes kind of… dangerous? Or just hot? Both?

“I’m not going to say anything,” Greyson said casually. “I’m just going to rip his throat out.”

I flinched back in shock, but he pulled me back into his embrace, chuckling.

“Cali, I’m kidding.” He paused. “Mostly.”

I gasped. “Greyson!”

“I’m just saying,” Greyson said, eyebrows arched, “killing him would put an end to the trouble we have with him, wouldn’t it? First he’s there, then he’s not. Freedom, finally.”

I stared at him. “I really hope you’re kidding.”

“Of course I am.” Greyson nodded. “I’d never kill Wigbert.” He paused. “At least not in a public place like a hotel. I’d lure him to the back alley first.”

“This isn’t funny, Greyson,” I said sternly. “Murder is never funny.”

He squinted at me, smiling some more. “Isn’t it, though?”

I smacked his chest lightly, because I knew he was teasing me. But also because that smile was doing things to me that weren’t very appropriate.

“I want you to play nice and be careful,” I said, gripping the front of his shirt. “Promise?”

Greyson’s expression softened. He leaned down, brushing his lips over mine. I felt all warm and tingly when he said, “I will.” He tucked my hair behind my ear. “Are you going to be okay while I’m away? Other than missing me terribly, of course.”

“I’m feeling much better,” I said. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

Greyson’s left eyebrow twitched. “Yeah, about that…”

“What?”

“I know it’s been difficult having Xavier and me be so worried about you,” he said. Apparently, he *had* heard my talk with Xavier. “I know it would drive me mad. But I want you to know that no matter what, I believe in you—I always have.”

I sniffed, getting all emotional as I smoothed the fabric against his chest. “I know. You even let me go out in a snowstorm, even though that was such a stupid idea.”

He stroked my cheek. “I love all your ideas, even the stupid ones.”

I chuckled. Then, I admitted, “Honestly, though, I’m just as guilty. I worry about you all the time, I think even more so because you’re the Alpha. I want to keep you just as safe as you want to keep me, and I—I know I can be overbearing at times…”

“You’re not,” he said, shaking his head. “It doesn’t bother me. If anything, it’s flattering.”

“It is?”

“Of course. You’re my mate—that’s what mates too. I like being fussed over by you.”

There was a weird lump in my throat. Because now that I thought about it, I realized Greyson had never had anyone fussing over him growing up. Xavier had always had Colton to have his back, and his mom. But Greyson? He’d been alone.

“I…” I wasn’t about to cry right now*. Get it together, Cali.* “I think that, at least in theory, it would be healthier for both of us if we tried to hover a little less. If we say we believe in each other, we have to try to back that up.”

He nodded. “I get it. We all want the same thing.”

He let me go then, which was horrible, and he picked up his jacket. A blazer. Then a long wool coat. He was fully dressed up now, and his pornographic presence just seemed to get worse.

“I’d better get going,” he said. “I still have to pack for New Orleans.”

I nodded as he leaned down to kiss me goodbye. It took everything in my heart and body not to deepen the kiss. I stroked his cheek when he broke it off. “Be safe.”

He kissed my palm. “You too.”

I stood in his room, all alone, listening to him walking down the stairs. I looked around, already missing him. I wished I could’ve just run after him and clung to his back like a fucking koala.

*Cali, no!* I scolded myself. *You literally just told the man that you should set some boundaries and believe in each other!*

I nodded to myself. Besides, he’d be back soon, and we’d all go to New Orleans together. I wouldn’t have to freak out about either him or Xavier, because they’d be with me all the time, and I’d be able to keep looking at them.

Respectfully.

I realized that I hadn’t even finished packing, though, so I went straight back to my room. I’d barely begun when I’d had that hallucination. I shuddered at the memory, but I was determined not to let it haunt me.

I was excited for New Orleans, actually—it was a chance for me to actually do something to find the ashes. And to help Artemis find out about her father. This could be a good thing, all over.

After giving myself that little pep talk, I started putting stuff in my bag. I’d never been to New Orleans, but I knew that it could get hot and humid, that it had great food and music.

And also, that it was haunted. Not *probably* haunted. Just straight-up haunted.

Many vampire stories took place in New Orleans. Which got me thinking—after all the trouble we’d had with supernaturals, going to a city that was known for them felt a little unnerving. But on the other hand, maybe it was the perfect place to settle this demonic feud.

*Positive thoughts only, Cali!*

I was ready to get my toiletries when I paused by the bathroom door. What if I was hit by another hallucination? Thinking about New Orleans lore had freaked me out a little, so I decided to go check on my sister. Just to make sure Artemis was still okay about going.

*Whatever gives me an excuse to avoid my bathroom…*

I got out of the room and walked down the hallway. As I approached, Artemis and Rishika’s door burst open. Rishika stormed out, huffing and throwing her hands up when she spotted me. Uh-oh, that didn’t seem good.

“Everything okay?” I asked, cautiously stepping forward.

“Cali! I can’t get through to her.” She pointed at me. “Can you try? ”

With that, Rishika stomped away, filling me with dread.

*Shit, is Artemis getting cold feet again?*

# Episode 3143

**Xavier**

*Bad idea. You shouldn’t come*.

I reread Ava’s text. Why would it be a bad idea for me to go to the Samara pack? Did the Samaras have mixed feelings about me? Or did this have something to do with my last conversation with Ava—did she not want to see me?

I wanted to respond with a *WTF* and get this over with, but I deleted it after typing out the letters. Ava had always been hard to figure out—she either adored you or she was ready to stab you in the back, no middle ground. Reading her was daunting, and even more so via text. At least if I could look into her eyes, I’d have a better chance of understanding what she was up to.

But this wasn’t about Ava.

If Ava couldn’t handle me coming over to talk to Zeke, that was her goddamn problem. Not mine. I’d told Greyson that I’d check in with the temporary Alpha and keep things smooth. Despite the fact that Greyson was an annoying pain in the ass—it came naturally to him—his request made sense. I couldn’t allow my troubled relationship with Ava get in the way of my assignment, and that was that.

Maybe, if I was lucky, I wouldn’t even see her.

I typed out my response, my jaw clenched.

*Too bad. I’m coming anyway*.

I was about to head downstairs, but then I realized I couldn’t just walk outside, shift, and go to the Samara campsite. Fucking Dick had drones everywhere, which was the reason why I was going to go see Zeke in the first place. I had to warn the Samaras about the billionaire asshole who was ready to fuck shit up for everybody.

Stomping down the stairs, in a very bad mood, I grabbed the keys for one of the jeeps and headed to the garage. I paused at the doorway, though, thinking about Cali. Should I tell her I was leaving? I thought about our conversation earlier. I’d told her I believed in her and all that. But if I went to tell her where I was going right now, how would she take it?

Would she think that I thought of her as fragile—that I didn’t think she could handle the fact that I needed to step out on routine pack business? Cali had been through a lot lately, and I knew she worried, but after the talk we’d just had, I felt like I shouldn’t stir any shit with her right now. She wouldn’t like it if she realized I thought she’d spontaneously combust if she didn’t know my whereabouts at all times.

I had to make good on my word, walk away, and trust that she would be fine.

Nodding to myself, I headed to the car.

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Driving over the rough terrain was bullshit. When I pulled up near the Samara camp, my body was actually feeling weird after bouncing around in the car. It would’ve been so much easier to shift and run.

I hoped that Greyson would finally lose his shit for once and tear Wigbert to pieces. Shift into his wolf and bite his head off, while he was at it—make an example out of him and show everyone what, exactly, happened to assholes who just wouldn’t leave Mother Nature alone. Sometimes nature would bite back.

I got out of the car and approached the Samaras. Some of them were gathered around the campfire. Since Knox and his buds had been shipped off to face the werewolf council, the vibes around here seemed to be lighter. I took that as a good sign.

I looked around for Zeke, hoping I could make this visit as short as possible. But as I looked around, the wind changed direction, and a very familiar scent hit my nose. My wolf suddenly stirred. Shoving down the reaction, I looked to my left to spot—

Ava.

Of course.

She was holding a drink to her lips, her eyes fixed on me over the fire. They were a pale blue color, but they looked so dark right now. I realized that the possibility of avoiding her had just been shattered, so I accepted my fate. Bracing myself for the awkwardness of the confrontation, I walked over to her.

“Don’t tell me you’re surprised,” I said. “I said I was coming over.”

Ava raised her eyebrows. “And I told you not to.”

It felt like everything about this woman was an endless mind game. It was fucking exhausting.

“You’re not the center of the world, Ava. I’m here to talk to Zeke about Dick Wigbert.”

Ava let out a chuckle. It sounded bitter. “You asked me to tell Zeke about that, and I did. But I guess you didn’t trust me to pull off the task.”

The way she stared at me had a sharpness to it that wasn’t normal. She took another sip from her cup, and I realized I could smell alcohol on her. She’d never been one to overindulge, so this was… odd.

“You’ve been drinking,” I told her. I wasn’t sure what the fuck was up with my tone, or why I cared, but I still said it.

She shrugged. “Don’t we have reason to celebrate? Now that Knox is gone, everyone is feeling better.”

If that was true, why did Ava look so fucking down?

“Actually,” she said, offering another low chuckle, “I’m glad you’re here. I’ve been thinking a lot about mates.”

I sighed. This was exactly why I hadn’t wanted to run into her. Ava was like glue—one misstep, and it stuck all over you. And I was just fucking done with this sticky business.

“I didn’t come over to discuss mates or any of that crap, so—”

She cut me off, completely ignoring my comment. “Actually, do you know about that boy who’s always talking and…” She leveled a finger toward the bonfire, where Perrie was talking to that woman Marissa and some other Samaras I didn’t really know. “You’ve heard about them, right?”

“I have no idea what you’re saying right now,” I told her. I was getting frustrated. Ava was hard enough to communicate with when she was sober—much more so when she was tipsy. And I’d never seen her tipsy like this since, not she’d come back from the dead.

“That’s Perrie,” Ava said slowly, pointing at the girl. She stared at me like *I* was the problem. “She thinks she’s mated to one of your twins. Chatty Lavender boy.”

I frowned. “You mean Lilac?”

Ava nodded, snorting. “Yep, that’s Lavender.”

If Lilac ever heard Ava call him Lavender, he’d be pissed. Now *that* would’ve been funny to witness.

“Anyway,” Ava said. “The pretty boy twin—that’s who I’m talking about. Perrie thinks she’s mated to him. Did you know?”

“No,” I said, “and I don’t care. It’s none of my business, and it certainly shouldn’t be any of yours.”

Ava shrugged, sighing as she stared down at her cup. “It just… It reminded me of…”

Her voice trailed off. She shook her head, taking another sip of her drink. I felt the urge to grab it and toss it away. Her scent was all wrong with the alcohol tainting it, and my wolf was antsy, angry over it.

This was fucked up, and I needed to distance myself. I wasn’t about to get into any of our unresolved bullshit feelings right now, and I definitely had no interest in talking about Lilac’s love life. Knowing him, he’d be making a scene about the whole thing soon enough.

Poor Marta, though. Yikes.

Either way, it was none of my business. Ava wasn’t my business, either. The idea of flying to New Orleans tomorrow was even more appealing now that I’d seen her—the more distance I put between me and her, the better for the both of us. We were just so toxic and terrible together that I had no idea how we’d even survived each other in the past.

Though, technically, we hadn’t.

I’d died inside when she’d killed my mother. Then I’d died again when I’d killed her, my wolf torn apart. There had been a time, though, when being with her had been as easy as breathing, and the thought of being away from her had devastated me. But that was long ago. Still, I couldn’t help but feel a little sad about our situation. It was tragic, ultimately.

I couldn’t help but see Ava’s own sadness and be affected, as if she were still mine. My wolf reacted to the thought, as if he were grieving. I refused to acknowledge him, and a wave of nausea hit me. I looked away from Ava.

“Where the hell is Zeke, anyway?” I asked gruffly.

“Over by the tents,” Ava replied in a low voice. “You can go look for him.”

The idea of stepping away from Ava right now, along with my earlier thoughts about going to New Orleans, suddenly had me thinking about something that I hadn’t considered yet.

What if the distance between Ava and me upset my wolf and caused another shifting problem?

# Episode 3144

What on earth was Rishika talking about? Had she and Artemis had a fight?

“Rish—” I started to speak, but Rishika had already run downstairs, still stomping around. I doubted she was in a state where she’d want to have a little chat with me, so I decided to go directly to the source of the drama. Which was my own flesh and blood.

*Somehow, I’m not surprised by this turn of events.*

“Artemis?” I called, walking into the room. “Everything okay?”

I found my sister sitting on her bed, an open suitcase beside her. She looked all huffy and annoyed, but that was kind of the norm, so I didn’t let it faze me. I had a lot of experience dealing with vivacious grumps—Xavier was a prime example there, before all his #growth.

“No, everything is awful,” Artemis said.

“What happened?” I asked, sitting down next to her. “Are you having second thoughts about going to New Orleans?”

Artemis scrunched her eyebrows with a frown. “What are you talking about? I told you I’m coming, and I meant it. The problem is *this*!”

She lifted a scarf that had been covering the other half of the bed. There was a huge collection of knives, a whip, and a set of small throwing knives.

“Um,” I said, “why is Rishika upset about these? I thought she liked weapons as much as the next werewolf? Also, she knows that you always have some kind of weapon on you.”

“Thank you!” Artemis exclaimed, gesturing at me. “You get it!”

It felt like there was a definite gap in communication going on right now, so I asked Artemis, “Get *what*?”

“Rishika insists that I’m not allowed to bring all my stuff to New Orleans!”

I flinched. “Wait, you want to bring *all of these*? What do you think we’re going to be doing—hunting down alligators? Is that even legal?”

“Alligators are majestic beasts of prey. I would never harm them, Cali,” Artemis scolded me. “People and magical beings that bother us, on the other hand, are fair game.”

Right. Good luck to me, trying to reason with my wacky, vaguely homicidal sister.

“Artemis, look,” I said patiently. “New Orleans is a big city. You can’t just walk around with an arsenal.”

“I feel like I can and should.”

“This isn’t how things are supposed to—”

“Who cares how things are supposed to work?” Artemis scoffed. “I need all my weapons—we’re already dealing with a dead demon. I learned in the Fae world that you can never be too prepared.”

I realized that there was no way that Artemis would leave this house without at least *some* of her weapons. I had to find a compromise here.

“Okay,” I said. “How about you narrow it down to the essentials?”

“These *are* the essentials.” Artemis pouted. “But Rishika said the TSA won’t allow any of them. Who the hell do the TSA think they are? I could kill them, you know!”

“I don’t doubt that for a minute,” I told Artemis while screaming on the inside. “But the TSA keeps people safe at the airport, and maybe you can check one or two weapons in a suitcase. Even though I’m pretty sure that’s still against the rules and a horrible idea.”

“But—”

I rested my hands on Artemis’s shoulders. “You can shop for new knives once we arrive. How about that?”

Artemis huffed. “Who’s going to pay? I don’t have any human money!”

“I mean, Mom or Dad,” I told Artemis. “Or if it came to it, I’m sure Xavier or Greyson would be happy to get you one. You’re an essential part of the team, after all.”

Artemis paused. “Oh.” Her mouth stretched into a mischievous smile. “Maybe I can get a special knife for Rishika, too.”

“How romantic,” I said. The sarcasm escaped Artemis, who grinned wide.

“I know,” she said happily. “Okay, thanks for the tip. I’ll go tell her the good news.” Artemis bounded toward the door, but then she paused and turned to look at me. Her eyes were narrowed. “Wait, did *you* finish packing?”

“I’m almost done, so, uh…” I trailed off, getting fidgety when I recalled my fear of the bathroom.

Artemis picked up on my shiftiness and walked up to me again. “Something’s wrong. What is it?”

“The bathroom,” I blurted. “I kind of—it’s crazy that I’m scared to go in, but…”

Artemis frowned. “But what?”

I sighed, and Artemis rested her hand on my shoulder.

“I’m your sister, Caliana. If you can’t tell me, who can you tell?”

I decided to just bite the bullet. “I had a scary hallucination in my bathroom.”

Artemis’s eyebrows shot up. “You should have told me—was it because of the ashes?”

I swallowed audibly. “I think so.”

Artemis’s expression hardened. She reached for the knife at her belt. “It’s a shame Seluna’s an ash heap—I would’ve loved a chance to fight her. I would’ve cut her tongue off, then her ears, and then—”

“No more graphic descriptions, please,” I said, wincing.

Artemis huffed, grabbing my hand. “Come on.”

“Where?” I asked, befuddled.

As she dragged me out of the room, Artemis shot a look over her shoulder, one eyebrow arched. “To face your inner demon.”

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A few moments later, Artemis and I were in my room, staring at the bathroom door.

“You’re going to finish packing, and nothing is going to scare you, not while I’m here with you,” Artemis announced.

*Easier said than done…*

I stared through the door, at the tub. I could remember how my lungs had felt as they’d filled with water. Cold sweat gathered at the back of my neck, and my chest suddenly felt tight, a gasp escaping me like I couldn’t breathe.

*Not again!*

“Cali, please trust me,” Artemis said, turning me to face her. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She prodded me toward the bathroom, and even though this felt like a lot, I knew I couldn’t just ignore it forever.

*Be brave, Cali*, I told myself. *Be. Brave.*

I took a deep breath as if I was getting ready to hold it and stepped inside. But once I got in, I wasn’t drowning. It was just me and my mirror.

“You okay in there?” Artemis called.

“Yes, actually,” I breathed.

I could fucking do this, *dammit*!

With newfound determination, I started grabbing my toiletries, stuffing them into a travel bag. I had a bunch of face creams and sunscreens that Lola had forced me to buy to keep breakouts and sensitivity at bay, and I couldn’t leave them behind—not now that I’d realized they were working.

Meanwhile, Artemis plopped down onto the bed and started rambling. She said things like, “I think a nice Black Sea dagger would be best to bring with me—it’s very light and agile, perfect to throw,” and, “I’ll take my larger Sesame knife with me as well, though—it’s got some teeth to it that would work for cutting down flesh or a rope,” and, “I wonder what kinds of knives I’ll find in New Orleans! I’m hoping for something stylish—I’ve always wanted a knife with gemstones or something fun like that. A little flashy.”

I only replied with *oohs* and *ahhs*, because I literally had no idea what she was talking about. Weapons were not my specialty. From the way Artemis looked at me, I could tell that she knew that and was just trying to distract me from my anxiety. Hearing talk about knives did just that, strangely enough. Or maybe it was my sister being sweet in her own way.

When I stepped out of the bathroom, I asked her, “Do you have any idea what we’re going to do when we get to New Orleans? Do you have any leads on your uncle?”

“I talked to Mom a little about the kinds of places a Fae like Adair might hang out, but she had nothing concrete,” she replied.

I shook my head. “It’s not like our mom has spent a lot of time in New Orleans, though. She was careful to keep herself off the Fae radar.” I paused. “I wonder if Maren would have any idea?”

Artemis hummed thoughtfully. “You could ask her—it couldn’t hurt.”

“Hah,” I said, sounding awkward. “I’m not so sure about that. I get the vibe that Maren is still mad at me and, by association, you.”

Artemis’s eyes got this mischievous glint. “Then ask Greyson to ask her. She’d never say no to Greyson. He can be quite charming.”

“Thanks,” I deadpanned. “That really makes me feel better about Maren talking to him.”

“You’re welcome,” Artemis replied, blowing me a kiss.

“The point is, though, that I *should* be able to talk to Maren. I have to talk to her.”

Artemis shrugged. “Well, okay. But think about it.” She glanced at my bag. “Are you done packing now? I need to settle things with Rishika.”

“I’m good. Thank you for, uh—helping me out. With the bathroom.”

“Of course.” Artemis smiled a little and hugged me. “I can’t believe we’re actually going to go to New Orleans.”

*Me neither.*

Artemis sauntered off to go make out with her girlfriend. Meanwhile, I stayed behind, building up the nerve to talk to Maren. There was too much at stake for me to be worried about this. I just had to be brave and do it.

*Do it, Cali! You can be a badass! You ARE a badass!*

Done with the BS, I stepped out of my room, ready to go hunt down Maren. But the moment I stepped into the hall, my phone rang. I checked it out in case it was one of my mates, but instead—

*Lucian?*

God, should I even answer? Lucian brought nothing but trouble.

*No, Cali! You’re a badass, remember?*

I was a fucking badass, dammit. Determined now, I answered the phone.

“Hello?”

“Caliana!” Lucian said in a suspiciously cordial tone. “How are you, darling?”

I frowned. “Why are you calling me?”

# Episode 3145

**Greyson**

The hotel parking lot was lit up like a particularly ostentatious Christmas tree. There was a fair amount of cars around, but the hotel was located right at the edge of the woods. Therefore, in theory, I could always lure Dick into the dark and then bite his head off.

Soothed by the thought, I parked the car and checked my phone. Lucian had tried to call me, but I wasn’t in the mood to deal with him. It was for his own good, really. Considering my current mental state, it was possible that I’d rethink my decision to spare Lucian after all the shit he’d pulled with Cali, and then he would accompany little Dick into the dark woods, where both of them would find a gruesome death.

Anyway, bottom line, better to talk to Lucian later. One asshole at a time.

I got out of the car and headed toward the hotel, looking around. I wasn’t sure about Dick’s current whereabouts. It was possible that he wasn’t even at the hotel right now. I’d wait for him, though. This needed to be done tonight. He’d better return to the hotel before my trip to NOLA tomorrow morning.

I hated the idea of missing my flight, and I knew that all of this was rushed. But the sooner we could address the drone situation, the better. Worst-case scenario, if I didn’t manage to talk to Dick in time, I would meet up with Artemis, Rishika, Xavier, and Cali there… I had to push the possibility out of from my head, though, because it only managed to make my blood boil.

The security guard at the entrance of the hotel gave me a nod, so at least I knew this outfit was doing its job. I walked through the lobby, looking around, processing how I was going to approach Dick. I couldn’t outright threaten him. Or at least not right away. I wanted to fish a bit for what he was doing back in the area. Did he think the wolves were still here? We’d deleted his footage, so what the fuck was his goal? What was his angle?

I’d figure out what to say to him in the moment. At least I knew where he was. I sniffed the air, trying to find his scent. All I smelled was the hotel restaurant’s food and all the drinks from the bar area—it would make a decent place for a stakeout, at least.

First, I had to make sure I was barking up the right tree. I headed for reception and put on my best charming smile for the receptionist. “Hey, there. I’m supposed to be meeting a friend here for a drink. Is Richard Wigbert in his room?”

The receptionist blushed a little, and if I wasn’t so focused on the mission, I’d have taken the ego boost. “Mr. Wigbert has not yet returned this evening, but you’re welcome to wait over by the bar.”

Bingo. I thanked her and made my way over. That was when I heard someone call, “Miss? Miss! You need shoes to enter!”

I glanced over my shoulder to see—

Elle.

*Elle*.

She was clothed but shoeless, walking through the hotel lobby as if she owned it.

What.

The actual.

*Hell?*

I shoved the shock aside—I was out of options here—and rushed up to her.

“What are you doing here?” I asked in a barely-there whisper.

“Dick,” she said simply.

Right. Like that explained everything.

We were gathering attention, of course—Elle didn’t have a jacket on, or shoes, even though it was freezing outside. I’d wanted to do this alone, not with her just dropping by unannounced like a barefoot grenade.

“Sir?” the hotel staff person who’d called for Elle earlier walked up to me. “Do you know her?”

“I do,” I said.

The lady raised an eyebrow. I offered an awkward chuckle. “It’s a long story. You know how it goes.”

The lady did not look like she knew how anything went. With a flat look, she told me, “If the young lady wants to enter any of the bar or dining areas, she needs shoes.”

“I do *not*,” Elle told the lady stubbornly.

The lady gasped, literally clutching at the pearls around her neck. “I beg your pardon?”

“Sorry, I’ll fix this,” I said quickly, grabbing Elle by the arm when I noticed the hotel gift shop on the corner. There had to be shoes in here, or—

Flip flops for the pool area.

I bought her a pair of black ones, hoping those would be the least noticeable (in comparison to the hot pink and yellow ones). I also stopped her from trying to buy an animal print hat to complete her outfit, and then we walked out of the store.

“Thank you, and apologies again,” I told the lady from earlier, who just nodded primly and walked away.

Elle stuck her tongue out at the lady’s back.

“Elle!” I hissed. “Where did you learn that?”

“Lola did it,” Elle said innocently.

Fucking hell, the patience I needed to live this life of mine.

“You’re coming with me,” I said tightly, pulling her to a halt outside the restaurant entrance. After looking around to make sure that we weren’t being watched, I whispered, “What the hell are you doing here?”

Elle crossed her arms over her chest. She was wearing a little black dress that stopped in the middle of her thighs and left half her chest area uncovered. Definitely not weather appropriate. At least the flip flops were the same color.

“And where the hell did you even get this dress?” I asked, gesturing at it.

Elle casually said, “I come with Greyson. Wigbert human is why my pack had to leave, why I can’t see them.” She pointed at her dress. “I took this from Lola’s closet because humans love clothes. Lola is small, so dress is small.”

I sighed and said, “I told you I can always organize for you to see your father’s pack.”

“I know,” she said, “but Wigbert tried to hurt wolves. That is not good. He is bad. So I came to help Greyson.”

“I don’t need—”

She grabbed the lapels of my jacket, her expression severe. “I came to help Greyson, because it’s my duty.”

I… was fucking *flabbergasted*. “How do you know what the word ‘duty’ means?”

“Lola,” Elle said simply.

I contemplated exiling Lola to Siberia as Elle continued.

“I will help,” she said. “As my duty to my old pack and to the Redwood pack.”

What the hell was I supposed to say to that? Send her away? What the fuck would she do if I did? I needed to keep an eye on her.

“I won’t tell you to go home,” I said, “but you have to take my lead on this. I’m the Alpha, and you can’t go rogue.”

Elle nodded emphatically. “I promise.”

I felt better after that, but I knew that Elle had issues with following direction. This would probably bite me in the ass at some point. Normal werewolf Alpha tactics wouldn’t work with her. I suspected that was because she used to be a wolf. Maybe I should consider literally training her. I wasn’t about to imagine what that would entail.

In the end, just to make sure she wouldn’t run off, I took Elle’s hand and led her to the hotel bar.

From this vantage point, I’d be able to scan the restaurant and bar for Dick and keep an eye on the doorway. I could also schmooze a bit with the bartender and try to get some info out of him. The desk staff weren’t going to give out Dick’s room number, but bartenders knew a lot of shit, and I was usually great with them.

“Greyson,” Elle said, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Small dress might break.”

I realized she was waiting for me to help her sit down in the high chair, because of the short hemline on the dress. Impressed she’d actually thought of that, I picked her up by the waist and settled her down. She then crossed her legs as if she’d been taught to do it. When she said, “Like Lola,” I realized that Lola had, indeed, taught Elle how to cross her legs.

Siberia wasn’t far enough.

An older man around the corner noticed Elle’s everything, and he gave me a sleazy thumbs up. I glared at him, hoping the fact that I was *this close* to losing my shit was obvious. The message was delivered, and the guy went pale.

Good.

“What can I get you two?” the bartender asked, pulling my attention to him.

“White wine,” Elle said.

I was supposed to become friends with the guy, but Elle had thrown me off my game. Once the bartender walked off, I asked Elle, “How in the world did you know to order wine?”

Elle smiled. “Sabine showed it to me. I like it. It’s sweet.”

This was fucking unbelievable. What if Elle got drunk? What if the white wine she’d just ordered wasn’t sweet enough for her tastes, and she spat it out like she did with food she didn’t like?

Betrayed by my own mother.

Anyway, the cat was out of the bag now, so whatever.

A moment later, the bartender returned with our drinks.

“I try yours?” Elle asked, peering at my whiskey with interest.

Satan worked hard, but Elle worked harder. Too bad for her, I worked the hardest.

“Nope,” I said, gulping down the whiskey in one go. “Get me another one,” I told the bartender. But then I got a whiff of the scent I’d been looking for. Dick was standing in the lobby.

Showtime.

“Forget about it,” I told the kid, then I dropped a few bills onto the counter, grabbed Elle, and led her out of the bar.

“Greyson? What—”

I pulled her aside, out of Dick’s line of sight. She noticed him and gasped. “Bad human.”

“I know,” I said as we peeked out. He was doing something on his phone. Probably protesting world peace and the legitimacy of climate change.

“Bad human,” Elle hissed again, baring her teeth, but I held her back.

“We can’t fight Dick out in the open. We’re going to follow him to his room where there will be no witnesses. Okay?”

Elle frowned, but she nodded. A moment later, Dick started toward the grand staircase. I waited till he was near the top before Elle and I followed. But as we reached the top, Dick suddenly stopped and began to turn back.

If I didn’t act fast, Dick would see us. I grabbed Elle and pulled her close. As I turned my back on Dick, I whispered to her, “Trust me.”

And then I leaned in to kiss her.

# Episode 3146

Just hearing Lucian’s voice made me realize how much I wished I’d let the phone call go to voicemail. But now it was too late, and Lucian was in my ear, and I had to be patient and deal with his bullshit.

“Well, Greyson called me,” Lucian said, sounding a little accusatory now, “but when I tried to call him back, he didn’t answer. Which was quite rude, I may add.”

Said the man who’d kidnapped me, like, five times*. Pot meet kettle.*

“Why are you calling *me*, though?” I asked. “I’m actually busy right now, so—”

Lucian cut me off, because of course he did. “I called you, dear, because you are not only Greyson’s mate, but you are also the closest person to a Luna.” He let out an incredulous little chuckle. “Honestly, your relationship with both Greyson and Xavier still confounds me, Caliana. But the point about your position in the pack remains.”

*My position in the… oh my god!*

I was struck by Lucian’s words. He was one of the only werewolves who’d ever called me a Luna, even if it was just a sort-of Luna. I’d take what I could get, though, because this was actually a little amazing in a way. I *was* a sort-of Luna, wasn’t I?

“Caliana, are you there?” Lucian asked.

*Yes, I’m right here*, I replied in my head. *Just bathing in my growing sense of self-importance, thanks!*

“What did you want, exactly?” I asked Lucian, sounding far more official now. Because an Alpha—even if that Alpha was Lucian, gross—had called to ask me for information, and I could provide it. Plus, both Xavier—Xavier!—and Greyson had recognized my strengths today. Was it just a coincidence that Lucian was now looking for my input?

*Is it all falling into place? Yay me?*

“What was it that Greyson wanted to tell me when he called?” Lucian asked. “Does it have anything to do with that child, Knox?”

I replied right away, with a newfound sense of purpose. “As far as I know, Knox is still in werewolf council custody.”

“Ah, very nice,” Lucian said. “I found him tiresome. He should be executed, you know.”

I ignored Lucian’s comment. “I think the reason why Greyson called you was because Dick Wigbert has been lurking around the Redwood territory, using drones. Greyson wanted you to be aware.”

Lucian huffed. “Am I to pay attention to that useless human? Really? Is that all Greyson wanted to tell me?”

I frowned. “Why? What did you expect?”

“Well,” Lucian grumbled. “I was hoping he’d invite me to a ball.”

I genuinely had no idea what to say to that. Did I explain to Lucian that normal people did not host freaking *balls*? Nope—that would probably take hours for Lucian to process as he dined on caviar and the blood of baby seals. Instead, I redirected the conversation.

“Look, Lucian, Dick is dangerous. He shot one of our wolves—he’s not coming in peace,” I said seriously.

“… So you’re *certain* there won’t be a ball?” Lucian reiterated.

I wasn’t sure if I felt like laughing or yelling at him. “No balls. I’ll let Greyson know I talked to you, but I have to go now. Goodbye.”

I felt a little guilty the moment I ended the call. Had I just been rude to Lucian? I had been a little rude…

*Oh my god, Cali! You shouldn’t worry about being rude to Lucian; he literally almost (indirectly, but still) killed you!*

Right. I shouldn’t feel guilty over that. And I couldn’t get drawn into Lucian’s drama and insatiable need for soirées. We didn’t have the time for soirées over here! We were leaving for New Orleans tomorrow morning, and I had to make sure I was done packing.

In a bit of a frenzy, I started going through my stuff—fat bag of toiletries included. I was pretty sure I had just about everything when I realized I had no idea where my sunglasses where. It was sunny in NOLA, right? It had to be. I started looking through my drawers for them—a nice pair that I’d picked out with my mom last year—but I found nothing.

And then, I realized I must’ve left them in the car. Not just any car, oh no—*my* car. The thought made me grin. It might’ve been a little over the top for Xavier to buy one for me, but I couldn’t deny that I loved it.

With a smile still on my face, I was heading over to my bedroom door when it burst open.

“Cali!” Lola burst inside, all flustered as she shoved her laptop in my face. “What do you think?”

“That’s way too close to my face; let me just…” I pushed the thing away to look at Lola’s screen. It was the admissions page for a state college. I was surprised now, so I asked, “What do I think of what?”

“It’s perfect!” Lola declared.

“I’m sure it is,” I said calmly. “But what is it?”

She grabbed my arm and made me sit on the bed, putting her laptop down next to me. “Remember when I promised my dads that I would go back to school?”

“That’s a great idea,” I said. “But what makes you so sure that’s the school for you?” I pointed at the laptop. “This is the first time you’ve ever mentioned it.”

Lola let out a low-pitched squeal of excitement as she clapped her hands. “Well, that’s because I just thought of it.”

I blinked. “You did?”

“Yes! After I hacked into Wigbert’s computer, I had an epiphany—I’m very good at hacking. Why not get a degree in something I’m good at instead of some boring thing that I don't like?”

I squinted at Lola. “I… don’t think there’s a degree in hacking.”

Lola scoffed. “Of course not! But there are courses…” She sat down next to me, typing away at the laptop. “Like this one,” she said as she pulled up a menu and selected the page.

The name of the course was “Ethics in Hacking 101”.

“Okay, that’s actually very cool,” I mused. “But I don’t know if you could make a career out of hacking… Could you?”

Lola wasn’t even listening to me. “Do you think that if I change my major, I’ll get credit for the classes I already took in Minnesota?”

“I don’t know much about all this, but I’m pretty sure you should talk to someone at the university before you make any decisions about your major,” I said.

Lola nodded. “I will! Jay said the same thing. But first I’ll tell my dads.” She grinned, leaned in to kiss my cheek, and then skipped out of the room. I felt like smiling—Lola was adorable when she was happy. And I was happy for her too, because perhaps this time, she would really go back to school.

*I wonder when I’ll have my own little epiphany. Will I ever just decide to go back to school? But what would I major in? Being a Luna, with a* due destini *dissertation?*

I scoffed, falling back down onto the bed. Staring at the ceiling, I reminded myself that going back to college could only be a fantasy right now. I could never attend classes while I was being haunted by a freaking dead demon. But once we recovered the ashes and transported them safely to the demon world, perhaps I’d finally be able to focus on my collegiate career.

*If I’m not dead… Yay?*

Rolling my eyes at myself, I sighed and stood up. I still had to go downstairs to get my sunglasses. As I passed by the living room, I could clearly hear Jay patiently telling Lola, “No, Lola, there is no ‘Masters in Hacking’. This is not how any of this works.”

Deciding to leave that whole thing alone—*good luck, Jay!—*I headed to my car and opened it up. I couldn’t believe how much stuff I had in here already. I found a scarf I’d been looking for earlier to pack for New Orleans, a pair of Xavier’s jeans—maybe for shifting emergencies? Or was he just marking his territory? Both options were possible.

I pulled out a random charger, a lip balm, a notepad, a pink pen, a pair of scissors, and two sets of gloves, and then I finally found my sunglasses wedged beneath the passenger seat.

“Aha!” I said, peering at them. “Gotcha!”

I leaned over to reach for them, wiggling inside—

Someone put a hand on my leg.

A voice that I didn’t recognize said, “Cali?”

My reaction was instant: I screamed, I kicked, and then I turned around to fight for my life against whoever or whatever this was.

# Episode 3147

**Xavier**

Ava pointed at one of the tents. “Zeke is probably in there.”

I shook off my earlier thoughts about her and my wolf and shifting. They wouldn’t do me any good. Instead, I focused on the tent she’d indicated. I frowned. “Why didn’t Zeke move into Knox’s Airstream?”

Ava shrugged. “I think it makes him uncomfortable. Between you and me, I’m not sure Zeke is cut out for being much of an Alpha.”

My joke about Zeke being the substitute teacher had never rang more true.

“It’s too late for second thoughts,” I said. “Zeke has to step up, even if he’s only interim Alpha.”

“You’d better tell him that,” Ava said, eyebrows arched.

The way she brought the cup to her lips, the way she stared at me… It unnerved me.

“Believe me, I plan on doing just that,” I said, turning my back on her to head to Zeke’s tent.

My wolf whined and scratched at the inside of my chest, protesting the loss of the sight of her. We’d been through this a million fucking times, though, and it was not up for debate. I was glad to be away from Ava, and my wolf would just have to learn to goddamn cope.

End of story.

As I walked by the Airstream, I thought that Zeke’s decision not to stay in there was pretty bad. Even a tool like Knox had realized that an Alpha needed to make an attempt to look like he was in charge. To differentiate himself from the others in some way. Zeke, on the other hand, just had a tent—one that actually looked smaller than some of the others.

Well, that was certainly less than intimidating.

“Zeke!” I called.

His voice was a grumble. “Who is it? I’m busy!”

He was *busy*? What the fuck did this little bitch think being Alpha entailed? Just lying in his tent, giving me attitude? That wasn’t gonna fly.

“It’s important,” I snarled. “And this is Xavier.”

“Xavier!” Zeke stumbled out. He looked at me, his face full of surprise. “I didn’t realize it was you—is everything okay?”

“Would I be here if everything was okay?” I asked.

Zeke rubbed his face, groaning. “God, what’s wrong now?”

I gave Zeke a once-over. The dude looked worn out, so tired, and he’d only been Alpha for what? A couple days? The poor guy wouldn’t last a week.

“Dick Wigbert is back, and—”

“I know that,” Zeke cut me off. “Ava told me already.”

A sudden shiver ran through me. I looked over my shoulder to see Ava standing there, an “I told you so” smile on her mouth. She must’ve been eavesdropping. Huffing, I turned to Zeke again.

“Greyson wanted you to hear it directly from me,” I said.

I tried to sound cool, but on the inside I was pissed. I’d told my dickhead brother that Ava would’ve told Zeke. This trip had been for nothing—it only solidified the fact that Ava could be trusted, but I’d already known that. For the most part.

Regardless, I didn’t want to think about her being trustworthy.

I didn’t want to think about her at all.

“That guy is such a pain in the ass,” Zeke said, rolling his eyes. I almost thought he was talking about my brother and opened my mouth to agree, when I realized he was talking about Dick.

“You don’t get it,” I said. “Dick is more than a pain in the ass. He shoots at wolves. He’s dangerous, so be careful when you go out in wolf form. Watch out for drones.”

Zeke sighed. “Yeah, Ava said that too. I was planning on telling the pack in the morning.”

Okay, so this was a whole new level of incompetence I wasn’t prepared to handle graciously. “What if someone runs off and shifts before you make the announcement?”

Zeke looked struck, as if that had never occurred to him. Did he even have a brain in his head? What the *fuck*?

“Now,” I said, gesturing at the others. “Call a pack meeting right now. This isn’t a fucking game, Zeke. These people are your responsibility—”

“You think I don’t know that?” he hissed, grabbing me by the arm. His eyes were wide. “I can’t do this!”

I was actually taken aback for a moment, not gonna lie. Zeke had this weird-ass, panicked look in his eye.

“You can’t hold a pack meeting?” I asked. “Seriously, what the hell is wrong with you?”

Zeke kept clinging to my arm, spluttering, “I’m not built for this, Xavier. I never really wanted to be Alpha. I only did it because there was nobody else.”

I looked at Zeke up and down, incredulous. The guy was practically groveling. He was holding onto me like he was about to faint. He was right—he wasn’t built for this. But for the moment, Zeke was all the Samara pack had.

I grabbed Zeke by the shoulders, pulling him close. “What about honoring Hector? You said you’d do it for him.”

“I know,” Zeke whispered, shaking his head. He looked so fucking miserable, I’d have laughed if this weren’t so messed up. “But it’s so much harder than I thought.”

“It’s tough, but it’s only temporary,” I said sternly. “Just get off your asses and find an Alpha. In the meantime, you should just pull your shit together. It’s not that hard.”

He groaned. “Says you!”

Okay, this shit was too much. I wasn’t about to stand by and play therapist with Zeke. No goddamn way.

“I’m done here,” I said, letting him go and turning to walk away.

But Zeke grabbed my arm again, turning me to face him. “What about you? You’ve got an Alpha bloodline!”

I pushed his hand off. This dipshit really had no idea how Alphas worked if he thought that touching me wouldn’t eventually cost him a limb. “I do have an Alpha bloodline, but when I’m the Alpha, it will be of the Redwood pack.”

Zeke scowled. “But Ava’s your mate; you have a claim to the Samaras through her.”

I had to stop myself from punching him. Through gritted teeth, I said, “Ava and I aren’t together.”

I shoved the man away, getting the hell away from him.

I couldn’t *believe* I’d just walked into this mess. Next time, Greyson could deliver his own fucking message. I wanted to get back to the pack house right the hell now. Maybe take a shower to wash Zeke’s cowardice off me. I also wanted to bleach my brain to remove his comments about my having an Alpha bloodline… But *not* being the Redwood Alpha because of my damn brother.

Yet here Zeke was, having had the position handed to him, and he’d fallen into pieces in just a few days. My hands clenching into fists, I shook my head and made a beeline for my car. I just couldn’t wait to get the hell—

“Leaving so soon?” I heard Ava’s voice first, then I felt her hand on my arm.

I stepped back, ignoring the way her touch affected my wolf. I was in no mood for her bullshit, so I snapped, “I thought you said you didn’t want me here. At least the text made that clear. Or was it because you knew Zeke was falling apart?”

Ava peered at me. She still smelled like alcohol, her natural scent covered, and it was fucking with my brain. “The text had nothing to do with Zeke,” she admitted quietly. “I just… I didn’t want to see you.”

This was goddamn hilarious.

“Sorry to disappoint,” I snapped. “Next time, I’ll take you at your word.”

I made a move to leave, but there she was, grabbing my arm again. I hated the way she held me, the way she looked at me, the way I didn’t shake her off right away, because my wolf reacted.

I hated every single thing about this.

“Hold on,” she said in a low voice.

I yanked my arm out of her grip. I wasn’t going to fucking do this.

“For what?” I demanded. “I thought things were clear, and you accepted that. Those were your words.”

I’d wanted to believe it when she’d said it, but her stare, her touch, had raised some serious doubts that had my blood churning. She just kept staring, not speaking, and the tension between us was so unbearable I wanted to claw at my skin, draw blood just to distract myself from how horrible this was, how wrong, how *unnatural*.

“Xavier,” she breathed. Her voice saying my name like that made me go rigid.

A second later, before I realized what was going on, she leaned in closer. My reflexes gave out, the mate bond overpowering them, startling me. The moment her lips crashed against mine, my wolf howled, shaking me to the core even if my brain was telling me to push her away.

I forced myself to regain control, and then I *did* push her away.

I was panting, my chest heaving as I stared at her, as I prepared to say, *What the fuck, Ava?*

I didn’t have time to speak, though.

She stared at me sadly and whispered, “Goodbye, Xavier.”

# Episode 3148

I was getting ready to blast my attacker with the full force of my magic when I realized it was Kevin—doubled over, clutching his stomach, his face twisted with pain.

“*Ow*,” he cried miserably.

*Oh my god!* I’d almost blasted Torin’s boyfriend! That wasn’t good. And what if I hadn’t been able to control my magic? That could have been a tragedy.

I scrambled out of the car. “Kevin! Shit, I’m so, so, *so* sorry. Oh my god. Are you okay?”

Kevin dragged in a shaky breath and managed to get himself upright again. “Yeah, I guess so. Nothing’s broken… I hope. Cali, do you happen to have your left leg registered as a deadly weapon?”

He winced as he chuckled, and I hurried to his side.

“I’m so sorry,” I said again. “I’ve just been a little jumpy lately, and I had no idea you were here.”

“Okay, well, next time I’ll stand back a few feet and announce myself, just to be safe.”

He smiled as he said this, which made me feel a little better.

“I guess you’re here to see Torin,” I said. I glanced back toward the house, praying no one was running around in their wolf form inside or outside the pack house.

I supposed that was the advantage of having Dick Wigbert running around on our land—the pack wasn’t supposed to be shifting.

Kevin nodded and held out a box wrapped in bright red paper. “I know it’s a day late, but I wanted to give him this. I hope it’s not too late.”

I smiled. “It’s definitely not too late. I’m sure Torin will love whatever you brought. It’s never too late for Christmas cheer, right?”

Kevin chuckled carefully. “Right.”

I grabbed my sunglasses from the car and headed up the porch steps to the house. Cracking open the front door just an inch, I peered inside, checking to make sure there were no wolves running around. Everything looked clear, but I couldn’t be sure, so I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted inside.

“Torin! Guess who’s here to see you!”

I opened the door a little wider to reveal the hallway, so Kevin and I saw when Torin appeared from the kitchen. He was holding a dish towel and wiping flour from his hands and face, but his eyes lit up when he spotted Kevin standing in the doorway.

“Hi!” he said brightly, looking surprised.

Torin hugged Kevin, and when they pulled apart, Kevin held out the box.

“Santa didn’t have a chance to drop this off yesterday,” he said with a smile.

“Oh!” Torin gasped, his eyes bright. “Thank you! I have a gift for you, too. Come on into the kitchen!”

I smiled after them as they walked down the hallway. I was glad to see things were back on track with the two of them. Torin was a special person, and he deserved to have someone special in his life.

“Hey, Cali, there you are,” Lola said, walking over to me. She looked down the hall, where Torin and Kevin were disappearing into the kitchen.

“They make a cute couple, don’t they?”

Lola thought about this for a moment, then narrowed her eyes. “But what do we really know about Kevin?”

I turned to look at her, surprised. “What are you talking about? What do we know about what? It’s Kevin. He’s a nice guy.”

Lola raised her eyebrows. “Exactly how the neighbors of serial killers describe them. Next thing you’re going to say is that he’s quiet and always brings his trash cans in on time.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh my god, Lola, don’t be ridiculous. I’ve been on a double date with Kevin and Torin, remember? I know him better than you do. He’s great. He’s really down to earth. And he’s really interesting. He thinks he might be psychic.”

“Oh, *that* makes me feel better,” Lola said sarcastically. “You do know that it’s very common for people to run background checks before they go out with people they meet online. I don’t suppose our Fae friend Torin thought to do that.”

“No,” I said uncertainly, “I don’t suppose he did. He’s just really excited about Kevin.”

“Come on then,” Lola said, grabbing my arm.

“Where are we going?” I asked, stumbling after her as she dragged me into the living room.

“Where do you think? We’re going to do a little digging,” Lola said.

“Lola, I know you’re just thinking of Torin here, but I really do think you’re being a little overzealous. Kevin’s a nice guy. He’s fine,” I protested.

Lola dropped down onto the couch and grabbed her laptop from the coffee table. “You can never be too careful.”

As the computer flickered on, I saw pieces of the drone footage, and I realized that Lola was still riding high from hacking Dick’s computer, which explained her sudden zeal for investigating Kevin. She had some good points about looking into him, but I was still worried.

“Don’t you think Kevin would be offended if he found out we were so suspicious of him that we ran a background check?” I asked.

Lola scoffed. “Cali, you’re insulting my skill. I’m a total pro. I can get in and out. No fingerprints.”

“Fingerprints?” I asked, confused.

“Digital or otherwise,” she muttered, typing away.

Sitting next to her as she entered what little we knew about Kevin into a database, I started to get a little nervous. I kept glancing up at the doorway, worried that Torin or Kevin was going to appear and find us.

Just as my anxiety was reaching a peak, Lola gasped.

“Oh my god! I *told* you so!”

“What?” I asked, confused.

Lola pointed at her screen. “*Look!*” she said triumphantly.

I peered at the screen. It was a copy of a criminal report.

“Kevin Somer,” I read, then felt my heart rate kick up. “Convicted of *murder*?”  
 Lola crossed her arms, looking satisfied. “*Now* what do you think? Pretty glad I ran a check, aren’t you?”

I stared at the report, flabbergasted. “I can’t believethis. Torin’s boyfriend is a convinced *killer*? How can this be? He seems so nice!”

“They always do,” Lola said sagely.

“But what is he even doing out of prison?” I wondered aloud, scanning the report for more information. “Hang on. Look at this.” I pointed. “The killer’s age. He’s sixty-eight. Kevin’s in his twenties. Unless he’s got the world’s best skincare routine, you’ve got the wrong guy, Lola.”

Lola’s eyes went wide, and she scanned the report. “Oh, sorry,” she said quickly. “Hang on. I’ll keep looking.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “I think you’ve done enough digging for now. Maybe it’s time you start that ethical hacking class.”

Lola glared over at me. “Not helping.”

“You’re right about that,” I said. “I’m not going to be part of this.”

“Fine by me,” Lola said, clearly annoyed, and waved me away.

I got to my feet and headed into the kitchen, where I found Torin and not-a-convicted-murderer Kevin.

They’d opened each other’s gifts, and Torin was holding a pair of potholders and staring at them with bright eyes.

“Cali!” he shouted when I walked in. “Look at these! Kevin made these! He *made* these! He knitted them himself! Can you believe that?”

“They’re great,” I said, looking at the finely knit squares.

“I can’t believe them,” Torin gushed.

“It’s nothing,” Kevin said, waving away the compliments.

“He said he’s going to teach me to knit a sweater,” Torin added.

“They’re beautiful,” I said honestly.

“Thank you, Cali,” Kevin said, smiling.

I tried to smile back, but I was hit with a wave of guilt. I was so ashamed of myself. How could I have let Lola convince me to be suspicious of this man—this guy who was kind and generous and who made hand-knitted potholders for his boyfriend?

Kevin and Torin were standing close together, speaking quietly, so I figured they could use some alone time. I started to back out of the kitchen, turning around when I heard the front door open.

Xavier was standing in the doorway, and in an instant I saw that something was bothering him.

“Hi,” I said, walking toward him. “You okay?”

“Fine,” he said shortly.

I gave him a searching look. “Did you go out?” I asked carefully.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “Dropped by the Samara campground. Told Zeke about Dick.”

I watched in surprise as he moved past me, his eyes averted. I was really thrown. Something else had happened—that much was clear. And whatever it was was really bothering him. But what? He and Zeke got on okay, so it was hard to imagine the Samara Alpha doing anything that would’ve made him so mad. Annoyed, sure, but Xavier wasn’t annoyed. He was simmering with rage. I could feel it coming off him in waves.

I followed him as he headed toward the stairs, suddenly certain I knew the cause.

“Xavier?”

He turned.

“What happened with Ava?”

# Episode 3149

**Xavier**

I stopped and turned back to look at Cali.

*What happened with Ava?*

I was both surprised by her question and not surprised at all. Cali had always been able to read me like a book—even from those early days—and I knew I’d always been shit at masking my anger. Regardless, I didn’t want to keep anything from her. I knew I needed to tell her, and the sooner the better.

I sighed. “Ava kissed me,” I admitted.

I gritted my teeth when Cali’s face went pale.

“It wasn’t something I went looking for, and I’m really pissed that it happened,” I added quickly.

Cali looked shocked, but she recovered quickly. “Xavier, it’s okay—”

“No, it’s not okay,” I said furiously. “It’s absolutely not okay. I’ve made it very clear to her on multiple occasions where we stand, and then she tries to pull this kind of shit with me. No, Cali. It’s *not* okay. She can’t just do that.”

Cali watched me closely as I raged. She only spoke when I paused for breath. “And what did you do?”

My thoughts went back to the kiss, and how it had taken me completely by surprise. I thought about how my wolf had reacted to the kiss. It had been powerful—there was no doubt about that—but it had made me angry as well. Genuinely furious.

“I got angry, and I left,” I told Cali honestly.

“You didn’t say anything to Ava?” Cali asked.

“No.”

She frowned. “Why not—”

“I told you, I was so pissed off, I just left,” I snapped. As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I regretted them. It wasn’t Cali I was mad at, and I stepped toward her. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to take this out on you.”

She nodded and wrapped her arms around me. “I know. You’re upset. It’s okay.”

It wasn’t okay. It wasn’t okay at all. I was pissed at Ava, but I was pissed at myself, too. I should have seen this coming. I should have stopped Ava before it happened.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Cali murmured, holding me tight.

My mind was spinning. I felt so guilty and so frustrated, but also really grateful. I was glad that Cali hadn’t reacted to this news with jealousy, and that she understood what I was feeling. It made a shitty situation a little bit better.

I pulled back slightly to look at her. “We won’t have to worry about this kind of thing ever happening again, because there won’t be a next time. I’ve got no reason to ever see any of the Samaras again.”

“What do you mean?” Cali asked.

“I mean that Greyson can handle the Samara pack from here on out. He *is* the Alpha, isn’t he?” I said bitterly, then I turned back to the stairs.

“Where are you going?” she called after me

My thoughts were on Ava’s kiss, and the cowardice I’d seen in Zeke when we’d spoken.

“I need to take a shower,” I said with disgust as I turned to look back at Cali. “I need to wash the stink away.”

Cali nodded, and I headed upstairs into my room. I shut my door and stormed into the bathroom. Flipping the shower on, I turned the water as hot as it would go. The bathroom filled almost immediately with steam, and when I stepped into the stall, I hissed in pain, but I didn’t adjust it. I *wanted* to feel the pain—the pain fueled the anger. This had all started when Greyson had made me go to the Samaras in the first place. Which had turned out to be completely unnecessary. That had been followed by Zeke’s total Alpha breakdown and then—of course—Ava’s damn kiss.

It’d been a fucking mess.

If I’d been in the mood to be fair—which I wasn’t—I’d have had to acknowledge that Ava had been drinking, and that her judgment at the time of the kiss might have been somewhat clouded. But, also, I knew Ava—I knew her better than probably anyone else in the world—and I knew she didn’t do things by impulse. Ever. Ava planned. She schemed. And it wouldn’t have surprised me one bit if she’d just *pretended* to be tipsy so she could use it as an excuse.

As the water seared my skin, my thoughts went back to my own reaction to the kiss. I’d been taken my surprise, of course, and I’d been angry, there was no doubt about that. But there had been a moment before the anger had taken over. I hadn’t immediately pulled away, and I was prodding at that moment like a splinter. *Why* hadn’t I pulled away? *Why* hadn’t I done everything in my power to make it perfectly clear to Ava that I had no feelings for her at all?

My wolf had been stirring, and it had made it difficult to simply pull away.

*Fuck.*

I didn’t get it. It just made no sense. Ava and I had sorted this all out. We’d acknowledged the past, and we knew what we were to each other now. My wolf was happy with Cali. I *loved* Cali, and our mate bond was stronger than ever. But if all that were true—and it *was* true—then why the *hell* had I let Ava kiss me?

Frustrated, I turned the water from searing hot to freezing cold. My whole body seized up, but I didn’t adjust the temperature. I felt this strange impulse to punish myself. Cali had told me it wasn’t my fault, and I believed her. I *wanted* to believe her.

So why did I have these lingering doubts?

“Fuck,” I muttered, and turned off the water.

I stepped out of the shower and had just grabbed a towel when I heard a soft knock at the door.

“Who is it?” I snapped, rubbing my hair dry.

Cali opened the door and peeked into the room. “Just me.”

“Come on in,” I said, softening immediately. “What’s up?”

She stepped inside. “Torin and Kevin made some hot chocolate and are watching a movie. I came up to see if you wanted some hot chocolate, too. You looked like you could use something.”

Listening to her voice, the sharpness of my anger began to fade. Cali always had that effect on me. No matter how shitty things looked, Cali always made things seem better. I loved her, and just being around her always made my life feel brighter.

She smiled a little nervously under my gaze. “So, how about that hot chocolate?”

I shook my head. “I don’t want any. And I doubt you actually came up here to offer me some.”

Cali blushed. “I guess I was just worried about you, and I wanted an excuse to come up and make sure you were okay.”

“You never need an excuse to come up here,” I told her. “And I am okay. Or at least I will be.”

She smiled at me. “I’m glad. Maybe you can help me finish packing?”

I nodded. “I can do that.”

Opening a dresser drawer, I pulled out the Christmas gift she’d given me—the black sweatpants with the tiger embroidered on the hip—and followed her down the hallway.

“I meant what I said,” she said as we walked. “About how I’m not jealous or worried about Ava. I’m really not. I understand that dynamic is complicated. And you shouldn’t be worried about it either. There was a time when I was, but things are different now.”

“That’s right,” I said firmly. And it was right. I wasn’t going to let Ava or anyone else come between my mate and me.

As we walked into Cali’s room, I pulled the towel from around my shoulders and slung it around her waist, pulling her toward me

Cali laughed but shuddered. “Ugh, Xavier. Your towel is freezing. Were you taking an ice bath?”

“Is it cold?” I asked with a sly grin. “I guess I’d better warm you up.”

She laughed again, and I kissed her smiling lips. Her mouth felt burning hot, and I leaned into it, hungry for the heat of her.

“You’re freezing,” she murmured.

“I’m getting hot,” I whispered back. “Trust me.”

She slid her hands around my bare torso and let her fingers drag up the length of my spine. I wasn’t joking about heating up. Everywhere she touched seemed to turn to fire. It felt good. Really fucking good. I eased my tongue into her mouth, and she opened to me, her whole body feeling pliable in my hands.

When I dropped my mouth to her ear, sucking on her lobe, she gasped.

I grinned to myself. This was what I wanted. All heat, no hesitation. No guilt, no doubts. Just passion, just love.

Just Cali.

I slipped my hand under her shirt and pushed her gently back onto the bed.

# Episode 3150

**Greyson**

By carefully pressing my fingers against Elle’s lips, I managed to not actually kiss her, but from Dick’s perspective, still look convincingly like I was merely cupping her face as we made out. At least, that’s how I fucking hoped it looked. I hadn’t had time to think, and we were at a hotel. Two kissing people in the hallway was nothing to bat an eyelash at.

After a very long moment of that, I chanced a half-glance behind me and was relived to see that Dick was moving on. With a sigh of relief, I pulled away from Elle.

Her eyes were wide as she looked at me, then they narrowed dangerously and—without warning—she slapped me across the face.

“Why did you kiss me?” she demanded angrily. “You have Cali!”

I was stunned, and after a moment, I realized my cheek really stung. Elle had slapped me really hard, and she had an arm on her.

“It’s not what you think—” I started to say, but I stopped when I heard a voice behind me.

“Greyson Evers?”

It was Dick. Fuck.

I gave Elle a desperate look. “*Don’t say anything*,” I hissed.

Then I turned to face Dick, who was walking toward us, a self-satisfied smile on his wide face.

“Sorry to interrupt.” He chuckled, sounding anything but sorry. His gaze shifted from me over to Elle, lingering on her for far too long. Then he looked back at me and raised his eyebrows lasciviously. “Especially when I see you’ve got your hands full.”

My hands balled into fists at my sides. I wanted to punch the smarmy smirk from Dick’s face, but I knew I had to control myself. We were at the top of the staircase, and I couldn’t make a scene.

“It’s fine,” I said stiffly.

“I’m surprised to see you, Greyson. I was going to ask what you were doing here, but…” Dick’s gaze drifted back to Elle, taking her in greedily, and he smiled knowingly. “I think I know.”

I forced myself to smile. “And why are *you* here, Dick? I thought you’d left the area.”

“Yes, I had, I had, but something keeps bringing me back.”

“Is that right?” I asked warily.

Dick smiled. “Well, I don’t want to interrupt anything, but maybe you and…” He looked again at Elle, his expression expectant.

I gritted my teeth. “Arielle, this is Dick Wigbert. Dick, this is Arielle.”

Dick smiled too broadly at Elle. “It’s very nice to meet such a beautiful young lady,” he said in an oily voice. “How about you and the lovely Arielle join me for a drink, Greyson?”

The way Dick kept looking at Elle made my skin crawl. I knew Dick thought Elle and I were here for a hookup, which made me even more disgusted, but I also knew I had to play it cool.

“Sure,” I said, forcing myself to use a neutral tone. “One drink.”

“Shall we head down to the bar?” Dick suggested, gesturing down the stairs.

We followed him down. I would’ve liked to have kept my distance, but Dick fell into step right next to Elle.

“So, my dear, are you a student?” he asked.

Elle looked confused. “Student?” she repeated, looking up at him.

“Not a scholar, eh? Well, no matter.” He chuckled. “Do you model? You look like you could model. Perhaps you’d like to start? I have a friend you could speak to. He works with some very elite agencies, and I’d be happy to put you in touch with him…”

It went on like this until we reached the bar. Dick tried to sit next to Elle at the booth, but I physically scooched Elle over and sat between her and Dick, using my size to prevent him from touching her.

I couldn’t, however, stop the lecherous looks he continued to give her, or keep his eyes from drifting down to her long, bare legs beneath her dress.

God, this guy was disgusting.

After a while, I pulled my jacket off and draped it around Elle. She was so small, and my jacket was so big on her, it covered up most of her body, which was handy.

“I can tell you’re cold,” I said, by way of explanation when she looked up at me, surprised. “Feels like the heat’s not on high enough in here.”

“No,” Dick muttered, looking at me suspiciously.

“What’ll you have?” the bartender asked, walking over to us.

“Whiskey,” Dick said quickly, without waiting for anyone else to speak.

I rolled my eyes and looked at Elle. “What would you like?”

“Another wine glass?” she asked.

“Another wine for the lady, and a whiskey for me, too,” I told the bartender.

The guy nodded and walked away.

“So,” I said, turning to Dick. “Tell me again, why *are* you back here?”

Dick’s eyes trailed over Elle once again. “It’s a beautiful place, Greyson.”

I narrowed my eyes and—my protective instincts kicking up—swung my arm around Elle. “The world is full of beautiful places, man.”

Elle raised an eyebrow at me but didn’t say anything.

Dick gave me an insincere smile. “That’s true, but nowhere else on earth have I found wolves as majestic and powerful as I have here in this part of the Pacific Northwest.”

Elle looked up. “Wolves?”

I squeezed her shoulder, hoping to remind her to keep quiet.

“Oh yes!” Dick gushed. “I *love* wolves. Beautiful, incredible creatures. That’s why I want to protect them. It’s my life’s work, you see.”

I stared at Dick in disbelief. This guy was incredible. I wondered how shooting my mother was supposed to have protected her.

“So, why are you no longer with LIPS?” I asked, interrupting Dick’s monologue.

Dick scowled. “*LIPS*. Ha! Those amateurs.”

I frowned. “Rhonda didn’t seem like an amateur to me.”

He scoffed. “Oh, their hearts are probably in the right place, but they’re all caught up in the great work of their cause.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” I said warily.

He shook his head. “They have no idea of what it takes to really make a difference.” He puffed up his chest like a preening bird. “I know how to get things done. They can go on, uselessly chasing their dreams, while I make mine become a reality.”

An alarm bell began to ring inside my head.

I leaned closer to Dick. “And what is your dream, exactly?”

Dick gave me a cold smile. “Have you ever seen *Jurassic Park*?”

“Yeah?” I said slowly.

“*That’s* my dream,” he said, his eyes going hazy. “A place just like that, but with wolves.”

I stared at the man. “*You’ve* seen *Jurassic Park*, too, right? That movie doesn’t end so well for the humans.”

Dick gave me a sharp look. “Are you still reluctant to sell your land, Evers?”

“Oh, it’s not that I’m reluctant,” I said. “It’s just that I’m never going to sell it.”

“That’s a shame,” he said. “We could be partners. Just imagine the possibilities.”

I *was* imagining them.

The bartender appeared and deposited the glasses onto the table. I seized mine and downed it in one gulp. I was done with this conversation. Clearly Dick was still harping on about the same bullshit as before, and whatever happened, it was not going to end well. I knew I needed to take care of this, one way or another.

Could I threaten him?

I shot a glance around the bar. It was still relatively full of people, and the bartender was still lingering close by. No, I was going to need to keep it friendly. Well, on the friendly side of a threat, at least.

“Sorry,” I said, looking back at Dick, “but I don’t think a partnership is in the cards.”

“That’s too bad,” Dick said. “Why is that?”

“Our interests don’t align,” I said shortly. “Maybe we should call it a night,” I said, waving over to the bartender.

I pulled out my wallet, hoping that once we paid the bill and pretended to leave and had Dick headed back to his room, I could do what I’d come here for in the first place.

Dick tsked. “What a shame, leaving so soon.” His gaze traveled to Elle. “But is your friend Arielle staying?” he asked, raising a questioning brow at the girl.

How had this guy managed to move through life being so blatantly disgusting? I was about to snap a similar question at him when, to my surprise, Elle smiled back at him.

Her smile was sweet, and Dick’s own smile grew into a leer until Elle reached out a lightning-fast hand and grabbed his tie. She twisted her wrist, twining the tie around her hand. She had turned the tacky green tie into a noose, and Dick was gagging, barely able to breathe.

“What the hell are you doing, you bitch?” he choked out, his face turning red, then blue.

Elle’s smile stayed in place, though her eyes had taken on a dangerous glitter.

“Why,” she said quietly, her grip on the tie tightening, “do you humans always think you can have everything you want?”

# Episode 3151

Xavier’s kisses were hard and insistent. As his hands greedily took in my body and his tongue delved deep into my mouth, there was no question in my mind of how he felt about me. My thoughts were on him, hovering over me on my bed—they weren’t on Ava and her rogue kiss, they weren’t on the handprint seared onto my back, and they weren’t on any of the other worries that had been cycling through my mind just a moment before. The blazing passion that I felt for my mate had driven them all from my mind, and now all I could think about was Xavier—his hands, his lips, and his body pressing hard against mine.

“I love you so much, Xavier,” I murmured as his kisses moved down my neck.

“I love you too,” he said, his voice a hoarse whisper. “Fuck, I love you. You’re mine, Cali. You know that, right?”

Looking into his eyes, I nodded. “I’m yours.” Leaning forward, I kissed him and whispered, “You’re mine, too. *You* know that, right?”

“Yours, tiger.”

Then Xavier pulled back and gave me a long look. He got to his feet and held out his hand. I didn’t know where we were going or what he had in mind, but I trusted him, so I put my hand in his.

He tugged me to my feet, then, grabbing the bottom of my shirt and pulling it off me. I shivered in the chill of the room and leaned toward him, but he didn’t move to touch me.

“Take your pants off,” he commanded. Then, “And your panties.”

When I was naked, he spun me around so I was facing the mirror over my dresser. Behind me, I could see his eyes on mine. He held my gaze as he slipped his own pants off, and immediately I could see the level of his arousal.

“Did you hear what I said to you?” he asked, taking a step toward me.

I nodded. “I heard.”

“Let me hear you say it,” he said, stepping close enough that his erection pressed against the back of my leg.

I leaned against the dresser. “I’m yours,” I nearly whimpered. “I’m yours, Xavier.”

“And I’m yours.”

Putting his hand on my hips, he nudged my thighs apart with his knee. He kissed my shoulder and trailed along up my neck to my ear. “Am I yours? I want to hear it.”

“You’re mine,” I said, feeling dizzy with desire. “Mine.”

He pressed his cock against my back. “Yours.”

“*Please*,” I said, my voice a breath.

I gasped as Xavier bent me over and teased his cock at my entrance. In the mirror I looked at him, his eyes dark with desire. Then he eased himself inside of me, and I moaned as I took all of him. He started to find a rhythm and filled me over and over.

I watched Xavier’s reflection pulling at my hair, tilting my head back until my eyes met his. There was a strange intimacy to this, and I could feel myself moving closer to climax as his grip on my hair tightened.

“Oh my—*fuck*,” I gasped out, rising onto my tiptoes. I wanted more of him—all of him. I wanted to be completely filled with him, and I arched my back, pushing into him.

Waves of pleasure were crashing over me, but Xavier didn’t slow down. He sped up as his own orgasm built. I squeezed myself around his cock, and he sucked in a breath.

I felt him pulse within me, and I nearly climaxed again with the pleasure of it. Xavier leaned over me, breathing hard, and I smiled up at him in the mirror.

“Hi,” I said softly.

“Hi,” he said with a laugh, wrapping his arms around my waist and kissing the back of my neck.

After a moment I extricated myself from him and, after a trip to the bathroom, met him back in bed.

“When does our flight leave again?” I asked him, glancing at the clock on my bedside table.

“Seven in the morning,” Xavier said, pulling his sweats back on. “Which means we need to leave here at, like, four.”

“Are you *kidding* me?” I squealed, sitting up straight.

“What?” Xavier asked, frowning.

“It’s already so late,” I pointed out. “It’s almost midnight! And I still haven’t finished packing. You were supposed to be helping me, but you distracted me instead.”

Xavier grinned. “I didn’t hear you complaining. But if you’re worried about waking up on time, I could just keep you up all night. You won’t even want to go to sleep.”

He leaned in and kissed my neck, and for a moment I almost let him convince me, but my better judgement won out and I wiggled away from him.

“You are a bad influence,” I said, shaking a finger at him. “I need to pack a few more things.”

Xavier chuckled and—propping himself up on his elbow—watched as I flitted around the room, picking up a hairbrush, then setting it down, then forgetting where I’d set it down, then looking for it again.

My suitcase was almost full, but I wanted to take a few more sweaters, so I tried to stuff another thick sweater in, leaning hard on the case so I could close the zipper.

“I did most of this with Artemis,” I told Xavier, grunting with the effort of zipping, “but I didn’t get it finished.”

Xavier looked amused. “You know, you can just buy whatever you’re missing while you’re in New Orleans.”

I rolled my eyes. “I have everything I need. I’m not Artemis; I don’t need *knives*.”

“What?”

“Never mind,” I said, waving a hand. “I just need to get it into my suitcase. I don’t want to have to go to some stupid mall when we’re out there trying to find who took the ashes. I don’t want to press pause on consulting with witches and meeting up with wizards just so I can stop by an H&M.”

Xavier shrugged. “Okay, whatever you say.” He grinned as he watched me try to shove a bra into my bag. “You know, you don’t have to even bring underwear if you don’t want to.”

I shot him a glare and threw a balled-up pair of socks in his direction. “You need to get your mind out of the gutter, sir!”

Xavier tossed the socks back to me with a smirk. “Or you could just join me there.”

I couldn’t help it—I laughed at this as I caught the socks. I shoved them into my bag and headed into the bathroom. Inside I took a deep breath, trying to let my anxiety rest. I felt better just knowing that Xavier was out there.

I tossed the rest of my toiletries into a small bag and zipped it up.

“Okay,” I said, stepping out of the bathroom. “I think I’m actually ready now.”

“Great,” Xavier said, lying back down. “Now come back to bed.”

I smiled and slid into the bed next to him. As he closed his arms around me, I snuggled close and closed my eyes.

I wanted to sleep, but almost immediately, I realized it wasn’t going to happen. I was just too wired.

I just couldn’t believe we were actually going to New Orleans, and that we might actually find a major lead on the vampire-witch there, and the ashes. It was possible I could soon be rid of Seluna’s dark influence forever.

“Do you think we’re going to find out everything we need to know while we’re there?” I asked, turning to Xavier.

“Why wouldn’t we?” he asked without opening his eyes.

“I don’t know,” I sighed. “Because it feels like the world is constantly against me, and we’ve had terrible luck so far?”

Xavier opened his eyes and looked down at me. “You need to not worry about this, Cali. We’re going to get down there and figure everything out.”

“Do you really think so?” I asked.

He nodded. “We’re going to find out where the vampire-witch is keeping the ashes, and then I’m going to kill her.”

As I took this in, I looked up at the dark ceiling of my room. “I just hope we find out all the answers we need.”

I was trying to hold out hope for myself—of course—but also for my mates. I knew they’d do anything to protect me, but I didn’t want to send them on a wild goose chase for my sake. They’d done that so many times at this point, and this time it just had to mean something. I just wanted all this to be over, but there was something in my gut telling me that we were headed in the right direction.

I didn’t know where the feeling was coming from, but it was there, and I was clinging to it like a drowning person clinging to a life raft.

Xavier’s breathing had regulated, and I suspected he was already asleep, so I drew even closer and closed my eyes again. I tried to match my breathing to his, and that helped a bit. I could feel myself growing tired, but just as I was starting to drift off, a sudden thought woke me up again, dragging me back to consciousness.

The next time Xavier and I were lying in bed like this, would I be free of Seluna for good?

# Episode 3152

**Greyson**

As I surveyed the scene in front of me, I knew I was in a precarious position. Elle’s grip on Dick’s tie was tight, and—judging by the blue tinge of Dick’s face—growing tighter all the time. I could see the asshole struggling to breathe. There was a big part of me that didn’t give a rat’s ass about that, and kind of enjoyed seeing Elle get the best of this guy. But the rational part of my brain knew I had to put a stop to it. We were in a public place, and there were cameras around. Even if the hotel’s cameras weren’t capturing every moment of this interaction, there were people here. And that was worse.

I put my hand on Elle’s arm. “Elle, you need to let him go.”

She didn’t move, and for a moment I wondered how tough I was going to have to get. But then—to my relief—she let go of Dick’s tie.

Dick sucked in a grateful breath and tugged the tie away from his neck. He looked up at me, his eyes red, puffy, and blazing with anger. “What the fuck was that?” he demanded. “You need to learn to control your bitch.”

Elle moved toward Dick again, but I was quicker this time and put a hand on Dick’s neck. I hoped from any other angle it looked like I was simply holding him congenially by the shoulder, but in reality, my fingers were wrapped around his throat. And my grip grew even tighter as Dick tried to move away.

“Call her that one more fucking time, Dick,” I said coldly. “Just try it. See what happens. I dare you.”

For once, Dick was silent, clearly getting the message I was sending him.

I patted his chest with my free hand and gave him a friendly smile. It was time to say what I’d come here to say. Elle’s off-the-wall move had made me push a lot further with my plan than I’d intended, but it was now or never, and I was running out of time. I was supposed to be on a plane to New Orleans in a few hours, so I leaned close to Dick and spoke softly, so only he could hear me. I kept a smile on my face, trying to keep up the façade of a friendly conversation.

“I’m real sorry that she scared you like that, Dick, but if you try to keep coming after our property and inserting yourself where you’re not wanted, you’re going to get a few more of those scares. Hell, you may even end up dead. Am I making myself clear?”

Dick’s eyes went wide with shock. “I… Is that a threat?” he spluttered angrily.

I smiled. “It sure is,” I said, then released my hold on him. I turned to Elle. “Let’s go.”

She nodded and got to her feet without a word. Neither of us looked back as we left the bar and headed outside to the parking lot. As we walked to my car, I had to admit that I wasn’t completely happy with how all of that had just gone down, but I kept it to myself.

Elle kept my jacket on as we got into the car, and she stayed silent as I started driving.

I finally broke the silence after we’d driven a few miles. “You can’t just do things like that, Elle.” I shook my head as she looked over at me. “I had a plan to execute in there with Dick, and you totally blew it for me by grabbing him like that in public.”

Elle was quiet for a moment. “I did what I had to do,” she finally said.

This wasn’t the response I’d wanted to hear, and I could feel myself growing frustrated. “I know you’re new to the human world, but you can’t just do stuff like that. You can’t just openly threaten people when there are other humans around. That’s just not how things are done.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that Elle had her jaw set stubbornly.

“I did what I had to do,” she repeated, not sounding at all apologetic for what had just happened. She looked over at me, her eyes blazing. “I did what you would have done, right? I did what you did. So why are you mad at me?”

I gritted my teeth. “You just don’t get it.”

“No,” Elle said stubbornly. “Maybe I do not get it. I know that the Wigbert dick is not a good human, and I am not sorry I scared him. I am not sorry at all. I will always do what I have to do to protect the pack, and to protect my Alpha.”

I sighed as I pulled into the long, winding driveway of the pack house. I understood where Elle was coming from—and her description of the guy as *Wigbert dick* was spot on—but the girl was just so green. And it was hard to convince her that there was any other way. The more I thought about it, the more familiar it felt. And then I realized why: her attitude about just taking care of business actually reminded me of my own, back when I’d been a Rogue.

I pulled the car to a stop. As Elle went to open the door, I put my hand out to stop her. “Hang on a second, Elle. I’m sorry for getting upset with you. I understand where you’re coming from, and I appreciate your instinct to protect the pack, but next time—and there won’t be a next time—I need you to follow my lead, okay?”

Elle paused, thinking about that. “Okay, Alpha,” she finally said. “But next time, do not try to kiss me, either.”

“Deal,” I said with a grin. “And thanks.”

Out of the car, we headed up the porch steps and into the house.

“I go to sleep now,” Elle said as soon as we stepped inside.

“Good night,” I said, nodding.

“Greyson, hi!”

I looked over to see Torin waving at me from the couch. He was cuddled up with Kevin, and the two of them were watching a movie. I waved back, wondering when the human had arrived. But now wasn’t the time to ask.

“I’m headed to bed,” I said, hoping to stave off any further conversation. “Have a good night.”

Torin grinned, looking happy. “You, too.”

Upstairs, I was heading to my own room, but I stopped at Cali’s door. I pushed it open quietly, hoping she was already asleep. We had such an early flight, and she needed her rest—but when I poked my head in, I saw Xavier in bed with her, his arms wrapped around her.

My throat felt suddenly tight, and I backed out quickly, shutting the door behind me. In my own room, I put my packed suitcase by my door so I could grab it easily, kicked off my shoes and my clothes, and climbed into bed. There wasn’t time for a full night’s sleep, but I knew I should get a few hours at least, so I closed my eyes.

Dammit.

The image of Xavier and Cali wrapped in each other’s arms kept appearing in my mind’s eye. I did *not* need to think of that while I was trying to fall asleep.

I gritted my teeth and tried to focus on *anything* else—the Samara pack, my mother’s wedding, baseball—to try to force that image out of my mind.

When I finally did fall asleep, I slept fitfully, my dreams vivid and strange. I dreamt I woke to sun streaming through my window and Cali next to me in bed. My tension drained away, and I wrapped my arms around her and closed my eyes. But when I opened them again, it was Maren’s curls against my face.

My heart beat hard as she turned to smile at me.

“Good morning,” she murmured, looking up into my face.

I squeezed my eyes shut, and when I opened them again, I was looking into Elle’s big blue eyes. She was naked next to me, stretched long in my bed, and she twined her legs through mine.

*Oh god, what is happening?*

Praying it would work, I closed my eyes again and turned away from Elle. When I turned back, Cali was there again, smiling gently at me. Thank god.

Finally able to relax, I fell into what felt like a deeper sleep—untroubled by dreams—until my alarm began to blare in my ear. It felt like it was only moments later, but when I peered blearily at my phone, I saw that it was just after four in the morning.

Turning off the alarm, I hauled myself out of bed with a groan. I had slept like shit, but hopefully I’d be able to get some sleep on the plane.

I threw on some clothes, grabbed my suitcase, and headed out the door.

It was time to go to New Orleans.